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Architects add a new role to their job duties: facilitator

- *Designing a school means getting the faculty, staff, students and community on board.*

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The role of the architect in educational design is evolving. As educational methodologies become more participatory and community-oriented, educational architecture is experiencing a similar trend.

Students, families, teachers, staff and the community are taking a more active role in the funding and design of their educational facilities. Consequently, the time of the architect-visionary who

designed more for visual impact than functionality is gone, if in truth it ever existed outside literature.

Today, responsible architects and designers facilitate a comprehensive building process with full stakeholder participation. And the role of the architect continues to evolve as we move from user-centered designers to experts in facilitation, helping stakeholder- and client-designers to generate more and more of the design of their own educational facilities.

Learning from the experts

As an integral part of this evolution, programming of educational facilities is expanding from a discrete phase at the beginning of design to an all-inclusive participatory process that spans and shapes every design phase.

This provides exciting new and enhanced opportunities for educational facilities to meet the needs of the people they serve and to receive their support. It also presents new opportunities for us as architects to learn from the true experts — the people who use and maintain the buildings we design.

An effective participatory design process is key. Stakeholders are invested in the design to the level of their meaningful participation in the process.



Image courtesy of Rolluda Architects and McFarland Marceau Architects

The more stakeholders shape the design, the more they will make the most of the design features they've included, and the

more they own and take pride in the finished building and feel a part of the institution. An inclusive process results in a building tailored to its intended uses and users, which is valued by its community.

Architects noticed that students on a planning committee for the University of Washington's Ethnic Cultural Center were shy around school staff, so they began organizing work sessions just for students.

Adapting to participants

To maximize the effectiveness of educational design projects, we encourage clients to build an inclusive design team of faculty, students, administrators, staff, maintenance personnel, parents, neighbors and other community members.

The architect works as a facilitator, mining relevant information, finding common ground among participants, and helping the team to develop criteria by which all design options are evaluated throughout the design and construction process.

The architect must creatively adapt to each unique design team and project. Typical design teams are composed of participants with varying degrees of exposure to the architectural process and a wide range of visual and verbal communication skills and styles.

Having access to a variety of group and individual brainstorming and design exercises will present a range of opportunities for participation. Exercises might include touring and evaluating similar facilities, visualizing a specific user's experience of the building, examining adjacencies between programmatic spaces

and arranging the individual program spaces in three dimensions.

Ideally, the activities will include individual, small group and large group formats, as well as interactive, graphic, written and verbal presentations.

Effectively adapting participatory methodologies to each specific group and situation is essential to helping stakeholders find common ground and ensure all participants are able to fully contribute to the design, as illustrated in the following examples.



Photo courtesy of Rolluda Architects

An inclusive design team — with faculty, students, administrators, staff, maintenance personnel, parents, neighbors and other community members — will have varying degrees of exposure to the architectural process and a wide range of visual and verbal communication skills. Architects can encourage participation with brainstorming and design exercises, such as the programming exercise shown here.

Ferndale schools

Ferndale School District asked Rolluda Architects to work with stakeholders to explore possibilities for co-locating two very dissimilar alternative high schools on a single site.

Parents, staff and students from both schools were initially against the co-location. Both school communities felt their philosophies and programs were too different to coexist on the same site, and expressed fears that their particular school and program would lose its individual identity.

The architectural team's primary focus was to carefully listen to and learn from each stakeholder. Meetings were emotional and contentious, but while there were disagreements, there were many more similarities than differences between the views of the two groups.

The strongest interests of both groups involved maintaining the separate identity of each school and keeping the two programs

physically separated. It was the architect-facilitator's role to clarify and explore these points of agreement, help stakeholders to develop design criteria and illustrate the compatibility of their views with design solutions that met the needs, priorities and concerns of all stakeholders.

The architect facilitated further discussions in which stakeholders evaluated the design concepts based on the criteria they had developed. Together, the stakeholders refined and validated design concepts, reaching consensus on options fully supported by both school communities and the district.

UW Ethnic Cultural Center

The University of Washington Ethnic Cultural Center was originally designed in 1970 to aid in recruiting and supporting minority students, including four student groups organized on campus. Today the facility serves hundreds of diverse students, and more than 60 student groups who use the building for performances, meetings, studying, cooking and informal gatherings.

The university asked Rolluda Architects, in conjunction with McFarland Marceau Architects, to program and design a new facility to better serve its mission, expanded program and student base.

The architects worked with the cultural center's planning committee, composed of students, administrators, staff and facilities project managers, for programming of the new facility. The committee agreed that the facility and its design should be "of, for and by the students."

The architect's role was to facilitate discussions, ensure all voices were heard and help the committee to develop shared criteria by which to evaluate options presented throughout the project.

The architect noted students were less likely to speak up in the presence of university administrators and staff. In response, work sessions were organized exclusively for the students.

In these sessions, the architect facilitated a variety of brainstorming and design activities. This presented an opportunity for the architect to learn directly from the students. It also allowed the students to take the lead in shaping the new facility. Different

students took leadership roles in each activity, as they worked together in groups and presented their ideas back to one another.

A programming document was developed, compiling extensive information gathered from stakeholders, reflecting the priorities and outcomes of the process, and achieving the full support of the committee. The committee will use the document as the basis for evaluating options presented by the architect throughout design and construction.

A support-building tool

Participatory design is a powerful tool. By effectively facilitating the participatory design process, the architect helps stakeholders develop, test and use criteria to shape the design for an educational facility that is highly responsive to the needs of the people who learn, teach and work in it. The process can increase community support for the institution, and further its mission.

To do this, the architect must build and develop trust with and between project participants, seeking common ground and finding shared goals, practicing patience, promoting communication and resolving conflicts as they arise.

A participatory design process is fun and rewarding. Participants stretch their imaginations, learn more about their organization's mission and goals, and develop concepts for improved teaching and learning. They increase their investment in the educational facility and see a return on their investment as their design becomes a reality.

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