



The Heart of the Matter

DesignIntelligence®
Quarterly



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*The Boston Architectural College School of Architecture
Dean Karen Nelson and Practice Dean Beth Lundell Garver
share an integrated approach to professional interaction.*

DesignIntelligence (DI): Karen, you have a background in architecture and cognitive science. What brought you to the BAC?

Karen Nelson (KN): The BAC’s educational mission drew me in: “to provide excellent design education emerging from practice and accessible to diverse communities.” I am inspired by the institution’s promise to address anyone interested in design and to address the whole student — not just intellectual curiosity, but also a student’s aspirations and financial realities to make a meaningful life in design. That includes professional practice, research, leadership, construction and a host of other areas.

DI: How about you, Beth? What brought you to the BAC?

Beth Lundell Garver (BLG): My first time sitting in the BAC’s Cascieri Hall, I was joined by practitioners, educators and thought leaders from across the country called together by ArchVoices, a nonprofit think tank for architectural education and internship.

The brainstorming began with remarks by then-BAC President Ted Landsmark on radical changes in professional practice and persistent disconnects between architecture schools and design firms. At that time, I was in the thick of it at Rafael Viñoly Architects in New York City. The greatest connection I could find between my education and professional growth was the grit required to sustain the long hours, sleepless nights and disregard for my personal well-being. On the other hand, the BAC erected and protected a rare bridge between education and practice — a bridge that promoted knowledge exchange and mastery by supporting self-directed students along a path between the two experiences on a daily basis. This astonished me. A decade later, I was called to return to the BAC and dedicate my own career to furthering the bridge between education and practice.

DI: The BAC has had a strong identity of integrating design education and practice for 130 years. I believe that to be a minority position. In my own experience as a faculty member at another university — granted it was 45 years ago, but things haven't changed much — suggestions to offer hands-on experiences and practical experience were frowned upon and dismissed as “trade school” or “vocational.” “We're a design school. There will be plenty of time for students to get experience after graduation. This is the only place they can learn design theory.” You've heard this before.

How has taking your stance shaped your belief system, mission and curricula? Have you had to react to criticism for this stance?

KN: My belief system, which is still evolving, emerges from the places in my own education and young professional experiences — and what would have helped me navigate the professional field. Teaching at the BAC helped me bring the entire student into focus in my work developing the curriculum. The BAC's curricula holds that a student learns in both settings — in classrooms and in professional practice. Our aim is to have the student integrate these experiences through their educational journey, through active reflection and through portfolios that are assessed qualitatively at important milestones in their program.

It seems to me that while our model of education has been critiqued by many, there are increasing numbers that are turning toward our model, as it better fits a more diverse student body.

BLG: The BAC is a place where many different people convene to engage in work they are called to do. We are mission-driven and resilient. The city — and the world — is our campus. We welcome everyone — students, faculty, staff, alumni, community partners and employers — who come to us ready to offer their gifts of experience and expertise in ways that set the stage for transformation of old, oppressive paradigms into new living systems. Adult learners are at the heart of this, as they bring a breadth and depth of insight to design education that demands an understanding of how our curricula can be immediately applied to their lives outside the classroom. In supporting this relevance, the BAC creates and cares for a productive flow between challenge and ability by dedicating curricular space for students' self-directed learning.

The BAC emboldens students to seek their own learning advocates outside the curated and controlled environment of the traditional classroom. We do this through the practice component of our curricula, shaped to unite learning advocates from the academy and the field by together promoting students' search for agency and purpose as designers of their own lives, careers, communities and futures. Our practice-integrated curricular model challenges BAC students to be change agents now — change agents who commit every day to evolving the architectural profession from the inside out, with us, striving to shift toward practices that are more entrepreneurial and, at the same time, more committed to public interest design.

DI: Has your integrated approach offered an advantage in coping in response to the COVID-19 virus?

KN: We have 14 years of experience teaching architecture online. That helped us meet the new circumstances with confidence that our expert faculty could help the entire community — and design faculty across North America. The pandemic has exacted a more serious toll on populations of color and those with low incomes. Many of our students became financially responsible for relatives who could not work or had to juggle their education, their employment and their families.

BLG: While we have seen student employment impacted by the pandemic, we have also seen design firms step up to intentionally protect and broaden opportunities for BAC students working on financially secure projects. One student told me that virtual client meetings are actually helping them engage more with the practice since they now get to listen in. Another student is using COVID as a time to reflect upon how public health and financial crises impact some sectors more than others. Our integrated approach emphasizes how soft skills like adaptability, teamwork, creativity and communication help keep students employed by preparing them to swiftly pivot to new paths in practice, when necessary.

DI: Is it evolving in response to the current crises (e.g., economic, political, social, environmental, misinformation)? New objectives? A reshaping of mission?

KN: My BAC colleague, Scott Harrison, associate vice president of academic affairs, points out that the conversation around privilege, civil rights and structural racism has shifted. It is now in focus. It has moved from the margins to dinner table conversations everywhere. We have been aware of structural racism in our curriculum — and have offered electives for many years that address spaces of the incarcerated (by faculty and alumni Jana Belack and Rand Lemley) and designing for cultural differences (by faculty member Hyacinth John). We have been examining the choices we share with our students and making certain that they are more inclusive. This has accelerated in the past few years. Much work still needs to be done. As an institution, we are working on being more socially just — not just in curricular endeavors, but systemically.

DI: In reviewing your website, I was encouraged to see practice assessments as a part of student mentoring and evaluation. Can you explain that process?

BLG: Practice assessments are incremental one-on-one meetings between a student and a practitioner faculty where the student's work-based experience is documented and learning outcomes in specific knowledge areas are measured. We use a rubric called a Student Learning Contract (SLC) to qualitatively evaluate students' performance. The SLC is a set of competencies that serve as a guide for students who are drawn toward many different practice-integrated experiences that range from professional project delivery to entrepreneurialism, project management, public interest design and research. I talk about the practice assessment process more in the Public Interest Design Education Guidebook (2018).

Practice assessments have a long history at the BAC. In 1971, we became the first and only NAAB-accredited architecture program in the United States to be offered outside of a traditional university degree program. At that time, the BAC was an 80-year-old grassroots organization called the Boston Architectural Center, not yet an official college. We were informed that reaccreditation would require “quantifying and qualifying” the experiential learning happening in students' offices. So in response, Don Brown, AIA Emeritus, was hired to develop a new system of practice assessment that had yet to exist anywhere in the world. The BAC model was closely observed by the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) who adopted our system, in part, to create what has evolved into the Architecture Experience Program (AXP) required for licensure today.

DI: What's your position on professional interaction? The implication in my question is that we need to become better at it. In all senses — racial, gender and other biases; listening and empathy skills; new technologies; all to end the lone wolf design practices of old. Has that thinking been a part of the college's thinking historically? If not, is it now?

BLG: Part of our mission has always been to expand upon and transform professional practice. In doing so, we need to do better at acknowledging key differences between monochronic and polychronic work cultures. As we grow increasingly global, considering intercultural acceptance and adaptability in the way we approach practice-integrated design education remains top-of-mind.

DI: How are you implementing these new areas of emphasis?

KN: We have instituted two courses in each student's first year (foundation) that ask students to work in collaborative teams. These teams celebrate and integrate each student's identity first through a collaborative credo, then a community meal, then through a series of exercises that bring forward (through consensus) shared values to create a firm to help a community client. We also help students negotiate salaries, help them with tools for networking and in advocating for themselves and for clients larger than the people in the room.

DI: Are you practicing what you preach in terms of removing bias and knocking down barriers? For example, if a student wants an internship with an engineer, contractor, owner or manufacturer, is that OK? How far does it go?

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KN: The BAC endeavors to remove bias and put forward BIPOC students for positions in firms, as teaching assistants and as educators once they have graduated. We are fortunate to have many firm partners who are actively trying to undo years of structural racism by hiring, mentoring and developing diverse student employees.

Students are very self-directed in their pursuit of practice. Each student determines the kind of practice or research that they hope to participate in. Some students engage in community work, while others are involved in master planning. Some students enjoy envisioning virtual reality (VR) meeting spaces, while others are meeting with clients and designing buildings. For those students who aim to become licensed architects, we help them advocate for AXP hours in areas needing development. For those who hope to work with communities, we connect students with opportunities in our networks. Working in construction is recognized as being related to architectural education.


DI: Do you teach collaboration or social skills? If so, how? Surely it requires faculty with skills beyond architecture. Do they have enough sense of design process and thinking to apply it in context?

BLG: We believe collaboration and social skills do not reach beyond architecture — they are the heart of it. As such, we created a full-time faculty position, the director of collaborative practice, dedicated to spearheading first-year, foundation-level courses and programs that creatively develop these cognitive skills and competencies through community-based, public interest design collaborations. Starting

students' first semester, architecture and allied disciplines are introduced as a social, transdisciplinary practice in a core intensive course called CityLab.

CityLab teaches design stewardship through neighborhood walks, interviews, observation, sketching and the courage of conversation. The final assignment involves developing team credos that use film to celebrate the way BAC students' differences strengthen our community through "we are ... we believe ... we hope to ... and we know this to be true" calls to action. Collaboration and interpersonal skills are again reinforced during the second-semester Community Practice core course. Community Practice scaffolds lessons in communication, collaboration and community engagement that complement and enhance other practice-integrated learning experiences at the BAC, including students' full immersion into community-based projects offered through the BAC Gateway Initiative.

Since 2008, our Gateway Initiative has connected over 1,500 BAC students to more than 80 nonprofit organizations and municipalities through hundreds of practice-integrated, community-based projects. Currently, BAC Gateway student teams are working on several sponsored projects ranging from the creation of a master plan for public art, lighting and projection mapping in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, to engaging public participation processes guiding visions for a new civic center in the heart of Uxbridge (also here in Massachusetts) through the adaptive reuse of a vacant school. BAC Gateway faculty bring an array of expertise in architectural practice powered by collaboration and civic engagement.



Faculty members include Killion Mokwete, Abby Gordon and Rob Freni, founders of the nonprofit, community-rooted architecture and planning firm Adaptiv; Rashmi Ramaswamy, co-founder of Territory, a nonprofit providing skill-building programs in urban design, public art and community-engaged planning for Chicago teenagers in at-risk communities; Ben Peterson, community design director at the Boston Society for Architecture; and many more deeply committed and talented civic-minded educators and design practitioners.

DI: Do you offer education on the use of new interaction technologies? Gaming, live collaboration, central data, AI and augmented reality as new interaction forms? Because despite the hype, very few owners or contractors are deploying these tools on real-life projects. Who will take the lead in learning this new “craft”?

KN: We have been offering courses in VR that use gaming technology for more than five years. The college initiated a group of educators, students, professionals and alumni who are imagining how mixed (MR), augmented (AR), and virtual reality can extend the space of learning, explore iterative design ideas, create spaces of community and offer new ways into design education.

*Submitted photos*

Student Testimonials

“Coming to the BAC, I was told by Dean of Students Richard Griswold that you should prepare a list of five architecture firms that you aspire to work at. I set up what I consider a rather ambitious list, with some of the best firms in the city, before walking into my first-ever meeting with the practice department. After showing Beth Lundell Garver my list, she took one look at it and my schedule and told me that both of my studio instructors for that semester worked at one of the firms on that list. At the end of the semester, I found myself and fellow classmates presenting our studio final in the lobby of Perkins&Will’s Boston Studio. The following day, I was asked to return for an interview and one week later I landed a position as an architectural designer. Since then, I have had the opportunity to work on a wide range of project types in various project phases across multiple market sectors. Practicing architecture while studying architecture has allowed me to bring the latest skills and techniques learned in studio or class and directly apply them in industry. It has also allowed me to bring my research and schoolwork to coworkers in order to gain further insight on design ideas or direction. Working with the BAC’s practice department has been a refreshing, stress-free experience, as they put the BAC’s vast vibrant network of alumni and practicing faculty to work for their students.”

—Sergio Riccardi, M. Arch candidate

“As part of a UNICEF project in Somalia, I served as lead designer to Support Strengthening Health Systems in Puntland. The overall objective was to increase access to quality and affordable health care services for over two million residents in the Puntland Region of Somalia. The scope of the project includes twenty health centers and two regional health offices that targeted both urban and rural centers. This is my first project in Somalia, and it gave me the opportunity to visit the proposed sites personally and understand how vital they are to these communities. I am happy that I had the opportunity to be able to see how these resilient communities functioned and that I am able to give back to my community that is still recovering from the civil war.”

—*Naimo Bakar, M. Arch candidate*

“During my time at the BAC, it was a really tall task to successfully maintain a good academic record as a full-time student while simultaneously working full-time at an architecture firm and performing at a competitive level. I am glad to look back, however, and realize that the many skills I developed during that time allow me today to have the flexibility to practice on my own. These are some strange times we live in, and the value of independence is highlighted more than ever. At graduation, it felt as if the long hours and extra hard work were coming to an end as we left academics behind. The truth is — I know now — it was simply the beginning. If you truly want to make progress in the architecture world, learning never stops. The long hours and the extra hard work never do either. The best thing you can do is hit the ground running as you come out of that graduation hall. And I’m happy to say, the BAC gave me the chance to do just that.”

—*Erion Nikolla, B. Arch alumnus, 2017*

“One major thing I’ve learned from my practice experiences is how to balance the amount of time spent and my vision of perfection for the project. In a practice setting, there’s always a need for efficiency — as a result I cannot spend the amount of time I do with studio projects and try to perfect every detail all at once!”

—*Kailin Zhao, M. Arch alumna, 2020*

“My practice experience at the BAC has been a fairly rewarding one, to say the least! I came into this program already working at an architecture firm, knowing that I wanted to go back to school to get my master’s degree and become a licensed architect one day. The BAC helped me to reach out to my firm for evaluations of my work in the office and helped facilitate the process of putting together my work portfolio. It was so beneficial for me to have all my work and hours processed through the practice department, as this helped me understand which categories my budding experience was divided into, so that I could branch out to other areas for further growth as a young professional.

My BAC practice instructor, Mark Rukamathu, has been a great support — since our very first conversation — and even way back to when I was first looking into the Boston Architectural College as the next step in my academic journey. His help and guidance over the years during our meetings (semester-based evaluations and many calls regarding portfolios); his understanding of my ‘Type A’ personality; and his professional advice has helped me grow as both a student and a young professional.”

—Hayley Fazio, M. Arch candidate

Karen Nelson is the dean of the School of Architecture and faculty at the BAC. In 1994, Karen began teaching design studios at the BAC and at Rhode Island School of Design, followed by theory seminars and faculty development courses. Karen practiced architecture working on housing for people with AIDS in New York City, a school building in Massachusetts and on small commercial projects. Karen’s passion for people, contemporary architecture, and art, travel and linguistics inform her teaching. In 2012, Karen received an NCARB grant to explore collaborative global practice. In 2018, Karen lectured on bento and architecture at the Japanese-German Center Berlin, and in 2020, she participated in three panel discussions about design education and diversity. Karen holds a Master of Architecture degree from Columbia University and her B.S. in Art + Design from MIT.

Bethany I. Lundell Garver, AIA, NCARB, is dean of practice, director of applied learning, and faculty at the BAC, where she leads college-wide efforts to bridge architectural education and professional practice. Leveraging her 15 years of professional experience in architecture, urban design and planning, Beth’s on-site and online teaching explores the city as the classroom through experiential learning, civic engagement and reflective assessment initiatives. She has been elected to serve on the board of directors for several national organizations including the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), Root Division (a community-based visual arts education nonprofit) and, most recently, the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS). Prior to joining the BAC, Beth worked with Rafael Viñoly Architects in New York and San Francisco, managing large laboratory and healthcare projects, including several years of full-time, on-site construction administration. She holds a Master of Architecture in Urban Design with distinction from Harvard University and a Bachelor of Architecture magna cum laude from Auburn University.