UCD’s architecture and design professions eye international business opportunities

Of the ten tallest skyscrapers built in 2008, six are in China, three are in Dubai and only one is in the United States, noted Taisto H. Mäkelä, associate professor at the College of Architecture and Planning, University of Colorado Denver (UCD). Clearly, opportunities for architecture and design work have become increasingly global in nature.

What does this mean for students?

Speaking at an International Executive Roundtable hosted by the Institute for International Business, UCD, Mäkelä, along with Jeremy Nemeth, assistant professor of planning and design at UCD, and Mark Gelernter, dean of the College of Architecture and Planning, made the point that at UCD international business education is now a key element of the curricula, providing students with an expanded view of cultures and business customs in other parts of the world.

Exposure needed

Nemeth, who traveled to China in January, called the trip “an eye opening experience,” that allowed him to evaluate China’s burgeoning construction industry compared to the US. “The development industry in China caught up to and surpassed the United States 5-15 years ago. I don’t think the design profession, and especially the students coming out of colleges in the US, are really grasping that.”

Nor are they grasping how business is conducted in other countries. “In China, especially, there is informality in business dealings and students need to be exposed to these different practices,” said Nemeth. “Informality plays out in planning, zoning and land use. There really isn’t zoning going on in the urban fringe and that creates an interesting environment that we don’t have in the US. Or if we do we’re fixing and formalizing it.”

Then there is the matter of control. Students and design professionals need to be aware that the architect is often not in control of the project. “The design going up may be very different from what was originally envisioned or even permitted.”

China’s phenomenal growth is not without negatives. “There is sort of a creative destruction of a lot of fascinating structures. The growth patterns are reminiscent of urban renewal in the US in the 50s and 60s. It’s pretty exciting and pretty frightening at the same time. I think the traditional Chinese architecture that we prized is unfortunately disappearing in a lot of cases.”

Citing China’s changing family structure and settlement patterns, Nemeth said, “Things that we might not be cognizant of as outsiders challenge our perceptions. We need to understand a country’s social structure and its relationship to architecture and development, because architecture is about community building.

“It’s important to recognize disparate norms especially as they relate to international business and international relations.”

Nothing like it

The rapid pace of construction in China is breathtaking. “Nothing in the history of the world compares to what is going on in China today,” said Mäkelä. “You have to see it to believe it.”

Low costs and a fast-growing economy are the driving factors in China’s construction boom. “In Shanghai, building costs per square foot for similar quality and materials are a fraction of those in the US according to Ala Hason, principal and managing director at the Denver office of Gensler, an international architectural design firm with extensive experience in China.”

Said Mäkelä, “The skyscraper is a global commodity. Why not build it where there is a cost advantage to building it, especially if it’s also attached to an exploding economy in an up and coming area?”

Architecture, landscape and urban design are all global professions now, said each of the educators who participated in the executive roundtable. “The most valuable learning experience we can offer our students is to take them on a study abroad program,” said Mäkelä who over the years has taken his students to India, Egypt, and Finland. “This is an absolute necessary component of a student’s education today. And it’s getting to be more so every day.”

Global reality

“International” is the key word for graduates in architectural planning and landscape architecture, said Gelernter who holds a PhD in architecture from the University of London. “They either will be working internationally or working in firms that are doing work internationally.”

This is the global reality, a trend that keeps gathering momentum. “Some of the largest design firms in Denver, before the
financial meltdown, were beginning to do more business internationally than in the United States.” Even today, Gelernter said, “you cannot believe the number of firms that are asking us what they need to do to expand internationally. They understand that’s where their future lies.”

What businesses might not understand as fully as necessary is that “business is done differently in other countries” and that the American model of development – highways, cars, malls – is no longer how the rest of the world wants to grow.

“In UCD’s College of Architecture and Planning, we believe we can help our students and our workforce understand the different business climates, cultures and contexts in which buildings and cities are constructed and the reality of how to design something that makes sense for a particular location.”

Gelernter referred to a new initiative in global design education that will soon be launched in the college and in partnership with Denver area firms. It will include and enhance many of the basics the College of Architecture and Planning has been doing over the years, such as study abroad programs and student and faculty exchanges.

“Our goal is to bring students, faculty and practitioners together with their counterparts from other countries to learn more about each other’s cultures; to undertake design projects in multicultural teams; and to build relationships that can evolve into business partnerships in the future.”

The College of Architecture and Planning will work closely with CIBER in developing new projects, he said.

Projects planned for 2011 include:

**Shared/dual degree programs.** The student of one school enrolls in another school to pursue the same major and ends up with a dual degree from both schools. “Subject to university approval, we will be pursuing a dual degree with Tongji University in Shanghai. The program would start with Tongji students studying at UCD. In the final year, Chinese and American students would complete their studies at Tongji and receive a dual degree from both universities,” said Gelernter.

Two educators from Tongji University, which Gelernter described as “one of the best in China and therefore in the world,” were in the audience and enthusiastically endorsed this program: Binyi Liu, professor and chairman of the department of landscape studies, College of Architecture and Urban Planning, and the first person to earn a PhD in landscape architecture in China; Song Liu, associate professor at the department of landscape studies and currently a visiting scholar at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Also lending his expertise was Yuk Lee, professor of planning and design and associate dean of academic affairs at UCD’s College of Architecture and Planning.

**Certificate and non-degree programs.** Aimed at design practitioners in Colorado, programs would focus on international business. “My distinguished colleagues and I know next to nothing about how to do business in other countries, yet we have colleagues in the business school and IIB/CIBER who have a lot of knowledge about international business and we look for opportunities to share in that knowledge.”

**Multicultural teams.** Example: Multicultural teams comprised of students from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, will be paired with American students to design affordable housing for Saudi Arabia. In the second half of the semester the same team will design affordable housing for Denver, giving each team the opportunity to learn about the other’s culture and building traditions, said Gelernter.

“This fall we will partner with the Dar Al-Hekma College in Jeddah, one of the first private all women colleges in Saudi Arabia.”

Regarding the proposed partnership with Tongji, you should note that “subject to university approval, we will be pursuing the dual degree with Tongji” in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the first-ever private women’s college in that country. They asked us to help develop a new architecture program and we’re in the final stages of doing that.”

**Shared research.** Building cities for the 21st century is a lot like feeling your way in a darkened room because of new mandates related to global warming and sustainable communities. “China is having a shot at it and they’re doing some amazing things but they still haven’t quite figured out how to make it all work,” said Gelernter. “Tapping the best talent from all over the world and working together to tackle these challenges is a better blueprint for success than working separately.

“The globalization of our economy is now central to the future of our students and where and how they’re going to thrive in the 21st century. If we can figure out a way to serve the workforce, serve the United States, serve the countries in the rest of the world that we partner with, and certainly to serve our students, that’s how we get to the forefront of the challenges we’re facing.

“The new initiative we’re proposing is a necessary step in this direction,” said Gelernter.