

“I’m an Architect”: Artistic Endeavor and Professional Responsibility
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The AIA and governmental licensing boards have conceded that it’s okay to use the terms ‘architect’ and ‘architecture’ in fields wholly unrelated to building and site design and construction. This despite objections that overuse leads to a loss of cultural cachet, and especially when the terms are used in reference to computing systems. This concession does not, however, mean a relaxing of the rules regarding architect and architecture for those who are in the building industries. The rules – laws, actually – are strict and can mean steep fines for misuse of the terms.

The reason for this is that the licensure of an architect means that they are legally bound to safeguard the life, health, property, and public welfare of the people of their state and to protect them against unauthorized, unqualified, and improper practice of architecture.¹ These laws vary somewhat from state to state. Some states go so far as to exclude architects licensed in other states. The point is to stress the importance of an architect’s services and their complex and specialized set of skills. There is also the further danger (although maybe harder to prove legally) of the erosion of our profession from those who received no education or training in the history and practice of architecture.

First, history: The issue of contested professionalism for architects goes back at least as far as 1857. In that year the AIA was formed, stating in its constitution that “[t]he object of this Institute is to promote the scientific and practical perfection of its members and elevate the standing of the Profession”². Up until that point anyone in the United States could declare themselves to be an architect. There were no licensing laws or architecture schools. In addition, “[t]he profession was not appreciated by the public, the fine arts were thought of little importance, and construction [workers] and carpenters, as practical men, were thought far superior to the architect,”³ wrote Glenn Brown, founder of the North Carolina chapter of the AIA. The original members of the AIA planned to elevate the standing of the profession and the standards by which it was practiced. Safer and better designed buildings of modern materials and construction techniques were intended to follow.

In the time since then, each state has developed their own regulatory board to oversee the licensure of architects. The first laws of licensure were passed in Illinois. The state had just passed laws regulating medicine and law and, in 1897 (forty years after the founding of the AIA), adopted legislation to also regulate the

¹ Colorado Revised Statutes, Title 12, Article 25, Part 3: Architects, Section 12-25-301. General Provisions. Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies. Effective July 1, 2008.

² “History of The American Institute of Architects”. American Institute of Architects. http://www.aia.org/about_history. Retrieved 2010-04-07.

³ “History of The American Institute of Architects”. American Institute of Architects. http://www.aia150.org/hst150_aia.php. Retrieved 2010-04-13.

practice of architecture. The first exam for an architect was given in 1898. By 1902, the Illinois Board of Examiners and Regulators of Architects had further required that only graduates of the state-approved four-year architecture program were eligible for that exam.⁴

Second, practice: As part of the research for this article, I conducted an informal survey of colleagues within the profession. The survey asked for their feelings on licensure as a requirement, the appropriate title for unlicensed people on track to become architects (by this I mean those who've graduated from an accredited school and are currently going through IDP⁵ with the intention of becoming licensed someday), and the qualifications for referring to oneself as an architect. The respondents covered a wide range of viewpoints: recent graduates, those currently taking the exam, people who have practiced for years without being licensed, the recently licensed, and veterans with decades of experience practicing architecture⁶. I found that most of those questioned feel that it's right to require licensure by law in order to practice architecture. And to refer to oneself as an architect is also a very real matter of public safety and professional accountability. Many people have little love for the term "Architectural Intern" in reference to those on track to being an architect, particularly those people currently having to refer to themselves as "Architectural Intern". "Architect in Training" has been suggested by more than a few people.⁷ This would be in line with the engineering profession and their "Engineer in Training" moniker. Further complicating this is personal ambition. While most architecture graduates intend to become licensed, some don't and others – most – take more than a few years to accomplish this. It becomes awkward when referring to a non-student in an otherwise respectable profession as an intern. Lastly, most respondents also felt that Interior Designers and Landscape Architects need to be similarly protected under the law.

The limitation of the survey was that I didn't ask (because I don't know) anyone who has set up a design business without a licensed architect. Their viewpoint may reveal different results. I suspect those who would use the terms in that way do so for one of two reasons. The first is acknowledgement of the cultural significance and broad definition of the terms 'architect' and 'architecture' but ignorance of the laws governing use of the terms. This can and has been bemoaned as contemporary culture's willingness to borrow a quick fix of prestige without acknowledging the larger role and implications of the title. Referring to computer systems as architecture and programmers as architects can be seen as an example of this. The second is a willing disregard of those laws as well as

⁴ "NAAB History". National Architecture Accrediting Board. http://www.naab.org/about/naab_history.aspx. Retrieved 2010-04-07.

⁵ Intern Development Program

⁶ Full disclosure: I graduated from an accredited program with a Bachelors of Architecture degree in June 1999 and received my license in April 2008.

⁷ "What do you want to be called in 2010?" AIA Archiblog, National Associates Committee, the American Institute of Architects. http://blog.aia.org/nac/2009/05/what_do_you_want_to_be_called.html#comments. Retrieved 2010-04-14.

the education and training that goes into architecture. This may sound familiar, but failing to inform the general public on the value of architects to a successful society really is our own fault. Much responsibility has been given up in the face of increased legal risk. In handing off our duties to builders, we've devalued what it means to become an architect. A recent position paper from the Congress of Residential Architecture (among many other recent articles) lays the blame with the licensure process, declaring that, "[t]he act of licensure has become a test of perseverance rather than reflective of knowledge, creativity and competence."⁸ The argument is that architecture has become a sort of mutual appreciation society, insular and segregated from the industry that it would claim as its own. We seem content to hide behind our titles, placing more emphasis on Who we are rather than What it is we do. Partly, this is because it's fun to introduce yourself to strangers as an architect. The prestige and the small measure of mystery that come with the word are thrilling. The risk lies in sitting back and allowing that reputation to fully drain away.

The proper use of architect and architecture seems to have also been brought into sharp contrast by the rise of sustainable design and Building Information Management (BIM). With the rise of green credentialing we can see how important it is in the building industry to prove expertise and authority. With BIM we can see renewed opportunities for involving the architect in directly carrying out the making of a building. Firms such as Peter Gluck and Partners and KieranTimberlake have been working to define the design/build process in such a way that reclaims portions of the construction process. They do so to further their own goals of research and design as well as providing a better service to their clients.

Beyond the legal ramifications of licensure, there's also the goal of artistic endeavor. Architecture, at its very best, is, "...the unending attempt to define ourselves and our place in the world in which we, as modern men, are all engaged."⁹ Equal weight should be given to the potential cultural contributions of architects and architecture. The laws are certainly important, and they're there for a reason, but we have a professional responsibility that goes beyond the pragmatic issues of shelter. Many people can make a house stand up, but to do it well, with knowledge of context and the environment, with a sense of ambition, and with an informed ability for making healthful and protective space for human activity, requires an architect.

The architect must be a prophet... a prophet in the true sense of the term... if he can't see at least ten years ahead don't call him an architect.
– Frank Lloyd Wright

⁸ "A CORA Position Paper". The Congress of Residential Architecture. <http://coragroups.org/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=1087>. Retrieved 2010-04-08.

⁹ *The Great Ages of World Architecture: Modern Architecture, The Architecture of Democracy*, by Vincent Scully, Jr.; George Braziller, New York; Second Printing, 1965; Preface, page 9.