

A NICHE ?

By Ralph W. Liebing, RA, CSI
Cincinnati, OH

Medical school graduates come away with their well-earned M.D.s, and the knowledge that they are, indeed, a doctor. They have been through a massive amount of information covering the end field of general medicine and medical care. But even at that juncture they also know that more lies ahead of them. Their period of residency focuses their individual interest and leads to their dedication and immersion in a special area of medicine—pediatrics, surgery, cardiology, ob-gyn, family medicine, and something else.

During this sequence the new doctors are selecting their niche in their profession. While they are doctors of a general ilk, they will devote their full attention and effort in a much narrower field of the profession. Here they will seek added training, association with experts, research on their own, all the articles, journals and other reading matter available—but all with a very, very pointed objective.

The doctor's shingle usually notes the M.D., but this is accompanied by some other indicator that states their specialty-- their niche!

This professional objective is developed and germinated during the student's basic training. Many term this a "calling", or a deeply held feeling that draws one to become totally involved with a very limited range of medical care. The medical curriculum provides indications about these specialties and some impetus that "strikes a chord" with each student, in different ways. Of course, other personal influences also play into the decision on a specialty.

Engineers, in another scenario, are trained in a large array of general engineering topics, as their fundamental foundation. They also receive some directed studies in a specific field of engineering-- mechanical and it's many sub-branches, civil and structural, aeronautical, electrical, etc. This acts as a focus for their practice and field of work. Indeed, the massive number of engineers contains innumerable special classifications or dedicated fields of work. In their professional work, engineers stay mostly within their field of study, having made a choice early-on that directed their studies. Professional registration is usually awarded after a general engineering examination and then a portion devoted to one's special field. This is not a matter of creating inequality, but rather identifying the specifics of one's expertise. Their subsequent registration and practice are also specifically identified much like the doctors'.

Architects, on the other hand, are trained within a rather narrow range of courses, and are rarely exposed to even the basic fundamentals of the whole of their profession, and its practice. The heavy [overwhelming] emphasis in most architectural curricula moves the student architect in the singular direction of design, as the single "acceptable" task for new architects. This occurs in such breadth and depth that other aspects of the training suffer.

Little, if any, orientation or instruction [indeed, some things are not even mentioned] is provided about the profession and practice overall, and the many tasks required to be performed-- many by people, registered as architects, but in work removed from design. By not being exposed to a fair array of discussion about practice the students tend to carry a "design is everything" notion and complex that shortchanges them—perhaps even handicaps them!

Fundamentally, the schools of architecture are regulated at a rather minimal level of accreditation, with widely diverse curricula. Since most are designed without due attention to the

creation of contract documents [the basic task of interns and young professionals] that task is simply left to other educational efforts and resources.

Some students do come-by a more enlightened, and wider perspective. They better understand the fullness of practice and its many tasks. But it is left to the architectural engineering and technology curricula to counter this situation, as they produce students and graduates more grounded in the full range of professional tasks—with design skills but in a more properly proportioned amount. These graduates move easily much like the new doctors, into personal niches such as document production, on-site observation, marketing—and some begin their journey to writing specifications!

Because of the limited time allotted to college curricula for architecture, the Intern Development Program [IDP] was developed. This was intended to act as an “after graduation/pre-registration period where one comes by the necessary “technical” skills required in practice. But this is too late in the sequence for the student/ graduate to identify a niche, and focus on it. They are thrown into a generalized scheme, and left to forage for themselves. As a work oriented program, the IDP lacks the instructional value and the discussion of all phase of practice—rather one must serve a period of time in each task, period. For many reasons, this program has not been wholly successful. Employer dedication and participation has varied widely, leading to a range of intern experience and satisfaction.

There is a built-in disparity between expectations in the functions, job descriptions and practice tasks, so a true depiction of the entirety of practice is still comes up short. Of course, the wide disparity between academic experiences of the interns serves to undercut the attempt to upgrade professional understanding and skills. Without tighter controls [which are rather impossible] the IDP stands unfortunately as more of a guide than a strict standard for achievement.

Architects are identified by the single word—Architect [or perhaps Registered Architect]—but are rarely if ever denoted in any other manner. The unrecorded implication, certainly not that well known to most of their clientele, is that architects are NOT all alike, and do indeed, practice specialties. They, too, find their own, individual professional “niche”! But, unfortunately, this is a form of silent precipitation rather than a distinct individual move—one just seems to “float” to certain aspects of practice, by default! This it s suggested, shortchanges both the young practitioner and the profession.

One can take the array of services architects offer and find that there are numerous tasks that are serviced by persons dedicated solely to those specific tasks of the practice. Registration, for architects, really signals that the new professional can design ANY building—any size, any complexity, and type. But how accurate is that? Even those with high design skill and a pre-determined “bent” toward design are hard put to produce the building project as a whole. Their design concept may be valid, but they may well come short of knowing equally well all of the other nuances of the project work.

There is need for the new architectural professionals to know-- even if they must seek it out on their own—that their chosen profession is multi-faceted and has many, many personal niches where one can find a place to perform, thrive, contribute, and receive full satisfaction-- career long.

Simply, there are indeed, many type of architects, never identified but necessary to seeing that well conceived design concepts are properly documented, and constructed. There are various resources, which discuss the many types of job positions open to architects, in the progression of

producing projects. Every student needs to know and understand this as early as possible, so wise, and informed personal decisions can be made.

Part of that involves the writing of specifications! Among the many professional tasks, there is both room for, and need for young specification writers. Nothing says that all "spec writers" need be older, more experienced or senior professionals. The task DOES require construction knowledge and the ability to capsule proper information for the trade workers on the site. In that pursuit, one parallels those doing the working drawings in preparing the documents vital to correct and proper construction and accurate manifestation of the design concept.

"They also serve, who do not design"! *"They also serve who write specs"!* **