

# Preparing for Leadership: The Case for Leadership Education in Architecture Schools

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## INTRODUCTION

*"Perhaps never in history have the talents, skills, the broad vision and the ideals of architecture been more urgently needed"*  
—Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang<sup>1</sup>

*"It's a challenge to all of us as AIA members to boldly vision a better future for ourselves and our profession in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "Better" in the sense of better education, better preparation to act effectively, better partners, better citizens. A constant focus (of the 1999 AIA Convention speakers) was the potential – indeed the obligation – for us as architects to expand our influence by embracing the call and responsibility of leadership".*  
—Michael J. Stanton, FAIA<sup>2</sup>

*"The habit of leadership begins in school...we must breed a culture of engagement with our communities rather than foster the reclusive role that architects seem to play. There can be no reclusiveness for a profession that designs the environments for human activity."*  
—Ronald Altoon, FAIA<sup>3</sup>

As the profession of architecture endeavors to "redefine" itself<sup>4</sup>, many are calling for architects to act as leaders in a broad spectrum of venues, from our relationship with others in the design and construction industry to the civic/political arena. Many of these calls to leadership include a plea for more leadership skill development in schools of architecture; however, these calls often fail to articulate a clear distinction of what skills are required, or even a clear definition of "leadership" within the context of architectural practice. Perhaps more significantly, we have not tackled the toughest question of all, which is "leadership to what end?". Are we improving our leadership skills as a means to more power and authority or as a means to more effective practice and service?

Can we develop insights into the leadership approaches most appropriate to the broad spectrum of private and public spheres we hope and dream of influencing? Contemporary leadership studies suggest that leadership skills and style are not a one-size-fits-all solution and that inappropriate approaches to leadership (and followership) can undermine the plans of those with the best of intentions.<sup>5</sup> If Ronald Altoon is right, that "the habit of leadership begins in school", how do educators begin to cultivate an ethic of

leadership and engagement in future practitioners? What training do we need to offer our students to foster the sea change in self-perception that the leaders of our profession are calling for? To effect positive change in any of our targeted arenas we (practitioners and educators) must first articulate a vision of our leadership goals, and identify the approach to leadership most effective in those settings.

This paper will look at the models of leadership which might be effective in some of the settings where architects find opportunities to lead, and will explore how these leadership skills might be developed inside students' academic experience.

## REFRAMING THE ARCHITECT'S ROLE

Throughout our history, the profession of architecture has struggled with competing (and often conflicting) visions of our relationship to our clients, to collaborators within the design and construction industry, and with the larger society.<sup>6</sup> As with other professions, our attitudes towards each of these groups have evolved in response to shifts in the economy and structure of the construction industry, shifts in the legal framework of practice (particularly our view of risk and liability), and shifts in the relationship between professions and society in general. In the last twenty years in particular, architects have seen significant erosion in their power and authority relative to other participants in the design and construction process. The response to these phenomena has been varied, but in general it seems that the profession is dismayed by the loss and anxious to halt it.<sup>7</sup> In response the AIA, the architectural press, and to some degree our professional schools have sought to encourage architects to (re) assert "leadership" within the design and construction industry and to expand their sphere of influence in the civic and political arenas that influence the physical environment. Advocates for this "engagement" initiative cite a range of reasons for the urgency of their call. Leading practitioners, educators, politicians and theorists have gone as far as to assert that the future of our profession and our communities hinges on our ability to reframe the architect's leadership role.

These calls to leadership highlight the conflict between our desire to exercise more power and authority as a profession, and the ser-

vice ethic engrained in our oldest professional ideals. An example of these competing motivations can be found in the AIA's current "Livable Communities Initiative", intended to effect much needed positive change in our communities and to position the profession as a powerful "player" in the emerging public discourse over growth and sprawl. The "enlightened self-interest" inherent in this example is not a bad thing; however, it illustrates the confusion surrounding the term *leadership*, a confusion we must address before we can prepare students to be truly effective leaders.

Since the Second World War, leadership has emerged as a field of study within many academic settings and other research institutions. Examples include public policy leadership programs such as the Kennedy School of Government, the Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, and efforts by private foundations such as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Kettering Foundation to support leadership development through fellowships and grant making. As a result of five decades of study and reflection, a complex and nuanced understanding of leadership has emerged, along with an awareness that leadership is *context sensitive* – the way one leads is highly contingent on the situation. Popular views of leadership, however, are largely shaped by observation of leaders in politics, private enterprise, and hierarchical organizations.<sup>8</sup> This view centers on the expectation that leaders will be heroes – men or women of passion and vision and the courage to act on these qualities. This view seems to exert strong influence over architects as well, and plays to our deeply held values regarding the transformative power of design and designers. This traditional view of leadership relies heavily on the belief in personal characteristics as a determinant of leadership success – that one is mysteriously anointed with leadership qualities, or learns them at the knee of an inspiring mentor.<sup>9</sup> The qualities that characterize this view of leadership include decisiveness, persuasiveness, assertiveness, commitment, and courage. Our system of educating architects encourages and cultivates some of these traits (commitment to design quality for example), but has acknowledged weakness regarding others (such as verbal and written communication – key tools of persuasion).<sup>10</sup> This view of leadership has undoubtedly motivated many architects to remarkable accomplishments, however it also has the unfortunate consequence of relegating those who don't see themselves as "anointed" to the sidelines (and off the hook).

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Another influence on our understanding of leadership and its requisite skills comes from a focus on leadership in corporate and institutional settings. The decade of the 1980's saw a remarkable expansion in leadership research. Practicing architects, like their peers across the spectrum of American businesses, have become fascinated with organizational leadership theory. As one could expect given the hierarchical management structure of most firms and the significant growth in the size of architectural practices, much of the focus has been on the roles of firm principles and senior managers as organizational leaders. Organizational leadership theory, although still strongly tied to a focus on setting objec-

tives (immortalized as "the vision thing" in the 1992 US presidential election), has moved away from the notion of a single form of leadership and has developed a heightened sensitivity to the relationship between leaders and followers and the overall context within which leaders act. At the forefront of this move towards understanding the role of leadership within architectural practice in the past two decades were groups such as The Coxe Group, David Maister, Jim Franklin, and others, who stressed the influence of the values and goals of principals on the shape of individual practices. This effort to understand how successful practices work has also resulted in an interest in the interpersonal skills that principals and mid-level managers must master to be effective at leading their growing practices. This has led to an increased interest in the cultivation of leadership skills, evidenced by the number of workshops, seminars and programs geared towards this topic at professional gatherings in the last two decades.<sup>11</sup> A growing sense that the profession faces major pressures to adapt to the impact of information technology and to shifts in project delivery methods keep the interest in leadership methods and theory high. Characteristic of this interest are the essays of Richard Hobbs found in the monthly AIA newspaper, the *AIArchitect*. Hobbs, leader of the AIA's Professional Practice Group regularly offers synopses of current business leadership theory, ranging from Peter Drucker to *Wired* magazine.<sup>12</sup>

Insight into the demands of collaborative process – either within the context of increasingly larger architectural practices or in dealings with clients, builders and the hosts of supporting participants to the design and construction process – is key to preparing students for the challenge of leadership in this time of "redefinition". As educators, we must balance our traditional emphasis on the individual designer with an understanding of the inherently social dimension of design, and help our students develop the skills to successfully lead in collaborative endeavors. This skill set includes the foundation skills of speaking and writing with clarity as well as facilitation, mediation and negotiation skills, what Franklin calls "groupwork".<sup>13</sup> Research centered on the dynamics of leading innovative teams by Helga Hohn suggests that groups engaged in creative work (unique, non-routine) move through two distinctive modes of work – *generative modes* and *focussing modes* – which require different approaches to leadership if they are to be successful. Hohn suggests that leaders of creative teams must be equally skilled at the management of both processes and must know how to effectively combine the "process concerns" key to the generative mode with the "task concerns"<sup>14</sup> essential to the focussing mode.

Students should also be introduced to the notion of transforming leadership – the view of leadership that emphasizes the leader as *servant*, supporting and empowering others to help achieve a common goal. James MacGregor Burns' vision of servant leadership calls on architects to look beyond the transactional nature of most exchanges in practice settings and to envision an elevated purpose to the practice of architecture. This model requires one to give up much of what we traditionally associate with power and authority – the autonomy to make decisions alone. This shift in perspective is especially important and challenging for architects because it is in conflict with our culture of individualism and our desire for design authority and autonomy. This notion of the leader as servant to the

group of followers is where the profession's conflicts between power and service must be addressed. As we come to understand more about leadership – especially leadership of creative processes, the paradigm of leadership as a means to power and authority is increasingly challenged.

## PERIPHERAL VISION

*“The profession does very little to prepare would-be architects for the crowds of participants who will want a say in their projects”<sup>15</sup>*

In addition to developing the skills required to work more effectively with colleagues, architecture students must develop greater insight into the complex web of forces that shape design in the context of practice: clients, consultants and other design professionals, public agencies, community groups, city councils, financiers, etc. This can only be accomplished by designing curricula with opportunities to study and understand the interests and approaches of other disciplines that shape the environment, including other design disciplines (i.e. planning, landscape architecture, interior architecture, and engineering, as well as building construction, development and finance). To have the effect of expanding students' leadership potential, however, these efforts to expand our “peripheral vision” must be brought back into the design studio. Students must be challenged to integrate these often-contradictory viewpoints into their work, and to expand their understanding of design to include effective leadership of this ever-growing team of collaborators.

Interdisciplinary collaboration presents a distinct set of leadership challenges which are at odds with the way most schools prepare architects. Christopher Barlow of the Graduate School of Business at IIT<sup>16</sup> notes that in this interdisciplinary setting “a new kind of complexity comes into play”, in which the “truths” of different perspectives conflict with each other. In these contexts differences in cognitive style, cultural backgrounds, personality and values can destroy all hopes of collaboration. Barlow also notes that in our intensive efforts to teach students to understand a certain perspective, we generally only expose them to problems that can be solved in that perspective. The more success a student realizes in solving these “single domain” problems, the more likely they will encounter problems applying their knowledge in the complex and messy “multiple domain” context of the real world. I believe this challenge is particularly relevant for graduates of architecture schools, where as Dana Cuff notes students are most often exposed to “pure design” divorced from the dynamic context of practice.<sup>17</sup> The result, according to Cuff, is a skewed understanding of design, and a missed opportunity to teach students the “social arts” essential to leadership in intra- and interdisciplinary collaborations.

## LEADERSHIP IN THE CIVIC ARENA

*“There is so little involvement by architects in community organizations,” an Indianapolis architect told us. “You just don't see*

*it in our profession. We need to get the profession back to the status of community leaders”<sup>18</sup>*

The call to leadership in the community arena resonates deeply with the professional ideal of service to society codified in our ethical codes and taught in our professional schools. Over the last two decades in particular, leaders of the profession have been urging architects to become more directly involved in civic leadership, through public service on planning boards and in elected offices, as well as in advocacy roles related to community design and planning. While many of the leadership skills developed in practice settings will serve them well in this arena (i.e. collaborative process skills) other business-based approaches may fail to serve as effective means to positive results. The civic arena is different in many key ways from the leadership challenges of the professional office and collegial institutions, and architects must become sensitive to the differences to succeed as community leaders.

One key example of the difference between private and civic arenas can be found in the dispersal of decision-making power, or perhaps more significantly, the power to oppose decisions. Within the last thirty years, most U.S. cities have seen power shift from a small group of business and political leaders to a widely dispersed network of groups advocating for their “special interests”, thus “fragmenting power and political will”.<sup>19</sup> This dispersal of power is readily evident in disputes over planning and development, where there seem to be an endless number of groups who can say “no”, but few empowered to find a way to say “yes”. When architects do wade into the civic arena, it is often as an advocate for one of the aforementioned “special interests, a role framed too often by a transactional approach which makes it difficult to act (or at least to be seen as acting) in the broader public interest.

Leadership in the civic realm also requires a shift away from project-based thinking to broader systemic approaches to the challenges faced by many of our communities. Using Hohn's perspective on leading creative efforts, leadership in many contemporary community settings requires more focus on process-centered skills (“have we created new ideas?”) than the task-centered leadership skills commonly developed in management settings (“have we solved the problem?”)<sup>20</sup> Sharon Sutton characterizes this as a shift from a “how-to”, vertical, discipline-bound thinking to a lateral thinking, “why-to” approach that can articulate ways to transcend the narrowly focussed self-interests that dominate debate over the physical environment.<sup>21</sup>

## PREPARING FOR CIVIC LEADERSHIP

So how do we prepare architecture students for leadership skills in the civic realm?

As noted earlier, I believe one of the most effective places to begin is in the design studio. We must manage to broaden the framework of design projects in ways designed to help students understand the broad spectrum of interests that come into play - on even the

smallest of projects, public or private - and we must help them develop the collaborative leadership skills to work effectively in these settings. For the past eight years, Auburn University's Rural Studio program has allowed 5<sup>th</sup> Year students to program, design, and construct projects ranging from a small smokehouse adjacent to a private residence to several community centers. In addition to the technical challenges of constructing their designs, students must engage real clients, the economics of the project, and the full spectrum of civic groups, public agencies, funding sources, sub-contractors and material vendors in an inclusive and inherently collaborative design process. As remarkable as the final structures are, the insight gained in the "making" of these mostly public projects is the real measure of their success. The experience of engaging the full spectrum of issues and problems involved in these projects has helped to prepare these students for leadership in their professional life in a unique and transforming way.

*"As designers of the environment, architects' intellectual leadership is needed.... to help clarify the personal and political actions that will preserve the nation's quality of life in the twenty-first century."*<sup>22</sup>

We must also help our students see beyond the narrow vision of the architect as steward of "good taste" to a vision of the architect as *steward of the public interest in the physical realm*. Connecting back to Burn's view of transformative leadership, Sharon Sutton challenges architects to break out of a discipline-bound view of our role and to "unravel the dilemmas associated with place - to reconceive it as a collective, rather than private, property".<sup>23</sup> This "redefinition" of the architect's civic role is perhaps the most critical challenge we face as educators. We must help students see that our most valuable contribution is our ability to help communities envision the physical consequences of civic decisions, inserting into public discourse a perspective most often left off the table.

We can cultivate this focus on *envisioning the public interest* in the design studio by the projects we choose. Rather than focussing on "test tube" projects and assignments devoid of consequences beyond technical and/or formal concerns, we can design studio assignments that allow students to consider issues from the front lines of community debate over the physical realm. As a by-product of this pedagogical objective, the students' work is often helpful in illustrating to political and community stakeholders the physical ramifications of the positions they're advocating. It also provides communities with sets of possibilities they often never envisioned as possible.

As architectural educators we can involve students in the task of cultivating greater public awareness of the designed environment through participation in physical environmental education initiatives in grades K-12. These educational opportunities, along with other public education and awareness programs, increase a community's understanding that almost every physical setting of their lives is the consequence of choices made in both the private and public realm.

*"Perhaps more than any other time, it is during the college years that those qualities of competence, caring, and character should be cultivated."*<sup>24</sup>

We can also have a tremendous impact on students' vision of the architect's role in society by the values and actions we model for them during their academic careers. Dana Cuff, echoed by Altoon, notes that "the ethos of the profession is born in schools" and that faculty are commonly the first professional architects students encounter in the socialization process of architecture school. Students form their first and often lasting perceptions of the behavior and beliefs that frame professional life based on the tacit and explicit values modeled by their faculty mentors. If we desire to cultivate a more "engaged profession", architecture curricula *and architecture faculty* must embrace an ethic of community outreach and engagement.

## CONCLUSION

The tools we need to prepare for the challenge of leadership, the curriculum examples, studio formats and outreach programs, are already in existence at many schools of architecture. Community design centers, social issues studios, and public education initiatives have been a staple of architecture schools for decades. Many have established a strong culture of community service at the schools that utilize these tools. What we must do, however, is elevate leadership and service issues within the critical discourse of our professional schools and professional societies. This critical discourse must include both educators and practitioners in a collaborative examination of what we wish to accomplish through leadership, as well as how we can cultivate a culture of leadership within the profession of Architecture.

If the scholarship of leadership is a relative new comer to the academic scene, it is younger still when applied to our calling. Programs which engage in a critical discourse about the changing context of the architect's role in practice and in society, such as the Center for the Study of Practice at the University of Cincinnati, are essential to the development of a deeper understanding of how leadership is applied to the context of practice. However, further research is urgently needed and our schools can provide an essential service to the profession by examining successful approaches to leadership within, and outside of, our discipline. I believe this examination will lend support to those among us calling for a re-examination of the "design culture"<sup>25</sup> which architecture schools have stubbornly adhered to since the profession emerged from its formative years in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Dana Cuff notes that Architecture's professional ethos is built around design quality - that we assign design the status of a "master value".<sup>26</sup> Cultivation of this ethos begins on the first day of design studio and is reinforced through our professional lives. I believe that architecture students must hear and participate in critical discussions of leadership and service from the beginning of their professional training as well as throughout their internship and professional careers if we are to cultivate leadership as a *master*

value within the profession. This will require a broadening of our skill sets, a broadening of our perspectives, and an examination of our motivations and professional culture – key steps to take if we are to meaningfully “embrace the call and responsibility of leadership”.<sup>27</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Boyer, Ernest and Mitgang, Lee *Building Community: A new Future for Architecture and Education*, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996, p 129.

<sup>2</sup>Stanton, Michael J. “Bold Vision for a Better Future” in the *AIArchitect*, June 1999.

<sup>3</sup>Altoon, Ronald A. “The Legacy of Dreams, Trust, and Courage” in the *AIArchitect*, July 1998

<sup>4</sup>Over the course of 1995 & 1996, the AIA’s Practice and Prosperity Task Force conducted a series of meetings and workshops intended to develop a “framework for a redefined profession”. The findings of this effort were published in the *AIArchitect* and presented as a video entitled “*Redefining the Architecture Profession*”. A transcript of this video may be found on the AIA web site at [www.e-architect.com/pia/redifprof/p&pvideo.asp](http://www.e-architect.com/pia/redifprof/p&pvideo.asp)

<sup>5</sup>Chrislip, David E. and Larson, Carl E. *Collaborative Leadership: how citizens and civic leaders can make a difference*, Jossey-Bass, 1994

<sup>6</sup>Cuff, Dana *Architecture, The Story of Practice*, MIT Press, 1991, Chapter 2: “Beliefs and Practice”

<sup>7</sup>Fisher, Thomas, “Architects and Power” in *Progressive Architecture*, February 1992, pp. 47-51.

<sup>8</sup>Grint, Keith, Ed. *Leadership: Classical, Contemporary and Critical Approaches*, Oxford University Press, 1997, Chapter 2 “Traditional Leadership” pp. 83-88.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Boyer and Mitgang, pp.83-88, & p. 136

<sup>11</sup>The American Institute of Architects Annual Convention is one of numerous venues for professional development training and continuing educa-

tion for practitioners. For at least a decade continuing education workshops at the Convention have focused on leadership and organizational management skills. At the 2000 Convention in Philadelphia there were over twenty workshops on this theme. A good example was a workshop entitled “Manager’s Boot Camp: Coaching Skills for the Leadership Advantage”, led by Elliott Jaffa, EdD.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Hobbs, head of the Professional Practice Group at the national office of the AIA, writes a regular series of articles on current topics in architectural practice for the *AIArchitect*.

<sup>13</sup>Franklin, James R., *Architect’s Professional Practice Manual*, McGraw Hill, 2000, Chapter 10: “Groupwork”.

<sup>14</sup>Hohn, Helga D. “Social Dynamics and the Paradox of Leading an Innovative Team”. A paper presented at the “Collaborating Across Professional Boundaries” conference at IIT in November, 2000

<sup>15</sup>Cuff, p. 74

<sup>16</sup>Barlow, Christopher M., “Creativity and Complexity in Cross Functional Teams” A paper presented at the “Collaborating Across Professional Boundaries” conference at IIT in November, 2000

<sup>17</sup>Cuff, p. 66

<sup>18</sup>Boyer and Mitgang, p. 149

<sup>19</sup>Chrislip and Larson, p. 20-21

<sup>20</sup>Hohn, Helga D. “Social Dynamics and the Paradox of Leading an Innovative Team”

<sup>21</sup>Sutton, Sharon “Power, Knowledge, and the Art of Leadership”, in *Progressive Architecture*, May, 1992, pp. 65-68

<sup>22</sup>Sutton, Sharon “Architecture as the Practice of Intellectual Leadership”, *Practices 5/6*, Center for the Study of Practice, 1997, pp. 30-31

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 30

<sup>24</sup>Boyer and Mitgang, p.150

<sup>25</sup>Fisher, Thomas R., “Critiquing the Design Culture”, *In the Scheme of Things*, University of Minnesota Press, 2000

<sup>26</sup>Cuff, p. 21

<sup>27</sup>Stanton, Michael J. “Bold Vision for a Better Future” in the *AIArchitect*, June 1999