

As someone who has created a company that is focused on the precise measurement of existing buildings, I found your “Measure” issue [September/October 2008] quite interesting.

It is true that most things can be measured, be it a building or business activity. If the proper methods and tools are used, your results should create an accurate representation of the data. However, it should be recognized that with all measurements, certain tolerances must be expected; the idea that an absolute certain value must be derived from measurement data would mean that nothing would truly be measurable. If we understand that the “exact science” of measurement comes with the caveat of a reasonable tolerance, this gives us the freedom to use the data collected. The key question is, how would your study change by working within expected tolerances? We must conclude that a measurement is accurate only when the observer is practiced and sensitive to those tolerances. To quote Aristotle: “It is the mark of an educated mind to rest satisfied with the degree of precision which the nature of the subject admits, and not to seek exactness where only an approximation is possible.”

Kurt J. Yeghian

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Joan Wickersham’s article on measuring academic architecture programs [“Taking the Measure of a School,” September/October 2008] is a clear and accurate snapshot of the current state of architectural accreditation. The Accreditation Review Conference that took place this fall provided an opportunity for people with leadership responsibilities and special expertise to continue an ongoing conversation about the future of architectural practice and of architectural education. Regular occasions like this to hear each other and share different perspectives are at least as valuable as NAAB’s work with individual schools. The organizational structure and processes of the NAAB provide the unique,

comprehensive venue in the world of architecture for consideration of where we are and what the future might hold.

When I noticed that one of the recommended websites in “Site Work” in the same issue addressed pass rates by school, I thought it might be helpful to point out that the Architect Registration Examination has consistently been designed to measure the information an intern learns and uses at work. Pass rates depend as much on their professional experience as on any particular academic program completed.

Sharon Carter Matthews AIA

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Former executive director of the National Architectural Accrediting Board

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture is circulating draft accreditation recommendations prepared by the National Architectural Accrediting Board. This “Fusion” model synthesizes scores of recommendations from educators and practitioners who have debated for the past two years whether accreditation ought to be more or less prescriptive (“...should all students know Revit, or study preservation principles, and if so, when...?”). No clear trend has emerged, but standards are essential to assure the profession’s accountability to the public.

Recent debates have centered on whether design education should be more or less technical, learning-outcomes oriented, client-centered, focused on licensure or the development of analytical and critical thinking skills, or freed of such constraints in order to nurture maximum creativity and innovation. American practitioners have favored prescriptive standards; European practitioners have favored the development of critical thinking skills; American educators have preferred maximum freedom.

The standards currently being developed will be in effect until 2014, when practice and academic demands may be far different than today. The widest possible input is essential from educators and practitioners to help us project what skills our graduates

must be able to demonstrate. Particularly given that half the heads of Boston-area design schools will not be the same as when these programs were last accredited, our schools need intense discussion of what we think we need to succeed in our wide-ranging programs. The new standards will affect how we prepare graduates to design spaces that are serviceable and beautiful, and who will enter a rapidly changing profession that is committed to life-long learning, research, innovation, thoughtful management, diverse client service, and social responsibility to protect our built and natural environments.

Ted Landsmark MEdD, JD, PhD

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ACSA representative to the 2008 Accreditation Review Conference

Whether or not there is agreement on the relative merits of the NAAB accreditation process, we can recognize that it has a significant impact on our profession. Before we can become architects, we first must be architecture students in accredited programs. Consequently, NAAB accreditation is a gatekeeper for assuring that our future architects have a minimal competency regarding issues of the public’s safety and well-being. We must, therefore, foster a strong reciprocal relationship between academia and the profession. It is in the interest of the profession to support academic programs by serving as jurors for critiques, teaching courses, joining academic advisory boards, and supporting mutually beneficial programs like faculty research, lecture series, internships, and student scholarships.

The onus of moving beyond NAAB’s minimal standards sits squarely on the individual architecture schools. Having served on all sides of the accreditation process, I have learned that the greatest value of a NAAB visit is the self-evaluation that occurs when assembling a school’s output into a cogent format for the visiting NAAB team. This process demands that a school’s mission and pedagogy are agreed

upon and clearly articulated among the faculty. While NAAB strives to be non-ideological in its assessment, each school can use the accreditation process to stake out its intellectual territory and refine its pedagogy accordingly. If done well, this process can build an ethos of teamwork and collegiality so a school can continually adapt to our ever-changing cultural and professional contexts.

Peter Wiederspahn AIA

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Building-performance evaluations or post-occupancy evaluations, not unlike David Silverman's fascinating "Measuring Stata" [September/October 2008], are sorely missing from the building industry's project-delivery process.

Silverman compares his story to an architectural Rashomon (a tale told from varied perspectives); however, at the risk of making one metaphor too many, I'd suggest this saga be considered more a "whodunit," with Gehry likened to a scientist and the Stata Center to a Petri dish. Imagine a scientist developing a hypothesis (design), and then cleverly assembling an experiment to test it (building); but as soon as his Petri dishes have been cultured (occupancy), he rushes out of the lab without waiting to find out what happens (failure).

Now, metaphorically speaking, should we blame scientist for his experiment's failure? Or for his not bothering to assess it? And, in reality, had Gehry evaluated the Stata Center post occupancy, would it be a better building? Would its users still sue him?

Simon Hare, Assoc. AIA

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I enjoyed Jeff Stein's interview with Alex Wilson of BuildingGreen Inc. ["What Do You Think You're Doing?," September/October 2008]. I disagree, however, with Alex's opinion that designers need only know the proper resources to achieve good "green" results, and that the "intelligent" people who write the standards can handle the rest. To the contrary, I believe architects need to be exceptionally sharp and critical, especially when it comes to intelligently

engaging environmental standards — and more importantly, surpassing them.

When it comes to thinking "generations" in advance and pursuing truly zero-carbon architecture (a step beyond being "less bad"), we as an industry need to start being critical of our own decision-making processes, and develop robust design methodologies, rather than using green guides as a crutch to limp towards a slower rate of environmental decline. We need to integrate environmental intelligence into our practices in a way that turns the checklists into a formality, rather than a prevailing catalyst for decision-making. We need to create a professional culture that produces designers who ask informed, critical questions; who can assess the complexities of "greenness" within a coherent, intelligent framework; who can identify and resolve the most critical problems; and who can do all this without compromising their design integrity or restricting the creative flexibility our industry needs to thrive. Their environmental skills need to be inseparable from their design skills. In other words, we need to fundamentally change the way we teach and practice architecture.

Sustainability is, by definition, how well an entity withstands the test of time and maintains its expected level of performance. The practice of architecture is fundamentally an industry of knowledge and expertise. It's no more sustainable to outsource our thinking and problem-solving, than it is to outsource the production of wind-turbine blades to the far side of the globe. The manufacture and maintenance of environmental design knowledge and the construction of robust design methodologies also need to move closer to the point of use. As an industry, we need to evolve.

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