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# The Discipline of Architecture



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## Revisiting the Discipline of Architecture

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The professions in North America are under attack. Surveys reveal widespread public distrust of professions such as law and politics, and the bottom-line management of professions such as medicine and architecture has become equally pervasive, with the rise of entities such as health maintenance organizations and disciplines such as construction management. What has caused this public- and private-sector reaction to professionalism, and how has this affected the disciplines in these fields?

All of the professions have begun to search for answers, and at least in architecture, this has produced a flood of articles, conferences, and books calling for sweeping reform of architectural education and the architectural profession. Some believe that the architectural schools must change to serve the shifting needs of practitioners, others think that the architectural profession has relinquished its educational responsibilities and thus weakened the field, and still others claim that both have become marginalized and need to rethink their mission in order to become more relevant (Crosbie 1995; Kroloff 1996; Fisher 1994, 2000).

In all of this discussion, we need to keep two points in mind. First, the situation we face is not new. The profession of architecture, like the other major professions, has come under attack before, for reasons similar to those generating the current crisis of confidence, and we cannot address the latter without understanding its history. Second, unlike in previous eras, academia has come under as much scrutiny as the

professions in recent decades.<sup>1</sup> This reflects not only the increasing professionalization of higher education but also its inextricable connection to the professions over the last 150 years. Any reform of the architectural profession must now include reform of higher education, of the discipline of architecture.

The current critique of the architectural and academic professions has its origin some eight hundred years ago in the medieval guilds. The academic profession emerged from the scholars' guild (the *universitas magistrorum et pupillorum*, or guild of master and student) that arose in Europe in the twelfth century associated with the cathedrals and local churches. The architectural profession had a similar beginning in the craft guilds (the masons' and carpenters' guilds) that also arose in part from service to the church. With the political fragmentation and disorganized capitalism of medieval Europe, the guilds served as the major way of organizing work, exerting control over membership, workplace conditions, markets, and relations to the state.<sup>2</sup> The guilds determined who could join, the length of apprenticeship, the dues and fines members had to pay, the means of production, the pace and hours of work, and who could practice in what market. To preserve their monopolies in particular locations, the guilds also actively lobbied and even occasionally bribed local officials.

The rising power of capitalistic enterprises and the growing influence of free market thinking in the Renaissance led to a weakening of the craft guilds, although not the scholars' guilds. Capitalists saw the craft guilds as a hindrance to free trade, eventually convincing the state that guild monopolies were more expensive and less efficient than capitalistic competition. That capitalists also bribed officials, often at higher levels than the guilds, may have helped this change in perception. As a result, the craft guilds in Europe had largely disappeared by the mid-1500s, replaced by construction trade groups competing in the marketplace without a monopoly.

The scholars' guilds generally avoided this fate for several reasons. Scholars and students were more mobile and would move if governments balked at their guild status, as happened when French scholars left Paris in 1229 in protest over waning government support and turned the church schools at Oxford and Cambridge into universities. At the

same time, academics posed less of a threat than the craft guilds to capitalists; education has always been a labor-intensive, low-profit activity. Also, as universities amassed wealth in the form of public sponsorships and private donations, they became less vulnerable to economic pressure. As a result, universities still retain many of the trappings of guild power, such as lifetime membership in the form of tenure, collegial decision making among faculty members, and strict control over contact hours with students.

The architectural and academic professions had relatively little to do with each other as their social and economic positions diverged after the 1500s. Although some specialized architectural schools did emerge, such as the Academy of Architecture in Paris, founded in 1671, professional education as we now think of it did not exist in most institutions of higher learning until the nineteenth century (Draper 1977). The rise of architectural education, at least in the United States, came in the wake of a populist revolt against the idea of professions. From the 1840s through the post-Civil War period, many citizens saw the professions as antidemocratic elites, causing states to repeal certification for professions such as law and medicine. The nascent architectural profession also suffered in this period. Mid-nineteenth-century architects such as Asher Benjamin, A. J. Davis, and Thomas U. Walter bowed to the populist sentiments of their time by producing building guides and plan books for popular consumption. One of the few professions to escape this trend was, again, the academic profession, which retained its guild power largely unscathed.

Their weakened position in that populist, free market era led many professions to form associations (the American Medical Association in 1848, the American Institute of Architects in 1857, the American Bar Association in 1868) in an effort to reestablish some control over their practices. From the 1880s through the 1920s, these associations swung public opinion around, convincing state legislatures to enact licensure laws that became the basis for the professions as we now know them. After decades suffering from quack doctors, crackpot lawyers, and carpenter-architects who built firetraps, the public and politicians needed little convincing; whatever gained in terms of efficiency in a relatively unregulated free market had been lost in terms of public well-being. The

professional associations recognized their chance. They emphasized their commitment to the public's health, safety, and welfare and recognized that the monopoly that licensing laws gave them was necessary if they were to advance the state of their knowledge for the greater good.

Key to the latter was a move away from an apprenticeship education toward the establishment of professional schools, often in the newly formed state land grant universities established by the Morrill Act of 1865 and in research-oriented universities such as Johns Hopkins and MIT. In architecture, for example, the first professional program arose at MIT in 1865, followed by programs in land grant schools such as Cornell in 1871 and Illinois in 1873. Here, after centuries of relatively little contact, the academic and architectural communities found themselves interacting once again, but this time, it was the scholars' guild that would undergo the greatest change.

The professional associations had considerable influence over the curricula in these early professional programs, with faculty drawn from either current or former practitioners. This represented a major intrusion into the territory of the academic guild. As a result, the professional schools occupied an uneasy place in universities, tolerated because of the student revenues and outside support that they brought with them, but separated from the traditional academic disciplines. That does not mean that the professional schools offered only a vocational training. In architecture, educators and practitioners worked out a system early on in which the schools would focus on areas such as design, history, and theory, and the profession would educate interns about such matters as running a firm, managing a project, and detailing and constructing a building. But unlike some other professional programs, such as medicine or engineering, architectural schools remained largely teaching oriented, with relatively little funded research or published scholarship (Fisher 1996).

Professional architectural education has remained fairly stable for more than a century. Despite changes in ideology, as a classical education gave way to a modernist and then a postmodernist one, the design-oriented, studio-based pedagogy has remained largely unchanged. But shifts have occurred in the last decade or two that have altered the ground on which both the academic and architectural professions stand and have set in motion the urge for reform in the field.

At one level, these shifts relate to the struggle that goes back to the conflict between guildlike professions and free market capitalism. Guildlike professions thrive when the free market has been either disorganized, as in the Middle Ages, or considered untrustworthy, as happened after the Civil War in the United States. At such times, the state has granted monopoly status to professional groups in exchange for their attending to the needs of the public and their raising the standard of care of their members. But when the ideology of the free market is ascendant, as happened in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries or in the last few decades, professional guilds must fend off the criticisms of inefficiency, elitism, and unfair advantage. The rise of fee bidding, the attacks on quality-based selection of professionals, the increasing pace of design and construction—all reflect efforts to measure the architectural profession according to the values of the marketplace.

With the rise of the global economy in the last two decades, the free market critique of the professions has had greater influence and a broader thrust than ever before. In previous eras, the church or the state often served as havens for professional activity, even as capitalists have prevailed in the marketplace. But today, the church has become less of a force, and the government itself has begun to fashion itself in the mold of the private sector, emphasizing its efficient use of taxpayer money and its adoption of business practices. This has resulted in an almost unprecedented alliance between the state and capitalism against professions, evident in the Justice Department's antitrust ruling against the use of fee schedules by architects or in the widespread use in the public sector of design-build as a project delivery method intended to drive down costs and speed up construction.

The free market critique of the professions has also reached into the universities, threatening the guild of scholars as never before. This has taken many forms, from proposals in some schools to eliminate the tenure system, to efforts in others to impose corporate-style management, to attempts in still others to tie budgets to research productivity. Some of this activity has come from outside groups—efficiency-minded state legislatures or free market-oriented university trustees or regents—and some has come from faculty and administrators themselves in an effort to gain flexibility or financial independence in the face of increasingly unstable government support or prescriptive donor requests. Whatever the

cause, the result has been an erosion in the power of the scholars' guild akin to what the craft guilds encountered several hundred years ago.

The other allegiance that the professions once could rely on—the public at large—has also withered in recent decades. Public support for the professions exists in proportion to how much the professions devote themselves to the public good and resist taking advantage of their monopoly position in the marketplace for private gain or to unfairly advance the interests of private clients at the public's expense. That often unspoken understanding has existed in periods when the public as well as the public sector have supported the professions. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, most architects and educators adhered to this unspoken agreement, advocating public control over the private realm or individual expression, be that in the form of Beaux Arts classicism or modernist urbanism.

Architecture and academia were likewise viewed as a "calling," a devotion to the common good or the truth. But professions now rarely use the word "calling" to describe themselves; instead we see what we do as a career, a way of making a good salary and of finding personal satisfaction while serving the needs of one's paying clients or students. The difference between a calling and a career may be subtle, but it has had a profound effect on the public's support of professionals. As professionals' incomes have risen higher and faster than those of most non-professionals, the public has had difficulty believing that the professions still put the common good before private gain. This public disillusionment with the professions has led, in the case of architecture, to proposals in several state legislatures to suspend architectural licensing laws and to eliminate the profession's unfair advantage in the market as we have become too much like just another service business. In the case of the academic profession, public support for such things as tenure or tuition increases has also subsided. Here, too, some faculty have come to seem more interested in their job security than in their devotion to learning, more intent on advancing their careers by hopping from one institution to another than on their service to a particular university in a particular place.

As traditional professions, like architecture or scholarship, face increasing opposition and declining support, many trade groups have achieved professional status, from house inspectors to hairdressers. For

trade groups, such status enables them to control their numbers through the process of licensure and to control their markets by demanding that only licensed professionals be able to do certain tasks. Likewise, for a state legislature that licenses such groups, granting them professional status provides a way of protecting the public and ensuring uniformity of service. But this extending of professional status to more people also relates directly to the attacks on the traditional professions. As happened in the early nineteenth century, we have entered a period in which the older professions seem antidemocratic and elitist to many people, which leads not only to reducing the privileges of some but to extending them to others.

Such is the context in which we now struggle to redefine practice and education. The architectural and academic professions face serious challenges in a largely unregulated global economy, with little support from either the public or the private sector. And the situation does not seem likely to change anytime soon. As the sociologist Christine McGuire has argued, "Predictions for the future of individual professions strongly suggest that most, if not all, will continue to be faced by more external regulation, increased competition from outside the field, intrusion of newer occupations, louder public demands for more high-quality service at lower cost, and increasingly rapid and pervasive technological change that drastically alters practice" (McGuire 1993, 15).

Architects and architectural educators have responded to this situation in various ways. Some have argued that the profession must rediscover its calling, its obligation to the public, and attend less to formal concerns of interest largely to architects. That calling can be an explicitly social one, using architecture to support the needs and values of the people who use it, or an ecological one, something that the public may not yet be asking for, but one that it needs and will greatly benefit from.

A related line of thought urges the profession to become more politically savvy, demonstrating its value not only through its buildings but in its ability to navigate public processes. That navigation involves both an empirical understanding of how people use space and a sensitivity to differences of culture, gender, and race, and a pragmatic focus on what we do best, demonstrating our value through our ability to see spatial relationships, to understand form and culture, and to put materials and manufactured assemblies together.

The critique of both the architectural and academic professions has led to a tension between the two unlike that ever experienced before in the field. Some would separate professional practice and education, acknowledging their differences and presumably enhancing the ability of each group to defend itself more effectively against its critics. Others would encourage practitioners and educators to become more aligned, sharing their knowledge and standing together against those who would attack professionalism. A third position emphasizes the discipline of architecture that embraces both practice and education, taking the discussion away from the contested matter of professional privilege and refocusing on the building of knowledge.

A number of other writers have focused on educational reform, although there is a lack of agreement about just what sort of reform is needed. Some see the problem in the subjectivity of design education, wanting us to be more intellectually rigorous, while others see the problem as just the opposite: that architectural education has, for too long, assumed a false objectivity and cut itself off from public narratives and myths. Likewise, some want architectural educators to do more traveling within the academy, connecting to liberal arts disciplines less vulnerable to the critique of professionalism, whereas others want students and educators to do more traveling in the larger world, understanding the various ways in which people of different cultures and genders view architecture. And still others urge us to take a more critical view of how we represent architecture to ourselves as well as to the public, recognizing the multiple ways in which such representations can be interpreted.

How do these views cohere into a workable strategy? One answer is that what worked before can work again. When faced with “market fundamentalism” in the mid-nineteenth century, the professions did several things: they emphasized their public calling as a counter to the private interests of the free market, they left behind hidebound traditions and began to address the problems ordinary people faced in a changing society, they joined practitioners and educators into a common research effort to build their knowledge base, they articulated and demonstrated the value of their core skills, and they opened their membership and extended their expertise to a greater diversity of people. We need to pursue a similar course today if both the architectural and professorial professions are to thrive.

## Notes

1. Books such as *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Kimball 1998) and *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (Sykes 1988) typify the critique leveled at the academic profession in recent years.
2. An excellent analysis of the professions vis-à-vis capitalism and the state is in *The Death of Guilds: Professions, States, and the Advance of Capitalism, 1930 to the Present* (Krause 1996).