

Amateur–Beginner–Citizen: A-B-C’s of Becoming an Architect

Dr. Lisa Landrum

Associate Dean Research / Faculty of Architecture
Associate Professor / Department of Architecture

In October 2019 I was invited to present at the POP//CAN//CRIT event at Toronto’s Design Exchange as part of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada’s annual conference. Created as a forum to discuss Popular topics in a Canadian context through Critical questions, the 2019 POP//CAN//CRIT focused on questions surrounding the “Education and Emergence of Architects in Canada.” Presenters were specifically asked to address the student-intern-architect trajectory and to speak to the gaps and hurdles between each step on the path to licensure. The following text is a slightly edited version of my response, which, instead of emphasizing distinctions, aimed to draw out commonalities shared by all architects, interns, and students.

Circumstances surrounding the 2020 COVID-19 crisis have reinforced the underlying premises of this pre-pandemic presentation, especially that all aspects of our vulnerable global society are inextricably linked, and that to sustain a measure of collective well-being we must reaffirm commitments to common principles and goals, without surrendering individuality, diversity, and freedom.

I have had the pleasure of working on many sides of the student-intern-architect threshold: as an architect, mentor, educator, and academic administrator who helped launch our Faculty’s new Cooperative Education / Integrated Work Program through ongoing consultations with all players in this process. Insights from these experiences underpin the following argument, which offers an alternative view of professional growth. In short, I aim to soften the presumed hierarchy of the student–intern–architect trajectory. Instead of emphasizing differences between these roles, I will highlight fundamental attributes uniting all three: the essential A-B-C’s of any present or future architect – being an Amateur, a Beginner, and a Citizen. Let me explain.

Amateur

Some may oppose the Amateur to the professional, but Amateurs are by definition pros at doing what they love. The root meaning of Amateur is *amour* and *amatore*, Latin for “lover.” As Roland Barthes explained, the Amateur works in perpetual amorous pursuit: the Amateur continually renews their pleasure, “loves and loves again,” working “without the spirit of mastery or competition.”¹ The Amateur pursues neither status nor power but joy – what Barthes calls *jouissance* – being motivated by intense

curiosity, genuine care, and compassionate struggle; loving not fame or recognition, but their work and the world.

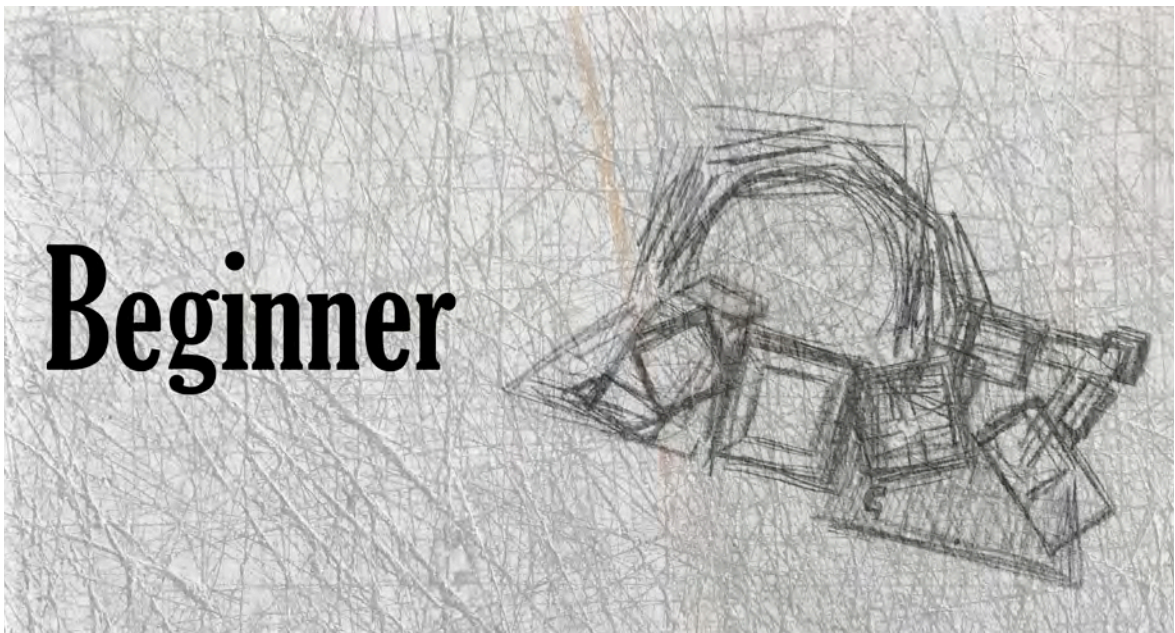
For architect Juhani Pallasmaa, such love involves deriving pleasure from uncertainty and open-ended pursuits. A sincere professional, Pallasmaa claims, is one who stops to ponder what others view as self-evident. As he writes, “In a fundamental sense, I can say that, by age and experience, one becomes increasingly more an amateur, rather than turning into a professional possessing immediate and assured responses.”² Such an architect accumulates not expertise but uncertainty.

Creating an environment where students can enjoy processes of uncertainty, and discover their love of architecture and its role in shaping a desirable world, is a key task of architectural education; just as keeping this curiosity and passion alive throughout one’s career is an obligation for every professional.

Beginner

Some may regard the Beginner as one who simply lacks experience, and view beginnings as mere preliminaries to quickly move beyond. Yet, isn’t the making of beginnings – inaugurating new conditions, establishing new relationships and opportunities – exactly what architects do? For philosopher Edmund Husserl, beginnings are what mature thinkers strive to discover, recover, and enact by continually asking fresh questions and approaching old subjects anew. Husserl referred to himself as a perpetual Beginner and introduced phenomenology as a “science of beginnings” – a return to the living present and matters at hand. From this embodied situation, experienced in the midst of particular circumstances, he believed one may always begin again and start anew.³

Architect Louis Kahn similarly pursued design as a process of unending beginnings. He strove to recover the originating purpose or human motive for any place he designed: such as moving into the light to read a book as the origin of a library; or moving between settings of quiet contemplation and social interaction as giving rise to a monastery. Kahn’s many sketches provide a compelling demonstration of architectural design as an unending search for beginnings. His quest is exemplified by the 900 drawings made for an unbuilt monastery collected in the recent book called *Drawing to Find Out*.⁴





Recognizing the regenerative potential and instituting the power of beginnings and Beginners helps us also to recover the original meaning and agency of “arche.” In its earliest usage, this Greek word meant neither master nor ruler, but to begin, initiate and lead. Recalling this active, generative, and guiding sense of “arche” can renew and reorient our understanding of the “archi-*te*ct” as a role based not on status, as a top-down master-builder, but on socially productive performances that create propitious beginnings.

Citizen

Architects do have specialized knowledge and responsibility, but their most important qualification remains their basic humanity, truly being a Citizen of the world. As Hannah Arendt emphasized in *The Human Condition*, communities are defined by citizens “acting and speaking together.”⁵ Such shared purpose does not imply sameness of views or homogeneity of actors. On the contrary, as she emphasizes in an essay on the question of world citizenship, this collective action is meaningful only when grounded in plurality, diversity, mutual limitations, and local responsibility.⁶

The global Climate Strikes of Fall 2019 and Black Lives Matter demonstrations of Spring 2020 are transformative initiatives of multi-national and multi-generational world

citizens acting together for the sake of climate justice, social justice, and the future viability of our shared planet.

Empowering “citizen-architects” is an ongoing initiative of the American Institute of Architects.⁷ The program builds on work of the Rural Studio in southern Alabama founded by architect-advocate Samuel Mockbee, who sought – through direct collaboration with underprivileged communities – restorative justice and what he called an “architecture of decency.”⁸ Canadian examples include the Architects Declare initiative,⁹ and practices of those calling for a “Citizen City,” like the Vancouver-based Henriquez Partners which works with government and community organizations to integrate affordable housing, public space, and art into Canada’s most expensive urban environments.¹⁰

Students are also citizen-architects. One of the outcomes of the Canadian Architecture Forums on Education (CAFÉ) is a broader recognition of the growing number of student-led organizations advancing the discourse on difficult global issues: equity and diversity, race and design, health, and well-being, Indigenous rights, and climate action.¹¹ Current practitioners and academics confronting the same societal challenges have much to learn from the advocacy and open-mindedness of the next generation of citizen-architects.



Architect-Intern-Student

I have argued that the student-intern-architect adventure is best approached by moving beyond presumed linear and hierarchical distinctions, and instead embracing mutually reinforcing capacities and concerns. I am not suggesting the three roles are identical, but they are in essence not only similar but interdependent, overlapping, and even reversible. Anyone who has adjusted their design thinking based on a proposition of a younger colleague will understand the reversibility of mentor and mentee, which is fundamental to the collaborative and multi-generational nature of design practice and education. Using a theatrical metaphor, if we think of these titles or roles as stages (and stage means “apprenticeship” in French), we may appreciate the mutability and reciprocal supportiveness of the student-intern-architect ensemble – where all participants are equally important players in a larger story.

I am fully aware that accredited architecture programs play a crucial role in preparing future professionals for practice. Yet, I’m also convinced that schools must leverage their relative autonomy to support diverse individuals in launching unique life-long trajectories of learning. Rehearsing the A-B-C’s described here may help all of us renew commitments to act with and on behalf of a more humane and desirable world.

Images: Digital collages by Lisa Landrum, with the following source material: Amateur – René Magritte, *The Lovers*, 1928; and NASA, *Blue Marble: Image of the Earth from Apollo 17*, Dec. 7, 1972. Together these images suggest a kind difficult love for the vexed and enigmatic world we share – what Hannah Arendt called *amor mundi*, “love of the world.” Beginner – one of Louis Kahn’s early 1965 sketches of the Dominican Motherhouse, juxtaposed with a photograph of an old Arch2 tabletop, the surface of which records six decades of inaugural design gestures by University of Manitoba architecture students from 1959-2019. Citizen – Winnipeg’s global climate strike, September 27, 2019, photos by Jeremie Charron/CTV News and Lisa Landrum.

1. Roland Barthes, *Barthes by Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 52. Roland Barthes returns to this theme of the Amateur again and again throughout his many books and essays. See also: Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 98-99; “Réquichot and His Body” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 230; *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975); *A Lovers Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday Press, 1978); and *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989). On the “amateur” impulse beyond Barthes, see S. Majumdar and A. Vadde, ed, *The Critic as Amateur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Andy Merrifield, *The Amateur. The Pleasures of Doing What You Love* (London and New York: Verso, 2017); and Hans Georg Gadamer, “The Limitations of the Expert” (1967) in *On Education, Poetry and History* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), 181-192. On the importance of love for architects, see Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love: architectural longing after ethics and aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
2. Juhani Pallasmaa and Matteo Zambelli, *Inseminations: Seeds for Architectural Thought* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 247.
3. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas. General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), especially the author’s 1931 preface to the English translation. On the significance of beginning “in the middle of things” (in *medias res*), see David Leatherbarrow, “Beginning again: The task of design research,” *Joelho: revista de cultura arquitetónica*, No. 4 (April 2013): 194-204.
4. Michael Merrill, *Louis Kahn: Drawing to Find Out. Designing the Dominican Motherhouse and the Patient Search for Architecture* (Boden: Lars Müller, 2010).
5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958), 2nd Edition (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 199.
6. Hannah Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?” in *Men In Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 81-94.
7. AIA, *Citizen Architect Handbook* (Washington, DC: Center for Civic Leadership, 2018), <https://www.aia.org/resources/194196-citizen-architect-handbook>.
8. Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley, *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002); Sam Wainwright Douglas, dir. *Citizen Architect. Samuel Mockbee and the Spirit of the Rural Studio*. Austin: Big Beard Films, 2010.
9. Canadian Architectural Professionals Declare Planetary Health Emergency and Commit to Urgent Sustained Action, <https://ca.architectsdeclare.com/>.
10. Marya Cotton Gould, Gregory Henriquez, and Robert Engright, *Citizen City: Vancouver’s Henriquez Partners Challenges Architects to Engage in Partnerships that Advance Cultural Sustainability* (Vancouver: Blue Imprint, 2016).
11. See especially the recent work of these student groups: Equality in Architecture (EiA), Dalhousie University, <https://www.equalityinarchitecture.com/>; the Graduate Architecture Landscape and Design Student Union (GALDSU), University of Toronto, <https://galdsu.ca/>; BRIDGE Centre for Architecture + Design, <http://waterlooararchitecture.com/bridge/> and Treaty Lands, Global Stories, University of Waterloo, <https://www.instagram.com/treatylands.globalstories/>; Indigenous Design and Planning Student Association (IDPSA), University of Manitoba; Advocates for Equitable Design Education (AEDE), University of Calgary, <https://aede.ca/home>; For a Feminist architecture (FaFa) <https://www.instagram.com/forafeministarchitecture/> and UBC’s chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students (NOMAS), University of British Columbia, <https://www.instagram.com/ubcnomas/>. For more on the 2019-2020 CAFÉ initiative, see <https://architecturecanada.ca/>.