

The \$100,000 Question

BY ANDREW CARUSO

It's the query every student should be asking: How do I make the most of my design education?

Reposted with permission from *DesignIntelligence* (www.di.net), November 2009.

After spending \$40,000 per year for five years, not to mention the blood, sweat, and tears that accompanied my architectural education, the piece of beige paper handed to me that summer morning in a neatly stitched faux leather folder seemed exactly that—beige. Yet when I look back on my design education, I could not think of a better way to begin my career—a launching pad for a unique way of thinking and of seeing the world.

What is design education? Many see it, particularly architecture education, as an intense set of enigmatic exercises blithely ensconced in an ivory tower of theory. For architects, formal education is just the beginning of a much longer path toward professional credentialing—one that may take 10 to 15 years. Beyond obtaining an accredited professional degree, an individual must complete a rigorous multi-year internship and a seven-phase licensing exam. Cha-ching! An investment in an architectural career is significant. Making the most of this outlay in time and money is lesson No. 1 in the game of life.

Though some may accuse me of cynicism in my critique of a 21st-century educational process whose roots date back to an early 19th century Euro-centric model, I am awed by its transformative power.

A design education can be one of the most intellectually stimulating and life-changing experiences in higher education. My relatives roll their eyes mockingly as I pause to admire the mathematic repetition of rotating angles within a pinecone. A friend laughs when I tell him that the chipped ice floating in his lemonade reminds me of a mosaic tile pattern I saw in Portugal. But for me and for others who have experienced it, design education fundamentally causes us to see the world in a different way. It is most certainly intense, frustrating, and

elusive. It is a world where questions are met with the sly grin of a faculty member replying in open-ended syntax. A slight nod implies you should have understood the answer.

Frustrating? Yes.

Fundamentally reordering the ways in which you see, understand, and engage the world around you? Yes.

Make the Most of Education

If you have taken the leap or are considering investing in design education, I offer some practical suggestions for making the most of your experience.

Get comfortable with the unknown. Curiosity is the greatest roadmap for your future. From day one, design education plunges students into the depths of the unfamiliar. Contemporary higher education—and most particularly design education—represents a fundamental shift from the traditionally ingrained process of learning and assimilating information. Early design students arrive with more than a decade of experience in an education model that centers itself on (and rewards) the assimilation of known quantities. Contemporary students are trained to recognize expertise as the accumulation of that which is known rather than the pursuit of that which eludes.

However, higher education—and none more so than design education—thrusts students into the realm of the unknown in pursuit of a broader, deeper, and more connected understanding of the world. It is not surprising that many design students find themselves paralyzed when confronted with this new measure for academic and professional success. Making the most of your experience in design education relies on developing confidence in exploring the unknown as well as acknowledging that the teaching faculty does not hold the answers. Such awareness will free you for greater exploration and easier “failure management,” a necessary part of the learning process.

There will always be time for architecture. Get out of the design studio. Pencils down. A timeless phrase imbued with memories of a grade school classroom that still make me shiver. Yet how poignant and relevant this phrase remains to the design student. All of us have a friend who spent every moment (both waking and sleeping) in the design studio. But figuring out how some unique space explores (insert architectural jargon here) is meaningless if your overall design statement cannot engage, address, or respond to the broader questions of the human condition.

Design education is too short to be spent solely within the confines of the design studio. Part of the value of design education and higher education in general is nurturing the ability to integrate a broad collection of interests, opportunities, cultures, and experiences into the learning process. Such pursuits create well-rounded, informed, contextually relevant, and temporally responsive design solutions, not to mention design professionals. Questions of the built and human condition of our time are the currency of the design professions and the essence of functional beauty, not aesthetics. This is the differentiator between an esoteric designer and a well-versed design professional.

Cross boundaries often. Design is a collaborative act. Design cannot occur in a vacuum. No matter the type, scale, context, or problem statement, design is inherently collaborative. Sourcing materials, developing solutions, negotiating manufacturing and building efforts, and even the ultimate occupancy are intrinsically connected to an infinite network of people, disciplines, resources, economies, cultures, and histories. Professionals must be fluent in managing collaboration to impact the built environment meaningfully, thoughtfully, and responsibly.

Always break the rules, but trust your instincts. This became a conscious effort of my design education, purposely challenging myself to develop well-reasoned, concise arguments about anything and everything. Not surprisingly, these became my best opportunities for learning and design innovation. For example, when asked to design a neighborhood library, I created a flea market instead. The argument? A flea market is a collection of artifacts that catalogs social and cultural heritage. It is simply a type of library. Opening an entirely new line of inquiry by breaking that rule, I was free to create one of my best projects.

No matter what the rule, challenge yourself to develop a strong case as to why and how to break it. This skill will be invaluable as you progress through your career, and frankly, it makes life more interesting.

Learn how to challenge people on their ideas, and do it often. Question everything. Never underestimate your voice and the power of your ideas. Every design act allows you to take a stand for the betterment of our world and its people. This is your responsibility as a design professional.

While this is a noble goal, to be effective one must learn the art of challenging the ideas and philosophies of others. I wish for early designers to embrace that they are never too young

or inexperienced to challenge a point of view. Negotiating common successes is the way of progress. In fact, design education is most fruitful when used as a platform for new generations to test, remake, and eclipse what has been done before. If done thoughtfully and through informed discourse, the challenging of accepted norms and ideas is an art form best practiced often.

See it, do it, teach it. Too much of traditional pedagogy focuses on observation and iterative practice. However, some of the most important learning experiences in design education come from opportunities in which teaching another designer illuminates new content, a new perspective, or deeper questions leading to an enhanced understanding. Recognizing teaching and mentorship as essential learning opportunities is an often undervalued and therefore underutilized component of design education.

Get comfortable in front of people. I was lucky. Through my previous experiences as a musical performer and student leader, public speaking had become a daily necessity. I had grown comfortable defending my ideas in front of people. Entering architecture school, I had not realized how critical these seemingly unrelated experiences were to preparing me for the barrage of critiques that accompany design education. Moreover, it struck me that while the intention of these critique sessions was to indirectly foster confidence and skill in public presentation, no formal theory or methodology was offered to help young designers hone this necessary part of their craft.

My musical training found me lying on the floor many times to practice breathing techniques and performing exercises in proper diction. Obviously, none of that found its way into my design education; yet neither did any rigorous instruction on the fundamentals of preparing a concise verbal argument. Herein lies the perfect opportunity for making the most of your design education: months of work are reduced to the fateful five minutes when you present your ideas to an audience of colleagues. First, note that this is a dress rehearsal for the rest of your life, and second, take every opportunity within the studio and beyond to get comfortable presenting ideas in front of other people. Like it or not, this will be how your life is transacted. Clients, city officials, the leaders of your company—all are your audience. Presentation is nine-tenths of the battle.

Go global. Develop a fluency in languages, cultures, and changing trends. Without doubt, traditional barriers have faded for a new generation of design professionals. Geographic, economic, social, and cultural barriers are quickly eroding as

practice demands a fluency of ideas and services across these areas. Making the most of your design education requires you to search out every opportunity for exposure to and awareness of the global context in which you will practice. Study abroad. Learn a second or even third language. Delve deeply into the practices and particulars of another culture. Globally focused talent equipped for success in emerging markets is the new must-have credential for leadership in a global economy.

Get on your hiking boots. The chasm between the academy and practice is deeper and wider than ever. Hands-on work experience through an internship, co-op, or similar model is critical to increasing the value of your education. Formal design education lasts only three to seven years, but it is expected to catapult you into several decades of profitable, productive service as a design professional. Design education, therefore, finds its success in instilling a framework by which to think, explore, and analyze the world.

How much should design education focus on employability? This is an eternal debate. Reluctantly, I am growing to accept that academe and practice are two fundamentally different worlds, and rightfully so. While rapid development of new knowledge and a dynamically evolving concept of the design and delivery process should unite these spheres, external pressures and the mechanics of how they function allow finite common ground. Is this to the profession's benefit? No, but it is the current and likely future reality.

Overcoming Limitations

Making the most of your design education requires you to anticipate its limitations. Consider these suggestions:

Your portfolio will not get you a job. You will get you a job. People hire people, not portfolios. Excellence in your design work is absolutely important. Resist the notion, however, that any job of consequence has ever been won or lost solely by a portfolio. Jobs are won or lost over a candidate's ability to articulate the broader issues that influence the design solutions represented therein. They have been won by the ability to propose confidently how knowledge gained through a particular exploration could provide added value to an initiative of the company or enterprise.

Network, network, network. Learn to be a rainmaker. Following my graduation, I spent three months working the night shift in fashion retail. Purposefully chosen, this was my opportunity to learn what design education had failed to teach me. Four nights a week, I practiced building quick rapport as a trusted advisor of strangers. I practiced intently listening to

clients and assessing the needs they communicated or only implied. It challenged me to develop a method for starting conversation, persuading courses of action and decision making, and anticipating questions and expectations.

Design education, perhaps rooted in a model that seeks patrons to commission projects, has not focused on equipping future designers with the business development skills of our fellow young corporate executives. I remember watching the business school host soiree after soiree on the plaza outside my studio window, where every student practiced the complexities of this art weekly. I ultimately realized what I was missing. Authentically marketing yourself, your ideas, and your growing expertise are a necessary part of your future. Rainmaking in the form of clients, projects, and collaborators will be as important to your future as understanding how to detail a glass curtain wall.

Don't let others tell you what architects do and don't do.

Was I lucky to walk into the architecture profession at the time of the greatest recession in more than 80 years? What it has confirmed for me is that the design profession (and the educational models that support it) are stuck in a narrow concept of what architects are trained to do.

While preparing a policy analysis linking the importance of design to the success of public transportation, I sat down with a number of my faculty for a discussion. To gain insight, I asked them how they influence local and regional policy as architects. Blank stares greeted my question. My line of inquiry began to explore why a group of highly accomplished professionals regularly lament the growing loss of influence architects have on the built environment yet remain reticent to exercise influence. It was illuminating.

"Architecture cannot solve social problems," one person said. Had I believed this faculty member, my career would have taken a radically different direction. Perhaps what he meant to say was that architecture alone cannot solve social problems, but it surely affects them. That is how I define what I will do one day as an architect.

I have landed on the side of feeling lucky to step into this profession at such an important time of change. The rules are being rewritten, and emerging design professionals should freely embrace and promote a broad spectrum of new capacities in which architects can apply design thinking for the greater good.

Too cool to join? You lose. First, a disclaimer: I led the American Institute of Architecture Students in 2007. Students should avail themselves of every opportunity to join professional groups related to their interests and goals. The AIAS allowed me to leverage my design education into the beginning of a professional career. Opening up experiences, information, and opportunities that are not readily accessible through one's formal education, professional organizations offer a complement to the intellectual rigor of a design curriculum.

Less than a year after graduating, I ran across a colleague from school. Volunteering on a design-build project, he put down his nail gun and pulled me aside. He said, "I remember watching how involved you were with AIAS. I never understood why or how important that would be once I graduated. Now that I am trying to figure out my own career, I regret not taking advantage of that opportunity."

I promptly handed him an alumni affiliate membership form.

Learn to talk to your parents about architecture. These will be your future clients. With jest, my parents find every opportunity to slip parti into casual dinner conversation or talk about how the couch might begin to "have a dialogue" with the rug. Meanwhile, I am reminded of how challenging it was for me to describe to them what I was studying as a first- and second-year architecture student.

Design school offers not only an education in new ideas but a new lexicon as well: design-speak. Design education is so intently focused on preparing students with an internal, albeit important, vocabulary that the skills and abilities to speak externally about our endeavors are not facile.

Learning to communicate effectively with others about what I do as a design professional was a significantly challenging and important part of my professional maturation. I laugh now when my parents proudly explain how they created a rhythm with the plantings in the front yard. Perhaps I was successful after all.

Even if the suggestions above are not helpful to you in leveraging the greatest value out of your design education, take to heart these last two observations from my journey:

You won't ever know if this is really what you want to do. Embrace it. If you survive design education and are still questioning if this is what you want to do, you are not alone. Get used to this question, since I suggest it is one you will never escape. This question is an opportunity to build bridges

to related disciplines, to exercise the methods of inquiry you have developed during your design education in alternate and adventurous contexts.

Be ready for the other 90 percent. Design education teaches you about 10 percent of what you will actually need to know for your early career. This is not an attack on contemporary design pedagogy as much as it is an honest observation. Recent studies estimate that more than half of what students learn in their first year is outdated by the time they graduate. What greater support could there be for education to provide a framework for the ongoing processes of learning, assessment, and generation of new knowledge?

Students and emerging design professionals make the most of their design education when they use it as a springboard to learn the other 90 percent of what they need to accomplish their career pursuits. My advice in the meantime: Do your best and learn quickly.

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