EDITORIAL

Greening the Profession

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In 1993 Elizabeth Hoffman and I published an article in this journal titled “Toward an Art Education of Place.” We theorized that an art education of place is possible by infusing community-based art education with a bioregional perspective. Our thinking in this regard was partly influenced through our association with colleagues in the School of Architecture and Allied Arts at the University of Oregon who were preparing architects, landscape architects, and community planners. Emphasis within the school was, and continues to be, routinely placed on environmental design and education. The school’s stated mission promotes faulty, student and staff accountability for their actions on environmental, social, and cultural systems. The school’s systemically oriented mission is in keeping with a bioregionalism emphasizing natural, cultural, and social environments toward a shared identity in the bioregion known as Cascadia.

The architects, landscape architects, and community planners with whom I work are noted in their fields for their leadership in research and teaching around sustainability. “Sustainability” has become frequently and possibly overused in public discourse about the environment. As a concept it seems generally undertheorized in its application. The literature associated with Architecture can be helpful in this regard. For example, Guy and Farmer (2001) outline six competing logics associated with sustainable architecture. Each of the six logics is considered in relationship to space, the source of environmental knowledge, building image, technologies, and concept of place. Guy and Farmer discuss the implications of these logics on architectural education, practice, and research. Pyla (2009), in response to the growing enthusiasm for sustainable Architecture, cautions that the profession must seek a nuanced understanding of the concept’s history “because such an understanding offers the critical tools to help architects detect the blind spots, anticipate the drawbacks or discern the subtexts of emerging strategies (pp. 1-2).

In the midst of this critical discourse, the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) proposes a set of standards for environmentally sustainable construction. Known as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), these standards address building sites, water systems, energy/atmosphere, materials, indoor environmental quality, and the design process (USGBC, 2009c). There are LEED projects in all 50 states of the US as well as 91 countries (USGBC, 2009b). Building projects seeking LEED certification are judged by specific criteria related to the above and awarded points for meeting or surpassing the standards. Points can be earned for providing educational programs and interpretive materials to the public about sustainable design. Based on the number of points earned, buildings are certified silver, gold,
or platinum. LEED is now being routinely applied to new construction as well as creative re-use of building associated with schools and cultural organizations among others. The USGBC hosts a specific website dedicated to building green schools (USGBC, 2009a) and educational institutions are identified as one the top three sectors for the construction of green building (USGBC, 2009b). The USGBC also publishes resources for both K-12 and higher education (USGBC, 2009d). Notable recent examples of LEED certified buildings that I have experienced first-hand in Portland, Oregon are the University of Oregon White Stag Block (Gold) and the Portland Center Stage Armory (Platinum). Both of these buildings are historical structures that demonstrate that sustainable design can enhance form and does not compromise function or historical significance. Among cultural institutions internationally, the building that is currently garnering a great deal of attention is the California Academy of Sciences Museum (Platinum) located in San Francisco. Designed by Lorenzo Piano, this museum includes a “living roof” along with other attributes demonstrating how buildings and the programs that they house promote sustainability.

Nationally and internationally the conversation around the environment is moving from needing to convince people of the seriousness and significance of environmental challenges to a focus on what can, and must, be done. Across all sectors, including education, there is a growing sense of urgency and ambitiousness. Art educators are not new participants in this conversation. The literature of the field includes many thoughtful and provocative examples of theoretical and practical approaches that promote the intersection between art education and environmental education. Studies in Art Education has a history of publishing articles that address environmental issues. Notable in that history is the 2007 special issue of the journal, edited by Candace Stout, that was dedicated to eco-responsibility and art education.

Inspired by what the USGBC accomplishes through LEED, art educators could accomplish a similar purpose by pulling from Art Education literature guidelines for developing and assessing art education theory and practice that promotes and contributes to a healthy natural and cultural environment. An initial and significant first step would be a review of our literature for the purpose of discovering the logics that art educators bring to art and environmental education. For example, I recognized in Guy and Farmer’s (2001) taxonomy of eco-logics that my colleagues and I at the University of Oregon are primarily situated within an eco-cultural logic because of our emphasis on cultural context, bioregionalism, and the vernacular. Following from this logic is the development and assessment of art education practice that emphasizes the interdependence of humans with other species, participatory learning, the importance of local knowledge, the promotion of biocentric values, and social/ ecological justice (Carr, 2004).

Given the growing urgency and ambitiousness of the public discussion that is taking place around the environment and sustainable practices, art educators can take leadership positions because of our history of involvement with the topic. The current focus within the field on visual and material culture, and the breadth of forms and experiences that can be studied in relationship to each,
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means that we can bring to students’ attention a plethora of images, objects, and actions that are being created to respond to environmental concerns. In doing so we should take counsel from Pyla’s (2009) advice to architects. We should be motivated by urgency, ambition, and enthusiasm for the purpose of critiquing what has been proposed and accomplished in the field to date, discover what has been ignored, and anticipate the ways in which the field can support and contribute to emerging innovative approaches to the revitalization of environmental, social, and cultural systems.

References