

The Forces that will Change Architectural Education

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Rarely do architecture schools use the design skills of our own faculty and students to reshape architectural education itself. While many radical ideas about the world get proposed in design studios, it seems far too radical to suggest that these studios might meet some other time than Monday/Wednesday/Friday afternoon or that there might be a different composition to studio than a dozen or so architecture students taught by one faculty member. The profoundly conservative structure and format of architectural education stems, in part, from the conservative nature of universities generally, with their societal obligation to preserve knowledge of the past and to counter reckless change.

But, we are in the midst of a transformation in our economy that will require an equally dramatic transformation of architectural education. Schools will need to change not only in response to this economic revolution, but also because we have an opportunity and responsibility to help lead it. The new economy being born right now has had several names suggested for it – the design economy,¹ the creator economy² – but most commentators agree that the greatest value in the future will arise from innovation and creativity, the core skills of an architecture education. While this may offer us solace, it does not mean that we can keep doing what we've always done and the rest of economy will simply embrace it. The new design economy will demand new forms of design education, and force us to change if we are to remain relevant.

For example, we will need to see the thought process we use as more important than what we apply it to. In the new economy, it will be more valuable – and more highly rewarded – to be a designer than to be an architect or any other design specialty. Those who can apply our thought process to the design of events, organizations, institutions, systems, environments, or services will thrive, and the more open we remain to the specific applications of our knowledge, the more in demand designers will be. We will also need to see our pedagogy as something not to protect, but to generalize and export. The conversational, problem-focused, project-based form of learning in design studio will become a key way of helping students in all disciplines understand, synthesize, and create with the vast store of digitally based information now at our disposal. But this will require a much more expansive view of studio, in which its means and methods get applied to projects and problems far removed from the design of physical things.

Some faculty will undoubtedly resist such changes, and that remains their right. But the old, application-specific way of teaching design will soon become a minor part of design education in the new economy. People will, of course, still need buildings designed, but what will change is the separation of that from the design of the organizations, institutions, services, and events that occur within them and from the design of the material, economic, social, and environmental flows of which they are a part. Education in our schools will have, as a result, a much more interdisciplinary, open-ended, problem-seeking, evidence-based form than what currently exists in most of our programs. We will not have much choice but to move in this direction. With the design or creator economy will come powerful incentives – academic as well as economic – to respond to and help direct the transformation already underway. And what of those colleagues who still refuse to change? They will soon find themselves in a paradox: not valuing an economy that increasingly values how they think.

References

Breen, Bill. "The Business of Design," Fast Company. <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/93/design.html>