

On “Change” (Spring 2012)

Rachel Levitt Slade’s “Architects Perceived,” however challenging, should be a welcome reminder to architects and design professionals that we should apply critical thinking not only to our own work but also to ourselves and how we personally and professionally engage the world outside our limited sphere. While there are difficult trade-offs in creative professions and working outside conventional thinking, much of Slade’s critique regarding disconnected architects rings true with commentary I hear from others outside the profession.

From the earliest stages of design education, we are taught to be highly critical and debate architectural ideas on their intellectual merits. In the controlled space of the academy, we are free from many real contingencies when solving design problems. And although it may be a necessary and liberating experience to test the limits of architectural logic and language in theoretical confines, we must recognize that the same rules do not apply outside the studio—especially when it comes to our engagement with others. Competitive posturing, obtuse language, insincere consideration of clients’ objectives, and other affectations may be symptomatic of the academic environment, but they do not fly especially well after graduation. In practice, the combination of competition, marketing, and constraints of time and money can also prevent healthy interaction with the broader world.

As Slade notes, artifice is no substitute for real engagement, whether with one’s client or oneself. Some intellectual honesty and self-criticism might go a long way to help us engage those around us in a more human way. It is, after all, the premise of a generalist profession to broaden our knowledge of the world

around us: there is no reason it must be limited to the design of buildings.

TOM MURDOUGH, ASSOC. AIA
Murdough Design
Boston

Unlike the socially unskilled in other professions, architects know how to dress well, and this obscures their less desirable traits from all but the closest observers. Woe to the client or new hire—or spouse—who chooses the wrong one! “Emotional intelligence” is a relatively new concept, as is noting its lack. Frank Lloyd Wright was ostracized from Oak Park society for his loose morals, but he was never called defective. The architects of the last century escaped being thus branded. What about this century’s? Our standards for social acceptability require us to be “interesting” beyond our inherently boring jobs; every new business book tells us that our creativity is a cultural advantage we aren’t fully exploiting. But just when we recognize the need to define our worth beyond our livelihood, we are unable to earn one.

Searching for a nonvisual joke about architects reveals more than just an image problem; there is no simple punch line. I share Rachel Levitt Slade’s situation: I pursued architecture in college and found easier success first as a stand-up comic and now as a marketer for the design industry. We’re both square pegs in the oddly shaped and shrinking hole that is the design profession.

Do architects have an image problem? Ha! We’re speaking of a profession that is harder than ever before to get into. Not finding a ready place for your creative desire gives perspective on the incongruities of the profession: the sacred cows, the shibboleths, and the faddishness of both design and its execution. Slade’s

rendering of Le Corbusier/The Raven’s pristine-city absurdity made me laugh out loud, and that’s all anyone trying to find humor in this business could ask for.

MIKE SWEENEY
Design-product Systems
Somerville, Massachusetts

“Transforming the Lost Half-Mile”

describes the dramatic physical changes to the former industrial wasteland between the Green Line viaduct and the Zakim Bridge, which serve as elegant bookends to the promising new riverfront area. This last stretch of the Charles River also brings great potential for new urban attractions, for recreation and festivities. The missing link between the Charles River pathways and the Boston Harborwalk is finally being filled in.

What makes North Point Park so special is the location and scale of these new spaces. With four MBTA stops within walking distance, this urban waterfront green space will be easily accessible and will offer large grassy areas and lagoons with pedestrian bridges ideal for kayaking and strolling. The large building that Education First is planning will provide 4,400 square feet of restaurant space on two levels with a waterfront patio, right next to the skate park the Charles River Conservancy (CRC) is building.

This 28,000-square-foot skate park facility under the highway ramp, with bowls and streetscape features, was designed by Grindline with input from 400 local skaters. The CRC has raised \$2.5 million for what will be a great amenity for athletes as well as spectators. Given its location under the ramps, the skate park will convert an area that might otherwise be an underused highway liability into an active and attractive civic asset.

The state’s metropolitan park planners as well as the City of Cambridge and the New

Basin Citizen Advisory Committee, who have worked decades on this rejuvenation, deserve our gratitude for their vision and perseverance.

RENATA VON TSCHARNER
Charles River Conservancy
Cambridge, Massachusetts

The recent “Change” issue was a thoughtful exploration of Boston/Cambridge as an innovation center attracting the best and the brightest—a reputation we will no doubt keep as long as our universities continue spinning off new technology and start-ups, and our hospitals make us the headquarters for cutting-edge healthcare.

But a corollary issue is how we not only attract but *retain* young talent for the future. The best and brightest often come here to go to school. They often begin their entrepreneurial careers and start-ups here. And then we lose them to Silicon Valley and New York City. Why?

We need to examine our barriers to entry and retention. Affordability of housing, reliability of transit, and quality of schools are all critical factors. More important, characteristics that some of us extol as tradition, younger people consider stodgy. We have a social and professional seniority system that often takes too long for younger, more impatient talent to penetrate. New York and Silicon Valley seem more open to interesting new ideas.

Boston is a great city. We are educating more young people. We are cultivating more talent and prospects for innovation. But are we able to keep them and grow them here? If innovation and change are critical to our future, we need a further conversation about how to keep from being a talent exporter.

GEORGE BACHRACH
Environmental League of Massachusetts
Boston

The Spring “Change” issue of *ArchitectureBoston* was one of the first in a long while I read cover to cover.

I praise the guest editorial committee for focusing on the changing environment of our city and the players who are guiding their respective industries. My assumption is that the intent was to spur the design community to follow suit, yet the opportunity to drive home this parallel in the “Wide Open” panel discussion left me disheartened and wanting more. I appreciate the issues the panel addressed: re-establishing the architect’s role in the longevity of the building, creating and using collaborative environments, and being entrepreneurial in pursuit of passion projects. Although many of us may be on the verge of abandoning good mother architecture, this group attempts to maintain their focus within the profession and the lofty dreams of steering it toward greener pastures—to a place where the role of the architect is no longer marginalized and the balance between quality building and sacrifice is harmoniously rectified. This is commendable.

Yet the conversation’s conclusion that we should “Just do stuff” only strengthens the stereotype of Boston designers lagging behind the entrepreneurial endeavors in other fields and other cities. It is obvious that we should be “doing”; should we not hear from and discuss those who are? Is this panel really the appropriate cross-section for an entrepreneurial design culture in our city? If the goal of the DIY youth is to do, we need to hear from those who are doing and learn how to do, rather than debating what should or could be done.

JONATHAN HANAHAN
over,under
Boston

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Renée Loth · rloth@architects.org

DEPUTY EDITOR

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Colleen Baker · cbaker@architects.org

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290 Congress Street, Suite 200, Boston, MA 02110
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