

Regarding: A Memorandum of Teaching

March 18, 2024

To: Architecture Professors and *APDesign* Faculty

From: Bob Condia, FAIA, ABITW, Emeritus Professor of Architecture

In my 40 years of teaching Architecture, I have realized a few things.

- First that our occupation is to educate - not train - students of architecture to “think like an architect.” Which is usually agreed to as the immediate feedback loop between one’s imagination and expertise that is sensed viscerally by thinking through actions, mediums of expression, and engagements of design. “It is this, not this!” Toshiko Mori in her AIA/ACSA Topaz Medallion (2019) acceptance speech, recognized over her teaching career much has changed in how we do architecture. Yet the most essential basis of our profession is the same as it ever was. Although many professions solve problems, architects remain exclusively specialist at seeking problems.
- Whereas promising fads, various software(s), and esoteric theories on architecture and education present glossy new hopes and temporary energies, I appreciate you only need to instill 3 things to buttress the proper thinking of young architects: Curiosity; Confidence; and Persistence. Persistence most of all. Curiosity is inborn, innate, natural order inherent in an architectural student. (It is why they come to us.) That is if inquisitiveness hasn’t been surgically removed by their race to the commonest of denominators, onset by the institutions of education. What you need do is inquire after their interests, drives and reveries, then demonstrate as a good academic your own determination towards some inquiry well pondered. In a curriculum built for learning-by-doing, what you do and demonstrate, who you are as a leader in their presence and in reputation is essential. Who you are teaches more than anything you will ever say. Confidence derives from preparation and dexterities. Everyone knows this, but I have seen fine teachers float into the new techniques, honestly excited by promise, promoting skills which cannot be mastered in a semesterly time frame. Such introductory work has a future in a few, but leaves most pupils in a relentless state of insecurity, unable and unwilling to assert themselves through a medium of expression. Beware when the means of reflecting through action becomes the problem rather than a tool for envisioning. Mastering a skill, being good at something, breeds confidence. Self-confidence breeds a practiced leadership and respect from others. Thirdly, above all else, it is persistence which promotes someone’s future success. Especially in this modern digital world of less is less and corporate subservience. In the ecology of all too much information, where we relinquish our decisions to impersonal analogs, it is easy to just give up. Becoming an architect means trusting your own well considered judgement above external critiques. Historically, architecture students are innately self-motivated. Nowadays lessons of persistence are demonstrated by chasing bottomless explorations into one’s own ideas and revelations, seeking self through fixated investigations. Persistence is coached by support, by support, by support. Summarily, thinking like an architect develops and matures as a craft, as a practice, as our professional expertise through conscious reflection on one’s own work.
- The economy of the academic is reputation value: both made manifestly by individual professors and demonstrated collectively as our institution’s character. Coach Ziegenfuss (PHHS, 1972) said one always plays to the level of the competition they surround themselves with so find and compete with the best. It

is vital that you do something compelled by your curiosity towards celebrated relationships within a peer group of similarly intellects and/or skills. Such oeuvre shall be made public, so colleagues and students know you are doing something noteworthy, and you are well regarded. Your work needs to construct a professional ego of confidence and leadership. An ego you immediately check-at-the-door when you enter the studio or classroom. Recognize, in these realms, in these spaces, *it is not about you*. Without choice, your reputation always precedes you.

- No one can teach **you** to think like an architect, any more than you learn to play a sax or shoot a basketball from a lecture. Or to dance a ballet or build a cabinet by reading a book. Fortunately, if you are interested and will practice the work you will acquire it by your own actions. An architecture teacher's original tasks are to interest students in what architecture is and get them entangled in the skills. Definitively, Donald Schön claims, with evidence, that all professional education is essentially coaching (1991). This coincides with my experience, but I will add that anyone can coach people who are like themselves. Most architects attempt to reproduce their own education as an effort to alter or modify the students around them into coachable persons. Such bias is a problem for learners, and not coaching. Alternately, I assert, professors of architecture must lead everyone in the room. A creative professional only emerges from their own singular personality, life experiences, time on Earth, and genetic inheritance, never from an imposed external appraisal or model. Your task is to discover the means of communicating with each student in the room demonstrating an architect's profound empathy and curiosity in others. You have as many studios as you have students. This is the definition of professional education. The mutual trust which comes from this ecology is the biology that will drive their work to its highest intellectual levels: individually and collectively in the room. For years I was accosted, "How do you make the students work so hard?" "I do not make them, I allow them. They do it because they know I care." I still care.
- My remarkable mentor, George Chamberlain (OSU, 1987) told me in my first year of full-time teaching that, "You never know what the students are really hearing. You must ask them." Which also denotes you must know what you are saying. Become a craftsman. Every single day, every class, have an agenda for the day and a specific lesson you are going to teach. I set out to impart this. Is it present in the work they made today? Then ask, "What message did you hear?" Reflect, evaluate, and repeat. In this way you will become a craftsman of your coaching. It is your job.
- People come to Architecture as a creative profession understood through a complex of sensory inputs. Early I was informed by colleagues, in complete certainty, that no one can teach creativity. A rather stunning proclamation in our place, which is nonetheless essentially factual. Defiantly, Sir Ken Robinson has shown that even as you cannot teach creativity, you can sure teach it out of someone, especially children in well-meaning public schools. What to do? Confidence, curiosity, and persistence builds authority to elevate creative thinking through actions by problem seekers. Arthur Koestler's seminal *The Act of Creation* (1964) has much to offer the scholarly studio critic. I will offer here but one lesson, that all creative work must be revealed through a medium of expression, through an artist act. Hence, the most fundamental question we must ask, "What is Architecture's artistic or aesthetic medium of expression?" I assert that Architecture, a verb, is a full body contact sport made up of real-world stuff and understood emotively, subconsciously, like a first impression which cultivates existential moments as memories and potential movements by one's own body.
- Which brings me to my last recommendation. Know that in this ecology of coaching architecture, without hesitation, your students are willing and capable to do whatever you can help them do.