AIA Michigan

Education Director Update

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As an educator, I am continuously reminded of the value that practitioners bring to the academic setting. And of their generosity! Many faculty both teach and practice, but I'm thinking here of architects and designers who engage with students outside of formal teaching roles. Visiting lecturers and guest critics share their experiences with Michigan schools of architecture each semester, helping students to envision their own professional futures.

In celebration of practice perspectives, and their value for students, academic institutions, and emerging professionals, I reached out to six established architects and designers for this newsletter. What, I asked, had they learned in the course of their careers that they wish they'd known at the beginning? Two themes emerged.

First, respondents emphasized that "the human element" is central to the practice of architecture. Several view client relationships among the most meaningful parts of their work—finding joy in clients' emotional reactions to successful designs, and satisfaction in client friendships. This architect-client relationship is difficult to model in the academy, but practitioners' experiences underscore the value of a human-centered design education. Several who I spoke to framed the "why" of their professional efforts in terms of the lived human experiences supported in the built environments they shape. This thinking extends to the office cultures they have built. Leading a firm, or a team, they suggest, is fundamentally about relationships and experiences. The key to success in the human side of practice? Express genuine interest in other people, not least through listening, and in your work, be authentically yourself.

Secondly, practitioners reflected on the benefits of non-linear career paths and diverse experiences. Upon graduation, several expected their work experiences would (or should) lead directly toward an envisioned model for an architecture career, only to find their plans or circumstances changed. By design or out of necessity, they tried out a firm type they weren't initially interested in, or worked in construction, fabrication, or the arts. They donated their time in community organizations, engaged in planning or politics, or took on leadership responsibilities they didn't expect to arrive so soon. In each case, respondents felt that "saying yes" to unexpected possibilities in the early stages of their career gave them experiences that made them better architects and designers. For students and faculty, working together on career preparation, these stories underscore the breadth of available possibilities, and the value of developing adaptability, and boldness, to seize emerging opportunities.

As we move into the academic summer, when faculty plan the next year's courses and graduates transition to full-time employment, we might think along with practice leaders

about why we do what we do. They remind us that ultimately our work “is about the people,” and invite graduates to see a professional world that is full of unexpected possibilities.

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Michael (Mick) McCulloch, Ph.D., AIA
AIA Michigan Education Director