

Rediscovering our calling

Tensions between the profession and the academy have a long history. As Robert Maxwell recounts in this issue (p.55), arguments over the proper education of architects go back to at least the eighteenth century, while as Dean Hawkes asserts (p.35), the pitting of practitioners against educators overlooks the fact that design lies at the heart of what both do. This debate has arisen anew because of a common threat facing both the architectural profession and the schools: increasing marketplace pressures to do more in less time at lower costs and growing public scepticism of the professions.

This has happened before. In the early nineteenth century, particularly in the United States, popular sentiment arose against the professions as anti-democratic elites, causing many jurisdictions to repeal licensing laws. That, in turn, led professionals to form associations in an effort to reassert control over their practices and to reposition the professions as the stewards of public health, safety, and welfare. Professional education moved into the universities, and the professional associations exerted considerable influence over the curriculum, with many faculty drawn from current or former practitioners. Thus began the uneasy alliance between the profession and the academy.

That relationship has been particularly strained in the last decade with the rise of the global economy and the return of the free-market critique of the professions and the universities. Architects have faced growing time and monetary pressures and academics have felt a similar squeeze. These pressures will continue until we return to our primary role in attending to the public good. We have, for too long, acted like elites, enjoying the monopoly in the marketplace that licensure and tenure provides without an equal devotion to the public need, and so have eroded the real base of our support.

As we discuss the responsibilities of the schools and the profession to each other, we should also do some soul searching as to our true purpose. Without rediscovering our responsibilities to the public, our profession may eventually become indistinguishable from business, shorn of licensure, and our schools eventually drummed out by distance-learning companies, without a single tenured professor – at which point, there may be little worth debating.

THE EDITORS

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