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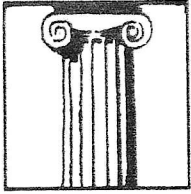
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Designing a Career in Architecture

By Ben Weese



Regardless of whether you've spent your undergraduate years studying *The Battle of the Bulge*, the *Indians of Middle America* or the *Victorian Novel*, it is not too late to consider architecture as a career. In fact, in a field which broadly overlaps many disciplines, even a "general" liberal arts undergraduate education can be a great asset.

The once-named "mother of the arts," architecture requires a broad understanding of history, art and the sciences. In fact, one of the historical dilemmas was where or how to teach architecture. Did it belong in the university or was it more a trade or craft? It certainly was not one of the disciplines (i.e. classics, philosophy, or theology) around which

—Fundamental to the creative side is the ability to think three-dimensionally. Composers hear and compose music in their heads. Creative architects should visualize architectural space in their heads.

universities were founded. In fact, it showed up for the first time in the curriculum of M.I.T. and the University of Illinois around 1865, starting the slow break from the master-apprentice/office-atelier relationship.

Today, an architectural education is highly organized around a mandatory 3-year graduate program (some exceptions on a 2-year basis are granted), offered by some 35 institutions, that reward the long hours with a Masters Degree. We hope this is all for the best.

Those of you interested in architecture probably have visited the big-windowed studios, with the lights on all night, housing the

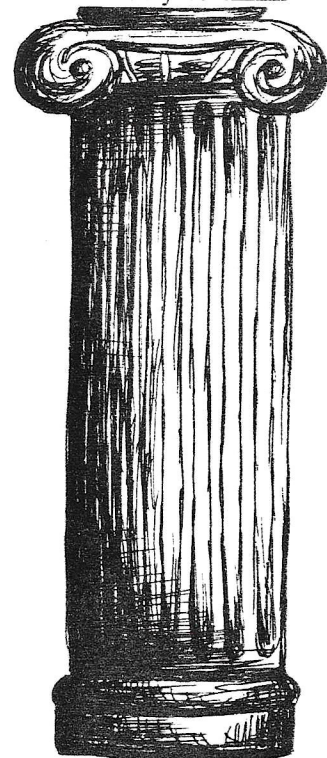
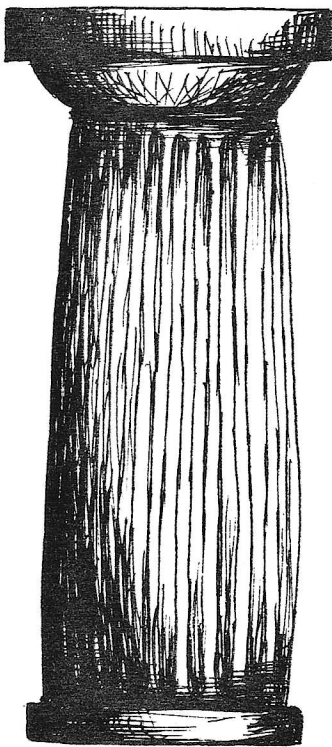
undergraduate and graduate architecture departments. Such schools as Yale, Harvard, Penn and Columbia continually compete to be considered "the best." General public awareness of architecture and related issues is growing. Schools are crowded.

But in spite of high competition in numbers and relatively low compensation, there is a permanence about architecture. The artistic freedom and struggle for integrity of Ayn Rand's hero in *The Fountainhead* or the growing myths of our late heroes, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies Van der Rohe feed the mystiques that the architect enjoys a unique role and can affect our environment for the better. It is intoxicating that on the one hand, a pragmatic, three-dimensional, hands-on activity (the coordination of building trades) can, on the other hand, produce the possibility of a lasting expression of culture.

What to do? Is it for me? GRE's are required, but other special visual aptitude tests may or may not help. Go visit construction sites or architects' offices. The atmosphere is often congenial and informal - just right for questions and dialogue.

What are your three-dimensional skills? Some schools, Harvard and Cornell, for example, give summer look-see intern programs that test these skills. Fundamental to the creative side is the ability to think three-dimensionally. Composers hear and compose music in their heads. Creative architects should visualize architectural space in their heads.

However, many trained architects do not create this way per se and still they preserve the patrimony of buildings, they represent clients, administer complex building programs, become professional urban planners and enlightened developers, or heaven forbid, they teach. So if you have strong desires to build, preserve, or make these things happen in an allied field such as preservation or real estate development, your training can be pursued with more emphasis within the curriculum on technology,



planning, economics or history.

To get a license, you must get your degree and work a cumulative three years in an office. Many graduates apprentice with larger offices to get the broadest overview of the field. I believe it is important to stay two to three years in one office in order to benefit from seeing specific projects through from inception to completion. Once you are licensed and have worked a three to five year stint, your developed skills are valuable enough that you can seek a more permanent connection with a firm. This means that your skill in design, project managing, or client contact (hand-holding), is valuable enough to have a good firm make a longer term commitment to you or that you are ready to start your own firm. The average watershed comes somewhere in your mid-30s when you have matured in your skills and self-confidence.

In this process, you will also have observed and acquainted yourself with the many types and styles of architectural practice. The style range is so wide, it can only be briefly mentioned - from working for "name" architects with recognized aesthetic styles to the more democratic "group" practices. In terms of the type of practice, it is unfortunate that while one's training should allow architects to design in a broad range of building types, it seems that architectural practices are getting more and more specialized. Designing for hospitals or multi-family housing is an interesting problem, but variety is a relief for the practitioner and the product.

One general observation on office size: small offices allow you to deal with every aspect of the practice, providing more complete hands-on experience; large offices will pressure you to specialize on a narrower range of expertise. Perhaps surprisingly the vast bulk of practitioners in the U.S. are in one to five person offices - low overhead and independence!

The notoriously low compensation can be answered with "we suffer for art," or "we have not compromised our ideals!" A few combine a business or law degree with their architecture and gain broadened roles and compensation. Women are entering, rightfully so, in even larger numbers; as much as one-third to one-half of total enrollment is now women.

Schools will test your skills at beautiful drawings and graphic techniques, possibly mistaking them as ends rather than means and as "art" in and

of themselves. Drawings should be considered as means to the end product of a building, to convince, but not to con, non-visual clients. In addition, computer graphics are lurking at the edge both in design and construction drawing as software programs become ever more sophisticated. Building three-dimensional models is the best way to include non-visual in the process. But again, they have typically been used more to impart practical information, not as art objects in themselves. The caveat is that the printed work, two-dimensional

The notoriously low compensation can be answered with, "We suffer for art."

graphics (photos included), and scale models, as pristine objects, delight us, but they lead us away from the sobering and flawed full-scale buildings. Our refuge and destiny is, for better or worse, in the building itself. The building is the reality and, if we enlist them, the people who live and work in the completed product are the final test of the success of the architecture.

If you can sit down quietly in a room and make lists about the room itself or the wider environment (such as, what are the behavioral and psychological questions addressed, the cultural implications, the role of history, and the symbolic content); if you seek long dialogue and involvement with clients, users, statistical models and questionnaires, or full scale environmental experiments with light, color, texture, and material or foreign trips (the built world is the laboratory) with sketch pads and camera, notes, observations; if you like all that, you will and should continue this interactive experimental process as an architect with patience and understanding, ultimately to see the average life cycle of three to five years for a well-tended project carefully and caringly done.

—Ben Weese graduated from Harvard College in 1951 and from the Harvard School of design in 1957. He was a partner in his brother's firm, Harry Weese and Associates, which handled such large scale work as the Washington Metro and the Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Airport New Town. In 1977, he formed Weese Hickey Weese with his wife, Cynthia, who is also an architect. They have a small firm concentrating in private institutional work, colleges, churches and urban housing.

