Points of View

Random Thoughts on Becoming a Worthy Ancestor

by John D. Anderson, FAIA

Last month I was in Seattle, where I had the opportunity to deliver a presidential citation to the University of Washington. It's a beautiful campus. I have no doubt that the men and women who graduate have been hot-wired to be advocates for design excellence and enlightened planning. It's the kind of special place that works magic. The profound sense of stewardship that shapes and nurtures the campus is surely worth a presidential fanfare and well-deserved applause.

The experience got me to thinking: How should we be preparing those who follow us for lives of service, fulfillment, and joy? Once I started down that road, it didn't take my mind too long to arrive at a topic that interests me a lot—architecture education. Our EVP, Norman Koonce, FAIA, is fond of quoting Jonas Salk, who challenged us to be worthy ancestors to those who follow us. How, then, can we be worthy ancestors to the rising generation that will take our place? What guidance should we be giving them based on our experience and the trends we see shaping their world?

A checklist

Here's a checklist of what I came up with.

· Architecture is a team sport. At least one problem at the graduate level should involve teaming with our partners in landscape architecture, planning, and engineering.

· There is much more to architecture than design. Our schools need to take more seriously the practice-related courses beyond studio and the students who may decide that their place in practice is something other than design. These students must be made to feel that they are every bit as essential to practice as the hotshot design star.

• There is much more to design than the creation of objects. As architects, we design building complexes and—inevitably—the spaces between and around individual structures. In short, we create community. Our schools need to develop curricula that prepare our students for this role.

• Beyond developing skills for the design of community, our schools could do a better job of inculcating in their students a community-service ethic. There are countless opportunities in our neighborhoods, towns, cities, and regions for architects to bring their problem-solving processes and skills to bear on community building.

• Our schools are the ideal place at the ideal time to introduce serious research into the curriculum, particularly at the advanced master's level.

• A thesis is no longer demanded for completion of graduate degree programs at many schools. I believe this is a questionable practice. A well-executed thesis is still the best way to demonstrate the synthesis of the parts of a problem's solution.

• The teaching of practice skills, spoken and written expression, and research process tends to be devalued relative to design. A balanced respect for all components of a curriculum is central to any effective program.

• Various means of correcting the problem of the isolation of architecture schools and their students from the rest of university culture need to be explored. Working alliances with other disciplines might be developed that would introduce the unique value of the architectural design process to a broader student population.

• In this high-tech age, is it not critical to reintroduce the concept of the value of architecture and building as craft? One means to this end: How about making a summer's work with a contractor—hands-on with the tools of the trade—a degree requirement?

• Schools should develop or improve a process of outreach in both directions (pre-college/post-graduation) so that architectural education is connected to elementary and secondary school as well as to an evolving culture of continuing education.

• Progress has been made on gender balance in our schools of architecture, but racial representation, specifically for our African American students, has failed to improve for over 10 years. African Americans constitute 13 percent of U.S. population, yet only 1 percent of architecture students is African American.

• Other diversity issues also need to be addressed. Our curricula need to go beyond narrow Eurocentricity to celebrate the contributions of other cultural traditions such as Asian, Native American, South American, Islamic, and African.

• Our schools need to take more seriously the task of introducing the realities of practice to their students. Cost control, scheduling, and dealing with contracts and clients need to be brought into the picture objectively and realistically. Again, case study methods are ideally suited to address these issues.

What would you add to the list—or take off? I'd like to hear your thoughts, because your Board of Directors will be taking up the subject later this month. Stay tuned.