

Department Strategy

Student Perspective Compiled and Presented by the Architecture Student Council

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Introduction

What is the student vision for MIT's department of architecture for the next five years and beyond?

In order to formulate a response to this question, ASC gathered input from the student body with varying degrees of formality and from a variety of sources. The following thoughts are the product of a number of recent discussions with students at all levels of the department and from the department of architecture student survey conducted in the spring of 2004. We've organized this input into three principal components: part one is an affirmation of the myriad strengths and unique attributes of the department which should be encouraged, supported, and fostered well into the future. Part two outlines our vision for the school in light of those qualities which distinguish MIT's program and constitute the basis for a strong future of the department of architecture. Part three recommends specific implementations of this vision for the next one to three years. We appreciate the opportunity to consider the future of the department at this crucial moment and hope this document serves to effect positive change.

Part One: Affirmations

There are strong qualities in department of architecture which must be maintained within any vision of its future. In most cases, these qualities, which should not be compromised, are what distinguish MIT from other programs throughout North America and abroad. These qualities include a number of strong young faculty, the broader context of MIT as a world-class research institution, strong discipline groups with a unique organizational structure, and a diverse, talented, and independent student body.

Young Faculty

The many young faculty members within the department offer a great deal to the program and exemplify many of the traits that uniquely position us for the future. These traits include enormous enthusiasm and energy as well as conceptual strength and experimental approaches to research, innovation, building, and teaching. These individuals also play a key role bridging between the department and the world of architectural practice, building technology, or digital making. As MIT looks forward, these are individuals who can lead in bringing together practice, research, and teaching to the mutual benefit of all.

The Institute context

That the department of architecture is situated within a renowned research institute is a tremendous asset whose value cannot be overemphasized. This context grants the department exposure and access to a diverse array of opportunities and perspectives afforded both by distinguished and rising faculty in other disciplines as well as by innovative and talented students in other disciplines. As an institution, MIT

is also able to draw an impressive range of visitors that the department can capitalize upon. Lastly, the Institute provides a background culture of research upon which the department can build.

Discipline Groups

The discipline groups within the department of architecture all have both enormous strength and enormous potential to position MIT at the forefront of architectural education. While the structure that coordinates and administers the discipline group organization has its shortcomings, these groups afford innumerable opportunities for the department. Discipline groups offer the kind of specialized knowledge that is a catalyst for individual student focus, and this specialization provides variety and diversity for the department. The discipline groups grant students at all levels, from undergrads to PhD candidates, the opportunity to participate in research. Thus, the discipline groups provide important and fruitful moments of focus within the department and the Institute that benefit students and faculty alike.

Students

MIT students are one of its greatest assets. We are self-motivated independent thinkers who blur boundaries, push limits, and question conventions. The students within each program of the department have unique qualities that should be acknowledged and built upon. The undergraduate students' intensive coursework in applied sciences and mathematics as well as their exceptional intellectual ability and curiosity offer unique opportunities for architectural investigation. The MArch student body possesses a diversity of backgrounds which, coupled with specific interests in the department's interdisciplinary approach, offers uniquely expanded opportunity within the context of a professional degree program. The SMarChS program has experienced and diverse students whose specialized knowledge and skills enable them make intense and focused use of the full resources of MIT. Lastly, the PhD students within the department continually demonstrate vanguard thinking and intellect while playing an influential role at MIT and beyond. Each level within the department thus serves to form a student body with enormous potential that could be leveraged even more fully than it has been to date.

Part Two: Vision

The student vision for the department of architecture cuts across discipline groups and degree programs. As we see it, the most positive future for the department comes from coaxing the best out of each of the many parts that make up the department. In order to best attain this goal, the department must pay particular attention to five areas which we feel form the cornerstones of MIT's future: the community that is fostered here, the autonomy and contingency of the discipline of architecture, the strong culture of making at MIT, the application of technology, and design as an integrator of the many areas which nourish the department.

Community

In our discussions with students, it is clear that the crux of a successful future for the department of architecture at MIT hinges on its community. We must better define and succeed at coming together, be it through shared space, mutual events, a common vision, or shared work. As much as the students can do, it is the faculty who are the constant at MIT, and the sense of community must be driven jointly by faculty and students. At the moment there is little or no perceptible initiative from the faculty to create a sense of community within the architecture program.

Autonomy and Contingency

Architecture at MIT is a program that has both autonomy and contingency within MIT. At the scale of the Institute, the school, and the department, we have semi-autonomous groups vying for territory, identity, recognition, funding, and students. These divisions are important for MIT, as they allow for interesting relationships and overlaps among disciplines within architecture. But how can we build in a degree of contingency among the groups so we are more than the sum of our parts? In the future, the department needs to seek out the connections and intersections that tie the web together. The strengths lie in the students, the interactions possible among professors, shared space and events, and a mutual sense of design as an integral component of synthesizing building technology, computation, HTC, and visual arts, rather than the sole dominion of one discipline group.

Hands on / Hands off

Institute-wide there is a culture of making. *Mens et Manus* founded the Institute, and continues to drive its experimental, open-ended philosophy. Over the years this outlook has encouraged MIT students to take initiative and meet challenges hands-on, whether to build an automobile or reprogram a computer chip. Architecture is in a position to embrace this tradition wholeheartedly in the service of its curriculum. The pristine studio space and lack of physical shop and construction space sends a message contrary to this ideal. The "Car Studio" is a positive example of the symbiosis between thinking and making, but occurs outside the Department of Architecture. Somehow we need to reinforce this culture of making, whether it is digital, manual, or preferably both.

Application of technology

The architecture school should position itself so it can both leverage and contribute to the technological assets of the Institute at large. At the moment there are nascent initiatives in this area, principally in the use of digital technologies in the service of fabrication and in the use of computation for design and analysis, visualization, and conceptualization. Architecture is largely seen as a consumer of technology, but in fact we are in a position to also be a definer of technology.

Design as integrator

The architecture department at MIT is uniquely situated within a culture of research at the forefront of technology. Therefore, design must be a vehicle to synthesize the other areas. The degree to which design is positioned as an end in and of itself is the degree to which it misses out on this opportunity. Design as a discipline should not be marginalized in any way, but must take the lead in negotiating among the strengths of MIT, as each student seeks to find an appropriate and personal balance between breadth and depth.

Design gives us the opportunity to tap into a number of areas and explore issues that go beyond what is available at other schools. Students tackle more issues at MIT; as a result, projects and presentations are less conventional than that which is seen in other schools of architecture, but as a result are absolutely stronger. This expanded range of issues has the potential for design presentation to fall short, yet both ideas and their representation must flourish simultaneously. Coordination and integration among disciplines is crucial, and must be recognized not only by individual professors but also by the entire department as one of its primary strengths. Broader input of social, structural, and technical issues, however, leads to a different understanding of representation and resolution than one has when focused solely on design as a goal. We believe the result is stronger and sets MIT's program and people apart.

Part Three: Implementation

There are aspects of the student ideals for MIT's future that can be undertaken directly, now and in the coming months. We focus on ideas which suggest positive change in structure rather than increased outlay of funds.

Advising

It is clear that the department of architecture cannot completely mimic the advisor organizational structure that is common to the rest of the Institute in which students are closely associated with specific faculty through research projects and related funding streams. However, the current advising system in place within the department diverges so significantly from this model that it often renders an advisor merely a token signature on a registration form. In order to capture some of the advising model utilized by much of the wider Institute community, the Department should allow students to select their own advisor/registration officer when they matriculate or there should be, at a minimum, the opportunity for students to change advisors once they've arrived and found a faculty member to whom they can relate academically and personally. Given the ubiquitous "drinking from a firehouse" analogy that is used to describe MIT, the department is severely hindering its students by denying them a formalized relationship with an advisory faculty member who could best aid them in negotiating the myriad challenges and opportunities that the Department and the Institute have to offer.

Timing of Design Studios

The current scheduling of architecture design studios is completely ineffectual. The Tuesday/Thursday/Friday arrangement does not work for a number of reasons. First, this schedule precludes students taking any classes that fall within the M/W/F or the T/TH afternoon schedule, which both hampers students' ability to take classes outside the department in the interest of interdisciplinary learning and severely constrains the classes offered within the department that seek to have MArch student enrollment, leaving many classes squeezed in either just before studio or lumped into three-hour sessions on Monday or Wednesday evenings. Secondly, the back-to-back arrangement of Thursday/Friday is horribly inefficient in the use of professor and student time alike: there is not enough time to produce between these two days, Thursday reviews render Fridays useless, and Friday reviews typically render Thursday unnecessary in light of the impending reviews. The Department should select a Tuesday/Thursday format which would promote interdisciplinary learning as well as effective and focused time usage and would also provide crucial scheduling latitude for professors more engaged in practice. Alternatively, adopting the Monday/Wednesday/Friday format offers the first two of these benefits as well.

Coordinated Calendar

The coordination of various events, such as lectures, classes, and social events, within the department is poor at best. While the discipline group organizational structure of the department is its defining characteristic and adds tremendous opportunities for focus, overlap, and intersection, the autonomy of these groups needs to be checked with a degree of contingency in a variety of areas. One of the most effective and tangible ways to tie these groups together is through a better coordinated calendar – on a given night it is not unusual to have as many as three lectures within the department occurring simultaneously or to find lectures during the day under-attended or empty due to class conflicts. The department should not organize itself in such a way that it rends its students and faculty through class, lecture, and event conflicts.

The department lecture series should provide a larger umbrella under which discipline group series fall and discipline group lectures and events should have a specific time set aside such that there are not class conflicts. For example, this term the SMArchS colloquium and Computation group lecture series are both scheduled during a time when 12 other classes are scheduled within the Department alone, the building technology lecture series is scheduled when there are 9 other classes offered, and the Friday Noon talks, one of the only opportunities for student lectures, are scheduled when 4 other classes are scheduled! If the department wants its students and faculty to come together, then it must set aside time for it to do so. Accordingly, the calendar should be coordinated and there should be at least one time per week that every student has free – this could be easily accomplished with a one-unit “course” required of every student within the department that could then be used for important events, meetings, lectures, etc....

Curricular Continuity

Particular attention should be paid to the longer-term understanding of where particular classes fall within a larger curricular framework. An important example of the Department's failure to do so are the arrangement/sequencing faculty for required courses within the Department. More specifically, design studio faculty selection should be coordinated so that as students progress from year to year, a repeated instructor should be the exception rather than the rule – at present it is not uncommon for two-thirds of MArch students in a given year to have had one, if not two, of the three studio options in previous semesters. Secondly, other required courses that are billed as “foundational” should be taught by faculty that have longstanding connections with MIT since these classes are predicated on preparing students for future classes/research at MIT but are often taught by visitors who, despite positive attributes such as enthusiasm, international renown, and experimental approaches, are unable to frame such foundational courses within the broader framework of MIT.

Research

Research can absolutely coincide with architecture in a pre-professional, professional and post-professional degree programs. The students are up to the task; it is up to the professors to make the most of the talents and thinking of the students around them. MIT undergrads are exposed to research in the courses around them, MArch students may come from a background of research in science or the humanities, and SMArchS students have often demonstrated prior architectural research interests. Research in architecture at MIT can make better use of the diverse talents and interests of the student body than it does now.