

# Civic engagement: The architect as a university leader

## Practice Matters

By Harris M. Steinberg, AIA

Architecture is a social art. Indeed, a public trust exists between the profession and society-at-large. In their study *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice*, the late Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang argued that the future of the profession depends on our collective ability to advance the knowledge base of the profession, tackle complex social problems, and seek admittance to the highest levels of decision making within the worlds of business and politics.

While architects have traditionally been involved in the social fabric of their communities—serving on planning commissions and design review boards—it has been estimated that up to 50 percent of architects do not enter traditional practice. What happens when the architect steps out of his or her traditional role and enters another profession? Does this person cease to be an “architect”?

James Barker, FAIA, feels that he has never ceased to be an architect, even though he is now president of Clemson University in Clemson, S.C. He earned the president’s chair after having successfully distinguished himself in both the worlds of traditional practice and academia. Barker didn’t set out to become a high-level academic. After receiving his bachelor

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degree in architecture from Clemson in 1970, he worked in a traditional practice setting before returning to school to obtain a master’s degree in architecture and urban design from Washington University in St. Louis in 1974. After graduate school, Barker began practicing and teaching. He served as dean of the School of Architecture at Mississippi State before returning to Clemson in 1986 as the dean of its College of Architecture.

During that time Barker was given a rare opportunity. Asked to help reorganize the university’s nine colleges into four, he helped create Clemson’s new College of Architecture, Arts, and Humanities.

The college gives students the opportunity to see how the design studio experience applies to many other disciplines. “Suddenly students in the humanities were involved in studioliike experiences,” says Barker. This pedagogical model has since moved to other colleges and disciplines at Clemson, in engineering and the sciences, for example, affording students across disciplines the ability to engage in “project-based teamwork in which students step out of traditional classroom settings and solve real problems.” In 1999 Barker was appointed president of the university.

Energized by the academic cross-pollination that is occurring at Clemson, Barker believes that there is more work to be done. “I think that it’s time for architectural education to move from the intellectual

fringe of the campus to its very heart.” The architecture faculty at Clemson is committed to this new curriculum, which uses the humanities to help its architecture students become more engaged in culture and which requires all architecture majors to have a minor degree. “It’s most likely the minor will be in one of the humanities,” says Barker. “We



**As president of Clemson University James Barker, FAIA (center), has shown the studio education experience can apply to other disciplines, like engineering and the humanities.**

also require four years of foreign language study. All of this is aimed at saying, ‘If you want people to be at the center of culture and society when they graduate, you must educate them at its center.’ We have to teach architects so that they feel comfortable within the center of culture instead of at its edge.”

“If you let me put the word ‘practice’ in quotes, I am practicing architecture. I am trying to encourage creativity in members of that

team and I am trying to use a non-traditional way of thinking about problems to help solve them.” As an emissary of the architectural profession, Barker uses his position as university president to reach out to architects and encourage professional interaction and dialogue on campus-wide design issues.

“Every once in a while I’ll review a set of drawings and have a presentation,” says Barker. “We set up a series of morning presentations of work that is currently under way on campus. All of the firms that are working on campus arrange their schedules so they can be here and they all sit in on each other’s work. It’s like a jury and it’s fascinating. The architects see what their colleagues are doing and they like the fact that I’ve tried to pull them into the conversation and treat it as a sort of exploration.”

The road from architect to academic leader has been a long one. But what Barker has done is a good example of what Boyer and Mitgang have said that architects can do to assure that the profession will have an important role in determining the future of our profession. “A university president should have vision,” he noted. “It is thinking about things architecturally and with creativity. It is thinking about the future with some degree of creativity and using your imagination and having a balance between rational and intuitive thinking. I can’t imagine coming to this job without having had an architectural education.” ■

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