

# Architecture Education

## From Education to Practice: Thoughts on that “Seamless” Transition An interview with architect-educator Kate Schwennsen, AIA



by John Simpson  
Associate Editor

The question of how best to structure the transition from education to practice, as our interviewee Katherine

Lee “Kate” Schwennsen, AIA, notes, has been discussed for as long as there has been formal architectural training in the U.S.

The issue gained new urgency with the release in 1996 of “Building Community: A New Future for Architecture and Education,” the so-called “Boyer Report,” whose authors Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang called for a “seamless transition between the classroom and the workplace.”

The number-one objective of the AIA’s Aligning the Institute for the Millennium (AIM) long-range strategic plan addressed architectural education, as did the Grassroots 2001 Issues Forum. The latter sought input from the membership on key issues involving architecture curricula, internships, and the timing of the Architect Registration Examination (ARE).

AIArchitect posed many of these same questions to Kate Schwennsen, AIA, who speaks from more than 20 years of experience as both a practicing architect and architectural educator. Currently serving on the AIA

Board of Directors representing the Central States, Schwennsen is an assistant professor and associate chair for academic affairs in the Department of Architecture, College of Design, at Iowa State University.

**Q. Should architecture students be more exposed to practice skills?**

A. Discussion of this issue has been going on since architectural education started in this country. Yes, I think they are in need of exposure to practice skills and always have been.

But when we talk about “practice skills,” we think of them as being business and management skills. Practice is obviously a lot more than that. It includes teamwork, design, ethics—all those are practice skills. I think if you look at schools, you find that they are address-

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ing this in a lot more interesting ways than they used to. For instance, you see lots of design/build studios in schools; that never used to happen. And in design/build studios they get construction

experience; they often get experience with clients; they get documentation experience, scheduling, budgeting—all those sort of traditional practice skills—

as well as teamwork.

A lot of schools offer service-learning studios, where students go out and work with the community and learn the importance of the public good of architecture—the ethical responsibilities. Many schools now have foreign studies programs. I would say that certain practice things are learned in foreign studies be-

cause it is a global economy and society, and learning about other cultures and how to work in other cultures, I would say, is a practice-based education. So, yes,

students do need to obtain practice skills, but I think we need to think of those skills more broadly.

**Q. If you could point to one thing that students are lacking when they graduate, what would it be?**

A. Awareness of the world outside of architecture! This is also an old problem and Boyer/Mitgang brought it up in *Building Community*: we lock them in the building.

Architecture programs still tend to be too internalized, and so much of what we do is about architecture only. We talk to each other only. When we have we reviews—I’m speaking in gross generalities here—it’s only architects who get on the reviews or faculty. So we don’t learn how to talk to other people or how to communicate in other people’s languages.

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Obviously, the consequence is that we tend to be insular. And the age-old accusation about “the only thing wrong with architects is their ignorance and their arrogance.” I think that comes out of our insularity and our unwillingness to engage others. The majority of architecture courses are required courses that have only architecture students in them.

**Q. Is that an argument for eliminating the BArch?**

**A.** No. There, I think we’re asking the wrong question. It’s not the name of the degree that matters, it’s the effectiveness, the content, the curriculum, and the learning objectives.

Just by changing the name, we’re not changing the nature of the degree. There are MArch programs that are almost identical to BArch programs in terms of content, learning objectives, and length of studies. And there are very good BArch programs and not-so-good programs; very good MArch programs and not-so-good ones. By going to an MArch only, you’re not accomplishing anything. But you *are* losing some things.

I think the BArch is a very solid degree. What we would lose by eliminating the BArch is the most seamless, cost-effective, and efficient path to licensure. Not that an efficient path to licensure is necessarily *the* goal. But the BArch is a highly structured degree with an early “gate to

entry.” Typically, after the first or second year of college, you can enter a BArch program. And then the curriculum is highly integrated and built on top of itself. Also, undergraduate tuition is less expensive than graduate tuition.

MArch programs have late gates to entry—typically after the third or fourth year—and it’s more expensive to deliver. I think the variety of degrees that we offer now is a very positive thing. There *are*

people who know when they are 12 that they want to be an architect, and they can go right into a BArch program. There are people who don’t figure out until they are 45 or 50 that they want to be an architect, and they can come into a first-professional-degree MArch program.

**Q. What about internships—is there a better way to structure the period between graduation and licensure?**

**A.** We—the schools, the firms, and the corporations—share responsibility for internship. And since it’s a place of shared responsibility, it can end up being a place of battle. I think we all need to accept our shared responsibility in internship.

Most students now, I think—certainly at my school—are graduating with practice experience. The economy has been so good, they’re working in offices after their first or second year in school, which is

highly unusual. And many of them continue to work during the school year. But it’s not mandated; it’s encouraged. I think schools probably need to encourage it more, and I think practices need to take their responsibility as far as the lifelong learning of an architect very seriously.

We shouldn’t turn out “ready-made architects” from the end of school. Certain things are better learned in different settings, and school will never be able to emulate practice and shouldn’t try to. Practice has some educational responsibility.

**Q. Realistically, then, can there ever be a “seamless transition” between education and practice?**

**A.** “Seamless” is sort of a funny word to me. Seamless garments are very ill-fitting! The seams are really important. Internship may be a seam that needs to be better-crafted. I think that instead of talking about “seamless,” we need to really communicate more about how to make that connection better.

**Q. Is it a good idea to try to move young architects along a little quicker—at least from a salary perspective?**

**A.** Certainly. The fee structure that firms charge does not allow compensation for *anybody* to be what it should be. I would say that we, as a profession, grossly undersell our services. So it’s not just interns, it’s everybody’s pay. But, yes, we need to work hard not to discourage our

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young. And when they are hired into offices where they spend 45 to 50 hours a week stuck in front of a computer monitor with their headphones on—not being mentored and not making much

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money—that’s a problem.

Having said that, I know many recent graduates who have wonderful internships. And the whole computing thing has actually been advantageous for many interns because they end up mentoring the more senior people in the firm about the electronic stuff.

### **Q. Is three years too long an internship period?**

**A.** Many students get some of their IDP activities taken care of when they’re still in school and working summers. So, for many people right now, as long as the economy stays good, it doesn’t necessarily take three years. I think we may be overly sensitive about the label “intern.” Again, I think it’s more important how we treat those people, what we teach them,

and how we think about creating future contributors to the profession.

### **Q. Should architecture graduates be permitted to sit for the ARE right out of school?**

**A.** I think perhaps they should be allowed to sit for part of it after graduation. But, again, I think certain things are best learned at the office—just as certain things are best learned in formal education. Practice should not abdicate its educational responsibilities, just as education shouldn’t abdicate its practice-education responsibilities.

I’ve heard some interesting anecdotes from practitioners that when they have interns studying for certain portions of the exam, like the structures portion, it leads to some very interesting conversations in the office. All of a sudden, the interns and other people in the office start really *thinking* about structure and *talking* about it. So, maybe the exam should be unbundled. But I don’t think it

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should all be offered after graduation, because then it’s too easy for the schools to be forced into teaching to the exam and turning out people who can pass the

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exam but may not have a broad enough view of the world.

### **Q. What should the AIA’s role be in shaping the education discussion?**

**A.** I think first of all AIA *members* have responsibilities in that regard. If we read our code of ethics, we find that we have the responsibility to continue to grow the discipline and to take care of our young. And we have a responsibility for lifelong learning.

All members need to think about how they contribute. And members can contribute in many ways. They can participate in programs at local architecture schools. They can serve as guest critics or guest lecturers. They can serve on professional advisory boards. And they can be very good employers and treat their interns well.

The AIA needs to communicate very well with collateral organizations and contribute its members’ concerns to the education debate. But I don’t think the AIA should be directing or dictating to collateral organizations what those organizations should be doing. ■