

POLITICS, ACTIVISM, AND ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

A CASE STUDY

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Introduction

The practice of architecture engages a political context, and an architect must recognize that projects operate within a legislative landscape of regulatory controls. This prosaic reality of practice seldom appears in architectural curricula beyond discussion in "Professional Practice" and with the occasional studio acknowledging financing, zoning, codes, review boards, etc., as elements pressuring and influencing the design process. This paper identifies a case study of engagement underway at one school. Highlighting a particular example, we advance the hypothesis that architects can only begin to confront the increasing marginalization of the profession through a fundamental reassessment of how we engage ourselves in the political process.

This paper focuses on an unusual moment in this history of one school of architecture. Faculty appointments at the University of Virginia School of Architecture over the past ten years have reinforced the institution's recognized strength in urbanism, with particular interest in the way that new faculty, along with several tenured faculty members, can contribute to the interdisciplinary dialogue among the four departments of architecture, architectural history, landscape architecture and planning. Pedagogical interest in the city includes an earlier focus on fundamental principles of settlement and place and has grown to include a range of challenging questions about the architectural implications of race, discrimination, and exclusion in our cities. Issues surrounding sustainability have increasingly influenced an inclusive, some would say "messy vitality" of urbanism within the school at this moment. No single model dominates; instead a shared appreciation for diversity flourishes, exploring relationships between architecture, culture and context. A brief survey of the range of projects explored in architecture and landscape architecture design studios, and in research seminars throughout all four departments mirrors this diversity. Joining these many activities is a rigorous commitment to the role of architecture and landscape architecture's contribution to the public realm.

Political Engagement

In parallel with increasing activity of faculty and students in urban issues (studios, planning application courses, research seminars, and fundamental "core" courses), we find ourselves at an unusual moment of

direct engagement by a number of faculty in political processes within the city, state, and region. Our faculty now includes one city councilman, chair of the city planning commission, vice-chair of the county planning commission, and a member of the Architectural Review Board, which reviews all capital outlay projects for the state. The dean is actively involved as a leader in sustainability and has advanced several initiatives within our region that will prove to be highly influential in the future of environmentally sensitive growth. Through these individuals, along with others operating in the political arena, the school is immersed in some of the most important issues affecting the growth and control of architecture and planning in our area.

Current studio and research activities within the School of Architecture involve funded research from individuals or foundations concerned with sustainable growth within our region; these issues inevitably engage political processes. One such dialogue with the School involves the Piedmont Environmental Council, a group of private citizens concerned with protecting the agricultural heritage of this region — and one of the groups that mobilized political influence so effectively in blocking the Disney America project in Haymarket, Virginia. Continuing research includes a consideration of light rail along an existing divided highway "corridor" through central Virginia, and the development of design guidelines for light rail communities that could concentrate growth over time. Issues surrounding suburban sprawl threaten the rural and bucolic setting, and this concern has helped in propelling a study of alternative growth and community building in the area of Charlottesville's airport.

The Preservation Program in the School of Architecture has engaged a parallel and reinforcing set of issues. One element of this program's curriculum involves a "Community Preservation Workshop" followed by a Preservation Design Studio. In contrast to former models of preservation involving curatorship and connoisseurship, our program emphasizes preservation and the normative fabric of cities. Integral with this approach is an exploration of "public history" as an agenda for engagement and action within the political arena and public realm.

Several of us have focused on issues of race within the political, architectural and planning contexts. It is significant to note that the school has been extremely successful in recruiting African-American faculty over the

past seven years; in collaboration with the school's administration, these five individuals have played key roles in focusing the school's direction toward increasing political engagement. Research has explored the political and regulatory mechanisms by which "urban renewal" in our own community's past were used as overtly racist forces, destroying several historically significant and socially vibrant African-American neighborhoods. Several graduate research and design seminars have explored historically and culturally sensitive in-fill growth in "real world" projects. These projects include a planned unit development of 40 houses in a racially and economically mixed neighborhood, a small elderly community in an urban neighborhood, a study of coordinated anti-sprawl growth outside of town, and design strategies for a "transition area" between a commercial and residential setting in one area of town. Two faculty members were involved in the design of a new bridge over the main railroad tracks along Main Street, providing an extraordinary example of collaboration between the school, the city, and a private corporation — the railroad company paid for the new bridge to allow added clearance for taller trains to pass through Charlottesville. We are also forming a Design Resources Center to support community involvement in important design and planning

questions. All of these projects involve faculty, graduate students, and research components.

A curriculum of political engagement however does not represent a panacea for the many problems facing society and the professions of architecture, landscape architecture and planning. It is important to recognize and explore some of the limits and problems encountered in our nascent emergence in the often controversial arena of public debate. Issues ranging from the pressures inherent in a participatory democracy, friction produced by any approach that is critical of status quo practices within governmental agencies and the professions, potential problems of conflict of interest, and concern for the autonomy of education free from the constraints of "the real world" must be considered. Notwithstanding these serious concerns, an architectural education of engagement seems to offer a renewed sense of purpose and focus on our relevance in addressing concerns in the public realm. The school is carefully charting a position that begins to pose fundamental questions and to explore answers about how we can shape a more effective and constructive role for our profession within the community. Through these incremental steps, we hope to form a more relevant and ultimately more powerful position in guiding a politically engaged model for the future.