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

By Larry Peña | Photography by Jean Paul Molynieux 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.”

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

PhoTo BY Jean Paul Molynieux

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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 demand, and they learn to translate design concepts into the presentation, to seeing it actually built.”

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 Agustino, 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.”

Houchin, who 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 aesthetics. “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.”