The Design of Environmental Design

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In an essay entitled "New Directions in Architectural Education" from this journal in 1949, William Wurster proposed that architectural education be collaborative and oriented toward group action. He lauded the San Francisco–based design group Telesis's work in "environmental studies and public education." Wurster's essay outlined the initial thoughts that informed the establishment, a decade later, of the College of Environmental Design at the University of California, Berkeley. Joining three disciplines (city and regional planning, landscape architecture, and architecture) into one college implicitly recognized their equivalence. Since the naming of the college at Berkeley, many others have followed the convention. It is important to note, however, that for Wurster the lack of disciplinary distinction in the title did not mean a lack of disciplinary focus in the curriculum. Quite the opposite, in fact. For Wurster, it was the conjoining of distinct disciplines around issues that was critical to the design of the environment.

Although the naming of the college was unprecedented, Wurster acknowledged his own thinking was not, and he was forthcoming about his sources of influence. The San Francisco office of the Farm Security Administration offered an example, for Wurster, of architects, landscape architects, and planners joining forces to design communities for the massive influx of migrant farm workers in California. The issue was not simply to make more houses to house the homeless. Questions of site, landscape, and infrastructure were equally important in the design process. Bringing various disciplinary expertise together around the design of the environment allowed for physical, social, and even political issues to be addressed. It was this same thinking that informed the work of Telesis, a group of architects, landscape architects, and planners from the Bay Area, many of whom went on to teach at Berkeley. According to Fran Violich, a founding member of Telesis, their work was based on "the use of a comprehensive, planned approach to environmental development, the application of social criteria to solve social problems, and team efforts of all professions that have a bearing on the total environment." This understanding of the environment foreshadowed the pedagogical framework at Berkeley decades later under the leadership of Wurster.

Now, fast-forward forty years from the founding of the college. In light of the history of "environmental design," the recognition of the Anthropocene was a long time coming. The nomenclature and the discussions around it do, however, draw our attention to the specific role of the discipline of architecture in the design (and destruction) of the environment. It is clear that the agency of architects has the potential to expand but also to lose disciplinary expertise. What happens when major issues such as food and water security, resource management, poverty, and urban growth are considered environmental issues? Examples provided by the Farm Security Administration, Telesis, and the College of Environmental Design at Berkeley (and the many other similar programs that followed) offer an approach that recognizes the value of disciplinary knowledge while understanding that disciplinary frameworks alone will not help resolve such issues. Homelessness, for example, is not simply an issue of providing more homes (an "architectural" solution), or more funding (an "economic" solution), or better education (a "social" solution). Rather, if homelessness is understood as an environmental design problem, the issue is privileged over disciplinary biases.

The recent rise of interdisciplinary institutes and research labs demonstrates that this approach is taking hold, but it is still not the norm for most architecture programs and many of the institutes are housed in discipline-based schools. In his book Crisis on Campus (2010), Mark C. Taylor proposed a radical reform of universities. One of Taylor's main arguments is that the disciplinary structure of universities is out of date in our networked culture and inherently divides faculty and students to the detriment of learning. As an alternative, he recommends developing departments around an issue, such as water, and then bringing various disciplines together to frame the issue in ways that overcome disciplinary prejudice. The architectural studio—as project-based and collaborative—offers an ideal pedagogic model. Bringing disciplines other than architecture and the allied arts to the table and privileging issues over disciplines would truly be a new direction in architectural education.

This issue marks the end of Amy Kulper's tenure on the *JAE* Board. Amy has been the Associate Editor, Design, with four Executive Editors, led the development of new frameworks for design content, and introduced Micro-narratives and Discursive Images. Each initiative has raised the collective bar for the design content in the journal. Her impact on the journal has been nothing short of tremendous, as has been her role on the Editorial Board. Amy brings a calm wisdom and a wide perspective to all of our discussions. She will be missed.