

A-level is accepted by Schools of Architecture simply because the list does not include the A-level in Architecture in its list. However, it seems questionable whether an A-level in Architecture will be as highly regarded by the admissions tutors at many universities as more conventional academic subjects such as Maths, Physics, History or English. With only anecdotal evidence to support the assumption that the A-level in Architecture will be well received, it is difficult to make a specific pronouncement on this point.

Universities are inclined to be cagey about how they make decisions and offer or decline places to students. However, if asked to advise a young person with high aspirations about suitable A-levels to take, my own instincts and those of many colleagues, would be to advise conventional academic subjects. This advice would almost certainly apply to students who had made up their minds to be architects and to those who had yet to make a definite career choice, particularly if their aspirations favoured a Russell Group university. For students who have not finally decided their career options, particularly in the competitive climate emerging from the changing fee structure and the implementation of the Browne Review's findings, the choice of Architecture at A-level may even be a dangerous strategy if they finally decide to opt to study a conventional degree subject.

Atkinson himself raises the question about whether a university education that lasts for seven years needs any additional preparation by students at the A-level stage. While the thoughtful and analytical approach to the curriculum described by Atkinson in his role as tutor on the Richmond A-level course appears to be well defined and pays close attention to the development of knowledge, skills and understanding, it is likely that other traditional subjects would also develop these characteristics and possibly help to broaden the minds of future architectural students. Concerns about early specialisation are often levelled at the UK education system; is it necessary to take this specialisation to an even earlier stage in a student's career path?

Notwithstanding these concerns, there are many aspects of Atkinson's curriculum that sound like a dream scenario for a more general education on design matters that could be extended

more widely. The argument that an architectural education is beneficial in its own right is an interesting one. Of course, people who have experienced such an education themselves are likely to see this through rose-tinted spectacles. The same argument may well be advanced by mathematicians who point to the beauty and the mind training of numbers, or historians who feel that in-depth understanding and analytical skills are enhanced by a study of the past. Nevertheless, countless commentators have bemoaned the lack of design understanding in the general population and the impact that this has on the built environment. Uninformed clients for new development are almost certainly one of the reasons for the poor quality of too much of the built environment. Consequently, it is tempting to welcome the fact that at least 100 students per year are having their design awareness raised; even if they subsequently enter other career paths. However, the argument for incorporating more design awareness into the curriculum is one that should be advanced to ensure that all students, and not just a handful, who opt to study an A-level in Architecture, should receive a basic design education. The UK's coalition government is currently rethinking GCSE and A-level curricula and the time is right to lobby to address the shortfall in public understanding of the need for design quality, not just in terms of built form, but in terms of the design of all products. Enhanced quality in design could benefit the economy and make the UK recognisable as a marketplace for high quality goods and services as well as built environments.

Turning at last to what might be an even stronger argument for this A-level than the ones advanced is the impact the course may have on the aspirations of young people who may have received the message that architecture is not for them. Architects for Change (AFC), the RIBA's Equality forum, are aware of the fact that the profession is not diverse and not representative of the population it serves. Encouraged by AFC, the RIBA commissioned research into the reasons why women were leaving the profession.⁴⁵ The findings of this research were not dissimilar to other work that looked at the experiences of many black and minority ethnic architects who had, in common with women, felt excluded and sidelined in the

profession. More recent research for the RIBA carried out by Manley and de Graft-Johnson on the experiences of disabled people in the profession, reinforces the idea that architecture is widely regarded as a high profile profession that is mainly suited to white, middle-class males and not open to everyone. A recent contributor to this research commissioned by the RIBA in 2008 and soon to be published, commented:

The school careers advisor said I wouldn't cope because of I was dyslexic and suggested being a plumber or an electrician. Two occupations I don't look down on in any way but neither were careers I personally wanted to pursue.

Another disabled person who had the potential to be an architect was discouraged by everyone, '... on the basis that I am a woman and would be having children. On the basis that it is a profession for the upper classes and not for the likes of us'.

These reports from respondents seem to imply that in spite of changes for the better, the impression given to many young people with potential is that the profession is not an appropriate one for them. Atkinson does not comment on the gender balance on the Richmond A-level course or on whether the course includes students from lower income groups or from families with no tradition for higher education, but it does seem to have a significant mix of people from different ethnic backgrounds. If indeed the course provides entry routes for students from a broader range of backgrounds then it will have proved itself of real value.

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Ask not what schools can do for us; ask what we can do for schools

For years I have bemoaned the absence of architectural education in schools. As I have intimated elsewhere, I believe there is an architect in everyone. The success of television programmes on 'Grand Designs' and house renovation seems to support the case. In that architecture provides the setting for just about everything we do in our lives – from the labour ward to the crematorium – it is as culturally

ubiquitous as language and history and it impinges on our conditions at least as much as politics and science. Yet ancient predispositions towards language and number seem to preclude the taking of architecture seriously in pre-university education. Now, as reported in the last issue (arq, 14.3, pp. 267–76), we find that an A-level course focusing on architecture has been in operation and developing at Richmond College for the past few years. Needless to say, this has had to be achieved ‘surreptitiously’ under the banner of art and design rather than architecture per se. Earlier this year I visited the instigators of the course – Robert Atkinson and his colleagues – to look at what they and their students have been doing. I was impressed. It set me thinking about what schools can contribute to architectural education and how university schools of architecture, in a spirit of mutual support and collaboration, might help.

The pre-university education system in this country does not recognise Architecture as a subject in its own right. Nevertheless it seems that Atkinson and his colleagues have received enthusiastic support from their college and from the authorities that oversee courses. What is more, students, in substantial numbers, want to do the course.

Maybe there are other university courses where the vast majority of incoming students have no previous education in their chosen subject but, certainly, electing to study architecture is often a leap of faith born of indecision as to whether to follow a career in the ‘arts’ or the ‘sciences’. And as soon as a student arrives in a school of architecture, the pressure is on to achieve at a sophisticated level within a few brief years. As the Swiss architect Peter Märkli said in a lecture at London Metropolitan University in 2006, it takes ten years and more to reach the proficiency in language to be able to write a love letter; yet we expect student architects to exceed this level in architecture within three or five years.

The availability of pre-university education in architecture would obviously be of benefit to those who wish to pursue a career in architecture. But surely it would be of value to those with other ideas about how they intend to earn a living. The list of contenders is fairly predictable: planners, building control officers, engineers, surveyors, project

managers, those responsible in large organisations for the procurement of buildings (the list is quite long); all would benefit from a general education in architecture. Just as everyone benefits from general education in language, mathematics, science etc.

Robert Atkinson is an architect who has gone into education, so when he teaches architecture he knows what he is talking about and can set up appropriate exercises for his students. Lack of availability of architectural understanding and skill among secondary teachers would of course be a problem in resourcing a widespread A-level in Architecture. But university schools of architecture could help, sharing learning materials and collaborating with local schools.

The first year of the A-level course at Richmond does have a rather traditional focus on architectural history; but, when I visited, it was the content of the second year that excited me. Students at this level are encouraged to explore architecture as it impinges on their lives, as it affects the ways in which they operate in the world, rather than as a branch of art history. This, after all, is the strongest justification for the argument that architecture deserves inclusion in mainstream education. What the students do begins to touch on and reveal the profound conditioning influence architecture has on everyone and why it should not be sidelined as an esoteric concern. Although the success of the Richmond course seems to reside in analysis rather than in design, this focus on architecture as instrument – setting the spatial matrix in which we all live – is an admirable preparation for those students wanting to devote themselves to a career in architecture. It also opens the eyes of those who don’t but might be heading for positions where they will be involved, in one way or another, in the procurement of buildings. A rooted appreciation of architecture as more than just a cosmetic art (as it usually seems to be presented in the media) would no doubt be a general good.

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The potential of children’s architectural education?

Talk of restructuring and reducing the length of the standard architecture course has been thrown into sharp focus in England, where the country now braces itself for significant university fee rises. Robert Atkinson’s paper (arq, 14.3, pp. 267–76) suggests one inventive route to introducing a school-based architecture foundation course, offering one means to address what will inevitably be seen by many as a compromise in the standard and quality of architectural higher education (HE). But, importantly, the article also points towards the inherent value in architectural or built environment education for children and young people as members of – and future adults in – society. As Atkinson puts it, ‘To see an architectural education merely as a step towards a specialised course seems unsatisfactory and somehow misses the point’. Like Atkinson, educators and practitioners from a range of disciplines have espoused the ‘manifest value’ of children’s built environment education; no matter whether they are to go on to become architects or other kinds of built environment professionals.

Built environment education can take so many different forms that it isn’t possible to explore these here. It is testament to architecture’s multidisciplinary and flexible nature, however, that it is considered to support the curriculum in a large range of subjects, including Art, Design Technology, Speaking and Listening, Literacy, Drama, Geography, Computer Sciences, Physical Education, History, Citizenship, Science, Mathematics¹ and much more. Introducing design, alongside the built environment, brings a different dimension to school education, which, as Eileen Adams points out: ‘[...] is usually organised, based on the past and what we already know. Design is about what we do not know. It is about imagining the future and making it happen’.²

In addition to specific architectural and disciplinary knowledge, built environment education has, therefore, been attributed with the development of critical skills and critical thinking, communication skills, exploration of ethical issues, collaborative working skills and ‘designerly thinking’, concerned with ‘adaptation, transformation, invention and innovation’.³ The impacts on students are reportedly