THE ROAD TO BECOMING A CLASSICAL ARCHITECT: HOW TO MOVE FORWARD?

Diana Yu continues the conversation started in September with George Saumarez Smith for INTBAU's Summer Series.

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Earlier this year, George and I gave a talk about the various ways to become a classical architect. We were surprised to hear that so many of you tuned in to listen (approximately 150!) and were also very pleased to see a growing global interest in classical and traditional architecture. Since I now find myself in another lockdown, I thought it might be a good time to follow-up with you all on our earlier conversation.

Having read through the remaining questions which we weren't able to cover during the live event, it seems most relate to one of the following:

1) Can you still become an architect outside of the standard process of obtaining a degree and formal license?
2) How does classical architecture marry with modern technology and technical detailing? and finally,
3) Where can typical technical details for classical architecture be studied?

On the first question regarding the requirements to becoming a practicing architect, the truth is, in most countries becoming an architect requires a professional license. The standard process usually requires a degree of some kind, a certain documented length of experience in a firm, followed by the completion of the accreditation process which varies by country. In many places it is illegal to call yourself an architect without this license. In fact, I, myself, am a licensed architect in the US but cannot legally call myself an architect here in the UK where I currently reside.

However, there are alternative routes you can still explore. In some countries, it is possible to complete an apprenticeship as part of the accreditation process. It is also possible in some places to become an 'architectural designer' depending on the country, but the salary and role may be limited if you want to maintain control of the project through the technical detailing and construction phase. If this is something you're keen to explore, I'd advise for you to think about two things:

1) Decide what country you would like to live in for the long-term
2) Research what the requirements are to become a fully licensed architect in that specific country.

I would highly recommend talking to a local architect who can more easily help you understand what the process entails since it is usually quite complex. From there you can assess your options and find ways to pave your own path towards your desired role.

On the second question regarding the synthesis between classical architecture and modern materials and technology, there simply is no disconnect between classical architecture and modern technology. The way you would construct any building largely depends on several factors: the place in which something is built, the client's budget, and the available supply chain. Government regulations in any given place will dictate basic requirements on accessibility, thermal performance, and health & safety. Local planning departments may sometime stipulate the architectural language in an area. The architect and contractor hired for the job will then rely on their local knowledge, network, and supply chain to bring forward known products and solutions within the client's budget. As a result, the technical detailing of any 'so-called classical' building is quite varied.

Believe it or not, it is very common to have steel frames supporting classical buildings. An architect might also, for example, choose to increase the wall insultation thickness or upgrade a window detail if the client is looking to improve the thermal performance of the building. Currently, we are finding that plant rooms are becoming larger and larger as the systems we incorporate become more specialised. 3D, acoustic, daylight/sunlight, and thermal modelling of a proposed design are also increasingly becoming normal parts of work life. The use of technology is generally well integrated into our current practice though the levels of this may vary widely between companies. Some classical architects may choose not to rely on technology out of principal, but they will be limited in the kind of projects and clients they can take on.

As for the final question on where one can gain technical knowledge for classical buildings, these will vary widely across the globe for the same reasons mentioned above. Here in the south of England, we are still using load bearing masonry but, for example, in the US and Scotland it is common practice to use timber framing. On one of our projects in New Delhi, the house was built was entirely with a steel frame. The façade was built from a thin stone veneer cladded onto the frame to appear like a traditional load-bearing structure. Because standard structural practices may vary by country, I think as a classical architect it is more prudent to have mastered an understanding of the details of the orders, proportions, and their purpose. Close collaboration with the consultant team will allow you to then work out how things can be built.

The truth is, in places where there are cherished historic places and communities, there will always be a market for the vernacular. In our case, in the UK, this luckily includes classical architecture. When it comes to classical and traditional architecture, there will be a scarcity of knowledge in next generation of architects – so why not help fill the skills gap?

ABOUT DIANA YU
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JAKUB RYNG AT ENGELSBERG SUMMER SCHOOL
Photo by Stina Stjernkvist