“CBE community considers intellectual and professional integration during BE PhD student-hosted symposium”

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Following last spring’s inaugural symposium entitled BE More, which focused on issues related to interdisciplinarity and the built environment, students in the college’s Built Environments PhD Program hosted a series of public discussion panels on intellectual, social and professional integration, this past April. The symposium, which took place in Gould Court before an estimated total of seventy-five viewers and participants who attended part or all of the three-hour event, was intended to facilitate open dialogue and self-reflectivity both as individuals and a college. “Building on several years of college-wide collaborative efforts, we hoped the symposium would reengage CBE community members in the tackling of what we think are very important issues related to all of our diverse works here,” said Jennifer Kim, BE PhD student and event organizer. This year’s BE Connected panels consisted of faculty and students from within the CBE, and themes explored included resilience, networks and identities, and connections currently in progress. “The more we consider and activate meaningful relationships and their potential to strengthen our creativity and productivity, the better off we’ll all be,” said BE PhD candidate James Thompson. “We’re thrilled to be able to facilitate these very important and necessary discussions, and to bring them out into the very heart of Gould Hall,” he added.

Members of the event’s first panel focused their comments on personal identities and the networks forged and negotiated among them. Following brief accounts of how each panelist defines and presents herself, Professor Thaisa Way (Landscape Architecture) called on those in attendance to take stock of their multiple, politicized, and changing identities when building a career in the built environment. “It’s not enough to name them, we need to know them, and to be confident,” she said. Others echoed the sentiment while exploring the various ways faculty and students interact at the college and elsewhere, and in so doing identifying both benefits and limitations stemming from cultivated identities. “Nobody knows it all,” said Professor Kate Simonen (Architecture,) before encouraging students to be brave in their willingness to take risks and challenge themselves to create new and mutually enriching networks.

The call to action voiced in the first panel carried over into the second on resilience, during which participants encouraged students and faculty to embrace complexity and to thrive in the face of professional, environmental and personal challenges. Each panelist discussed his or her interpretation of the concept before Professor Ken Yocom (Landscape Architecture) exhorted others to find meaningful opportunities and to work beyond minimum requirements towards the creation of a stronger, better built environment. MUP/MLA student Vera Giampietro, in describing resilience through the concept of “permaculture”—a combination of permanent culture and permanent agriculture—encouraged all to “challenge standards and do better,” in order to help individuals, societies and cities bounce back from increasingly complex challenges. Needed redundancies, she concluded, cannot be achieved without cooperation.

Having well established that intellectual pursuits and professional activities could stand to benefit from more effective integration and potentially strengthening confrontation, the final panel highlighted successful examples of highly integrated activities underway. Two student groups presented design projects recently completed that successfully engaged local communities in the region. Bryan Brooks (M.Arch ’13) stressed the value added to activities undertaken with representatives of different professional fields—an idea reaffirmed across the
panel. Professors Branden Born (Urban Design and Planning) and Ben Spencer (Landscape Architecture), both of whom regularly engage in community-based research and design work, agreed that students could more actively engage faculty and the college in the development of interdisciplinary courses, as well as more externally-focused projects. “Ask good questions,” extolled Born before suggesting that researchers ought to “reduce the hierarchies between ‘us and them’.”

Probing questions from the audience, which included members of the college community and several local built environments professionals, inspired thoughtful responses from panelists and moderators throughout the event. Organizers and participants deemed the symposium a success and reiterated its general call for more thoughtful integration and critical engagement across the board, both within the college and beyond. A lunch reception for participants and audience members was held after the symposium thanks to funding provided by all four of the college’s departments. Students in the BE PhD Program, who have conceived and presented the symposium twice under the guidance of Professor Carrie Dossick (Construction Management), have already begun discussing plans for next year’s iteration of the event which they hope will be even more dynamic and engaging.