

THE YARDSTICK: A NEW METAPHOR FOR THE PROCESS OF PLANNING

“Our team began thinking about the dichotomy of approaches to planning learning spaces. One group is concerned about the educational mission and the other about the design work. These are two different perspectives on the process of planning.

Architects are thinking about the start of the design process, the solution at the end, and the design process in between. After the ribbon-cutting, they are off to another project which could be completely different. From the academic perspective, colleges and universities—year after year—are slowly turning through the evolution of programs, cyclically innovating, paying attention to changing culture and context and community along the way. Architects are not familiar with this academic approach to planning, thus our proposition, our audacious question:

What would happen if we decouple the traditional linear architectural process (e.g. programming, designing, etc.) from its position early in the planning timeline and think rather about planning as more iterative...?

The planning team of academics and architects could adopt the academic approach of cyclical, iterative planning of academic programs for a process of prototyping, assessing, and retooling spaces, beginning to think collectively in a new way about learning spaces.

This is a process quite different from beginning planning with the date already set for getting the shovel in the ground. It would essentially give the planning team (academics and architects) more time to understand what works for that campus community.

One example to illustrate this idea.

In terms of complexity, a replacement project that requires swing space. Our idea is to use the existence of swing space as an incubator, a place to test what might be in the new (renewed) spaces and then—as a planning team—analyze what we learn from this experience.”

“It seems rare that such pop-up sandbox spaces happen as part of the planning process once the architects are hired. Why is this?

As architects, we do mock-ups of the exterior wall to look at energy performance. We do mock-ups of interior finishes, ceilings, for example, to gauge performance. Shouldn't we also be mocking up spaces to gauge their performance? **What is the value proposition of how we are working with our clients?”**

“What our group thought about was coupling this new approach to incubating new spaces with the traditional model of beginning with programming. What if we coupled these together to create new kinds of intersections between what campuses do iteratively as new academic programs emerge to what campuses do as new spaces are being planned?

*“I agree with what you are saying and wish to add a slightly different twist. **I think your visual of the yardstick illustrates how much needs to be done before designing and digging.** This dedication of significant time to think through the project is a critical time to get inside the institutional culture, to codify what is important to the institution.*

As you just noted, these are conversations that should be happening before architects are sought or hired. It is time to take the ingredients of what individuals members of the community bring to the table, to begin to shape them into a meaningful language and vision. Many institutions are risk-adverse and not willing to pilot innovative learning environments.”

— Comment from a Roundtable Colleague



Essentially we are thinking about how to open the process up and become more disruptive. We are asking the question about what we can learn from the process of planning while we are doing the planning.”

“To highlight our discussion about ‘pop-ups,’ the idea to about looking at and assessing something that is designed to be a sandbox, rather than a place designed to be permanent. This process frees up the client to say, ‘Let’s just bang something out and try it for a year. Let’s not be afraid to fail. Let’s not be constrained by thinking that we have to get it right before we begin design documents.’ I think this might be a way an architect can adapt more of the academic modality of planning.”

“As a dean, my thoughts about this discussion from our team come from thinking where we are now in the process of planning on my campus. I am doing due diligence in asking my faculty and my students and other constituents to program an innovator space. We do not have one now. None of us have ever seen one. We have not been able to experiment with one. We are all trying to figure out how many rooms, how many square feet we need for something we have never done before.

I found a swing space (unused and unlovable) on our campus. I convinced the administration to let us experiment with the space, to play around in the space. It will probably take us a year for this playing around and by then we will have some valuable data and experiences on which to make decisions about the new building.

I am really aware of the need for and benefit of taking time in the planning process (before the architectural process of programming begins) to have a clear and common understanding of what we want and why.”

“As a faculty member, I’d like to extend the yardstick metaphor in two ways. Your visual suggests all the things that need to be known and understood prior to engaging a design professional. From my perspective, I agree academic planning is cyclical and iterative and am intrigued by the notion of coupling episodic attention to spaces of ongoing institutional planning focusing on faculty, program, etc. This brought to mind the thought of building a shell of the new building and then fitting out just part of it and using/assessing it for a year before moving forward and completing the process. That would really be ‘loose-fit’ planning and perhaps require a different way institutions could think about budgeting for a project.”

“From the architect’s perspective, that would be a tough sell, proposing to take \$90 million of a \$100 million project to build out, reserving the rest for piloting, assessing, and then completing the entire facility. But one could argue that this process might be less expensive in the long term than remodeling of spaces that do not work from the time they are occupied.”

“This approach would also encourage campuses (and design professionals) to do a better job of post-occupancy assessment. **We need to get a better handle—hard data and anecdotal stories—about what difference the spaces make in meeting the institutional vision and goals set for the project.**

- Current trends in higher education value a culture of openness and sharing in the academic culture. How can our planning and spaces promote strategic partnering between students of different backgrounds and disciplinary interests?

Can this happen if we push the boundaries of learning beyond the formal classroom?

- What do we know about different learning styles? What might be the appropriate balance and blend of learning modes in the spaces we are planning?
- What do we know about how content can be delivered and explored to optimize the learning of diverse groups of students?
- How will students, how can students, understand how to use the spaces we are designing and constructing?
- Collaborative environments are as much a result of a collaborative programming and design process as they are the result of an architectural response.

How do we integrate our clients and community more effectively into the design process?

- As a prototype spaces, how will the new classroom help the broader University community beyond the Physics Department access and appreciate active-learning environments?
- How can we create a “place of choice” for the broader community?
- How do we manufacture spatial configurations that drive awareness of the learning experience through visibility, vertical integration, and cultural connectivity?

— From LSC spaces that work portfolio

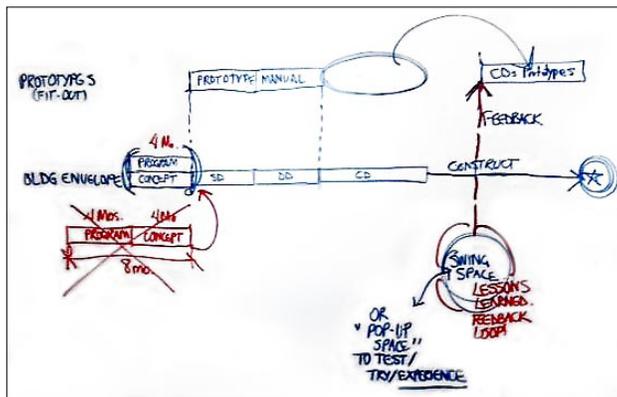


As an architect, I would like to roll such information back into our work. We are all guilty of this, often meeting a client for whom we've designed a building some years back and when I ask for feedback the usual, generic answer is, '...it's wonderful, but....' And I realize that the building was not designed to do that; it was not how it was supposed to be used. Most critically, I realize that we just did not think about that as we were planning. I agree with this conversation that we have to be more deliberate.

I also think there is a systemic problem with the existing process in that it does not give us any time for such experimentation. Everyone negotiates a set program with tight fees and an efficient planning schedule to get to construction as fast as possible to save money."

"After being in private practice for many years, for the last decade I have been on my campus as campus planner/architect. What I've learned over the past ten years is that campuses do not understand the design process and they do not know how much advanced planning needs to happen before an architect is brought to the planning table. We found space in the library to mock-up the kinds of new spaces we were imagining—formal and informal. We invited campus-wide comments on these mock-ups, particularly from students. We were looking to plan a schoolhouse on steroids and through this process we accomplished that."

"My final thought is that the sense of prototyping and looking into the future should never stop. I am now teaching in a classroom that was designed five years ago. It reflects best practices that are perhaps ten years old, given the time it took to plan the building after the architects were engaged. There is no thought if or when this space will be renewed, probably at least not in my academic lifetime. **I propose we always think of the spaces for learning we are building as prototypes, living spaces, spaces that might fail in the future and spaces that are already ready for repurposing, renewing...."**



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