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University of Thessaly
Department of Architecture

External Evaluation – Final Report

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Introduction

The External Evaluation of the Department of Architecture at the University of Thessaly at Volos took place in March 2012. From March 12 – 15 the External Evaluation Committee (the Team) met with faculty, administrators and students in the compilation of information leading to the present document. The Team met with the following individuals:

Vice Rector of Academic Affairs and Personnel: Professor Yannis Theodorakis
Vice-Rector of Economic and Student Affairs : Professor Michel Zoumboulakis
Dean of the School of Engineering: Professor Pantelis Skayannis
Chair of the Department: Professor Zisis Kotionis
Vice Chair of the Department of Architecture: Professor Lois Papadopoulos
Department of Architecture MODIP: Associate Professor Vassilis Bourdakis
Undergraduate Study Program: Associate Professor Vasso Trova
Theory and Criticism: Professor Filippos Oreopoulos
Architecture Studio Sequence: Lecturer Iris Lycourioti, Assistant Professor Kostas Manolidis and Assistant Professor Kostis Paniyiris
History of Architecture: Professor Vassilis Colonas
Audio Visual Art: Associate Professor Maria Papadimitriou
Technology: Assistant Professor Aris Tsangrassoulis and Prof. Nicolas Rémy
Post-Graduate and Ph.D. Program: Associate Professor Giorgos Papakonstantinou

The documents provided by the Department include a number of faculty reports as well as specific fact sheets and print outs of power point presentations related to course presentations. The most important documents provided to the Team include: Department Self Evaluation Report (provided in Greek only), the University catalog, Research and Evaluation, Basic Information of the Department, the Compulsory Courses Listing, and the Regulations Governing the Post Graduate Studies Program and the Elaboration of the Doctorate Thesis. The Team was also provided the website at www.arch.uth.gr/en/statistics/coursestaffing/3.

The Team visited all related facilities including the University Library.

Unfortunately the Team was unable to meet with the undergraduate students (which is by far the majority) for political reasons. This affects this report in so far as we were unable to investigate important issues such as course loads, examination, quality of courses as perceived by students, duration of studies (peak at 8 years without even ending at a Masters' degree!), etc.

Internal Evaluation Procedure

The Team recognizes that the department made a considerable effort to accommodate an assessment in short notice. However, because of this short notice information was often incomplete or provided in the final moments of the visit. In that context a policy of minimum time provided for preparation should be established. It is the opinion of the Team that the faculty should be commended for accepting the beta test for a new form of assessment and external communication for the study of architecture.

The Team is comfortable with the comprehensive nature of this visit and is therefore able to conclude that the objectives of the evaluation process were met.

It is important to note that the Team does not separate the undergraduate studies from the post-graduate studies for the purpose of this assessment because of the relatively new post-graduate programs and the limited information presented to the Team regarding its academic and/or research directions.

A. Curriculum

Strong Points

There is a significant commitment to digital communication. This commitment sets in motion an agenda regarding digital media and representation that invites a profound conversation of the digital and the manual in architecture.

Digital media and representation efforts foster an exploration of alternate career paths complementing traditional career expectations at a time when such a consideration responds to the dynamic evolution underway in the profession.

The efforts to foster digital media and representation is further enhanced by a mature balance between technology and the visual arts. This balance inspires a healthy research spirit in technology as well as the visual arts.

The Elective Studio, when utilized in a carefully managed structure that balances opportunity and constraints, has merit. Never the less the caution related to this exceptional tool is that it draws energy and resources from required courses undermining the core studio sequence. Occasionally elements of these elective studios are redundant of efforts already included in the core studios.

Concerns

The inevitable reality of the budget crisis will cause a fundamental change in curricular offerings. The Team did not observe that the faculty as a whole has yet begun to internalize this reality. The result is that faculty members have continued to overload and over commit themselves and the curriculum at considerable effort. While such enthusiasm is commendable it must also be a source of concern. The Team urges the faculty to embrace this challenge as opportunity in a time of crisis.

There is an impressive number of courses, often referred to by individual faculty members as thematic axis, with limited cross-pollination. It is our opinion that this causes compartmentalization deterring integration and subverting combination strategies. This could lead to the possible reduction of the number of courses as well as course requirements. Such a strategy of combination and reduction could lead to a clarification of the department's mission and reduce the duration of studies.

The study of energy performance in building design has been isolated to the technology aspects of the curriculum. While there is an emerging awareness of the discourse on landscape and sustainability in architecture the Team did not observe that this has been reflected in the product of the design studios with any enthusiasm.

The Team is left without a clear understanding of the relationship between expected course outcomes and related grading strategies. In particular, this is further exemplified by lack of a progressive understanding of materials, technology and systems in the drawings from one level of design to another.

B. Teaching

Strong Points

The Team finds that there is a highly capable, energetic and innovative faculty among whom there is a strong sense of community. The faculty is respected by students and mentioned as a primary reason by students for enrollment in the post-graduate program.

The diversity and content of technology instruction complemented by the noteworthy commitment of a particular teacher is exceptional.

The first year introductory studio sequence, again complemented by the outstanding commitment of a particular teacher, is exceptional.

Concerns

There must be a clear strategy in the curricular program to balance the observed exaggerated use of teamwork in the completion of student studio work with the necessity of autonomous performance emphasizing personal responsibility and learning outcomes.

There was no evidence presented to the team of the student evaluation of courses and teaching performance. The department must devise a strategy to establish this necessary process.

The department must undertake a careful management analysis of course enrollment, addressing the "floaters" condition, to better distribute increasingly limited budget support funds and to reduce the stress on faculty expected to provide instructional attention to a number of students who will not complete the course.

The Team wishes to express concern over the loss of all adjunct teaching positions. It is our opinion that this goes beyond the limits of bearable budget reductions and it undermines the department's academic performance and integrity.

C. Research

Strong Points

The team wishes to endorse departmental efforts to define scholarly efforts in the creative disciplines complementing and expanding upon traditional notions of faculty scholarship. In particular, the Department of Architecture Assessment Criteria expands upon the Ministry of Education Guidelines while noting the importance of research, the acknowledgement of research and the nature of publications and exhibits. This is particularly exhibited by, but not limited to, the commitment of faculty involved in activities such as international exhibitions, funded technology and research, audio visual and acoustics projects and ethnographic studies.

Concerns

Students are not participating in the research activities of the faculty, either because of the distance between the curriculum and the work of the faculty or because of attitudes of student collaboration related more to receiving information rather than actively participating in knowledge generation. This is aggravated by the active role of student unions in establishing a climate resistant to active participation in research projects funded by outside funding sources that could be beneficial to their own interests and the interests of the faculty.

The University must establish a climate for Public/Private partnerships to engage in sponsored projects to foster research and scholarship in conjunction with students and faculty.

D. Other Services

Strong Points

The facilities present an excellent environment for the study of architecture. The interior spaces provide generous public spaces essential for the gathering of students and faculty. The construction of a new building will further address the needs for a library and other resources such as a model shop.

Concerns

The library, despite the pervasive influence of new media and on-line sources, is severely challenged by budgetary concerns. The library is simply not meeting fundamental instructional needs that include the maintenance of an archive, a rare books collection, reserve collections, and reading and new media rooms. This is further exasperated by no budget for the acquisition and replacement of books. The case regarding the continued subscription to on-line publications is a partial solution better suited to engineering and science than to the disciplines of art and architecture. This is an especially critical concern in the context of the development of post-graduate and Ph.D. studies. The Team strongly urges an extension of the library into the architecture building in some form as either reading room or reserve collection.

The Model Shop must be given attention to address serious faculties shortages and safety concerns. This solution must include aspects that address both facilities and staff needs.

E. Strategic Planning

The faculty demonstrates an open, willing and collegial spirit freely engaging in a discourse on the necessity of change.

Architecture at the University of Thessaly shows the beginnings of a specific curricular profile: *the strength and weight given to computing, digital media and representation linked to art and architecture*. We encourage the Department to further develop this specificity in order to become an internationally recognized place of excellence in this field in view of national and international rescognition.

Such a policy has definite consequences on curriculum adaptations, future staff nominations, equipment and other budget allocations. It also implies a public relations campaign to attract the best and most motivated students for this field from all over Greece, one of the arguments being the perspective of a more extended realm of professional outlook than merely in architectural design.

In case the Department decides to strengthen this orientation there is little to no hope for government financing under the present circumstances. Private and corporate support are therefore mandatory for lectures, conferences, guest professors, seminars and even new positions, (i.e. why not a “Samsung chair” for a certain number of years).

The Team urges the reconsideration of post-graduate studies to concentrate on departmental strengths in digital media and representation balanced by scholarship in technology and the visual arts. This direction *taught in English* could establish the department as a leader in a competitive international community. This observation implies a change in direction from a design orientation to the core competence of the department.

The slow process of approval from the Ministry of Education is frequently mentioned by faculty as an impediment to the strategic development of the curriculum.

The Team wishes to express the opinion that the student enrollment of the department must be maintained at the current level, discouraging growth at a time of a reducing budget. This concern is amplified by the dependence of the department on increasingly volatile TSMEDF funds.

Faculty have expressed concern regarding the development of two new architecture programs in Greece while existing programs are struggling with the budget crisis. The Team wishes to express a shared concern.

While the Team recognizes that the number of courses required for graduation has recently been reduced from 69 to 56, it is apparent that a further reduction is necessary to enable students to successfully matriculate through the program in five years. While the Team recognizes that under the new law the maximum duration is fixed at 7 years (10 if the student is working outside to make his living), there still remains an effort to be done in order to make the five-year program realistic. This effort could provide innovative leadership bringing the program into closer conformance with the Bologna Process thereby promoting a spirit of opportunity for students to move on to other studies in Europe and opening the opportunity for others outside of Greece to study in Volos as long as upper year courses are delivered as well/or in English, at the Masters level in particular.

The Team recognizes that collaboration has begun with other UTH departments and wishes to encourage even more efforts in this area.

The Team urges that an effort to define course minimum enrollment standards be implemented to manage resources and therefore to provide another level of discipline elective course offerings.

As the department continues to grow and mature, it is the advice of the Team that a resident faculty is critical to the maintenance of the sense of community that exists.

F. Final Conclusions and Recommendations

The Development of the Department of Architecture from its beginning a short thirteen years ago, is marked by significant achievement in the balance of technology, media and representation and art and visual studies. The Team believes that it is upon this foundation that future strategies may be derived to develop post-graduate studies as well as to more clearly focus the undergraduate program and to establish a unique identity within the European architecture schools.

The team wishes to re emphasize our concerns regarding the library. The library is simply not meeting fundamental instructional needs. This is an especially critical concern in the context of the development of post-graduate and Ph.D. studies. The Team strongly urges an extension of the library into the architecture building or in the newly planned building extension in some form as either reading room or reserve collection.

The Team recommends the combination and integration of courses and curricular directions to reduce course requirements and for the department to accept responsibility to reduce the time to graduation more closely approaching a five-year timeline for study.

Given the new policy regarding the decision-making processes of the General Assembly, the department must derive a strategy to more efficiently develop programs avoiding overly long periods of planning to the detriment of innovation.

The Team believes that the department must find a way to implement a substantive student evaluation process that can become the basis of teaching evaluation as well as course effectiveness assessment. This is particularly important as new courses are being introduced as a by-product of combination and collaboration with faculty members who may be teaching such materials for the first time.

A greater effort must be made by the faculty to give importance to the technical and sustainable aspects of a comprehensive design studio to be more evident in the products of student work.

The Team urges the Department of Architecture to give particular emphasis to the employment of faculty who are best characterized as resident faculty. The definition of residency includes the responsibility of a member of the faculty to the whole life of the community including teaching, service and scholarship. An individual who would be a member of a faculty with a reputation for community and collegiality must be responsible for its continued vitality.

The Team urges the Ministry of Education to consider the reinforcement of existing programs in architecture in Greece before any new programs are initiated. This strategy is particularly critical in a time of severe budgetary limitations.

The Team recognizes, as must the University Administration and the Ministry of Education, that there is a limit to how extensive budget reductions can become before no further reductions can be assigned. This limit is rapidly being approached in the case of the Department of Architecture at UTH.

The Members of the Committee

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