

Lost Generation

Michael Liu



An upbeat article in a 2008 architectural magazine featured chirpy stories of enterprising young architects who, unable to find positions in their chosen profession turned to alternative professions. Now, twenty months on, it's doubtful they'll ever come back. Many economists predict a slow, plodding recovery beginning in the third quarter of 2011. Others are less sanguine. In either case, the durability of the present recession will elongate the period in which young graduate architects leave the profession and inevitably reduce the number of young people choosing an architectural education in the first place. One has to ask, how will this influence the practice of architecture? The breathtaking rapidity of the 2008 economic deceleration and the collapse of credit distinguish it from its predecessors in a ways that have made an even greater impact on architects than previous recessions.

The job board Simplyhired.com tracked the loss of architecture jobs when the recession hit, logging a sharp decrease of 11% from March 2007 to September 2008. Architecture firms had staffs totaling about 221,000 people that summer, which by the summer of 2010 had dropped to 167,000. Naturally, such statistic hits recent graduates hardest. In the current downturn, national unemployment hovers just below 10%, yet in April 2009 the Boston Society of Architects estimated an unemployment rate among local architects of between 30% and 50%. To put it in stark terms, the unemployment rate among architects in Boston is as much as twice the national level during the Great Depression and likely to get worse. The same is true in other cities. One obvious reason for the wildly disproportionate impact upon architects this time is the dependence of building on financing, the machinery of which has seized. Just as the long recession of the late 1970's and early 1980's decimated an age cohort in the practice of architecture, we should antici-

pate an absence of working architects in graduating classes of 2008 through 2010 and probably beyond. This one will be even longer. The reduction in the number of new architects entering – and working architects leaving – the field will be exacerbated by the increased difficulty and expense of becoming licensed to practice architecture and the burdens of maintaining licensure that did not exist in the 1970s and were only beginning in the 1990s. Hard to get in, hard to stay in The present process of registering and tracking hours of experience is a cumbersome part of the current Intern Development Program (IDP) system and the nine-part registration exam impose a daunting bureaucratic burden on the architectural intern – as well as a financial one. While costs associated with the two can easily run into thousands of dollars, once study materials are added into the calculation, most interns would probably tell you that the administrative effort required to attend to the process is at least as great a disincentive. Becoming licensed, then, brings the obligations of additional fees, dues and, since the 1990's, continuing education. This system, apart from its merits or flaws as a concept, is presently served by all manner of vendors hawking products through “lunch-and-learn” seminars, “self-certification” product articles and other thinly veiled marketing vehicles. Unsurprisingly, cynicism about the continuing-education system is endemic, and it is widely viewed simply as a burdensome consequence of becoming licensed. It is not clear that the bureaucratic rigors of these processes have produced better architects, but it does seem to have ensured that there are fewer of them. According to a May 2008 article in *Banker and Tradesman*, the total number of registered architects in the country had been falling at an annualized rate of 1,500 per year for the past ten years. And that was before the current downturn. How do you turn this thing on? It is difficult to predict how the dearth of young architects will affect the practice of architecture in the age of building-information modeling (BIM), but it may be that the age of BIM affects the dearth of architects. It is axiomatic that architecture schools do not teach building technology. Instead, most teach a way of thinking while the business of how buildings are put together is learned on the job. That approach is the same today as it was in the decade of platform shoes and *Mork and Mindy*. In those tedious pre-computer days, a 100,000 square foot building might take 5,000 hours to draw by hand. Graduates were put to work doing the rote exercise of hand drafting, “picking up red-lines” at first, learning to detail later and, immersed in the design environment, learning by osmosis. The advent of computer-aided drafting and design reduced drafting time by half, but the process of educating young architects via drafting remained essentially unchanged. However, once the widespread adoption of computers in architecture firms began in the 1980s, the newest and least experienced employees were often the most computer literate members of their respective architectural firms. What they lacked in knowledge of building technology was often compensated for by their newly-minted, cutting-edge understanding of computer technology. Entry-level salaries for graduate architects doubled in the space of ten years. While the coming of the digital age gave fresh graduates a leg up, recent advances in computer graphic technology may have the opposite effect. After three decades of CAD, the two-dimensional age of drafting is rapidly being replaced by BIM, three-dimensional building modeling. Because of the amount of information which may be embodied in the lines that are drawn to represent walls, roofs, windows and other components on these new three-dimensional models, a higher premium is placed on an understanding of building technology. As the programs become more intuitive and user-friendly, facility with the software, the domain of the recent graduate, will become less valuable. As in most

industries, but especially in architecture, the universities pollinate the practice with advocates for the newest design ideas, along with the newest digital skills. In the present economy, this steady influx of young architects and their technology has been throttled down, and one can anticipate a corresponding deceleration in the dissemination of new computer technology within the profession. It will be interesting to see if there is a parallel effect on the intellectual culture of architectural practice as well. Stylistic trends, which in recent decades have become ephemeral, may become more rooted, presumably a good thing. It is arguable that with the exception of a handful of architectural auteurs experimenting with complex geometries, BIM is being practiced in its most sophisticated applications in the construction trades where the models are used not only for coordination and estimating, but as manufacturing templates. Because building trade models can be fed directly into automated fabrication processes they are developed to describe every bolt hole in every steel connection and every elbow in each piping run making design models look diagrammatic by comparison. Here one can anticipate the demand for technical computer skills coupled with creative problem solving and an interest in building will put a premium on the education of the architecture graduate. Of course, architects and builders suffer together in the current economy, but salaries have historically been higher on the construction side and are likely to remain so during the long recovery. Greater competitive pressure for the talents of young graduate architects will therefore be exerted from the construction side. This gravitation of talent to the construction industry, whether as designers working for builders or as part of the construction process per se can be seen as either a consequence or accelerator of the historical shift of building becoming a more contractor-driven, rather than designer-driven process, a trend that has been underway for at least the last 30 years. Architects see themselves as uniquely open to change. The question is how open they are to changes in how they see themselves and their role. It is telling that the construction industry, rather than the design industry, has largely expanded into the new service of “program manager.” To some extent, that is a result of owners’ perceptions that it is the designers that need to be managed and to some extent designers’ self-perception of needing to be somehow apart. A sudden and protracted reduction in the number of practicing architects coupled with the austerity of a recovering economy is likely to force the profession closer to its development and construction counterparts. In the worst case this would result in a profession completely subordinated to the construction side, similar to the Japanese model, in the best case the emergence of the “master builder” in modern form. Michael Liu, AIA, NCARB, is vice president and principal in charge of design for The Architectural Team, an architecture-and-planning firm based near Boston. He oversees the firm’s recruitment efforts as well as the design of new construction and renovation projects, including historic restorations, which is one of the firm’s specialties. With more than 30 years of professional experience and a registered architect in Massachusetts since 1984, Michael is highly regarded in Boston and nationally for waterfront project planning and hospitality, recreation, residential, and mixed-use commercial facilities. His work has been recognized or earned awards from the American Institute of Architects, the Boston Society of Architects, the Massachusetts Historical Commission, among others. Actively committed to community service, he has chaired the Massachusetts Designer Selection Board, served on the boards of Directors of the Boston Society of Architects and Bay Cove Human Services, and he now serves as Chairman of the Board of Directors for Habitat for Humanity of Greater Boston.