



the JUBILEE YEAR

Cal Poly Architecture Celebrates its 50th Anniversary with a No. 1 Ranking

BY LARRY PEÑA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEAN PAUL MOLYNEUX AND BRITTANY APP

Cal Poly's architecture program is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, and it seems the design world is honoring the occasion with a special gift. This fall, for the first time, the industry trade publication DesignIntelligence named Cal Poly the best undergraduate architecture program in the nation.

Long a fixture among the publication's Top 10 programs, Cal Poly leapfrogged prestigious programs including those at Cornell, Rice and Syracuse universities.

"This year we received 1,108 valid responses to our survey of professionals who have authority to hire within firms and organizations," says Bob Fisher, associate publisher of DesignIntelligence. "When asked which undergraduate architecture programs best prepare students for success in the profession, their No. 1 choice was Cal Poly."

The publication further endorsed specific skill areas at Cal Poly. "It is interesting to see that rankings of skill areas — like construction, cross-disciplinary teamwork

and sustainability — combine findings for graduates of bachelor's and master's programs," says Christine Theodoropoulos, dean of Cal Poly's College of Architecture & Environmental Design. "Graduates with Cal Poly bachelor degrees have skills that compete with graduates of prestigious master's programs like Harvard, Columbia and MIT in many of the skills."

In her previous positions as head of architecture at the University of Oregon and a contributor to the

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Architecture students thrive in the creative chaos of professor Thomas Fowler's third-year design studio.

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Architecture Department Head Margot McDonald (left) and College of Architecture & Environmental Design Dean Christine Theodoropoulos (center) weigh in on the creative process with third-year architecture student Shereen Ghishan.

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BRITTANY APP

National Architecture Accrediting Board, Theodoropoulos recalls wondering how this CSU architecture program in an obscure rural town kept showing up near the top of national rankings year after year.

When she joined Cal Poly in 2012, she found a whole host of reasons why. Most prominent, she says, is the program's unique facilitation of what she calls a "making culture."

"Students begin designing the very first day they're on campus as freshmen," she says. "Over five years, they complete 15 design studios that are very exciting and demanding. Throughout this process they shape and experiment with materials. They build the forms they visualize and learn to translate design concepts into spatial and material realities."

Thomas Fowler, a Cal Poly architecture professor who has coordinated the program's critical third year,

intentionally builds that complete experience into his instruction. "I like to model my classroom as if it were a practicing firm," he says. "I give students a dense, tight schedule of deliverables where they have to come to class with some big components already accomplished."

Architects who have been through that rigorous experience never forget it.

"I remember my first student project, designing a winery," says alumna Charlene Dekker, '88, an architect and community and education specialist at Gensler, one of the top design firms in the country. "That professor, Sandy Miller, was awesome at teaching the full process, from understanding a program, to working through the design, to the presentation, to seeing it actually built."

Keith Houchin, '10, is a junior designer at WATG Design in Orange County. "One emphasis that I took from

the program that gave me a competitive advantage was that I actually had some built work when I graduated," he says. "The fabrication aspect was really, really important to give me an edge in my career."

Alumni and architecture recruiters agree that the wealth of hands-on, holistic experience enables students to be professionally productive from Day One — and even before. As part of their intensive fourth year, many Cal Poly architecture students participate in the Professional Studio Program. It's an unusual feature in architecture education that places students in top firms for an experience that blends professional and academic work — but lacks the menial tasks that characterize stereotypical internships.

WATG is part of this program, and Houchin works directly with those Cal Poly students. "We treat them like full employees rather than interns," he says. "Knowing they can come in and hit the ground running is really important, and then their academic foundation is really the cherry on top."

"They actually influence the design dialogue here, and a lot of the projects they've developed for us have been really great."

Students find the experience of integrating into a professional firm invaluable. "You're dealing with business people, not classmates anymore," says Agus Tio, a third-year architecture student who participated in a placement last quarter at the Los Angeles design firm AECOM. "The people who have experience are willing to help you with the work. I had to learn all the practical aspects of really getting the job done — to learn the reality."

Fowler, who has also taught at other top programs, including Cornell and UC Berkeley, credits the Cal Poly program's legacy with another key differentiator — a strong focus on constructability rather than just design aesthetic. "We grew out of an architectural engineering program, and our architecture students take more structural engineering courses than most other programs," he says. "They go through the buildable aspects of the class — integrating all the ways the elements come together — not just fantasizing about how the project will look. This makes the student designs very strong. It's like separate instruments in the orchestra — our students can put all these instruments together and make beautiful music."

The combination of unique hands-on opportunities, a holistic curricular focus, and a distinctive making culture has created something Theodoropoulos calls the "Cal Poly Signature" of design: highly functional projects that are both intricately detailed and bold in their conception.

"It's not just the commitment to technical skills development," says Theodoropoulos. "The architecture faculty encourages students to experiment freely with form. The projects are daring — even fearless. Our students believe they can build anything, and then they convince you that they can."

By some estimates, Cal Poly graduates make up one in five practicing architects in California and a significant number nationwide. To put that in per-

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spective, there are 10 schools with accredited architecture programs in the state and more than 120 across the country.

"In terms of numbers, our impact on the architecture profession is significant. Our graduates are getting into practice — they're everywhere," says Margot McDonald, head of the architecture program. "I hope that our strong presence in the industry raises the quality of the built environment — and not just aesthetically but also in terms of innovation and sustainability."

"We have so much potential to shape the future of the built environment by training the architects who go into the field and do the full spectrum of design work," she says. With such a large presence in the profession, McDonald hopes that the "Cal Poly Signature" will increasingly characterize the future of the industry.



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