PROFESSIONAL SABBATICAL

Eleni Bastéa

I propose that offices begin to implement a "sabbatical" program that would give architects with about six years of work experience a six-month leave of absence. Architects would be encouraged to use that time as creatively as possible to work on personal projects, travel, or seek a visiting teaching position. Schools should make a greater effort to include in their visiting staff professionals with strong design experience but little or no teaching or research experience. I do not believe that architects should be required to further their design education. They should be allowed more time for personal development and encouraged to go back to school as professionals, not as students.

which would not only give one access to the current research going on in the field, but also allow the visitor to contribute his/her design knowledge and practical expertise to the school.

How would this last arrangement address the question about continuing design education? Although there is always room for improvement in one's art, craft and profession, I do not believe that in the case of architects, who are already required to attend professional school and pass registration exams, this improvement should be imposed by their profession. As I described above, for some individuals simply providing unstructured time periodically would give them the opportunity to explore other fields and pursue interests that would enrich their lives and ultimately, their design. For those who miss the rigorous academic exchange of their school years, returning to school as *students* would not be the most beneficial solution. How do you give a desk-crit to a mid-career architect? It would be as inappropriate as asking accomplished musicians to go back to school to study composition, after they have been performing on stage for years. Interested and competent architects would learn infinitely more when asked to direct other students in their designs, give lectures, answer questions, and participate in studio reviews. I know that I learn faster as an instructor than I ever learned as a student. Like everybody in academia, I also learn a lot from my students and my colleagues. Pairing the visiting architect with a full-time instructor would provide continuity for the students and ease any minor technical problems that may come up.

Equally important would be the opportunity to attend advanced classes and familiarize oneself with the current state of affairs in a host of new topics that might not have been addressed when the architect was a student: energy efficiency, environmental issues, co-housing, low-cost housing, new urban and suburban planning, architecture and linguistics. Courses in related fields, like planning, economics, business, art history, history or geography, could also address the visiting architect's current interests and inquiries.

One does not need to be convinced that the architects involved would benefit from the proposed program. What I also want to point out is that schools would equally benefit, as they would have the opportunity to strengthen their connection to the profession, thus influencing the practice of architecture. Upon return, these "sabbatical scholars" would bring into their office a fresh breath, an insight into the theoretical problems that currently concern schools, and a better understanding of the education that younger architects received. No proposal could, or should, erase the differences between the study and the practice of architecture. Yet, encouraging dialogue, as described above, would help us better understand each side's limitations and aspirations.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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First of all, I would like to oppose the notion of the "mandatory" expressed in the position state-ment. Although I hope to demonstrate in this paper the benefits of continuing education, I would like to set them forth as recommendations to be considered by the profession and academia and adopted as deemed appropriate. I do not see any compelling reason to bring about additional mandatory requirements to the practice of architecture.

Before I focus on design education I would like to outline the need for continuing architectural education in a broader sense. As stated in the call for papers, there are already courses avail-able to working architects which focus on technical and business aspects of the profession. Un-doubtedly valuable, these courses for the most part do not address the broader changes of the last decades that affect our society in general, and architecture in particular. The client of today and tomorrow differs considerably from the client of the '50s and the '60s. Both the demography of the country is changing, with an increasing number of "minority" members working and living alongside with the white "majority," and the needs of the modern family are changing. Finally, the needs of the work environment are in constant flux with the widespread use of computers and facsimile machines, as well as the current tendency to retreat to the home office. Yet architecture has been slow to adjust. I think one of the reasons for the intrin-sically conservative nature of the profession is the fact that architects, in their design method, tend to follow what they were taught at school. Since they left school, some of those methods have been questioned and superseded, but practicing architects have little time to follow up on the literature that continuously comes out.

One often hears the disappointment of practicing architects due to the lack of intellectual stimulation at the work place. Not that school is perfect. Yet, it gives everyone a chance to grow, a challenge to outdo oneself and the intellectual camaraderie of classmates and faculty. Little relief from practical problems is offered at work. Seminars on codes and fireproofing, marketing and liability insurance improve one's technical knowledge but do little for the soul. Many practitioners feel left out and left behind the current discourse and envy those architects who were able to establish connections with a university and thus bridge the gap between theory and practice. This rift is increasingly becoming dramatic in its proportions. Some teaching architects have indeed developed an esoteric vocabulary and syntax that seems to pur-posely leave "real" architects and real buildings out of it.

It is clear, both from the current concern about the division between architectural education and the profession, and, hopefully, from the issues outlined above, that the present condition is detrimental both to our schools and to the profession. Our architecture students have little to look forward to once they come out of school. These days, they are lucky, of course, if they can even secure a job, but our hope is that things will get better and that the guidelines presented below could eventually be applicable, with some good will and imagination.

I would like to propose a radical solution that addresses the issues presented above and would benefit both the schools and the profession. My proposal is still a draft that is intended to generate discussion, suggestions, and even alternatives. The details are not set in stone. It is the spirit of my proposals that I want to communicate here. The discussion of funding pos-sibilities, which is beyond the scope of this essay, could be addressed at the conference.

Similar to the sabbatical program established for faculty, I propose that medium and large-size offices begin to implement a program that would give architects with about 6 years of work ex-perience a 6-month leave of absence. Architects would be encouraged to use that time as crea-

tively and productively as possible, and would be asked to share their experiences once they are back to their office. What are the possible ways one could spend these six months?

- 1. One could decide to spend more time at home, read, do volunteer work, photograph, write, learn a language, remodel, or enter design competitions. We are all too familiar with work burn out and I strongly believe that allowing time for unstructured work and personal growth will improve one's outlook towards life, and, consequently, improve one's design work. Taking time off to think about how buildings work, how we use them, how our cities function, and how we can improve our surroundings is critical to professional growth. One wishes that time for introspection and creative work should be part of our daily life. Unfortunately, most practicing architects I know find little time to pursue other interests or maintain a perspective towards architecture that goes beyond daily trouble-shooting and the fight with deadlines. Although one semester off per six years is a limited relief from one's work duties, it can serve as the starting point for channeling one's interests and creative energies.

- 2. Some architects might use that time to travel. Before the study of architecture became the province of schools and academies, students acquired their knowledge by apprenticing and by traveling. In the absence of well-illustrated volumes, slides, television, films, and videos, architects throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relied on personal visits to the various sites. Although travel has become much easier and architects have taken advantage of it, work conditions and limited vacation time forces most travelers to rush through most of the famous monuments and venture little outside the trodden routes. Experiencing old and new buildings in situ is especially critical now, when familiarity with *images* of a project -- colored sketches, immaculate, abstracted models, and glossy architectural photographs -- threatens to displace first-hand knowledge of the actual building.

- 3. Finally, some architects might wish to further their architectural education, both in design and in theory. This is the group on which I want to dwell further. Schools have commonly accommodated visiting scholars who come for a semester or a year to attend advanced courses, offer a course of their own, pursue their research and thus contribute to the intellectual community that hosts them. Some architecture schools, my home institution included, have held a visitor's program where well-established architects/educators from the U.S. and abroad spend a semester leading an advanced graduate studio and participating in other studio reviews. Most such programs, however, favor architects who are already in the academia. I believe that a lot could be gained by encouraging interested practicing architects, on "sabbatical" from their offices, to apply for visiting teaching/research appointments at schools around the country. While emphasis for most regular academic appointments is placed on experience, teaching, and publications -- a condition that discourages practicing architects from considering a visiting teaching position -- schools interested in this "exchange" program between schools and offices would focus on the architect's design work and research potential, rather than research evidence.

A visiting, practicing architect, who would be selected in a process similar to that of hiring regular faculty, would design and offer a studio, probably assisted by a resident architecture instructor. He or she could also lead a research team, offer a seminar, or participate in graduate courses as a visiting scholar. This position would be similar to that of an adjunct professor,