

ACADEMIC AGENCY: TOWARD AN ARCHITECTURE POLICY FOR CANADA

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Since 2017, I have been working with a group of Canadian architects to help initiate a public conversation about the future of the built environment, and to create a unified call for a national architecture policy. More than 30 countries have already adopted or are in the process of creating an architecture policy. Canada currently lags behind, but that is beginning to change.

What is an architecture policy? It is an aspirational document. Whereas a building code sets minimum standards, a policy sets forth ambitious goals and calls to action with compelling arguments, images, quotes and case studies. It shows how well-designed settings can enhance social, cultural and environmental well-being, and provides guidance to politicians, professionals and the public on how to achieve more sustainable, equitable and engaging communities. An architecture policy empowers people to pursue positive change and sustainable growth. It would inform public debate, influence legislation and inspire Canadians to create more meaningful and resilient cities and rural development in view of climate change, rapid urbanization, vulnerable lands, threatened heritage and other 21st century challenges.

Any national architecture policy would ultimately be written by government. The initiative to discuss if and how a policy should be created is being jointly led by the Canadian Architectural Licensing Authorities (CALA), representing provincial and territorial regulators; the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC), Canada's leading voice for promoting architectural excellence; and the Canadian Council of University Schools of Architecture (CCUSA), representing all of Canada's accredited architecture programs. With complementary mandates to regulate, advocate and educate this trio comprises an informed and inspiring voice.

In May 2019, I was invited to speak at the Ontario Association of Architects' Empowering Change Conference in Québec City, to describe why students, educators and academic-researchers should be involved in the policy process. The following text is a slightly edited version of my presentation.

Academic Agency

With this presentation, I aim to show how architecture schools can bring vigour, rigour and long-term relevance to any architecture policy for Canada. Since there are twelve schools of architecture, I thought I would share twelve key ways that schools can advance – and enhance – this initiative. So, here are twelve things students, teachers and researchers can do:

1. Amplify

Schools of architecture can amplify the call for a comprehensive policy and consultation process. There is power in numbers. There are just over 10,000 registered architects in Canada. Architecture students and professors add about 4,500 passionate people to the mix. Collectively, we graduate about 600 Master of Architecture students a year, contributing to the pool of registered interns, which hovers around 3,500. But the potential for schools to amplify this initiative is about more than just numbers. With this informed and involved population comes more creative energy, agency and diversity. Students and educators are key stakeholders in the future of architecture. They already play meaningful roles in shaping the future of the discipline, and should have a voice in any future-oriented architecture policy for Canada.

2. Cooperate

There is a profound partnership and complementarity between academic and professional sectors. Universities are where the next generation of architects are trained to envision, evaluate and tackle new challenges. One way we do this is through Cooperative Education. Seven of the twelve schools have Co-op programs. Long-established programs provide many global placements – connecting Canadian students to design challenges around the world. Diverse regional work terms are also impactful: helping students to secure their first office position; to



gain valuable on-site experience; to discover related career paths (like developing green energy policy with Alberta Infrastructure); and to learn about the challenges and cultural richness of Canada's north. Through Co-op, career fairs and related professional development opportunities, we are strengthening internship processes and working together with professionals to create more resilient and meaningful societies. The architecture policy initiative is an exciting opportunity to strengthen this alliance around such common goals.

3. Inspire

Architecture schools do more than prepare capable graduates for practice, they also inspire new and interconnected ways to think about the built, natural and social world. Through heuristic experimentation, creative collaboration, and open-ended questioning, schools approach design more imaginatively, optimistically, and interrogatively than some practitioners and policy makers can afford to do. Architecture schools are uniquely positioned to support visionary, experimental and even controversial design research. Students are not afraid to imagine a future more equitable and engaging than today. Many are fearless visionaries. Students are often inspired to reach beyond their capabilities – that's how they learn and inspire others to push the status quo. Architecture schools are testing grounds for holistically rethinking how sustainable, just and inspiring environments might be conceived and manifested.

4. Provoke

Schools are leading conversations and provoking debate. Design studios are often framed around real issues and local challenges, but in ways that balance these complex challenges with creative license, critical distance and historical perspective. Architecture schools are where what-if scenarios are seriously entertained. And the best results influence public debate. Two winning submissions to the 2019 OAA Shift Challenge are from students with academic leadership. The Carleton submission envisions a wastewater system that doubles as a power source; the

McGill winner reimagines the Welland Canal as infrastructure for cultural memory. Recent winners of the Canadian Architect Student Award of Excellence have tackled related issues of sustainable urbanism, adaptive reuse; and energy efficiency. In Winnipeg, years before there was an international design competition for Market Lands, there were many student projects for the same site framed by needs for social justice, affordable housing and public space. Such student projects are infusing public imagination and provoking political attention.

5. Engage

Schools of architecture regularly engage guests from around the world as visiting critics and lecturers, and involve alumni, interdisciplinary partners and local communities through design events and symposia. Some schools bring the conversation directly to the public by opening downtown discursive hubs – like Calgary's new City Building Design Lab. And many schools are proactively engaging Indigenous communities. The McEwen School of Architecture at Laurentian University is exemplary in this regard: involving students in learning circles, and sharing First Nations wisdom through foundational canoe-building exercises. Engagement means bringing others into the school, but also going out to remote regions. An important example is a research-engagement project, *Living in Northern Québec*, led by Laval University. This interdisciplinary team is working with Inuit and Innu peoples to imagine and mobilize more culturally appropriate and sustainable communities. An architecture policy for Canada could include calls for action to continue and expand government funding for such strategic collaborations.



6. Empower

Engagement alone is not enough. We must go further to empower Indigenous achievement. Empowering change, as the OAA Empowering Change conference calls for, also requires disempowering systems that perpetuate obstacles to positive change. Universities are striving to lead certain reconciliatory actions. For example, Indigenous Design and Planning Principles, like those collaboratively created by the University of Manitoba, are shaping campus master plans, orienting new development, and contributing to the creation of new facilities to support students and enable ongoing dialogue and transformative understanding, including the new Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at the University of British Columbia. More needs to be done. An architecture policy for Canada can help expand conciliatory efforts and advance the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

7. Advocate

With empowerment comes more vigorous advocacy. Students crave meaningful agency and are persuasive activists for urgent global concerns. University of Montréal students (along with thousands worldwide) have been marching for climate action in 2019. Students are also advocating for equity and diversity. The Equality in Architecture group at Dalhousie recently launched a series of Poly-logues, enabling diverse voices with many (poly) perspectives. Universities embody this multicultural advantage. International students bring varied experiences and expectations to schools of architecture in Canada, and Canadian students gain further global exposure via exchange programs and field trips. The student body today is far more culturally-mixed and gender-balanced than ever before. Expectations for diversity and equity are the norm. Nine of the twelve founding members of the Building Equality in Architecture (BEA)-Prairies chapter are students (or recent graduates). These advocates are striving to ensure the profession reflects the diverse society it serves, and are willing to tackle the remaining fights to ensure that historically underrepresented communities have an equal place among the arbiters of culture. Such advocacy extends to high-schools

through programs like Carleton's 'Imagine Architecture' program, and the University of Toronto's 'Summer Academy.' For Universities, this is a form of recruitment, but it is also a way to help young people discover their agency as citizen architects.

8. Criticize

School is serious fun, but it also provides a dedicated place and time for critical reflection – to approach design as a 'patient search,' as Le Corbusier called it. It takes time to discover the best course of action. Design critiques are discursive forums to discover creativity as integral to criticism and to practice criticism as a craft: to formulate questions, weigh conflicting criteria, sift alternatives, and make difficult decisions in view of complex circumstances, which is the root meaning of 'criticism.' (In ancient Greek a 'kritic' was one who exercises good judgment). With critique comes courage and, more importantly, understanding and humility – essential traits for any professional.

9. Contextualize

Criticism entails framing and contextualizing issues – considering the big picture and all the messy complexities embedded in the dynamic contexts within which architects operate. Architect-academics help provide breadth and historical depth to contemporary issues. The future of architecture needs history. Indeed, the future has a history – and history has a future. Academic commentary and research publications contribute to public understanding of cultural memory and meaning, and help ground, orient and advance conversations and best decisions about the built environment – at times forging new lines of thought.

10. Innovate

Architecture schools are places of innovation – often with support of industry partners and interdisciplinary research hubs. The Carleton Immersive Media Studio (or CIMS) advances the development of new digital tools, but also critical understanding and the ethical use of such



technologies for the conservation and management of architectural heritage. Innovation goes hand-in-hand with preservation. There are many other examples: such as UBC's Centre for Interactive Research on Sustainability; and the University of Toronto's Institute for Architecture and Health, Model Cities Theatre and Lab, and Global Cities Institute – which involves professors of planning, policy and geography to measure the impact of policies on urban development and orient new initiatives. There is also a growing array of Fabrication Labs, including Calgary's Laboratory for Integrative Design, among others.

11. Experiment

Innovation Labs – which augment design studios with access to well-equipped facilities, technologies and research experts – enable controlled (and out-of-control) experimentation, allowing students to test and learn from mistakes, take risks, and push prototypes to the point of epiphany and the eureka of both serendipitous success and failure. All this experimentation is imperative for discovery.

12. Make

Ultimately, architectural education is about sharing a passion for making and learning by making. Canadian schools are unique on the global stage by their continued integration of hands-on experiential learning and lands-based knowledge – instilling an ethos of craft, place and an appreciation for well-made environments and local building trades. While many architects love making, the initiative to create an architecture policy for Canada is as much about making the desirable possible, and making better decisions that make social and environmental justice more likely.

The twelve academic agencies described here are not definitive, but aim to mobilize more discussion and reflective action. As I have argued, involving students and academics in the initiative to mobilize an architecture policy for Canada, will help ensure the policy's vision is informed by current research, robust with fresh ideas, and relevant to future generations of architects.

During 2019-2020, students can expect to hear more about this policy initiative through the Canadian Architecture Forums on Education (CAFÉ). CAFÉs are part of an outreach project to discuss and debate the role of education and research in shaping Canada's future and an architecture policy for Canada. The forums enable students, educators and academic researchers to play meaningful roles in articulating the policy's priorities, ambition and depth of vision. CAFÉs are supported by a Connection Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and all participating CCUSA schools of architecture. For more information, see www.architecturecanada.ca.

IMAGES:

1. Faculty of Architecture Co-op/1 student Jessica D'Toste at work with Nadine Pearson (M.Arch 2013) at Number TEN Architectural Group, summer 2018. Photo: Lisa Landrum.
2. Livable Cities Charrette with Faculty of Architecture students, regional professionals and Jan Gehl. Forks, Winnipeg, September 2018. Photo: Lisa Landrum.
3. Studio Curio interim reviews with guests Jaya Beange (Manitoba Museum), Grant van Iderstine (Architecture49), and Candace Karhut (F-BLOK). December 2018. Photo: Ted Landrum.
4. WHAK, ED3 Warming Hut under construction in C.A.S.T., January 2019. Photo: Braden Goodall.