

TEACHING HOUSING, TEACHING IDEAS

The Teaching of Housing at Canadian Schools of Architecture

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Introduction

During a discussion with architectural students on the role of architects in the housing industry in the Lower Mainland, Peter Simpson, general manager of the Greater Vancouver Home Builders' Association, referred to architects as 'consultants - no subconsultants - at best in the home building industry in the Lower Mainland.' How did this happen? And how can architects become more engaged in this dynamic industry? Why are more architects not involved in the delivery of housing, not only from an employment point of view, but also from a desire to provide decent, affordable housing?

These questions resulted in this study. What avenues could be taken to open up these opportunities and responsibilities? It was decided to look at the teaching of housing at Schools of Architecture across Canada to review what existed in terms of preparing students for this field. The results show a wide variety of styles, content and intent.

This study looks at the opportunities provided by each of the schools of architecture in Canada with the aim to discover the importance placed on housing in each school and to highlight the trends and differences among them.

The work began with the preparation of a series of fifteen questions on the teaching of housing in general with additional questions about the history of teaching of housing at UBC in particular. This was followed by a look at the practice of housing in architectural firms in British Columbia with data obtained from the AIBC Register & Firm Directory 2000. The requirements of the NCARB accreditation board were then reviewed in order to see where the teaching of housing belongs within their criteria. Following this, an investigation was made of the described listings of the offerings of each School of Architecture as listed on their web sites and calendars.

After reviewing the above, a questionnaire was formulated and tested with the first interview held at the University of Toronto School of Architecture. Modifications were made to these questions and the resulting questionnaire was distributed across the remaining schools. A telephone interview was then conducted with a faculty member of each university; these names were recommended by Heads of Department and/or other professors. The results of these interviews form the basis of the study.

Original Questions

The original fifteen questions - themselves culled from more than thirty - describe aspects of the author's original interest in the study of, teaching of and practice of housing in architecture. An inconsistent approach to the teaching of housing was discovered at UBC's School of Architecture since the departure of a group of 'housing professors' including Wolfgang Gerson, John Gaitanakis and Dino Rapanos. Interest lay also in the way in which housing is taught, the link between various players in the housing industry, the architect's role in housing and opportunities of employment for architecture graduates. These questions proved to be too broad in scope, however, for the purposes of this study. Revisions focused the project and resulted in the questionnaire proposed.

Review of AIBC Firm Directory

A statistical review of the Architectural Institute of British Columbia Register and Firm Directory 2000 showed that nearly sixty percent of architectural practices in British Columbia are one or two person firms. Residential work accounts for approximately forty percent of these firms' work and over fifty percent for half of them.

Although these numbers were smaller than imagined, there are many architectural graduates who work in the housing field without being registered members of the AIBC. This number would be very difficult to establish accurately, however, the discrepancies between the number of students who graduate from a School of Architecture and the number who register with a provincial organization suggest that there are many unregistered graduates working in this (and other) fields. In addition, the fact that an architect's stamp is not required on any building containing less than five dwelling units reinforces this indication.

NCARB

NCARB is the accreditation body which establishes performance criteria for Schools of Architecture to prepare students for the broad. The majority of universities provided courses and seminars on housing including history, theory and contemporary issues. These courses seemed to relate directly to the experience and interest of the individual professor with lecture courses provided in earlier years and seminars at more advanced graduate levels.

Studio offerings were equally variable. Although most university studios were offered on an 'ad hoc' basis, University of Waterloo offered a systematic approach from the small shed or garage of first year, first term through a single family house, duplex or triplex, multi-unit housing project and finally another house before graduation.

Although not specifically asked, several professors indicated that many students include a housing scheme or incorporate a housing component in their thesis project.

What works best in your school? Do you think housing is better taught in lecture, seminar, design studio or integrated format?

Although most professors queried responded that studio was the preferable method for teaching housing and putting ideas into practice, several also indicated that a co-requisite course with this studio would be preferable. Most faculty included lectures within their studio time as it was felt that there was not enough time (or, in some cases, inclination) to research all housing issues. Norbert Schonauer emphasized that lecture, seminar and design studio were equally valuable.

Are these courses popular? What proportion of students sign up? Are they gaining popularity? Is there more or less emphasis on housing than in the past? How did it change? How is it changing?

All professors felt that the courses and studios were extremely popular and increasing in popularity with most being oversubscribed, although Dalhousie felt that general interest in housing is only starting to increase. Interest from students continues to be strong

except for University of Waterloo where it was felt that, because of the lack of social housing in practice (since the Harris government) where students spend their work terms, appreciation of social housing seems to be eclipsed by the prevalence of condominium and loft construction. Two professors indicated a concern that, with their pending retirement, their housing courses might not be continued.

Are you happy with these courses? If not, how would you like to see them change?

Everyone appeared to be happy with their courses and studios with changes being made yearly based on current issues. In an earlier interview with John Gaitanakis, a retired 'housing' professor from UBC, however, he indicated a perpetual dissatisfaction with his courses as there were so always many new possibilities to include that he never seemed to be able to fine tune his course to his liking.

Do you feel that housing is a better vehicle for the teaching of architecture than other typologies?

Although reasons varied, all professors contacted affirmed that housing is a better vehicle for the teaching of architecture than other typologies. In general, it was felt that many aspects of architecture can be easily understood in housing because everyone has the common experience of having lived somewhere and the scale of the house is easily understood. Students generally have lived at home with their parents, have lived in some type of student residence and have usually rented their first apartments.

Housing was also felt to be a good vehicle for incorporating all of the issues of architecture, whether theoretical or practical. It seemed that no matter what the particular interest in the larger field of housing, all issues of architecture could be dealt with in housing better than in any other building type; students can understand the direct relationship between theory and practice.

This question elicited the most intense and involved responses.

Do you have faculty with a particular interest in housing - in teaching, research or practice?

Each of the professors contacted was the person with the most interest and expertise in housing at their particular university as they were each recommended by one or more of the other faculty members or Department Heads. Except for the University of British Columbia, all Schools of Architecture could easily point to that faculty member. These professors felt enormously responsible to educate their students about housing and felt overwhelmed and sometimes unsupported in their efforts except for McGill University and Université de Laval, who each had a large number of interested faculty, and University of Manitoba where two faculty members share the load. The shift from practicing architects to research faculty in the academic environment has decreased the number of 'housing' professors at some universities.

For the most part, these professors took on their responsibilities in a void and made up their courses from scratch; senior faculty members expressed concern that no one would continue their work after their retirement. All of the professors were involved in housing within their private practices and considered this their research base except for Norbert Schonauer who was the only person interviewed involved in more academic research.

It was interesting to note that Dalhousie mentioned a link with their Planning Department who had more faculty and general interest in housing than the Architecture Department.

UBC (through Sandy Hirshen) also indicated a potential link through the Human Settlements Group.

The connection between housing and urban design was also noted, with housing being a component in many of these studio projects.

What are your graduates doing in architecture? Are your students involved in housing? Do you think that the experience in these housing courses has helped your students? Does their work reflect what they have learned? Has housing improved because of what

you have taught?

For the most part, the first two questions were difficult for the respondents to answer with a variety of answers ranging from 'don't know' to every architect is involved in housing at some time. Considerable anecdotal evidence was given in response.

In answer to the last three questions, all professors said that they hoped that their work reflects what they have been taught and, again, anecdotes were given to support that claim.

What are the major problems with housing on an international, national and local level and what issues is your school committed to? What is your programme doing to help solve these problems?

This question is very large in scope and responses varied widely.

Internationally, the concern with homelessness was seen to be enormous with Canada's problems seeming to be very ordinary in comparison. Manitoba and Dalhousie are addressing these concerns with studies abroad programmes in Korea and India; the Minimum Cost Housing Programme at McGill is also involved in Third World housing problems.

Nationally, the lack of government involvement in housing in both Canada and the United States was mentioned by many professors resulting in a housing crisis in several areas of both countries with homelessness and near homelessness in many urban centres. This lack of societal commitment leads to a lack of social and affordable housing and students are therefore not exposed to current examples. Some professors felt that universities must do what the broader culture is not doing and become activist in promoting solutions to housing crises.

Locally, the development industry is being blamed for the poor quality of housing and for urban sprawl. Too much emphasis is being placed on market conditions and not enough on cultural and psychological conditions and architects' response and on the provision of decent, affordable housing. It is felt that developers are leading the housing industry with very little input from architects, except as subconsultants.

General Questions

Do you know what percentage of houses / housing are designed by architects?

Although no one knew the exact percentage, everyone suggested that the percentage of single family houses in North America designed by architects is extremely small whereas housing projects are generally designed by architects. It was interesting to note that in Eurasia - Russia, Denmark and Germany for example - architects were responsible for almost all housing including single family houses.

Do you know what percentage of an architect's practice housing constitutes?

Although some respondents suggested a figure around thirty per cent, most felt that the percentage varied widely depending on the type of practice from none to one hundred per cent.

How important is understanding of the history of housing to the study of housing?

All professors felt that the history of housing was extremely important in the study of housing. In addition to specific courses in the history of housing at McGill and University of Toronto, most of those providing courses in housing considered about one quarter of their course should be on history. What this history constituted, however, differed widely with most schools teaching history of housing from about the mid - nineteenth century to present day but with some schools, such as the University of Waterloo, focussing on ancient settlement and McGill University providing a history of housing from prehistoric to contemporary times. With his historic perspective, Norbert Schonauer understands the house as the building block for many building types.

Do you have any opinions on NCARB's nontypological approach to the teaching of architecture?

Interest in this question was mixed with half of the professors feeling that a nontypological approach was fine and the other half not expressing any opinion.

John Brown from the University of Calgary suggested that providing the objectives and letting the individual school decide on how to achieve them was an 'enlightened' approach to accreditation; he felt, nonetheless, that housing was a good vehicle to incorporate the integration of various NCARB requirements and rich in possibilities to connect basic competencies; many housing course and studio provide these opportunities.

Do you know of any discourse or references to the teaching of housing at Schools of Architecture?

Very little information was provided here with the major exception of McGill University where Norbert Schonauer referred to his extensive research into the history of housing; Professor Wanzel (Dalhousie) mentioned two papers he had written and Professor MacDonald (Waterloo) noted a symposium, organized by Waterloo, entitled "Anti-Loft" held in Toronto in 2000.

Other suggestions included Herman Hertzberger's "Lessons for Students in Architecture" and the Harvard Design Review.

Conclusions and Further Study

From this study, the importance of the study of housing as a part of the education of an architect is clear, for it is at university that a student forms important impressions of the larger field of architecture and determines where he will eventually belong.

Because of students' common bond of housing - be it in their parents' house, student residence or their own first flat - all have shared the experience of living in a home; these rich experiences make housing an ideal basis for beginning the study of architecture but also, because of its versatility and complexity, housing also becomes an appropriate place to end the education of an architect, be it in a final tutorial or a thesis.

From a practical point of view, many aspects of architecture can be

studied and understood in this one typology and many universities have taken advantage of this opportunity to further studies in real estate development, production of construction documents and design / build options to name a few.

Housing is a potent vehicle for the exploration of architecture and for integrating its rich diversity; the opportunities it provides to synthesize are very real in every person's life. These can also be realized through interdisciplinary studies with Planning and Landscape as well as being integrated with Urban Design. Housing changes with the times and, as a topic, easily incorporates issues such as homelessness, affordable housing and sustainability.

How has it happened then that architects play such a minor role in the field of housing? How have they become so disengaged from the delivery of decent affordable housing to Canadians? Is it the government's fault for stepping out of the social housing field and leaving the market open for developers interested only in the bottom line? What can schools of architecture do to bridge the gap and engage their students and graduates in this broad and dynamic field? As the world becomes increasingly populated, there is an increasing need for architects to design better and more dense housing. Housing deals with life and how people occupy space; dwellings are of primary concern to everyone and need to be understood fully before anything else can be understood. If students are aware of the constraints surrounding housing - codes, laws, economics, land tenure, marketing and convention - these future architects will be well served to engage in the housing industry.