AIA Michigan

Education Director Message

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University commencement ceremonies are among the greatest joys of springtime. I'll never forget my own, and I'm probably not alone in that. But as the graduates and their families toast to the future, we AIA members have much to celebrate as well. Architecture in Michigan will be strengthened as a new cohort of M.Arch graduates, from the state's five accredited programs, bring their academic training to bear in practice. They have studied the discipline's history, the environmental implications of building, and the profession's legal and ethical commitments, to name just a few. Most importantly, graduate education has challenged these emerging professionals to think critically.

That may sound like higher ed jargon, but criticality, or independent-mindedness, is the greatest gift of academic study and arguably the most admired quality in an architect as well. It is questioning received ideas, taking positions on important disciplinary questions, and engaging in cycles of action and reflection. These skills are practiced throughout an education, but for many, they gain their greatest traction in the final year, in thesis. As students select a thesis topic, they face a question that takes significant intellectual maturity, built up over their years of study: what is my project? In other words, what do I care about as a professional and how can my work make a difference in that area?

The range of thesis projects developed at any given school will reflect its particular academic culture—built up in seminars, studios, lecture series, and hallway conversations—but it will also illustrate the broader disciplinary ambitions and concerns of the new generation of graduates. In this sense, it can give us a glimpse at the future of architecture. To understand graduates' priorities, I've compared notes with my friend and mentor Dan Pitera, and observed trends in the zeitgeist at the University of Detroit Mercy and at my home institution, Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University. Above all, it is clear that today's graduates are not shying away from difficult problems.

Students' interest in complexity and nuance is evidenced in their embrace of adaptive reuse strategies. The built world has been rapidly reshaped by technological change and uneven patterns of development, and many students are seeking an architecture that brings new life to marginalized places. Reuse takes advantage of the embodied energy in existing buildings, but for many it is also a cultural intervention. It preserves something of the memory of the past—of the small-town main street or the industrial factory for example—while extending a vibrant public realm into overlooked built environments.

Climate, unsurprisingly, is a concern of recent graduates, and many center it in their thesis work. For some, this takes the form of densification plans that redress the carbon-intensive and auto-centric development patterns of the past. Others imagine new built environments to support populations who are displaced by climate change. Setting an agenda for climate justice, students are demonstrating a capacity to see singular, localized projects within the context of global concerns. And whether imagining a post-carbon

world, or developing incremental strategies for managing change, they seek an architecture that addresses climate challenges while making the lived experience of buildings and cities richer and more meaningful.

Students, finally, are favoring community-centered approaches to design in many projects. This often means focused research, including interdisciplinary reading but also interviews and workshops, to respond to the needs and desires of specific populations. With empathy, imagination, and practiced listening skills, graduates have designed environments to support veterans, the post-incarcerated, parents, and children for example. These projects reject a one-size-fits-all approach to architecture, and invite reimagining of the design process itself, and the roles that architects and community members play in it.

Commencement season is a time of growth and opportunity for our AIA community. Please join me in celebrating the important contributions that this year's graduates will make, both in their immediate work, and over time, as they chart an ambitious course for the profession and the built environment of the future.

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