

A Review of Design Juries on Trial: The Renaissance of the Design Studio

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"Juries have rarely been seriously questioned, studied, and evaluated. They remain the taboo topic of design education and practice, that sacred turf upon which one dare not walk. As a result, some critical issues have long been ignored: What are the goals of design juries? What do students, faculty, and practicing designers think of design juries? How much do students learn from juries? When are juries of greatest educational value? What are students' private reactions to public criticism? What can students, faculty, administrators, and practitioners do to help improve the status quo?" — from Design Juries on Trial: The Renaissance of the Design Studio, by Professor Kathryn H. Anthony (Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1991.)

The above quoted questions seem especially pertinent now, as we (students, faculty, administrators) find ourselves in the midst of yet another semester of architectural studies and design studios. How did that first design review, jury, critique, etc., of the semester go? (Presuming you have had one.) What? Your ideas were shot down once again? Your design concept ridiculed? Had your frustration at the whole process raised to a new level? After a sleepless night?...Or two?...Or three? Or if your review went well, did you still find yourself questioning its worth? As a faculty member, did you find yourself questioning once again the educational value of the review process and your role in it? What can be done?

Well, for starters, you can read Design Juries on Trial, The Renaissance of the Design Studio, written by Kathryn H. Anthony, Professor of Architecture here at the University of

Illinois at U/C. Professor Anthony both raises then addresses the questions quoted above, and more. Design Juries on Trial is modeled around a central question—"Should we abandon juries altogether, or can a few minor changes make a big difference?"—and attempts both a systematic, empirical as well as a qualitative answer. The book goes even further to examine design juries as they are currently utilized in the awarding of professional commissions, and their worth outside the academic arena as well.

Design Juries on Trial provides an historical overview of the evolution of the design jury and a comparison and analysis of its use in both academia and the profession. The book relies on both qualitative and quantitative information from students, faculty, and practitioners to describe their experiences with design juries. It points out that "a fundamental flaw of the traditional jury system, then, is that its goals are rarely explicitly spelled out, and to make matters worse, faculty, practitioners, and students have widely differing opinions about what they believe juries ought to accomplish." Professor Anthony suggests ways to improve the worth of design juries, both practical suggestions for students and constructive, methodological ones for faculty. An especially pertinent section of the book advances possible alternatives to traditional design juries, and it is this section in particular which should be read by those fed up with the current use of what should be a valuable educational tool. Another section looks at how practitioners view professional design juries, their use in deciding design awards, and their increasingly popular use to award especially large, prestigious commissions. The book closes with perhaps the most entertaining section—interviews with twenty-nine leading practitioners, including their thoughts on design juries and the use of juries in their own education.

Perhaps the key question raised by Design Juries on Trial is whether design juries as they are currently utilized should be completely done away with. Professor Anthony feels they should be, in their current form, but argues from a reformist position that changes in their structure and use can revitalize their value and role in design education. She argues for discarding the weakest aspects of the jury process, while retaining the strongest.

"Aspects that should be maintained include debate and discussion about design from many different viewpoints, even those of the students, leading to even greater dialogue than the current system offers; and the opportunity to deliver, receive, and learn from constructive criticism of your own work and that of others. The ability not only to produce high-quality design work but also to criticize it are hallmarks of a good design professional. This much-needed dialogue is essential to the future growth of the environmental design professions."

"Aspects that must be eliminated include the psychologically destructive and sometimes unethical behavior stemming from antagonism, fear, boredom, insensitivity, and competition—all of which promote unhealthy attitudes toward design practice."
(from Design Juries on Trial, p. 158)

Perhaps what strikes me most in Professor Anthony's conclusion in her review of the jury system is what she feels we can learn from other professions' educational models, specifically medicine and law with their balance of courses, as opposed to design's emphasis on the design studio. And she speaks strongly to the idea of professional ethics and implications for design juries, stating design students have the right to demand something like a "Bill of Rights," similar in content to statements of professional ethics of the education profession, an example of which is reproduced here in full:

"With their professors as role models, students have the right to learn the best scholarly and ethical standards of their discipline. They have the right to expect that professors demonstrate respect for them as individuals, adhering to their proper roles as intellectual guides and counselors. They have the right to demand that professors make every reasonable effort to foster honest academic conduct and to assure that evaluations of student design work reflect each student's true merit. They have the right to expect that the confidential nature of the relationship between professor and student will be respected. They have the right to be free of any exploitation, harassment, or discriminatory treatment based on their sex, race, age, clothing, or otherwise.

Students have the right to (1) independent action in the pursuit of learning; (2) access to varying points of view; (3) expect that their design ideas shall not be deliberately suppressed or distorted; (4) be protected from conditions harmful to learning or to mental health and safety; (5) be free of intentional exposure to embarrassment or disparagement.

Students have the right to demand that their design education accurately reflect the realities of the world of professional practice, with a responsibility not only to their future employers and to the design professions, but also, and equally important, to clients, users, and to the public at large. They have the right to demand that their design work be evaluated with these diverse responsibilities in mind. (my emphasis) (from Design Juries on Trial, p. 162)

Anyone for a constitutional convention to adopt our own "Bill of Rights"? Or for opening a dialogue on the worth of design juries (or reviews) and possible suggestions for their improvement at this school of architecture? (Two copies of Design Juries on Trial are available for reading in the Architecture Library.)