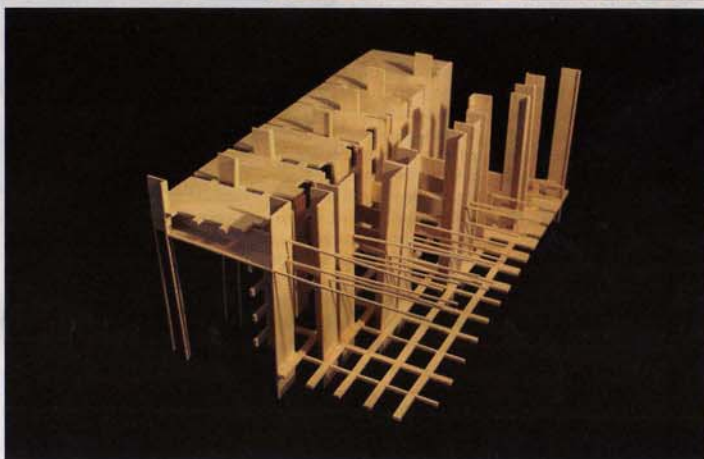


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PHOTOS: QUITO BANGSON; RENDERING: JEREMY AFUSO; MODEL: JENNY POPE

LA ARCHITECTURE FEEDER BUILDS DIVERSITY FOR THE PROFESSION LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

Take a look around most architecture offices and you'll notice a sea of white, upper-middle-class faces. There are so many reasons, from cultural divides to architects' meager salaries and job prospects, but perhaps the most important is the lack of access to affordable architectural education. After all, most top-tier architecture schools cost well over \$30,000 a year.

One little-known but increasingly appreciated Los Angeles school is doing its part to address the problem: the Los Angeles Institute of Architecture and Design (LAIAD), located in the city's Koreatown neighborhood.

While not on the tip of many tongues, the Institute, founded in 2001 by architects William Taylor and the late Bernard Zimmerman, recently celebrated its tenth anniversary. It teams significant architectural expertise with local West Los Angeles College's affordable resources (including that school's non-architecture courses) to serve as a feeder into top schools from around the country.

The idea is not to send students right into the workforce, but to prepare them for top architecture programs—building their expertise and their portfolios—at a very affordable price. Taylor, calls it an "alternative portal," or a "peer school." Classes take place at night because most students have day jobs.

Tuition costs \$3,200 per semester. Annual tuition at Yale School of Architecture, by contrast,

costs \$39,450. Tuition at Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) costs about \$34,000. Once going through LAIAD's two-year undergraduate program, students enter fully accredited architecture schools in their third year, many with scholarships. Students at the school's Graduate Preparation program build their portfolios to enter grad programs from the start.

LAIAD does not offer an accredited BArch or MArch, just a certificate. But all classes are accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), so students generally don't have trouble transferring credit, said Taylor. Agreements with SCI-Arc and Otis College of Art and Design make the process even easier, and the school is working on additional deals with California State University—Long Beach and Woodbury University.

Many community colleges offer architecture programs that are also far cheaper than typical architecture schools, said Taylor. But that education is often geared toward a "vocational" and "technical" angle, not aimed at getting kids into more design-oriented programs after graduation.

The school, for now, is located in a nondescript office building in Koreatown, over a bunch of beauty shops and pizza joints. LAIAD grads include former attorneys, CPAs, a rabbi, and a boxer. But the results have been impressive. Students have moved on to SCI-Arc, USC, Woodbury, Harvard, Yale, and other institutions.

"The portfolio is the great equalizer," said Taylor, who is also a principal at TFO Architecture. Almost anyone who wants to go to LAIAD can get in, and all can get help through financial aid, "even if they're really, really broke," said Taylor.

Classes at LAIAD are similar to those at other architecture schools, including seminars, studios, and reviews. But the point, said Taylor, is not to make students experts in formal gymnastics, but to develop a "form language" to create arrangements based on specific ideas and logical systems. "It lights up a different imagination," said Taylor. "The hardest part of architectural design is making decisions." Students are discouraged from making CNC models at first.

Francisco Palomares, 36, a recent graduate, is now excelling at SCI-Arc, a school where he had been rejected years earlier. The reason was his portfolio, which he beefed up at LAIAD. "It's definitely prepared me well," Palomares said. "I know how to approach everything logically, step by step."

SCI-Arc professor Marcelo Spina says he was impressed with Palomares' grasp of technology and of architectural principles: "What he did not know, he knew or had the intuition where to find out, which in the culture of specialization that we live today, is an essential quality for progress."

Judith Kinnard, president of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ASCA), lauds schools like LAIAD for addressing the "concerning" costs of architectural education and the lack of diversity, which she says has only gotten worse as the economy has deteriorated. "We're all aware and very concerned about the debt issue for our graduates," she said, adding, "It's

great to give more students the opportunity to engage in architectural education."

But she does worry about some students graduating with only a certificate, not a full architectural education, and moving into the field underprepared. "I'm a little nervous about encouraging students to take part in non-accredited education. There's no oversight of that," she said. "They are perhaps advancing the notion that it's perfectly appropriate to move into professional licensure without achieving a professional degree."

Taylor assures critics that 90 percent of students who finish the program move on to a BArch or an MArch program. Besides, "We go through curriculum committees to make sure our courses are in keeping, just like they do," he added.

And if you take a look around a classroom you'll see students from every ethnicity and social class. The student body is 60 percent minority, a refreshing change for architectural education. In one studio students were creating balsa wood models to reflect architectural systems, with results similar to Sol Lewitt's permutations. In another they were preparing "language models" for an architectural competition. Many have stayed up late nights and have the telltale look of any architecture school student. Isn't opportunity grand? **SL**