QUESTIONS ACADEMICS AND ARCHITECTS SHOULD BE ASKING

REPORTING OUT: A ROUNDTABLE GROUP

"The thread through our conversation was that planners, like students, learn through discussion. In each case it is a process of discovery.

Most often a project focused on renovating or repurposing is motivated by a particular need: this building or these spaces need attention for these specific reasons. **What if the first step in planning was not to give immediate attention to a specific project, but rather to gather a group of stakeholders from the campus (usual and not-usual suspects) to engage in an open-ended process of discovery?**

We could start with questions about how discovery happens in the course of learning, questions that would prompt questions about how discovery happens in the process of planning. We would be discovering new kinds of questions to ask. **This would mean that early conversations between academics and architects would not focus on a project, on ideas about the how and the why of a specific project."**

"As our discussion proceeded, as an architect I began to think this discovery approach might challenge how we now begin working with a client. We recognize that most often it takes a building project to get conversations started on a campus, but we also know that many internal "what if" discussions have happened before we arrive. For example, when a chemistry professor decides she wants to team-teach with a biology professor and a political science professor, and they begin to think about how this would work pedagogically, and then they move to thinking about the kind of spaces that would make that happen.

Our first question is:

> *How can we initiate a process for planning that focuses on learners and the experience of learning, on what will be happening within the space, before focusing on the spatial design and affordances?*

It seems, from my perspective, that unless and until a 'project' is formally announced—a building to be designed and built, a building for which funds have to be raised—the conversation never really heats up, never goes beyond a small group of people. **Our discussion resonates with reports from other LSC roundtables that many discussions need to happen on a campus before an architectural firm is selected.**

Personally, I am not always sure what has taken place on a campus before the RFQ is issued. Most often, when we step into the process it seems as though we are starting from scratch, that there has not been much thinking or collective discussion about what should happen next and why, given their particular institutional context.

We continued our discussion by trying to think about a process that would make up for lost time. **As much as it is becoming a buzzword, we were talking about truly integrated planning. I think we should try to discover a new way of planning—one that incorporates a process of discovery."**

What we should be doing in the discovery/planning process is asking some really absurd questions:

What if the library we are planning now becomes a humanities classroom building in the future?

What if we did not think about flexibility as though everything had to turn on a dime?

What if we had a better sense of the cadence of planning spaces across campus?

What if used this kind of early design process to come to an understanding of who owns the spaces, to break down the territoriality on a campus?

What if…?

If we are to achieve things never before accomplished, we must employ methods never before attempted.

— Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626)

"At least on our campus, the conversations that happen before the architects are brought in somehow evolve into ideas about a building with 10 classrooms, each of which has so many seats; academics seem to like to solve specific problems. **We were imagining in our team a different start to discussions, the kind of conversations that would involve all campus stakeholders discovering what we want the biology program to look like in the next five to ten years based on what is happening in industry, in research labs, etc., making the case that we have to be ready for that future.**

In this discovery process, we might find a biology faculty member saying, 'I partner with chemistry and political science faculty in my teaching, and thus I have to think about them in this planning process.' We have to ask, to discover what an integrated science building really means. We need to ask how it connects to the curriculum."

"It is a critical insight that we should always frame the planning conversation in the context of goals and not solutions. This is hard for architects, but also for academics—who are mostly good at solving problems. Your advice for always stepping back and saying, 'wait, what was our goal again?' Then, hopefully the discussion restarts with attention to goals, and it might even become a rephrasing of a goal or arriving at a new one. ('Wow, that's a cool goal. Let's put it on the list.')"

"Let me return to something we presented earlier about goals. I do think that we need something other than a goal of a 12,000 sq. ft. space that does x, y, z. Goals need some descriptors about activities, experiences, the feelings that users of the space will have when they walk into the space."

"Perhaps what we should be doing in the planning process is asking some really absurd questions.

- **What if the library we are planning now becomes a humanities classroom building in the future?**

- **What if we did not think about flexibility as though everything had to turn on a dime?**

- **What if we had a better sense of the cadence of planning spaces across campus?"**

- **"What if we used this kind of early design process to come to an understanding of who owns the spaces, to break down the territoriality on a campus?"**

"My perspective on this discussion comes from my role as responsible for technologies on my campus. What I most often hear from faculty is that, 'well, all I need is a website that does x, y, z.'"

"I think this sounds familiar to my architect friends—it's like everything is already prescribed by faculty. I try to take a step back and say "wait a minute, let's think about the whole life cycle of technologies, about costs for operating, refreshing, keeping these tools alive, avoiding obsolescence."

"My vision is of spaces and learning tools and technologies as part of a living lab that will always be changing and evolving, just like a playground where you can always be figuring out what to do, recognizing that in five years what needs to happen will be totally different."

I would like spaces on our campuses like a biosphere, a little miniature of that experimental space, a space that can continually serve our need for discovering and exploring in the process of shaping learning environments that serve our community— now and into the future.