Chapter 7
Professionalism in Architecture and Engineering

ABSTRACT

Increasingly, pressure has been exerted on both architects and engineers to conceptualize their work in terms of economic demands on the one hand and communitarian ethics on the other hand – to be business people and cultivators as well as designers of visual images for the development of future buildings and products. Professionalism is seen to be a means of compromising among the demands of technical expertise, business imperatives, and social ethics. Thus the Mediation Modern of Design Professionalism is proposed as a method of harmonizing the various demands of the triadic forces comprising design as an activity in the 21st century. The history of design professionalism has been different for architects and engineers. Modern architects first regarded themselves as scholarly gentlemen whose work was high art, whereas engineers begin as self-made men who by learning science gained the knowledge they needed to make themselves valuable to society. For these reasons, architects resisted professionalization while engineers embraced professionalization. At the present time the original architectural identification with art and the original engineering identification with science are both being submerged beneath the demands of the marketplace and the political forum. Two things are certain in this new professional climate. Architects and engineers no longer come from different social backgrounds, and neither profession is dominated by white males as much as it used to be.

INTRODUCTION

Because design is the essential activity and the essential pedagogical concern of both architecture and engineering, these two disciplines have been repeatedly linked in the ongoing discussion of this book. Despite the fact that architecture and engineering appear to be quite different in relation to various matters, particularly imaginative creativity and technological teleology, they have much more in common than the basic fact that they both focus on design in the work that they do

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1999-9.ch007

and teach. Perhaps the most important thing they share at the present time is the immense public, governmental, and academic pressure they both are experiencing to expand their collective consciousness to be more responsive to the general social, economic, and political temperament of the age. Architects are being urged to place the well-being of the natural environment above all else, and engineers are being urged to design products that contribute, first and foremost, to the sustainability of the planet. In order to ensure that these goals are met, both architects and engineers are also being pressed to exhibit a meaningful commitment to communitarian ethics and cultural diversity – the belief that working to promote the common good should be the moral imperative of all design activity. In other words, both architecture and engineering are now being regarded and judged mainly in relation to the dominant ideology of the postmodern Western world.

In Chapter 3 we saw that architects and engineers have distinct social identities, and in Chapter 5 we saw that designers have a strongly expressed and immediately identifiable culture, particularly in relation to the collaborative studio setting where design education is usually focused. Nonetheless, important question still remain. First, what is the relationship of architects and engineers to professionalism? Secondly, how does the professionalism of architects and engineers relate to the professionalism of higher education in the teaching of these disciplines? Design, too, is sometimes regarded as a profession, though its qualifications as such are somewhat fuzzy and dubious. We will, therefore, concentrate on architecture and engineering as professions, assuming that design is an integral function of both. In order to proceed it is necessary to consider and explicate professionalism itself. Although professionalism might seem at first to be a simple, even an obvious, concept, it is actually something that has been much debated and is still rather ill-defined and poorly understood.

PROFESSIONALISM EXAMINED

According to Walter Metzger (1975), the purpose of professionalism is to organize and assess the ever-growing body of disciplinary knowledge in an honorable manner. Such a definition also suggests the other two characteristics that are usually evoked to define professionalism: autonomy or self-regulation and social responsibility. Societies have traditionally trusted professions and granted them the autonomy to manage knowledge to the best of their abilities. The trouble is, as Adam Unwin (2007) observes, this social trust has been steadily eroding over the past few years, to the point where there have been numerous demands for professionals to be more "transparent" and "accountable" in their operations. Needless to say, this sudden attack on the trustworthiness and autonomy of professions – especially when it is spearheaded by government agencies – has been deleterious, even traumatizing, to many of their members. The implications of this crisis in the discourse of professionalism are something we will look at in some detail in the following pages.

An even more fundamental matter is how professionalism fits into the paradigm of architectural and engineering design. It will be argued that professionalism in design is a mediating concept that allows the concepts of art and business to relate to each other, if not smoothly, at least effectively. In other words, professionalism is a compromising force in both architecture and engineering, a factor that serves to balance and preserve the best of the often opposing claims of theory and practice. Indeed, without professionalism neither architecture nor engineering could survive in today's world.

Related to the professionalism of architects and engineers is the professionalism of the educators of these disciplines. More and more, professionalism is being regarded as something that must be deliberately and extensively taught to students throughout their academic careers.