

# USE IT OR LOSE IT

## Design Against Architectural Education

*Zach Hicks*

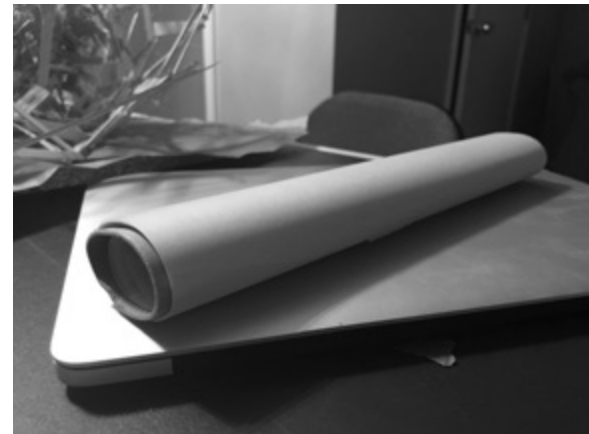
Design Against is an interesting topic and there is wide spectrum of elements in the world that we can all change for the better if we pay more attention to the design of even the most mundane objects in our daily lives. Take a roll of trace for instance. How often does a roll of trace roll off your desk or start roaming around your desk as you are reaching for it? Smashing the roll down so it becomes oblong makes it impossible for it to roll away. Tired of messily torn drafting tape that is always too long or too short? Buy a cheap roll of clear scotch tape, cannibalize its serrated metal strip, fashion a jacket for your drafting tape out of chipboard, and hot-glue this strip onto the assembly. These are both small design changes that can help benefit you and start you off thinking differently about your world and the items existing within it. These are small design

However, there are also major ideas or topics that should be considered for redesign or new iterations to be tried. As a fan of Oklahoma – yes, it is understood that most cannot wait to leave – and as someone who is determined to work to make changes in this imperfect place, I am interested in asking what makes a good professor? What makes a great professor? What is the difference between a professor you will genuinely miss after graduation and those that you just need to interact with to move on to the next step of your life? These people shape us for better or worse and can be important to how we form our own approaches to design. Granted, as students, we do not get involved with the hiring and firing of professors. Nor can we help the fact that some within the college – or at the University level – are merely concerned with what it takes to get tenured. What we should stop and think about though are the course evaluations at the end of each semester. These are as important to our college and our professors as voting in elections. DO THE EVALUATIONS! Our interactions with our

“Design Against is about an awareness of the built environment around us all and using a critical eye and mind to find the less than optimal situations that can be improved or at the very least the conversation about them being started.”



*Design against messy tape*



*Design against runaway trace*



*Dean Bryant Vollendorf*



*Gary McCowan*

professors and the projects they present us with can result in changes we want.

Maybe when you are sitting in the studio or walking around the campus at three in the morning you are thinking about all forms of anything other than architecture. Well, an interesting fact is that those great professors that are loved and remembered by the mentoring architects of our time taught their students to step out of architecture and go experience life, art, and nature. By going to concerts you may find inspiration in how the acoustics change as you move through the space or in how the music is affecting you in that moment. You could go camping or hiking and discover glimpses of untouched nature that invokes an epiphany regarding structure or biomimicry. You might even be sitting in an art appreciation class and find that artists like Albrecht Dürer painting chiaroscuro can teach you about depth and composition for renderings. Any architecture student or architect can tell people just how much their perspective of the world around them changed after going through the college of architecture.

Architects like James Schildroth, Gary McCowan, Jim Gallagher, Andrew St. John, and Herb Greene have been outspoken about their professors or mentors that shaped their understanding of architecture and each have mentioned that music was one of these stepping-out of architecture exercises they remember from their time spent in the design studios. In one instance McCowan was told by his life-long friend and studio professor Dean Bryant Vollendorf to stop looking for architectural influences and go to a concert. It may sound odd today to speak of a professor as a life-long friend or even a long-time friend but, that is exactly who Vollendorf was to his students. The idea of our college not being aware of Vollendorf was highly offensive to many of his students who have formed a group on Facebook called the Friends of Vollendorf. I have spoken with many of the members and pointed out that our American School program is righting the wrongs of time and memories fading about our past and forefathers that made the University of Oklahoma a powerhouse of architecture colleges worldwide.

Professor Vollendorf is a fascinating example of passion, dedication, inspiration, and a source of friendship to his students. Professor Vollendorf was already at the University in 1963 when student Gary McCowan met him. The two remained the best of friends until Vollendorf unfortunately passed away 2008 – although it saved him from reliving the economic events after his birth in 1929. Vollendorf is affectionately remembered by any of his students. Gary McCowan was the closest to DBV

that I spoke with and is responsible for the amazing collection housed at the Oklahoma Historical Society. Gary and I shared a “quick” lunch on a beautiful day at the Lake Hefner Louie’s where we talked about Vollendorf, the fact that organic architects aren’t being sought after enough, and the work Gary is doing for Bart Prince for three full hours.

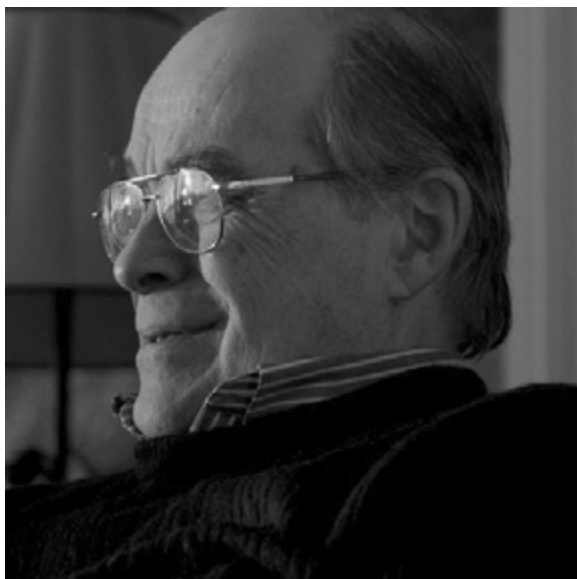
While we talked about Vollendorf, Gary shared a thesis Vollendorf wrote about architectural education with me. Vollendorf began his thesis by referring to a sensitivity plant. He points out how this plant can be caressed lightly, and the leaves will close up then later open up and continue to grow. Next, he notes that if you step on one of these plants it will die. This perspective is exactly what Goff was talking about when he told his students “do not try to remember” when designing for the present. Letting students grow and find their own vernacular was vital to a student’s growth. This is not to say that petting zoo safe spaces in a restaurant or that every idea was a good one to grow upon. You had to show talent and skill to refine designs because students from all over the world were looking to come to our university. It was very challenging and required dedication to make your space in this college your own. Vollendorf was a key element in the continuation of the organic design movement or as we are coming to know it lately, the American School of design following Goff. The Vollendorf thesis continues to talk about architecture coming from within not without – cue The Beatles Within You Without You. There is a quote by John Randal McDonald that rings true regardless of decade or profession in the thesis, “Each man should search for his own simples, that which HE does well.” Anyone that has been in Professor Cricchio’s studio may have heard him speak to the same idea. Push yourself by designing a box. The box must be beautiful. The box must be so well thought through that there is beauty in the details. The box can be the stepping off point to greater and grander ideas but the principle of refinement will follow you. Your version of the box will evolve and should be something that is clearly designed by and belonging to YOU.

The progression of the thesis immediately makes individuality the clear objective for his approach to teaching. Philosophically speaking we tend think of ourselves as either detail oriented or big picture types. Vollendorf refers to the detailed types as “explainers” and big picture types as “generators.” It should also be noted that this thesis includes a name that many have heard lately given his recent death, Robert Venturi. Venturi’s work is used as an example of an explainer. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown both understood/understand architectural history and theory

so well that they make fun of a style or embellish the characteristics of a certain style to a point that some of their work becomes a thesis in itself. Alternatively, the almost expected example of a generator comes as Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruce Goff with the Johnson Wax Building and Ford House. The philosophy of Organic Architecture is that the individual is the candle to illuminate a path of design once a spark ignites the student. Professors are either going to simply shovel information into students in order to meet requirements or they can become a great source of imagination. Dean Bryant Vollendorf did just that.

During a tour through the current American School exhibit in the Bizzell Library with fellow student Clay Dobbins and Professor Guido an older gentleman named Wayne, whom is an alumnus from the mid-sixties, stopped to talk to us with our own Dean Butzer. Wayne explained how he was a football player, member of the ROTC, AND an architecture student. Immediately you could see the pride and glow of Wayne as he opened up about his experience at OU and how it has influenced other aspects of the life he lives. In the midst of our conversation it dawned on me that he may know James Schildroth, so I asked. Wayne looked shocked to hear the name and admitted he did know James and added simply, “James Schildroth is an intense man.” I had to laugh since I can recall a week into talking with James, he scolded me for sharing a risqué post on Facebook. James, like Gary McCowan, is a deep well of Organic design knowledge and it is serious business for him. Personally, I like to think of myself as a Jim Loftus with a serious sense of humor and openly sharing it to both willing and unwilling participants. I digress.

James Schildroth was a student at the Taliesin Fellowship before he came to OU to graduate



*James Schildroth*

in 1965. It is hard to imagine anyone outside of Wright, Bart Prince, Robert Bowlby, Gary McCowan, or our own Dr. Luca Guido housing such an extensive knowledge about Organic Architecture other than James Schildroth. Professor Schildroth taught in Maine before calling it quits and focusing more on his architecture once again. Professor Schildroth is very detailed in his explanation of Organic Architecture but, he is every bit a generator when you read his essays. One of the most important essays on his website - of his own name - sake of course - is about Organic Space and how the use of a unit system can take a student out of the two-dimensional approach and introduce them to the third dimension of space. Something that sounds so simple is such a key element and will provide the student of architecture a vastly open sandbox world of possibilities. Again, this idea of establishing a philosophy for architecture allows a student to face their own individuality and set forth with experimenting and perhaps even failing with pride. Failure is a huge aspect of learning. As McCowan, Schildroth, and Vollendorf all ex-

pressed, a student should feel safe in failing. Safety in failing meaning you are experimenting and learning what works. Schildroth told me prior to this semester to stop talking about my thoughts and put ink to paper. There is nothing more exactly true than that.

Things today are different with professors. With the requirement of licensure for architects to call themselves such comes the necessity of accreditation. This list of mandatory items is made by the NAAB agency (National Architectural Accrediting Board) and is to be taught so the college can continue to offer degrees in architecture. This means that this is a priority to be upheld. Pair this priority with a more microcosm priority of tenure for a professor and you take a large portion of their attention away from the students as individuals. We have a few professors who are very capable of juggling their requirements while nurturing individualism within students and they are easy to identify once you get into the meat of their studio projects. The blame for professors being much more distant or keeping themselves at arms-length is not solely on them. The format that professors are facing today limits them. As a certain professor commented to me last semester during my final presentation, "it's like you are designing with one arm tied behind your back." We must take the requirements of today and find creative solutions. Frank Lloyd Wright did not have the codes or ADA to maneuver around like we have today, but there is little doubt that he still would have designed creative solutions, nonetheless. This is where our voices become important.

Those course evaluations are taken into consideration when it comes to a professor achieving tenure. What we say is taken seriously and what we produce through the semester is compiled to result in a grade for the professors. As a note, keeping your evaluations professional means they must take these comments seriously. The moment you curse in the evaluations they get dismissed and fall on deaf ears. I am sure none of us ever get so frustrated that we have had colorful language to use, but this is an example of restraint being required. So designing against a system of professors who care more about their own grades over becoming long-term positive mentors of pushing students and the profession is as important to the bigger picture as their tenure is to their own piece of the picture. We can have an impact on our college being something we are all extremely proud of which will in turn result in more of us giving back to the future generations and our school.