

The Chronicle Review

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION • Section B

March 7, 2008

Observer

The Architect as University President

By JAMES F. BARKER, FAIA

AS AN ARCHITECT, I'm a rarity among university presidents, and I've often wondered why. Architecture is the ideal background for my job for reasons that are both philosophical and practical—very practical.

That's because architecture offers one of the last Renaissance educations available. At its best, it strikes just the right balance between art and science, the creative and the pragmatic. I often tell people I learned everything from plumbing to poetry in architecture school, and I use every bit of that knowledge as president of Clemson University.

To begin with the most obvious advantage: A big part of my responsibility is to help plan, financially support, build, and maintain campus facilities, as well as to develop campus master plans. As a land-grant institution, Clemson has more than 30,000 acres of campus and research lands statewide, 200 buildings, and at least six million square feet of built space. Those buildings range from cow barns to one of the nation's top academic electron-microscope facilities. It clearly helps that I understand planning and design, speak the language of architects, and have the technical ability to read a set of architectural drawings. (I may be the most challenging higher-education client an architect must face!)

We have made a commitment to sustainable design and building in all new campus construction, and the first of five "technology neighborhoods" is almost complete on a new 250-acre automotive-research campus, with its own master plan, that is nearby. I can't imagine presiding over a building program of that magnitude without having a background in architecture and urban planning. While many of my colleagues who are chemists, physicians, and historians do a fine job, I would not want to attempt it.

On a much deeper level, however, I believe architectural education offers a model of how we can meet some of the clearest challenges facing universities today. How do we teach creativity? Where do ideas

come from? How do we educate fact-based critical thinkers and individualists? How do we then teach those students to communicate, to understand one another and other cultures, and to work well together as part of a larger team? Those are the demands and expectations of higher education in the 21st century. It is a matter of national concern in a world where prosperity aligns so

clearly with innovation and a creative, knowledge-based economy, and we must not fail.

In my view, the architecture design studio is the best learning experience ever invented to produce the kind of deep, engaged learning and creative graduates that are so needed today. Small groups of students work with a master teacher on a semester-long or yearlong team project to design solutions

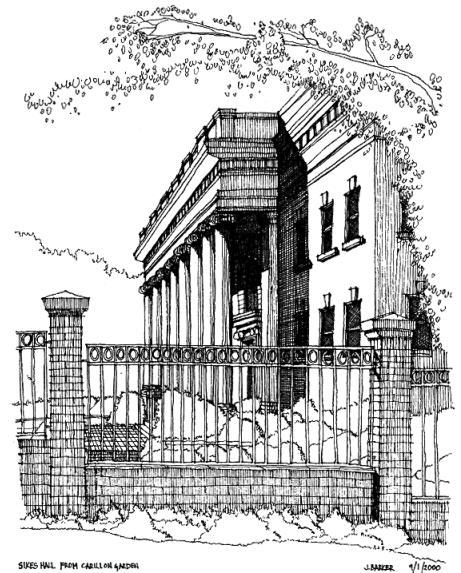
to a specific problem or to meet a particular need. Some projects are purposely fanciful, purely imaginative. Others, often the best projects, tackle real problems for actual clients.

For example, our students in planning and design have helped communities throughout our state preserve historic buildings,

revitalize dying town centers, and plan new parks, bikeways, and green space. For every project, they interview the key people involved; gather statistics on demographics and traffic patterns; collect previous plans, deeds,

and plats; photograph the site from every conceivable angle; and put all of those data on a computer.

Eventually they brainstorm ideas, discuss them, refine them, and present them to their teachers and clients in a process that we, in architecture, call a "design charrette." Then, and only then, are the best ideas sifted through the filter of what is possible and



Drawing of Sikes Hall, which houses the Clemson U. president's office, by James F. Barker

I believe architectural education offers a model of how we can meet some of the clearest challenges facing universities today.

affordable. As the great Charles Eames once said, “Design depends largely on constraints.” It’s important for students to learn that, too, if they ever want to see their plans on paper leave the file cabinet to live in the real world of bricks and mortar.

In the process of doing such public-service projects, our students learn about research, communication, interpersonal relationships, culture, politics, municipal government, creativity (its power and its limits), and teamwork.

THE LONGING to once again be a part of that creative ferment sparked my personal journey back to education from architectural practice. And the desire to bring the power of that educational model to the larger world led me into administration and, ultimately, university leadership.

In the mid-1990s, when a radical reorganization reduced Clemson’s nine colleges to four (now five), I realized that it, too, was an opportunity and a challenge for me as the college’s dean of architecture. (It was also a constraint.) The designer in me took over. Could architecture—an applied, professional discipline—collaborate with the basic arts and humanities in a new college? Could we adapt the “design studio” as a pedagogical model for engaged learning across the curriculum? Could we design a university community with bridges, instead of barriers, to teamwork?

We could, and we have. Project-based learning has increased significantly across our campus. Service learning has increased. More than 75 percent of our seniors last year reported working on a research project with a faculty member to the National Survey of Student Engagement. Thousands are involved in “Creative Inquiry” projects in each of our five colleges. Some students studied Boccaccio and staged an original play, *The Decameron*, at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2007. Another team of industrial-engineering students studied hospital emergency-evacuation planning in order to design improvements.

It seems, at times, as though our entire campus is one big studio. My goal is to have every undergraduate participate in such a research or creative-inquiry experience before he or she graduates.

In *Building Community*, a 1996 report published by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang challenged architectural educators to integrate the design curriculum more fully within and outside the architecture discipline, and to prepare architects for lives of civic engagement. That notion has been a subject of intense debate for years among architecture deans, but I have always been firmly in Boyer and Mitgang’s camp. If architects want to be influential, we need to get out of our ateliers and connect with the curriculum, engage the culture, and serve our larger communities. That is why we require our architecture students to have four years of languages, to declare a minor, and to work on projects that contribute to society not only in this country but abroad.

As the president of a university, I interact on a close and daily basis with leaders in the world of business and politics. I’m amazed every day at the subtle ways in which my architectural education and background prepared me for this responsibility. It taught me to think visually as well as verbally, to listen intently to the needs of clients and colleagues, to seek feedback and test my ideas, to dream big dreams but make concrete, “buildable” plans.

And, as the American Institute of Architects says on the Web site of its Communities by Design initiative: “There’s a reason you became an architect. It wasn’t just about buildings. It was about people, it was about making communities more livable.”

University presidents spend a great deal of time thinking about the future and sketching out what that future might look like for the people and the communities we care about. It requires creativity, vision, and the right balance between intuitive and rational thinking. Fortunately, those are the architect’s strengths, the gift of a somewhat unconventional education for a university president. ■

James F. Barker is president of Clemson University. He holds degrees in architecture and urban design from Clemson and from Washington University in St. Louis.