

Globalizing Architectural Education in Japan

By Geeta MEHTA



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Like other professionals, architects today work in the increasingly global world. Exciting opportunities for building and design in the medium and long term are increasing in the rapidly urbanizing countries of China, India and the Middle East. Architects are working in global practices in cross-cultural teams like never before. While Japanese design, sense of space, and attention to detail in traditional as well as contemporary architecture are admired around the world, architectural practice and the building industry have historically evolved here in a way unique to Japan. This article discusses the features of architectural practice in Japan that are different from those of other countries, and examines the opportunities in preparing Japanese students for the global opportunities today.

Architecture straddles the disciplines of social sciences, engineering and art, and is best when it succeeds on all three fronts. A factor that sets apart architectural education in Japan from that in other countries is the fact that all schools of architecture are under the faculty of engineering, so there is a strong engineering bias which influences, and sometimes overshadows, architectural and urban design concerns. While earthquake preparedness is given as a main reason for this engineering emphasis, good architectural design and good engineering do not preclude each other. Potential of contribution of each building to the public realm includes public amenities, public space, a minimal environmental footprint, and visual articulation of urban form to make the city user-friendly. Contextuality was very well understood in pre-Meiji Japan, but a low emphasis on “social responsibility” is evident in most architectural projects in modern Japan today.

People-friendly Buildings & Cityscapes

The role of the architect is also different in Japan from that in other countries. For example, in the United States, an architect controls and signs off on all aspects of design from concept to the fin-

ished product, and takes legal responsibility for it. However, in Japan it is customary for the architect to develop the project only up to the concept or design development stage, and then hand it over to the general contractor who prepares the working drawings and builds the project. The architect’s involvement after the design development stage is mostly in an advisory role. In the final stages of design, engineering and economic concerns may seriously compromise or change the design intent, unless the architect stays involved in more than a peripheral role.

Construction companies that employ a large number of architects, albeit lower in their hierarchy, design and build about 90% of the buildings in Japan, with business rather than architectural concerns as their top priority. The fact that Japan has a few architectural masterpieces dotted in a sea of mediocre buildings is probably a result of this. Separation of the design and construction aspects of a building between two different firms also results in better accountability and checks and balances that in the long run benefit the owner or developer. During the bubble period in the 1980s, small boutique firms produced some remarkably good buildings and construction companies also started to show increased interest in good design. However, further improvements will happen only if owners, users and the general public demand “people-friendly” buildings and cityscapes. The design of buildings and public spaces will then feature more prominently in the financial calculations of the project.

The fact that cities like Tokyo are very efficient, but are not aesthetically satisfying, is surprising in a country with a distinguished aesthetic tradition. While most people in Japan bring a high level of aesthetic sensitivity to wrapping a present, arranging flowers, or dressing themselves, this sensitivity is not apparent in the bulk of architecture and built environments around them. The reason for this is that average citizens do not feel empowered to influence, or even comment on, the built environment beyond their home. Public interest, understanding and participation are necessary to create an environment that fosters good design. *Machizukuri*, or public participation in city building, is a rela-



Photo: author

Class discussions encourage students to critique each other’s work in a supportive environment. Global understanding reaching across cultural and national borders is an important part of an architect’s training today.

tively new movement in Japan, and compared to other countries it lacks legal teeth to make a significant difference. The situation in Japan can be contrasted with that in countries such as Finland, where a robust dialogue between citizens, architectural experts and public officials has resulted in demand for high-quality urban environments.

TUJ Program: Model of International Architectural Education

While celebrity Japanese architects such as Tadao Ando, Shigeru Ban and Kazuyo Sejima are invited to design projects in the United States and Europe, an average Japanese architectural graduate is still ill-equipped to take advantage of the global opportunities in architecture and planning today. In the past six years, the Ministry of Education has encouraged architecture and planning schools to respond to this new global scenario. The University of Tokyo and Waseda University are among those that have recently launched new architecture and planning courses in English, as well as some international programs where foreign students are welcomed. However, the limited English ability of Japanese students continues to challenge the intent of these programs. Meanwhile, the number of foreign students in the Japanese universities is rising, particularly from other parts of Asia, and this is helping universities to grow their international programs.

Another model of providing international architectural education is represented by Temple University Japan Campus (TUJ). This small but unique institution provides an opportunity for Japanese students to get American/international education without leaving Japan. While the university has offered programs in liberal arts, education, law and business for the past 26 years, the architecture program was launched only four years ago to serve the needs of foreign students who wanted to study in Japan for part of their education, and for Japanese students who want to get American education or to prepare for studying abroad. Architecture courses are taught at TUJ around the year, and an intensive architecture program is offered in the fall, including a studio and seminar courses. All classes are conducted in English and the program follows the rigorous curriculum taught at the main campus of Temple University in Philadelphia, while taking advantage of its location in Tokyo. Although several foreign universities such as Yale University, the University of British Columbia, and University of Texas in San Antonio conduct programs for their own students in Japan, the TUJ program is the only English-language program of a foreign university permanently based in Japan. Admissions are granted based upon the portfolio review and average GPA of students, and credits earned can be transferred to US universities.

A recent example of the cross-cultural aspects of the TUJ program was a collaborative design studio jointly conducted in the fall of 2008 between TUJ and Kokushikan University. This studio added the experience of working in an international environment to the hands-on learning, experimentation, invention, and reflection that are the core pedagogical tools of an architectural design studio. Students from both universities worked on designing the showroom and offices for INAX Corp. in Aoyama, Tokyo. They had several joint studio sessions, where they participated in open discussions about each other's work. This studio enabled Japanese and foreign students to understand each other's ways of working and problem solving, cutting



Students from Japan and the United States work side by side on constructing temporary street furniture they have designed for Kanda, a Tokyo district packed with antiquarian bookshops.

across cultural and national borders. The students noted that while the Japanese students in this group tended to conceptualize their designs through making models, the American students were more used to conceptualizing with the help of plans and drawings.

Good Design Becoming More Important for Cities

Good architecture is the result of several elements coming together. These include a strong vision of the architect, the technological and economic means of realizing it, and the urban, regulatory, and participatory civic environments that promote good design. Each building in the city should make the city more people-friendly, and its residents and the bureaucrats responsible for representing them should demand that every new building do that. The civic society also needs a strengthened role in shaping the built environment of Japanese cities. The University of Tokyo and TUJ are currently supporting the work of URBZ, a think-tank focused on developing web-based tools of participatory planning for “user-generated cities.” URBZ has already organized participatory workshops in Shimokitazawa in Tokyo (2006) and in Mumbai (2008), and is gearing up to launch the participatory planning system for municipalities in Japan and other countries.

In the very competitive economic climate that is sure to follow the recent economic turmoil, the quality and environment of cities can give certain cities an edge in attracting financial investments and jobs. The “soft” aspects of a city, including good design, are becoming increasingly important as cities compete for global investments and jobs. Modernizing certain aspects of Japanese architectural practice, and internationalizing architectural education will prepare young Japanese architects to play a role in the economic resurgence of Japan, as well as have access to opportunities for working on the global stage. **JS**

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