

I have a confession. For five years, I resisted doing this issue. “Education” regularly emerged on lists of possible themes, and just as regularly, I dodged and ducked it, usually by distracting our otherwise astute editorial board members with other tempting theme ideas. Why? I found most conversations about architectural education to be tiresome — the same old debates framed with the same old arguments, exciting passions only among the same old players.

Sometimes procrastination pays off. The world of architectural education has shifted, and the atmosphere has cleared. Whether that means that fresh air has blown through or only that a new synthetic has been sprayed over the old mustiness remains to be seen. But the signs are encouraging.

First, many schools have wrung out the excesses of theory that so often provoked both outrage and derision among practitioners only a decade ago. Theory seems to have found its place, lending a welcome intellectual grounding to the profession while coexisting far more comfortably with the practical and technical aspects of building. As several of our contributors note, many architects who were once known only for their “paper architecture” are now designing “real” buildings that force them to contend with the realities of codes, budgets, public review, materials, even leaks and liability. Academics themselves are questioning the wholesale appropriation of theoretical systems from other disciplines: the summer 2003 conference of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture was devoted to this very topic.

Another change can be seen in the students themselves. For whatever reasons — unthinkable tuitions and debt, the broad consumer culture, youthful idealism — students today are not the modest novitiates they once were. They are far more assertive, as demonstrated by the heightened visibility of the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS) and the emergence of ArchVoices (see page 39), the four-year old think-tank and website for architectural interns.

The profession, too, has changed, demonstrating greater leadership and invention in its approach to architectural education. Under the leadership of Boston architect Peter Steffian FAIA, the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) recently established the NCARB Prize for Creative Integration of Practice and Education in the Academy. Local firms are demonstrating initiative, too, including Cambridge Seven, which has a formal internship program with Rice and a program for German architectural exchange students sponsored by the University of Michigan, and Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott, where the Design Fellowship program offers students greater exposure to design work and to the firm’s principals than typical internships provide. Even more innovative is the Moshe Safdie and Associates Research Fellowship, which provides a one-year stipend to selected graduate students and young architects and offers designers the opportunity to do research in an office setting — thus moving the profession closer to the model of “teaching offices” that parallel teaching hospitals.

As the profession evolves, so will the schools. But the reverse has always been true, too. What is the real change in architectural education? Perhaps it’s confidence — greater confidence among educators, students, and the schools themselves.

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2 Letters to the Editor

**6 Declaring Victory:
Practicing and Teaching**

A roundtable discussion with:
Brian Healy AIA, Andrea Leers FAIA,
Kyna Leski, Elizabeth Padjen FAIA
Wellington Reiter AIA,
Peter Wiederspahn AIA, and
J. Meejin Yoon

16 A Delivery from the Assembly Line
by Kirin Joya Makker

19 Required Reading:
An educational timeline
by Nathalie Westervelt

24 Clio and the Education of Architects
by Eduard F. Sekler

26 The Architecture of Education:
Photographs by Nancy Royal
by Elizabeth Padjen FAIA

35 Great Expectations
by Erin Rae Hoffer AIA

39 Hearing Voices
John Cary, Jr., Assoc. AIA
talks with Jeff Stein AIA

**44 Compare/Contrast:
Learning from other professions**
Architecture and Medicine
by George Takoudes AIA
Architecture and Law
by Jay Wickersham AIA

46 Covering the Issues:
Periodical roundup
by Gretchen Schneider, Assoc. AIA

48 Books

51 Index to Advertisers

51 Site Work
Websites of note

52 Other Voices:
Oxford, England
by Julia Gibert