

An Argument for *Argument* in Architectural Education

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FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT CREDITS H. H. RICHARDSON WITH THE FIRST principle of architecture: *first get the job*.¹ But getting the job, and then running it in a competitive and complex society, involves more than sheer talent and craft. Unquestionably, successful architects need well-developed critical thinking, interpersonal, and written and oral communication skills, all of which suggest the ability to reason logically through a problem and to argue competently for its solution. Many Schools of Architecture, however, find their students lacking in such skills. We believe that teaching the elements of practical argument as it applies to architecture can help architecture students to develop the critical thinking and communication skills that will enable them to legitimate their designs to their peers, clients, and communities. In this essay, we outline an instructional plan that engages practical argument in a context that students will recognize as valuable to their careers. In addition, this instructional plan can be used to help architecture professors and practitioners identify and employ on a conscious level their own critical thinking and oral and written communication skills. In sum, we think that teaching practical argument to architects at all levels provides one viable answer to the complex communication challenges facing the profession.

Why is the ability to reason logically and to argue practically so important for architects? Consider the tasks that architects routinely perform and the ways they document, evaluate, and communicate information to others. To get the job, professionals advertise through Web pages, make personal contacts, develop proposals, select consultants, prepare for interviews, present the firm's qualifications, and follow-up through letters and telephone contact. These activities require architects to analyze prospective clients' needs and to appeal to others with interest, honesty, and sincerity. Architects are equally challenged to communicate well as they run the job. They prepare meeting notes; develop program and site analyses; conduct and report on feasibility studies; meet with design review panels and community groups; research and document design standards, materials, and products; prepare drawings that relate images and words clearly; write unambiguous specifications; issue press releases; and assist clients in facility management through procedural manuals, diagrams, and As Built drawings.

As in other professions, computerization has led to an explosion of information—technical, environmental, economic, and social—that the architect must understand, evaluate, synthesize, and incorporate into the work. How well do architecture students measure up to these critical thinking and communication requirements?

According to Stephen A. Klimont, FAIA, former editor of *Architectural Record*, there is "little in the architect's long costly education to prepare him or her to deal adeptly with the host of written products required in everyday practice." Further, "clarity or confusion can spell the difference between retaining or losing a client." Klimont added that: "Poor writing is widespread, serious, persistent, damaging, and not on any visible road to improvement. The architect's education tends to reward design proficiency at the expense of the written word" (p. 71).² Others agree. Boyer and Mitgang also reported basic skills deficiencies among undergraduate students of architecture: "In common with many undergraduates, architecture students often display weak oral and written skills. . . . It's not just grammar and spelling," said a faculty member at an East Coast private institution. "They can't construct an argument with a beginning and an end and something in the middle."³

Indeed, practicing architects frequently express concern that entry-level graduate architects lack basic reasoning skills, as revealed by awkward and unclear writing. Problems include deficient research skills, the inability to organize and convey thoughts logically and coherently, lack of accuracy in documenting information, and the inability to be brief without sacrificing meaning. In a recent issue of *Architectural Record*, Mitgang discussed a poll asking practitioners what architecture graduates most need to know. A third of those polled strongly agreed that the schools were providing a well-rounded liberal arts education, but the "messages were mixed." For example, architect Andrea Clark Brown, AIA, explained that architecture students need to learn proper English, writing, spelling, debating, and negotiation skills and indicated that she had received such skills from her 1970s education at the University of Virginia. However, Mitgang offered no such testimony from anyone educated in the 1990s. Andrei S. Harwell, a New York intern with a recent BA in Architecture from Carnegie Mellon, found his education lacking in the liberal arts, believed he had not been broadly educated, and felt ill prepared for an intellectual life. Further, a Bristol, Connecticut, practitioner complained: "I've had employees who can barely read specifications or topological maps or write a business letter . . . [T]here's a whole generation that can't spell. What if one of these people had to write a proposal for a client? What kind of impression would that leave?"⁴

Addressing this problem is challenging, however. Poor reasoning and communication skills are typical of many undergraduate students but once students begin the coursework associated with their major discipline, their opportunities narrow for direct instruction in these skills. Most Schools of Architecture offer top-heavy undergraduate programs of technical courses, architectural history, theory,

and studio design. Typically, architecture students have little time or incentive to take courses in other disciplines and few students take writing courses beyond first-year English composition; thus, they rarely learn and practice research, critical thinking, and oral and written communication skills. To address this deficit, we have developed a class in practical argument that will give students an opportunity to learn and apply basic rhetorical principles to architecture issues.

Practical Argument for Architects: Basic Principles

In western society, practical argument has strong historical ties to the rhetoric taught by Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Each wrote about rhetoric in treatises concerned with the nature of truth, ethical argument, practical wisdom, civic virtues, and pedagogy.⁵ Practical argument recognizes that people argue not about issues of which we are certain, but about imprecise human functions and ideas. For example, in curriculum committees, we debate whether an architecture school should offer certain courses, not about whether architecture should be taught at all. Likewise, in society, argument arises with issues of social concern or public policy because citizens may hold different values or disagree on how to achieve certain desired ends. In practical argument, we recognize that we have an answer, but other answers exist as well; indeed, we can argue only when more than one potential answer exists. Rhetorical argument in its classical sense generally refers to rigorously constructed reasoning and discussion that persuades, or moves, people to action.

To effect persuasion, three essential elements are required. The first is *logos*, or logical reasoning, which is essential to intellectually convince an audience. Dialectical inquiry into the problem allows the one making the argument, the rhetor, to determine the issues and to seek the heart of the matter; Plato's Socratic dialogue is a common form. Good dialectic tests various premises around a problem with an incisive question-and-answer process. Once the best possible answers regarding a matter have been determined, the rhetor uses practical reasoning techniques (*phronesis*) to discover the best ways to present the case. These techniques include the *topoi*, or a series of common topics as questions (e.g., cause and effect, greater or lesser good, and past and future fact), the *enthymeme* (a rhetorical syllogism), and examples. Honest rhetorical argument is dependent on strong *logos*, but because its purpose is to move the audience beyond conviction and toward action, it requires two other elements. *Ethos* and *pathos* take the argument beyond the intellectual range and engage human nature. The rhetor's *ethos*, or ethical character, is essential for a successful practical argument. According to

Aristotle, the speaker or writer must possess good sense, good intentions, honesty, and integrity. The audience intuits the quality of the rhetor's ethical character by their sense of the argument as well reasoned, sensible, and fully supported. Good research and an honest inquiry must be combined with a desire to find the best possible answer (*endoxa*). Together, these are indicators of the rhetor's good will and strong character. Finally, those who argue an issue must have some understanding of human psychology in order to make appropriate emotional appeals (*pathos*). While classical rhetoric does not support attempts to sway the audience by indiscriminate appeals to emotions, one should understand those emotions most likely to impel action because action is practical argument's goal.

These elements of practical argument are valuable for architects engaged in daily work. The very nature of architecture as a competitive profession demands that architects "argue" by submitting proposals and interviewing to win a job over another firm. They use their critical thinking abilities in a dialectical process by asking and answering questions about the project and the client's needs. Using practical reasoning, they determine how best to prepare and present their proposals to prospective clients. Successful architects engage more than their logical reasoning skills, however. Clients trust them because they demonstrate a strong *ethos*, an ethical character that reveals common sense, honesty, and understanding. Finally, such architects, perhaps unconsciously, engage *pathos* by conveying sympathetic understanding of the client's needs and aspirations.

Indeed, practical argument offers architects yet another valuable resource in cases where disputes require negotiation or mediation. In such cases, an architect's ability to identify the problem (*logos*), find the best possible answers (*endoxa*), and understand what motivates the disputing parties (*pathos*), combined with the architect's well-developed and previously demonstrated good character (*ethos*), will assist him/her in problem resolution.

Practical Argument for Architects: A Model Course

Our course in practical argument specifically addresses issues particular to architects and, with modification, can be adapted to three different user groups: third- and fourth-year undergraduates and graduate students in architectural professional degree programs, faculty interested in teaching these skills to their students, and practitioners who want to improve their communications and earn AIA required learning units. This course can be constructed as a three-semester-hour class for deep practical experience that, ideally, either would be required or would be a professional elective within the School of Architecture.

However, because this option requires philosophical agreement about students' needs for practical argument in an already replete curriculum, a second option of a one-credit workshop might prove a fruitful beginning for many Schools. This workshop can be planned around students', instructors', and practitioners' schedules. Ideally, the course is co-led by two instructors: a trained rhetorician or philosopher and a practicing architect/faculty member. Inviting such visitors as local area architects and city planners enriches the learning environment and provides an objective audience for student arguments.

The course's major objectives are to learn the basic principles of practical argument and how they can be applied to the real problems of practicing architects. Participants are expected to research topics through the library, the Internet, and interviews with subject-area experts. Students write several practical arguments that respond to problems commonly found in contemporary architecture practice. Instruction includes lectures, discussions, collaborative writing groups, and both oral and written presentations.

A sample syllabus includes the following major topics.⁶ (1) *Overview and principles*: Defining practical argument, inquiry as the backbone of critical reasoning, the ethical basis of argument, and considering the audience. A practical exercise would consider how clients view architects and what services they expect. (2) *Learning to convince*: Researching the issue, determining the best solution/s, anticipating counterarguments, and arguing logically. A practical exercise would be to write an article to a national architectural publication taking issue with the design premises of a major building project. (3) *Learning to persuade*: Applying the writer's ethical character to a reasoned solution, analyzing the audience's emotional needs, and moving the audience to action. A practical exercise would be to present a design project to a skeptical community group of nonarchitects who are convinced that the project will impact them unfavorably. (4) *Learning to negotiate and mediate*: Identifying deadlocked situations, reducing conflict through negotiation, mediating between polarized interest groups. A practical negotiation exercise would find common ground among a divided community group to resolve design issues and meet their concerns while maintaining project quality. A practical mediation exercise would find the common ground between an Owner and a Contractor involved in a contractual dispute.

Practical Argument and Design

In Schools of Architecture, the design studio is where students have the greatest opportunity to connect and synthesize diverse informa-

tion and knowledge in the pursuit of design excellence. As we know, the design process is an extraordinarily complex activity that creatively combines reasoning and intuition and seems to defy analysis. This activity most excites the imaginations of those involved: students, teachers, harried practitioners, and even the general public. We believe that learning practical argumentation will enable architecture students to discuss and legitimate their designs in studio and other public forums.

In design, as in practical argument, there coexist many opinions and many different solutions for any given problem. In developing and proposing design solutions, students must be prepared to argue for their particular solution. Practical argument enables them to make a case for their designs as "right" or worthy of public evaluation and discussion. For example, students should be encouraged to view the design process holistically, with thorough research, dialectical questioning, and information analysis. Further, they should develop sensitivity to clients as their audience, use practical reasoning to find the best possible solution/s, and propose designs in a persuasive, defensible manner. Students should be encouraged to consider such questions as: What is the problem we wish to solve? Who is the "audience" for whom this solution is conceived? How can we best document and present our proposed solutions?⁷ Unfortunately, this kind of questioning may not be practiced rigorously enough in architectural design studios, where design often is considered a personal and private matter between students and architect-teachers who both disseminate their knowledge and act as surrogate client. Exposure to practical argument, we believe, can help students begin to view their designs through the eyes of other, wider audiences.

Finally, the importance of training faculty in practical argumentation principles cannot be overstated. If faculty understand the value of learning and teaching these critical thinking and communication skills, they more likely will encourage such skills in the classroom and studio. Practical argument adds a welcome rigor and healthy debate to course work and enhances the student's creativity. Further, educators who make their students aware of critical reasoning and argumentative principles do their students a great service by making them more valuable to their future employers. Conversely, without these skills, students may be limited in their initial job prospects and, once employed, such deficiencies may impede their advancement to management levels in firms where client contact is required. We believe that practitioners, too, can benefit from learning the principles of practical argument at any stage in their professional careers.

The key to empowering contemporary architecture students is teaching them to understand how their designs relate to their

peers, clients, and communities. Practical argument learned in the context of architectural studies, can play an important role in training successful architects capable of making crucial connections among general knowledge in many fields, knowledge of the craft of architecture, and the communication of that knowledge to others with what Kliment calls the "frankness, clarity, and honesty expected of those with special skills and responsibilities."⁸

Notes

1. F. L. Wright. *Genius and the Mobocracy*. (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pierce, 1949).

2. S. A. Kliment, FAIA. "But What Does It Mean?" *Architecture* 71, 73 (Nov., 1996). See also Kliment's *Writing for Design Professionals* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), which addresses communication deficiencies for architects who want to improve their writing skills.

3. E. L. Boyer and L. D. Mitgang. *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice*. (Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996), p. 80.

4. L. D. Mitgang. "Back to School," *Architectural Record* (Sept., 1999):114.

5. Plato. *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*; Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*; Cicero, *De Invencione, De Oratore*; and the pseudo-Ciceronean *Ad Herrenium*; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*.

6. We favor Crusius, T. W. and Channel, C. E., *The Aims of Argument: A Rhetoric*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1998), which covers practical rhetoric, as well as negotiation and mediation.

7. Edward R. Tufte's landmark series on this subject provides insightful critique and excellent examples: *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (1983), *Envisioning Information* (1990), and *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative* (1997), all published by Graphics Press in Cheshire, CT.

8. S. A. Kliment, FAIA. *Writing for Design Professionals*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), p. 13.