

Challenges and Opportunities: Towards a Socially Responsible Curriculum in a Globalizing World

The architectural curricula in U.S. universities are often criticized for their inadequate and slow response to global and contemporary issues. Curricular revisions, even with respect to National Architectural Accreditation Board (NAAB) criteria, can be viewed as both superficial and rushed reactions to the fluctuating market in the construction industry, as well as to innovations in other disciplines, rather than as fundamental efforts to take leadership in responding to critical global issues. Most recent revisions in architectural curricula have focused on the two mainstream trends of sustainability and digital technology, both of which are well supported by industry and government—the source of financial resources. Given increasing attention to the issue of “Social Justice” in the humanities, questions arise on the viability of current architectural curricula in responding to complex problems in a globalizing world. The authors seek to critically examine this issue through an analysis of the NAAB criteria as an influential tool for architectural programs, and discuss opportunities and challenges offered by this tool. The paper concludes with reflections on imperative issues facing curricular transformation and their potential for social impact, as well as ways these could be addressed as minimum requirements for program accreditation.

INTRODUCTION

The architectural curricula in American universities are often criticized for their inadequate and slow response to global and contemporary issues. Curricular revisions, even with respect to National Architectural Accreditation Board (NAAB) criteria, can be viewed as both superficial and rushed reactions to the fluctuating market in the construction industry, as well as to innovations in other disciplines, rather than as fundamental efforts to take leadership in responding to critical global issues.¹ Most recent revisions in architectural curricula have focused on two mainstream trends—namely sustainability and digital technology—which are well supported by industry and government funding. The so-called NAAB “checklist” was initially envisioned as an accreditation foundation to ensure consistent education in architecture

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programs across the United States. Essentially, NAAB developed criteria and procedures to verify that each accredited program would meet basic standards for the proper and comprehensive education/training of future architects.² Yet, after all these years it appears that this accreditation checklist has turned into a somewhat amorphous goal rather than an essential requirement!

Challenges facing architecture curricula and accreditation requirements have led to a longstanding question that architectural education has been grappling with: What is the role of the architect and what should be the mission of an architecture program? Current issues pertaining to architectural education, such as the decline in the role of architects in the construction industry, the attrition of professional opportunities, the dearth of entrepreneurial and innovative approaches in architecture (compared to engineering and scientific disciplines), and an unacceptably high number of recent graduates who have not been able to become actively involved in the globalized market, point to potential major problems in the current architectural education model. Indeed, the decline in the active participation of architects in the marketplace poses potential restrictions on their leadership in solving imperative problems facing the global community.

Even though creativity lies in the nature of design (and architecture), one may ask why architects cannot achieve more. The answer, in part, lies in the dependency of architectural design thinking on the building industry.³ Despite numerous advances in technology, the building industry—and architecture in general—has not been able to keep up with the current pace of societal changes. The construction industry is a slowly growing field, leaving minimal opportunities for architects and designers to conceive architecture in a different fashion. Perhaps a shift in vision trajectory is needed—one that invests in and is derived from a social agenda rather than one that simply responds to technological capacity. In light of increasing global attention to concerns of “social justice” and “impact,” one wonders how leaders in architectural curricula reform are responding to these issues. Thus, this paper clarifies the shortage of NAAB criteria in terms of the “social impact” of architecture, which has led to serious educational gaps in architectural programs.

SOCIALLY-RESPONSIBLE ARCHITECTURE

The current direction of architectural education has raised concerns about the relatively minimal level involvement of architects as responsive members of society. While one can point to a number of contributors to this trend (e.g., a plethora of publications promoting do-it-yourself solutions to building design and execution), the fact remains that architects still appear to have distanced themselves from the public interest. In this sense, there seems to be three distinct trends in current architecture that rarely overlap: the large-scale architecture promoted by corporate firms and brand architects; the profit-based architectural trend espoused by non-architects, especially developers and investors; and trendy design projects, both large and small, promoted in popular design magazines and on the bookshelves of big-box home improvement stores. In short, “Public Interest Design” still does not have a core place at the architectural curricula table.

Most current trends either promote large-scale projects, luxury buildings, or “paper architecture” as a high-end fashion, which do not necessarily address public issues; and even if they do, groundbreaking solutions are scarce. Moreover, the present obsession with publishing or exhibiting the architectural work of “starchitects” in recent decades has overshadowed the efforts of lesser

known architects who seek to make an impact—both in the classroom and in practice. Some may ask what architects should do other than designing buildings. It appears that the lack of a utopian view, which was once the driving force behind Modernism (and other major styles), has drastically decreased the impact of architects. Architecture today faces big responsibilities in solving ‘real’ problems such as poverty, public health concerns, and natural/man-made disasters; nonetheless, it seems that architectural curricula rarely address these issues in a structured manner.

There are numerous cases highlighting the failure of architectural education to tackle global concerns. One such example is the proliferation of cookie-cutter, low-income housing projects, which have not significantly elevated the social condition of their residents—in spite of the availability of advanced technologies and materials. In addition, once vibrant and productive, now-shrinking cities such as Baltimore, Detroit, and Buffalo speak to missed opportunities and the vital leadership role that architects could have played in collaborating with decision makers and other stakeholders in solving social problems and addressing broader issues of the society. A recent example of a slow-growing shift to remedy this myopic approach is the City of Baltimore reaching out to IBA Hamburg for their development model in engaging various stakeholders for the Inner Harbor area and Baltimore City urban development.⁴ The existence and success of such initiatives as IBA Hamburg in Europe allude to differences in levels of operation of architects (and possibly architectural education) in comparison to the U.S.

GLOBAL VISION

The current globalizing economy has turned architecture into an international phenomenon and enterprise. This means that there is urgency for architects to embrace a comprehensive vision in addressing social and cultural issues, given that in this current global network any weak node has the potential to affect the others.⁵ The same trend can be seen in architectural education as a discipline as well, in that it forces students to think beyond their local and national borders. The necessity of thinking in ways that address damaging problems such as climate change and deprived communities calls for a holistic vision at a global scale.⁶

The question, however, is whether our current model of architectural education trains students who are capable of addressing both global and local issues in their projects. Most architectural curricula, including design studios, are inclined to prioritize urban architecture over vernacular and rural, and seek design interventions as ultimate studio products. With an emphasis on U.S.-based urban architectural design, little room is left for a “research studio” model whereby students engage in real-world problems in-depth, and have a real opportunity to learn from the global context. A similarly blinkered view is applied to architectural history classes in which the coverage of “non-Western” cultures is marginalized under the influence of Ameri-centric and Euro-centric perspectives. In fact, until just a decade ago the main architectural history references neglected “other” cultures to a significant extent. This Western-centric vision has also affected the conceptualization and formation of study abroad programs, which are still mostly based on visits to bastions of Western architectural traditions. In both cases (an educational focus that tends to disregard the “other” and Euro-centric study abroad programs) the West is still the “center” and thus is considered as an exporter, sender, and giver of knowledge and technology, while the East is “exotic” and seen as an importer, receiver, and taker. Such an “orientalist”

view is also reflected in the way that the Southern Hemisphere cultures are represented in architectural curricula. In short, these issues and many others raise serious doubts about the preparation of graduates for a rapidly-changed career that requires a much deeper global understanding and a deep global sense of responsibility among architects.

REAL PROBLEMS

As noted earlier, recent years haven't been kind to architects who have been dealing with severe budget cuts and a fragile housing and construction market. This tough economy in the United States and Europe has therefore encouraged architects to look for opportunities in other parts of the world. This global market, however, requires architects to think beyond the conventional boundaries of architecture to find new solutions for real and bigger problems such as poverty and globalization. It should be noted that this is not a new mission for architects. Three decades ago, the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathi criticized architects for focusing on their rich clients at the expense of ignoring the clients most in need—the middle class and the poor.⁷

Despite burgeoning opportunities, architects do not seem to be equipped with the vision and skills to deal with pressing global problems. The current educational system is more focused on form and design (instead of problem-solving) and monumental architecture (rather than vernacular). Issues such as climate change are not still addressed comprehensively as a root concern and as interconnected with social systems. As an example, nearly a decade after its launch, the Solar Decathlon Competition Project—which absorbs millions of dollars from modest architecture programs—has not still resulted in revolutionary changes in local architecture and improvements for those most in need. Solar Decathlon exemplifies the marginal impact of serious incentives in architectural education and their slowness in affecting the real market. The supremacy of “paper architecture” that satisfies the ego of the architect, reflects the architect's absence from real society and decision-making processes, and highlights the lack of a dialogue between architects and the public has created an anti-architect society that tends to underestimate the role of architects.

TRANSDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATIONS

Over the last four decades, architecture as a career has rapidly changed, requiring practitioners to adapt themselves to the interdisciplinary demands of the profession and market. Architects, architectural historians, and landscape architects should be credited for taking initiatives to enhance interdisciplinary conversations in their meetings and symposia. More, however, is needed. Contemporary architects have to increase exchanges with experts from “non-neighbor” fields. The multi-disciplinary facet of architecture is not a new phenomenon, but it calls for a broader and more systematic dialogue with other fields.

These interdisciplinary collaborations are driven by the demands of the market rather than potential opportunities that could be created by architects. Despite the current emphasis on collaborative efforts with scientists and engineers, architecture as a profession (and not in theory) seems to be disjointed from interactions with experts in humanities. “Systems thinking,” an emerging avenue for design professions, would be an outcome of collaboration between architecture and other fields. While nowadays it is common to include, say, energy experts as part of any major construction project, fewer efforts have been made to involve sociologists, anthropologists, and macro-/micro-economists as partners in design.

This lack of collaboration in the “real world” is also rooted in the split between scholars and practitioners (professionals), or so-called “realists” and “idealists” in architectural programs. This contrast is even visible in the NAAB checklist, which tends to separate architectural problems from illegible aspects of design. A shift in the current educational paradigm requires revisiting the NAAB criteria and architecture curricula, acknowledging complexities residing at the heart of architecture. By acknowledging architecture as a complex human enterprise, architectural education will find opportunities to go beyond formal, structural, or environmental issues in order address and solve complicated problems.

ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

The social responsibility of architects demands that they be innovative, mindful, and entrepreneurial. Unfortunately, the major problem with architecture schools today seems to be their focus on design aspects of architecture and their negligence of the larger role that architects can play within their communities and societies. Most schools struggle to train visionary architects who can do more than just design attractive and/or utilitarian buildings. Indeed, the notion of promotion more socially responsible design necessitates a radical change in the architectural discourse—one that goes beyond the territories of tectonics and technology; this is a change that reflects the needs of human beings regardless of their geographical location. How can an architect’s vision contribute to helping billions of people who live below the poverty line? How can architectural inventiveness improve the economics and life experience for all? IDEO CEO Tim Brown addresses this issue: “Beyond philanthropy, why should global companies invest in social impact projects in developing countries?”⁸ Core to his argument is an entrepreneurial spirit in design thinking as means for promoting micro-economies in deprived communities. How can design innovation create social change? The answers to this quest is partly addressed in the field of design through social entrepreneurship, which aims to create and sustain social value. With nearly one third of the world’s urban population living in slums, architecture faces a big question: How can architecture embrace a broader vision of design thinking that reaches out to the underserved—one that calls for collaboration, trans-disciplinary thinking, and product-oriented design?

The technical and utilitarian outlook of NAAB and NCARB seem to have led to the slight discounting of innovation in architecture. It may also have diminished the architect’s main responsibility within society. This dilemma refers to that fundamental question about the contemporary and future role of the architect in society. While there is no simple answer to that question, it is clear (at least to the author) that our responsibility as architects is much more than merely designing ‘buildings’ for those who can afford the privilege. It is up to architects to define their own market and open new fields and initiate interdisciplinary collaborations. As noted earlier, however, the regrettable dearth of visionary and entrepreneurial spirit in architecture has not fostered the exploration of new grounds for practice that address pressing social problems, both here and globally.

CURRENT NAAB CRITERIA

On August 29, 2013, NAAB issued draft criteria for accreditation, which include changes in the Student Performance Criteria that are more integrative and visionary compared to the analogous 2009 document. Specifically, the new draft argues for criteria that address issues of social responsibility, civic engagement, and public interest at a higher level. The 2013 draft proposes changes in “five perspectives,” which include leadership and collaboration, university context, career development, stewardship of the environment, and community and social responsibility. These new

perspectives “are intended to address values and core principles held in common throughout the profession and the academy relative to practice and discipline of architecture rather than to describe the viewpoint of each collateral organization.”⁹ Among the new perspectives, two stand out as relevant to our discussion of social impact: Leadership and Collaboration, Community and Social Responsibility.¹⁰

While these new perspectives call for further reinforcement of core values emphasizing social responsibility, much of the content draft remains intact compared to the 2009 edition. Common to both of them is an implicit emphasis on notions such as social responsibility in terms of civic engagement and impact. However, neither draft specifies how to get there. Indeed, such issues are expected to be addressed in detail by individual institutions. This vagueness raises questions and concerns about the extent to which these values are interpreted and adopted in architecture programs. Thus, it remains ambiguous as to what extent NAAB-accredited programs are obligated to craft curricula with a robust commitment to social impact. Most schools appear to be content to offer courses “seasoned” with issues of social responsibility, rather than actively placing this notion at the core of course content.

Prior to a discussion of the role of architecture programs in leading and advocating for a true socially impactful curriculum, we need to better understand the Student Performance Criteria. For that purpose, we have used the August 2013 draft, which reflects NAAB’s most recent thinking on this issue. In reviewing the new criteria, we highlighted items that both directly reference “social impact,” as well as items that strongly implicate the notion of “social impact” minus that precise verbiage. This review facilitates a better understanding of the current structure, as well as ways in which these requirements could suggest a constructive change in curricula. This review followed a SWOT analysis to identify four distinct realms: (A) Critical Thinking and Representation; (B) Integrated Building Practices, Technical Skills and Knowledge; (C) Professional Practice, and (D) Integrated Architectural Solutions.¹¹ In each realm, key “learning aspirations” helped to establish overarching goals permeating the various items.

Realm A (Critical Thinking and Representation) sets high aspirations that advocate for a broad breadth of learning that include pressing societal issues. However, the very notion of promoting critical thinking in social sciences with a commitment to action and social justice is ambiguous here. Setting “aspirations” does not necessarily promote a critical agenda towards social impact; nor does emphasizing modes of representation urge programs to critically examine innovative modes of representation, thereby opening a seamless line of communication with the public. Twitter is a good example here: an un-editorial open source surpassing highly edited media in its audience and impact.¹² A detailed analysis on pertinent criteria is as follows:

A.2 Design Thinking Skills: Presents a limited view (visual and physical approach) of design thinking. Emphasis on the use of abstract ideas is suggestive of formal investigations. Questions arise on the connectivity of abstract formal investigations with real-world problems. Certainly there is an opportunity to redefine design thinking in light of current trends of holistic thinking and criticism. For example, promoting public health in deprived communities through the built environment is a study that requires design thinking skills way beyond formal investigations.

A.3 Investigative Skills and Applied Research: There is much room to expand on investigative skills and research to include broader issues concerning humanities and social sciences.

A.4 Architectural Design Skills: Attention to social and cultural dimensions of design seems to be absent. Design skills are defined in terms of formal issues culminating in three-dimensional design. Targeting serious social problems as part of design skills could be an added dimension to the criteria.

A.5 Use of Precedents: There is a missed opportunity in this criterion to critically examine social and cultural problems through the use of pertinent precedents. The current trend uses precedents as tools to investigate formal, spatial and, to some degree, environmental analyses. While the language of the document weighs toward an urban scale, there is no indication that a precedent should embody issues of global concern. The use of precedent as a viable model of education emerges from law school curricula, where cases are used as opportunities to revisit sophisticated situations and provide a platform for decision-making for students. For a socially responsible curriculum, this criterion ideally could be a trans-disciplinary investigation to expose students to real problems “out there” (e.g. China’s aging communities, sea level rise in deprived communities, etc.). Questions arise why global or vernacular have not been highlighted here? The current tendency to use historic or celebrated contemporary buildings (often by signature architects) depresses the possibility of using precedents that incorporate “lower forms” of architectural creativity, for example. Ideally, the study of precedent should contribute to the development of disciplinary “criticism,” thereby promoting general critical thinking. Viewed this way, one could argue that the “discovery of absence” of certain appropriate design decisions in an ordinary building could deliver equally powerful educational outcomes. The final item in this criterion is the lack of emphasis on the use of precedent as a contextualized entity—a building in social, political, economical, and environmental contexts.

A.6 Historical Traditions and Global Culture: This criterion takes a passive position by emphasizing “understanding.” When discussing global culture, we tend to look at the historical significance of an edifice and encourage students to “learn culture” through a historic lens. Many of these cultures have experienced significant changes and are currently facing new circumstances. For instance, courses on world architecture do not invest in addressing recent history. History is discussed in terms of types and edifices, and critically examining dynamic evolutions of tradition are often marginal. How should programs plan to address both issues—and in so doing encourage students to both learn and contribute. Again, “research studio” models are good examples here, where the intention is not “intervention,” but rather “understanding” complex sets of relationships amongst various sets of flows. Such an educational setting provides ample opportunities to learn from global culture and past/recent traditions of other cultures.

A.7 Cultural Diversity: The passive tone of the language (understanding) does not provoke the necessity for taking leadership and promoting cultural diversity. Understanding is not enough; rather, what comes after that is key. Action that emerge from understanding can be a decisive element in promoting notions such as “collaboration” and “leadership” to solve critical problems in the spirit of preserving and promoting cultural diversity.

Realm B (Integrated Building Practices, Technical Skills and Knowledge) is designed to specifically address technicalities of the architectural education. As such, an analysis of this realm relevant to notion of “social impact” is not necessary.

Realm C (Professional Practice) presents the most relevance to issues of social responsibility and impact at the professional level. Identified student learning aspirations are structurally targeted towards conventional definitions of professional practice.

C.1 Stakeholder Roles in Architecture: A missed opportunity is noticed here to comprehensively address all potential stakeholders in architectural projects, especially those with non-conventional clients.

C.4 Non-traditional Forms of Practice: This very important criterion offers great potential for addressing critical changes that occur in the nature of architectural practice. Another missed opportunity is noticed here—namely, to emphasize and articulate alternative ways of practice that indicate the following paradigm shift in the profession: Architects are no longer the sole creators of an edifice or landscape; rather, they are creative collaborators in teamwork.

C.6 Professional Ethics: This criterion is implicit in necessitating a commitment to action, and thus impact. Professional ethics here is tailored towards legal issues and the existing business structures in the field. In a world where the building industry is directly responsible for consuming a considerable amount of the world's energy (approx. 50%), architects are powerfully positioned to reduce that onerous percentage through their vision and decisions. The notion of ethics should be discussed in broad terms and in relation to global problems.¹³

Realm D (Integrated Architectural Solutions) is a new realm with the goal of advancing architectural education towards a more integrated experience. There is much room to expand this realm and play on “solutions” as beyond technical and environmental attributes. Identifying an expanded context that is based on informed solutions is essential. For example, throughout the entire NAAB document the theme of “environmental stewardship” is briefly addressed as an isolated topic—although in reality it interacts dynamically with social, cultural, political systems and, therefore, requires an active collaborative platform.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: REFLECTIONS ON THE ARCHITECTURAL CURRICULA

The new NAAB draft demonstrates well-intended efforts in promoting a culture of social responsibility and integrative education as basic requirements for accreditation. As such, it offers new opportunities to advance architectural curricula towards further responsiveness to concerns of national and global social importance. Since the NAAB sets minimum requirements, addressing the notion of social responsibility and impact becomes an essential responsibility of architectural programs. However, the “learning aspirations” in each realm and the “five new perspectives” offer an added dimension to reinforce a social agenda for the Student Performance Criteria. Leadership and collaboration calls for a life-long mutual nurturing of “self” and “world.” Community and Social Responsibility lay out the rules of citizenship including issues of ethics and public service.

To its detriment, the architectural curricula present an obvious recognition of urban as context, with little in the realm of rural and less urbanite perspectives as context (directly influenced by the NAAB). This presents challenges in ensuring that current criteria meets global demands for a new generation of activist-architects who wish to pursue non-conventional forms of practice. Non-conventional forms of practice could be articulated through both a spirit of activism and entrepreneurship, to provide new social and economic contexts for change.

Some major challenges in the Student Performance Criteria pertain to a lack of emphasis on “thinking in systems.” In a world of increasingly interdependent systems (social, political, environmental, etc.), it is crucial that systems thinking be addressed in the new criteria. For example, an emphasis on “environmental stewardship” seen in multiple instances in the narrative must be considered in

ENDNOTES

1. This paper examines the newly released NAAB Student Performance Criteria Draft in August 29, 2013.
2. These standards were developed with professional schools, academic institutions, professional societies, state registration boards, members of the profession and related professions, students and the public.
3. The lack of visionary approaches could be also considered as another reason why the leadership role of architects in society

close context with “social systems.”¹⁴ This also opens up scales of scholarship and critical thinking. Articulation of criteria to promote the necessity of acknowledging systems thinking at a various scales, and emphasizing the importance of contextualized education is both a challenge and opportunity for contemporary architectural pedagogy.

is in decline. These issues reveal the significance of revisiting the aims and ambitions of architectural programs.

4. For more information please see: <http://www.iba-hamburg.de/en/the-iba-story/iba-hamburg.html>
5. This goes beyond the mainstream vision of the 20th century, wherein architecture was still operating with a degree of independency from sociocultural issues at a global scale.
6. Today architecture graduates are less exposed to global thinking. This is simply because their education has not promoted such career paths as viable option, and there is no robust economical infrastructure in these areas to be considered as “viable” market for graduates.
7. Hassan Fathi, *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*, University of Chicago Press, 2000.
8. Opening session talk by Tim Brown at 2012 Clinton Global Initiative: Designing for Impact. (<http://www.fastcodesign.com/1670862/ideos-ceo-5-reasons-global-firms-should-serve-the-developing-world>)
9. NAAB 2013 Draft Proposal, released in September 2013. P.12.
10. The NAAB describes these perspectives as: “Leadership and Collaboration: The program must describe its culture for instilling, developing and promoting leadership and collaboration across diverse groups and stakeholders. This includes a description of how students are being prepared to: nurture a climate of civic engagement, including a commitment to professional and public service and leadership; live and work in a global world where diversity, distinctiveness, self-worth and dignity are nurtured and respected; understand diverse and collaborative roles and responsibilities of related disciplines; understand pressing environmental, social, and economic challenges and their impact on architects; and, emerge as leaders in the academic and professional setting. Community and Social Responsibility: The program must describe its approach to developing young professionals who are prepared to be active, engaged citizens able to understand what it means to be a responsible member of society and to act on that understanding. This includes the responsibility to act ethically, to communicate honestly and with integrity, to treat all persons with dignity and respect, and to nurture a commitment to professional and public service.”
11. The authors conducted a SWOT analysis of the Student Performance Criteria. The present paper only portrays a snippet view of the study according to the paper’s structure and limits.
12. One could formulate questions on high quality and sophisticated visual representations in the architectural field and their capacity and effectiveness in reaching out to the society when public opinion matters.
13. In an attempt to establish Student Performance Criteria for a socially responsible curriculum, one could consider demonstrating professional commitment through leadership and collaboration before commencing the practice of architecture. In this regard, the Hippocratic oath in the field of medical sciences is informing in how the social agenda could be further instilled in the architectural education.
14. Landscape Architecture Professor Emeritus Randolph Hester argues for the interconnectedness of environmental and social systems in his seminal work: *Designing for Environmental Democracy*. The book also argues for the interdependency of Social and Environmental systems. Therefore, it becomes essential to revisit the issue of “Environmental Stewardship” in close association with social stewardship.