Unlimited learning

Embracing technology and new ways to educate is critical

Jane Duncan

‘You’ll never know everything about anything, especially something you love.’
Julia Child

Education for architecture students does not start in Freshers’ week, or stop at qualification. It’s time to look again at how our interaction with the changing built environment could offer lifelong learning opportunities.

I was encouraged from my first moments to look and draw, visit and absorb buildings, galleries and historic places around Europe. My vantage point was from the back of my Dad’s old Rover, piled in with siblings, picnic and the dog (not called Rover). Others less fortunate need great teachers to fully see and interact with the world they look at every day.

However, damp, deteriorating school buildings cannot encourage a pupil’s respect for, or interaction with their surroundings. The RIBA’s latest report, Better Spaces for Learning, is a timely cry for government to understand the impact of poor school environments on educational outcomes, to use smarter design and drive up derived value by reviewed procurement, to ensure all children have the start they need in life. This convincing evidence-based research demonstrates the impact of well-designed school buildings on student behaviour, engagement and – crucially – attainment. I am delighted so many members have been involved in this work.

School buildings matter, but the curriculum must include an engaging introduction to the built environment. RIBA Learning starts to address this with its creative school education programmes and adult workshops, drawing on collections in our architectural library, and developing activities that span arts, science and heritage. Please get in touch if you’d like to join the architects and students who support this work with their own local schools, as RIBA Architecture Ambassadors.

Today’s children are our future built environment leaders, governors, professionals and clients, and need to absorb and adapt to a fast pace of technological change as they develop. Students of architecture rely on their schooling, and then academia, to develop sensitive approaches, sustainable knowledge and contextual skills. They will need an appreciation of the benefits of evidence-based practice, and guidance on how to steer their career path within the emerging ethical, social and economic context of a global profession. While leadership and drive for this can come from the Institute, the full picture cannot be conveyed to students by the school curriculum or schools of architecture alone. Practices need to play their part, and benefit from their young employees’ technical abilities – or frankly be left out of touch.

As the cost of architectural education spirals, earn-as-you-learn will become more attractive and involve much more input from practices. RIBA Studio (formerly the RIBA Examination in Architecture for Office-Based Candidates) remains the only distance learning, truly cost-effective UK programme in architecture delivering both part 1 and part 2 qualifications, although new alternative programmes are emerging including those at Sheffield, Reading and LSA.

Students and practitioners at all stages in their career however need to acquire the mental dexterity to tackle a new and dynamic mix of virtual, bio or nano elements, and to balance this against the constraints of our historic fabric, reducing resources and a global outlook. As engines of a new architectural future, the schools need to redefine their purpose to prepare future professionals, re-train current practitioners, and re-educate and re-connect with those many active third-age professionals who have so much to contribute.

Education with no limits is critical now and for the generations to come.

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