

Ability, Relevance, And Licensing --Or What Am I Doing Here?

I had just finished lettering some new license certificates. Everyone else had left the office; it was not quite time for martinis, and I fell into a "What does it all mean?" mood. There is an immense amount of effort and time spent in qualifying men to practice architecture so as to protect the public health, welfare, and safety. I sometimes wonder if this really is the reason, and if it is, I wonder if all of this effort really does serve the public. Even further, does all of this professional effort serve the profession?

Planning and construction are, after all, natural human abilities held in greater or lesser degree by all of us. The Parthenon was built without a licensed architect; so were Canterbury, the Taj Mahal, St. Peter's, and the Octagon House. No board examined Palladio nor checked the plans for the Katsuri palace at Kyoto. What do we need licensing for?

There was no electrical system in the Pyramids, and if they had fallen down it really wouldn't have mattered much as far as public safety was concerned. But the fellow who designed Beauvais Cathedral didn't pass Structural Examination "G," and it would have been better if he had. The time and money spent on the bridge at Avignon might have been put to better use had adequate studies been made before the project was begun.

I suppose that we need licensing, zoning, and such other regulations because we have gone past the public-be-damned days when states, princes, tycoons, or great corporations built and planned as they chose, and the people had not only to pay for it but to put up with it. If the place for the clergy was lovely, rich, and warm while the general worshippers knelt on dank stone floors, that was just too bad. If 277 slaves or construction workers were killed because improperly designed vaulting fell on them, *c'est la vie*. If wastefully designed buildings consumed hours and years of unnecessary human effort, if badly designed structures encouraged the development of tuberculosis, influenza, and the like, well, the sufferers were after all, the lower classes. The buildings looked impressive and paid a high return on the investment—one way or another. And now they often are revered historical monuments—however uninhabitable!

In every place and in every time there have been a few individuals observant enough or gifted enough to design buildings which raised the quality of life of the people who used them. If the public was lucky, these individuals founded schools or gathered a coterie of followers so that, for a time, the architecture—regardless of fashion—was progressive and added something to the lives of the people. But it needed the world wide egalitarian revolutions of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries to give the public the power

by:

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to attempt to raise the standards for design and construction and to protect the people by law.

The first registration laws were set up in the western nations just about one hundred years ago. In monarchies such as England they were national; but in federal republics such as ours they were local, and parochial indeed. Candidates were tested for competency by being asked to demonstrate their ability to do what their elders were doing. They were asked long and complicated questions on history or construction, and these questions were often whimsical or designed to support the pet theories or prejudices of the examiners. Nor were all candidates treated alike. The public's interest was sometimes made secondary to the preserving of an elite gentlemen's club or to the keeping out of "foreigners"—i.e. Yankees in the South, Westerners in the East, people with different accents, long hair, or muddy shoes. A brilliantly qualified man from New York might have found it extremely difficult to become licensed in New Jersey or New Mexico. This might be for one of the above reasons or simply because the locals didn't want to cut somebody else in on the pie. Deprived by law of the services of all but the local architects, the public had to accept their work for what it was worth—and we were headed back to the Middle Ages again!

Then came the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) which established a system for interstate reciprocity. All of the states eventually joined, and this worked moderately well considering all of the difficulties presented by different examinations in each state. Obviously we were a long way from a national certificate, and would continue to be until we could at least approach uniformity in the examinations given by the different states. Back in the thirties, the Council—which is comprised of members of the various state boards—met and agreed upon seven general subjects which most of the states were using as a basis for their examinations. Over the years agreement was reached even on the general content of the several examinations. We were moving, we really were.

After about thirty years of effort, uniform national examinations were first given in the sixties. This made the first realistic basis for interstate reciprocity. But the exams were still in the same seven classical subjects first assembled back in the 1930's. Practitioners, board members, teachers, and students began to question the validity and relevance of the

whole system of examination and licensing. We were asking the candidates to prove their competency by demonstrating their ability to do what their elders used to do, and to pass the same kind of exam which their elders had passed. We had slipped back into the 19th century again—and we are there still.

Even the most casual thinker, lay or professional, can see that the profession is vastly different from what it was forty years ago. THE WAYS BY WHICH ARCHITECTS DO THINGS, THE THINGS WE DO, AND WHAT THE PUBLIC EXPECTS OF US ARE NOTHING LIKE THEY USED TO BE; YET WE ARE STILL TESTING CANDIDATES AS IF THEY WERE TO PRACTICE IN THE OLD WAYS.

So the state boards, taking seriously their charge to protect the public health, safety, and welfare, began working through the NCARB to develop a realistic examination—one which will test a man's ability to do the things that he will actually be called upon to do, in this last third of the twentieth century. We started out by sitting back to note just what it is that we really do today, sometimes casually, without even realizing that we are doing it. Many meetings and discussions were held by the Board over the past three years, and it was a genuinely illuminating experience for those involved. Problem seeking, problem stating, programming, and the whole design and construction management process—it soon became clear that existing examinations misplace the emphasis and fall far short of the sort of testing that is really needed to carry out our charge from the people of our states. It would be rather like testing an operatic composer on Scales and Chords, Construction of Musical Instruments, Business Management, Musical Composition, and Acoustics. He should presumably know something about each of these things, but such a test would not indicate whether he could compose an opera.

Once we had put it all on a blackboard and could really see what architects actually do today, together with the number of options available at the

various steps, it became a relatively simple matter to formulate questions testing the candidate's ability to think professionally, to make the mature decisions which will be expected of him in practice. But then, no examination is easy to write. In multiple choice questions the language must be unambiguous and carefully chosen so that it will mean the same thing to candidates from all parts of the country. There must be no irrelevant or silly questions; the correct answer must not be available by a simple process of elimination; the diagrams and photos must be crystal clear and nationally understood, avoiding regional hang-ups.

It will take many, many hours, weeks, and months to put together this first single comprehensive examination replacing the seven separate ones now given. When it is finally assembled the examination itself will have to be tested and put back onto the anvil for final shaping and perfection before it can be tried out in a few selected areas. But when this is done the architectural profession will have gone a long way toward taking up the slack and closing the time gap. The students and candidates will know just what is expected of them; the examinations will be machine graded without the opportunity for personal prejudice; the public's interest will be preserved; and we should have a generation of better architects.

We are thinking both of interstate reciprocity and of international reciprocity. This is already upon us. Americans can now become licensed in the United Kingdom, and British architects may get licenses here. Negotiations are under way with Canada, Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand—we'll be citizens of the world one day soon.

This was a lot to mull over in the fading hours of daylight. When I had finally convinced myself that my effort with the state board is really worth while, it was well into prime martini time.

—John W. McHugh, AIA



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