



# Taking the Measure of a School

A visit from the National Architectural Accrediting Board is as much an assessment of the profession as it is of a design school.

**On a recent episode of *House*,** television's addictively bratty medical drama, a patient was admitted to the hospital with a mysterious disease. No news there. But in addition to the usual plot points — toxins, delirium, misdiagnoses

leading to administration of the wrong drugs leading to the patient's near death — this episode featured another hazard: an accreditation visit. The accreditor (there was only one) was an annoying little stickler with a clipboard who had to be herded from one falsely calm venue to the next, like a suspicious great-aunt in a Feydeau farce, while the staff ran around saving lives.

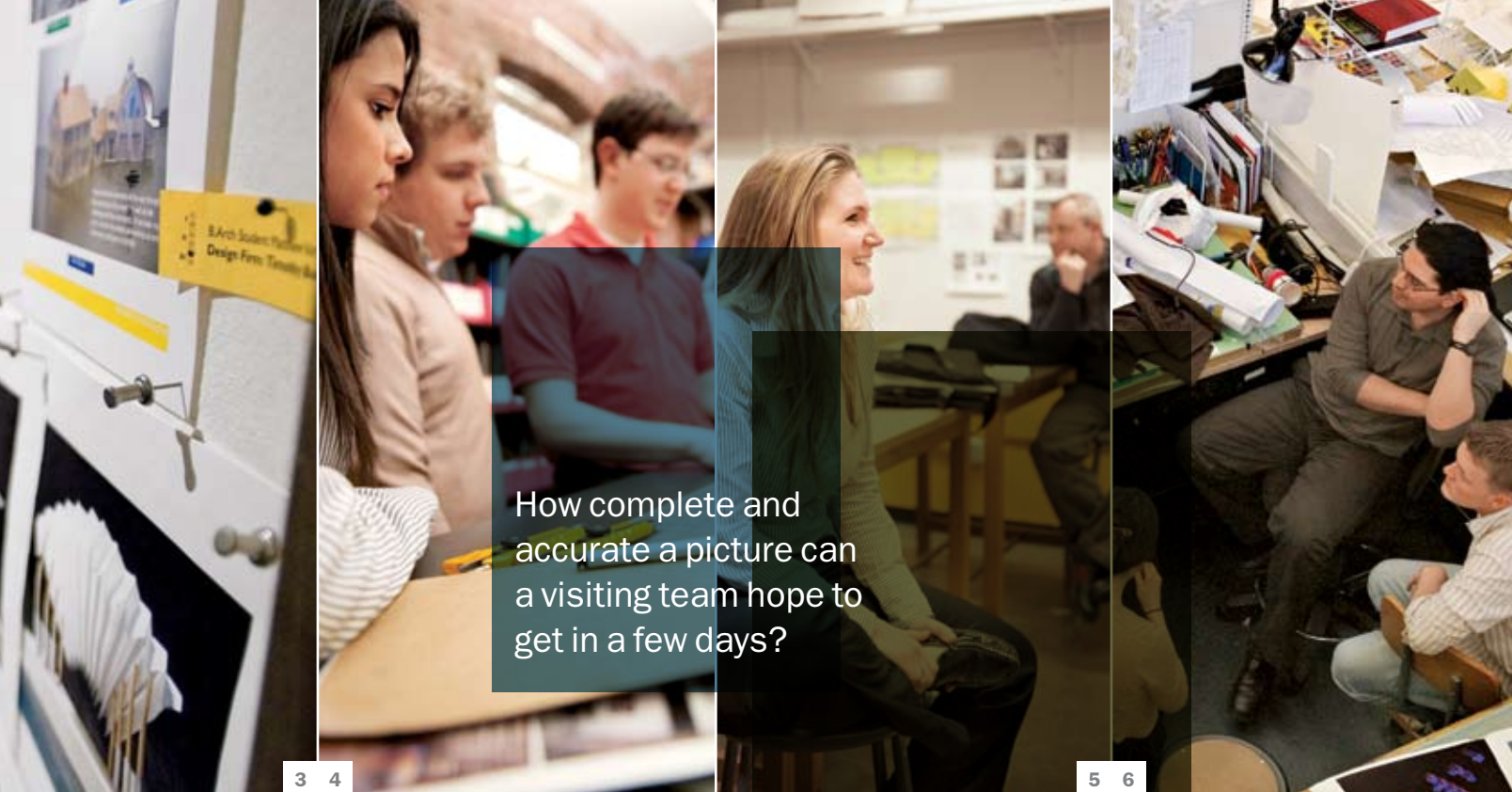
Nobody would claim that *House* is anything but an outlandish, if entertaining, caricature of medicine. But what about its portrayal of the accreditor as the enemy — a bean-counter who must be placated with evidence of compliance to meaningless regulations so the institution can continue to carry out its important mission? How does accreditation really work? Is it actually a useful measuring instrument? And when it comes to architecture, where graduating from an accredited program is a prerequisite for licensure, what exactly is accreditation seeking to measure?

First, a brief introduction to architectural accreditation. It's the purview of the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB), an organization whose constituencies include: the AIA; the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB), which also administers the IDP program and the Architectural Registration Exam; the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA); the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS); and the public.

Every year the NAAB sends out visiting teams — in some

by Joan Wickersham

Photos 1 and 6 by Anita Kan; courtesy Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Photo 2 courtesy Wentworth Institute of Technology. Photos 3, 4, and 5 by Liz Linder; courtesy the Boston Architectural College.



How complete and accurate a picture can a visiting team hope to get in a few days?

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years, as many as two dozen — to assess architecture schools seeking to earn or extend a term of accreditation. Between their arrival Saturday night and departure at noon on Wednesday, team members immerse themselves, with charrette-like focus and energy, in the school: its curriculum, its resources, its culture, and the work produced by its students. They meet formally and informally with students, administrators, faculty, staff, and alumni; they visit the studios; and they comb through syllabi and exhibits of student work.

By Wednesday morning, they've pulled together a draft of their report to present in a school-wide meeting, detailing which of NAAB's accreditation conditions have been met and which haven't. They've also already voted on a recommended term of accreditation (generally three or six years), but the school won't learn the result until after NAAB's summer meeting, when board members will discuss each report before voting to accept or modify the team's recommendation.

So how complete and accurate a picture can a visiting team hope to get in a few days?

"It's amazing how much you learn," says Marilyns Nepomechie FAIA, who as a faculty member and past graduate program director at Florida International University and also a frequent team chair for NAAB, has been on both ends of the accreditation process. "Schools spend at least a year and a half preparing for the visit, writing their self-assessment, and collecting the evidence to mount an exhibit that represents their program. So before you visit a school, you read their self-

assessment very carefully. You're trying to get a sense of how this particular place educates

architects, and then when you arrive you're looking at the evidence. Everything is a comparison between what's claimed and what's actually there."

Such a system, which relies on both written data and eyewitness evaluation, is both objective and subjective, reflecting the current national debate about accreditation and higher education in general. Is it possible — or desirable — to quantify the quality of an education? It also reflects the nature of architecture itself. Is a "good" architect one who designs a beautiful building, or simply one whose building is structurally sound? And how deeply should accreditors be involved in deciding what goes into the education of a good architect? Should architectural accreditation reflect a prescriptive approach to pedagogy; or, as disciplines such as engineering do, should it focus on measuring student performance outcomes? In other words, do we look at what is taught, or at what is being learned, or both?

Ken Lambla AIA, who is dean of the College of Arts and Architecture at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and has also chaired many NAAB teams, believes accreditation addresses the need to measure student performance. "This is especially important in a public university: we are accountable to our public constituencies. We need to show that we are meeting qualitative standards in terms of student outcomes." At the same time, Lambla recognizes, "Architectural education isn't as quantifiable as other disciplines."

Stephen Schreiber FAIA, head of the newly accredited architecture program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and also a veteran NAAB team chair, says "Accreditation assures the public, students, and future employers that there's a consistency among programs. It's proof that your school conforms to some agreed-upon rules, that what the school is doing isn't completely capricious. Beyond that, accreditation doesn't tie the hands of

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programs; they have the flexibility to shape the kind of program they want. But it ensures there won't be big issues missing."

If the bottom-line reason we accredit architecture programs is to produce graduates qualified to take the licensing exam, then in theory accreditors could just make sure that schools are "teaching to the test." But many people take the position — reflected in NAAB's current conditions for accreditation — that accreditors have a more active role in advocating for certain unquantifiable values such as "studio culture," a recent addition to the conditions (lobbied for by architecture students) that requires a school to demonstrate that it is "a positive and respectful learning environment."

Changing ideas about architectural education will be aired in October 2008, when NAAB and its varied constituencies meet for the Accreditation Review Conference (ARC). Held every five years, the ARC will ultimately lead to a revised set of conditions and procedures. Issues such as globalization, climate change and sustainability, new technologies and practice models, and distance learning have become increasingly important since the last ARC was held in 2003. Such changes inevitably raise new questions about what — and how — accreditors should be measuring.

Whatever the results from the ARC, it is unlikely that architectural accreditation will ever turn into the adversarial, us-versus-them conflict that *House* caricatures. Each visit will still involve professionals on both sides who care deeply about architecture, in a relationship that is both respectful and tense.

The school will try to show itself at its best; and the accreditors, many of whom are educators who have prepared their own schools for visits, will probe deeply to assure themselves that the program meets the standards of the profession.

At UNC Charlotte, the faculty have already begun preparing for the program's next accreditation visit, which won't take place until 2010. Ken Lambla acknowledges that this preparation is "expensive in terms of money and time, especially now when the faculty labor market is so competitive and specialized faculty members have many amazing projects to work on in the private sector." Still, Lambla says, "the faculty find the accreditation process incredibly useful. We are alert to change, and respond within our context. At the same time, like all architecture programs, we protect our identity with great vigor."

Marilyn Nepomechie also sees the accreditation cycle as a continuous process. "It's an ongoing story, a narrative. A team arrives and leaves at a certain point. But programs and contextual cultures are always changing, as is the profession. Accreditation is the external agent that forces self-examination and questioning. Where are we now and where are we going?" ■

For more information on architectural accreditation, go to [www.naab.org](http://www.naab.org).

Joan Wickersham, who writes "The Lurker" column for this magazine, is a public member of the NAAB board. Her new book is *The Suicide Index: Putting My Father's Death in Order* (Harcourt).

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