Amateur–Beginner–Citizen: A-B-C’s of Becoming an Architect

Dr. Lisa Landrum
Associate Dean Research / Faculty of Architecture
Associate Professor / Department of Architecture

In October 2019 I was invited to present at the POP CAN CRIT event at Toronto’s Design Exchange as part of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada’s annual conference. Created as a forum to discuss popular topics in a Canadian context through critical questions, the 2019 POP CAN CRIT focused on questions surrounding the “Education and Emergence of Architects in Canada.” Presenters were specifically asked to address the student–intern–architect trajectory and to speak to the gaps and hurdles between each step on the path to licensure. The following text is a slightly edited version of my response, which, instead of emphasizing distinctions, aimed to draw out commonalities shared by all architects, interns, and students.

Circumstances surrounding the 2020 COVID-19 crisis have reinforced the underlying premises of this pre-pandemic presentation, especially that all aspects of our vulnerable global society are intrinsically linked, and that to sustain a measure of collective well being we must reaffirm commitments to common principles and goals, without surrendering individuality, diversity, and freedom.

I have had the pleasure of working on many sides of the student intern–architect threshold: as an architect, mentor, educator, and academic administrator who helped launch our Faculty’s new Cooperative Education/Integrated Work Program through ongoing consultations with all players in this process. Insights from these experiences underpin the following argument, which offers an alternative view of professional growth. In short, I aim to soften the presumed hierarchy of the student–intern–architect trajectory. Instead of emphasizing differences between these roles, I will highlight fundamental attributes uniting all three: the essential A-B-C’s of any present or future architect – being an Amateur, a Beginner, and a Citizen. Let me explain.

Amateur

Some may oppose the Amateur to the professional, but Amateurs are by definition pros at doing what they love. The root meaning of Amateur is amour and amatere, Latin for “lover.” As Roland Barthes explained, the Amateur works in perpetual amorous pursuit: the Amateur continually renews their pleasure, “loves and loves again,” working “without the spirit of mastery or competition.” The Amateur pursues neither status nor power but joy – what Barthes calls jouissance – being motivated by intense curiosity, genuine care, and compassionate struggle; loving not fame or recognition, but their work and the world.

For architect Juhani Pallasmaa, such love involves deriving pleasure from uncertainty and open-ended pursuits. A sincere professional, Pallasmaa claims, is one who stops to ponder what others view as self-evident. As he writes, “In a fundamental sense, I can say that, by age and experience, one becomes increasingly more an amateur, rather than turning into a professional possessing immediate and assured responses.” Such an architect accumulates not expertise but uncertainty.

Creating an environment where students can enjoy processes of uncertainty, and discover their love of architecture and its role in shaping a desirable world, is a key task of architectural education; just as keeping this curiosity and passion alive throughout one’s career is an obligation for every professional.

Beginner

Some may regard the Beginner as one who simply lacks experience, and view beginnings as mere preliminaries to quickly move beyond. Yet, isn’t the making of beginnings – inaugurating new conditions, establishing new relationships and opportunities – exactly what architects do? For philosopher Edmund Husserl, beginnings are what mature thinkers strive to discover, recover, and keep by continually asking fresh questions and approaching old subjects anew. Husserl referred to himself as a perpetual Beginner and introduced phenomenology as a “science of beginnings” – a return to the living present and matters at hand. From this embodied situation, experienced in the midst of particular circumstances, he believed one may always begin again and start anew.

Architect Louis Kahn similarly pursued design as a process of unending beginnings. He strove to recover the originating purpose or human motive for any place he designed, such as moving into the light to read a book as the origin of a library; or moving between settings of quiet contemplation and social interaction as giving rise to a monastery. Kahn’s many sketches provide a compelling demonstration of architectural design as an unending search for beginnings. His quest is exemplified by the 900 drawings made for an unbuilt monastery collected in the recent book called “Drawing to Find Out.”

Inciting an Architect

Dr. Lisa Landrum
Associate Dean Research / Faculty of Architecture
Associate Professor / Department of Architecture

In October 2019 I was invited to present at the POP CAN CRIT event at Toronto’s Design Exchange as part of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada’s annual conference. Created as a forum to discuss popular topics in a Canadian context through critical questions, the 2019 POP CAN CRIT focused on questions surrounding the “Education and Emergence of Architects in Canada.” Presenters were specifically asked to address the student–intern–architect trajectory and to speak to the gaps and hitches between each step on the path to licensure. The following text is a slightly edited version of my response, which, instead of emphasizing distractions, aimed to draw out communities shared by all architects, interns, and students.

Circumstances surrounding the 2020 COVID-19 crisis have reinforced the underlying premises of this pre-pandemic presentation, especially that all aspects of our vulnerable global society are intricately linked, and that to sustain a measure of collective well-being we must reaffirm commitments to common principles and goals, without surrendering individuality, diversity, and freedom.

I have had the pleasure of working on many sides of the student–intern–architect threshold: as an architect, mentor, educator, and academic administrator who helped launch our Faculty’s new Cooperative Education: Integrated Work Program through ongoing consultations with all players in this process. Insights from these experiences underpin the following argument, which offers an alternative view of professional growth. In short, I aim to soften the presumed hierarchy of the student–intern–architect trajectory. Instead of emphasizing differences between these roles, I will highlight fundamental attributes unifying all three: the essential A-B-C’s of any present or future architect – being an Amateur, a Beginner, and a Citizen. Let me explain.

Amateur

Some may oppose the Amateur to the professional, but Amateurs are by definition pros at doing what they love. The root meaning of Amateur is “amor,” Latin for “loved.” As Roland Barthes explained, the Amateur works in perpetual amorous pursuit, the Amateur continually renews their pleasure, “loves and loves again,” working “without the spirit of mastery or competition.” The Amateur pursues neither status nor power but joy – what Barthes calls jouissance – being motivated by intense curiosity, genuine care, and compassionate struggle, loving not fame or recognition, but their work and the world. For architect Juhani Pallasmaa, such love involves deriving pleasure from uncertainty and open-ended pursuits. A sincere professional, Pallasmaa claims, is one who stops to ponder what others view as self-evident. As he writes, “In a fundamental sense, I can say that, by age and experience, one becomes increasingly more an amateur, rather than turning into a professional possessing immediate and assured responses.” Such an architect accumulates not expertise but uncertainty.

Creating an environment where students can enjoy processes of uncertainty, and discover their love of architecture and its role in shaping a desirable world, is a key task of architectural education, just as keeping this curiosity and passion alive throughout one’s career is an obligation for every professional.

Beginner

Some may regard the Beginner as one who simply lacks experience, and view beginnings as mere preliminaries to quickly move beyond. Yet, isn’t the making of beginnings – inaugurating new conditions, establishing new relationships and opportunities – exactly what architects do? For philosopher Edmund Husserl, beginnings are what mature thinkers strive to discover, recover, and enact by continually asking fresh questions and approaching old subjects anew. Husserl referred to himself as a perpetual Beginner and introduced phenomenology as a “science of beginnings” – a return to the living present and matters at hand. From this embodied situation, experienced in the midst of particular circumstances, he believed one may always begin again and start anew.1

Architect Louis Kahn similarly pursued design as a process of unending beginnings. He strove to recover the originating purpose or human motive for any place he designed, such as moving into the light to read a book as the origin of a library; or moving between settings of quiet contemplation and social interaction as giving rise to a monastery. Kahn’s many sketches provide a compelling demonstration of architectural design as an unending search for beginnings. His quest is exemplified by the 9,905 drawings made for an unbuilt monastery collected in the recent book called Drawing to Find Out.2

Circumstances surrounding the 2020 COVID-19 crisis have reinforced the underlying premises of this pre-pandemic presentation, especially that all aspects of our vulnerable global society are intricately linked, and that to sustain a measure of collective well-being we must reaffirm commitments to common principles and goals, without surrendering individuality, diversity, and freedom.

I have had the pleasure of working on many sides of the student–intern–architect threshold: as an architect, mentor, educator, and academic administrator who helped launch our Faculty’s new Cooperative Education: Integrated Work Program through ongoing consultations with all players in this process. Insights from these experiences underpin the following argument, which offers an alternative view of professional growth. In short, I aim to soften the presumed hierarchy of the student–intern–architect trajectory. Instead of emphasizing differences between these roles, I will highlight fundamental attributes unifying all three: the essential A-B-C’s of any present or future architect – being an Amateur, a Beginner, and a Citizen. Let me explain.

Amateur

Some may oppose the Amateur to the professional, but Amateurs are by definition pros at doing what they love. The root meaning of Amateur is “amor,” Latin for “loved.” As Roland Barthes explained, the Amateur works in perpetual amorous pursuit, the Amateur continually renews their pleasure, “loves and loves again,” working “without the spirit of mastery or competition.” The Amateur pursues neither status nor power but joy – what Barthes calls jouissance – being motivated by intense curiosity, genuine care, and compassionate struggle, loving not fame or recognition, but their work and the world. For architect Juhani Pallasmaa, such love involves deriving pleasure from uncertainty and open-ended pursuits. A sincere professional, Pallasmaa claims, is one who stops to ponder what others view as self-evident. As he writes, “In a fundamental sense, I can say that, by age and experience, one becomes increasingly more an amateur, rather than turning into a professional possessing immediate and assured responses.” Such an architect accumulates not expertise but uncertainty.

Creating an environment where students can enjoy processes of uncertainty, and discover their love of architecture and its role in shaping a desirable world, is a key task of architectural education, just as keeping this curiosity and passion alive throughout one’s career is an obligation for every professional.

Beginner

Some may regard the Beginner as one who simply lacks experience, and view beginnings as mere preliminaries to quickly move beyond. Yet, isn’t the making of beginnings – inaugurating new conditions, establishing new relationships and opportunities – exactly what architects do? For philosopher Edmund Husserl, beginnings are what mature thinkers strive to discover, recover, and enact by continually asking fresh questions and approaching old subjects anew. Husserl referred to himself as a perpetual Beginner and introduced phenomenology as a “science of beginnings” – a return to the living present and matters at hand. From this embodied situation, experienced in the midst of particular circumstances, he believed one may always begin again and start anew.1

Architect Louis Kahn similarly pursued design as a process of unending beginnings. He strove to recover the originating purpose or human motive for any place he designed, such as moving into the light to read a book as the origin of a library; or moving between settings of quiet contemplation and social interaction as giving rise to a monastery. Kahn’s many sketches provide a compelling demonstration of architectural design as an unending search for beginnings. His quest is exemplified by the 9,905 drawings made for an unbuilt monastery collected in the recent book called Drawing to Find Out.2
Recognizing the regenerative potential and instituting the power of beginnings and Beginnings helps us also to recover the original meaning and agency of “arche.” In its earliest usage, this Greek word meant neither master nor ruler, but to begin, initiate and lead. As Hannah Arendt emphasized in The Human Condition (1958), 2nd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 5: “Roland Barthes returns to this theme of the Amateur again and again throughout his many books and essays. See also: Camus’s Le mythe. Reﬂections on Photography, mens.”

Citizen Architects do have specialized knowledge and responsibility, but their most important qualiﬁcations remain their basic humanity, truly being a Citizen of the world. As Hannah Arendt emphasized in The Human Condition, communities are deﬁned by citizens “acting and speaking together.” Such shared purpose does not imply sameness of views or homogeneity of actors. On the contrary, as she emphasizes in an essay on the question of power, “Power is not a monolithic force. On the importance of love for architects, see Albert Speer-Görl. Built upon love and architectural longing, other ethics and aesthetics (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). Y et, I’m also convinced that schools must leverage the mutability and reciprocal supportiveness of the student-intern-architect ensemble – where all participants are equally important players in a larger story. I am fully aware that accredited architecture programs are best approached by moving beyond presumed linear thinking based on a proposition of a younger colleague will understand the reversibility of mentor and mentee, which is fundamental to the collaborative and multi-generational nature of design practice and education. Using a theatrical metaphor, if we think of these titles or roles as stages metaphor, if we think of these titles or roles as stages can appreciate the mutuality and reciprocal supportiveness of the student-intern-architect ensemble – where all participants are equally important players in a larger story.

I am fully aware that accredited architecture programs play a crucial role in preparing future professionals for practice. Yet, I’m also convinced that schools must leverage their relative autonomy to support diverse individuals in launching unique life-long trajectories of learning. Rehearsing the A-B-Cs described here may help all of us renew commitments to act with and on behalf of a more humane and desirable world.
Recognizing the regenerative potential and instituting the power of beginnings and Beginnings helps us also to recover the original meaning and agency of "arche." In its earliest usage, this Greek word meant neither master nor ruler, but to begin, initiate and lead. Rehearsing the A-B-C's described here may help all of us in launching unique life-long trajectories of learning. Yet, I’m also convinced that schools must leverage the mutability and reciprocal supportiveness of student-architect-mentors and the three roles are identical, but they are in essence not only similar but interdependent, overlapping, and even reversible. Anyone who has adjusted their design thinking based on a proposition of a younger colleague will understand the reversibility of mentor and mentee, which is fundamental to the collaborative and multi-generational architecture. The global Climate Strikes of Fall 2019 and Black Lives Matter demonstrations of Spring 2020 are transformative initiatives of multi-national and multi-generational world citizens acting together for the sake of climate justice, social justice, and the future viability of our shared planet. The condition, communities are defined by citizens “acting together.” Such shared purpose does not remain their basic humanity, truly being a Citizen of the world. As Hannah Arendt emphasized in The Human Condition, communities – restorative justice and what he called an “architecture of decency.” Canadian examples include the Architects Declare initiative, and practices of those calling themselves citizen-architects.

Architect-Intern-Student

I have argued that the student-intern-architect adventure is best approached by moving beyond presumed linear and hierarchical distinctions, and instead embracing mutually reinforcing capacities and concerns. I am not suggesting the three roles are identical, but they are in essence not only similar but interdependent, overlapping, and even reversible. Anyone who has adjusted their design thinking based on a proposition of a younger colleague will understand the reversibility of mentor and mentee, which is fundamental to the collaborative and multi-generational nature of design practice and education. Using a theatrical metaphor, if we think of these titles or roles as stages and stage means “apprenticeship” in French, we may appreciate the mutuality and reciprocal supportiveness of the student-architect ensemble – where all participants are equally important players in a larger story.

I am fully aware that accredited architecture programs play a crucial role in preparing future professionals for practice. Yet, I’m also convinced that schools must leverage their relative autonomy to support diverse individuals in launching unique life-long trajectories of learning. Rehearsing the A-B-C’s described here may help all of us renew commitments to act with and on behalf of a more humane and desirable world.