

Molding new architects

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When he was a boy, Norm Lach saw a picture that changed the course of his life. It was a photograph of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater house in Fayette County, Pa. "I imagined myself fishing out the bedroom windows," he says. That photo sparked a lifelong interest in architecture.

As a teenager, Lach attended Lane Technical College Prep High School in Chicago, Ill., which offered an extensive technical curriculum. He took eight semesters of architectural drafting, which helped him land an internship with Holabird and Root architects during his junior and senior year. "It was a great experience," he says.

Lach went on to get an associate's degree at Wilbur Wright College in Chicago, then bachelor's and master's degrees in architecture at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. While pursuing his master's degree, he secured a teaching position at University of Illinois and fell in love with the classroom. When he graduated in 1973 and was offered a teaching position at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in Carbondale, he jumped at the opportunity. Now, 43 years later, he remains at SIU teaching architectural studies.

Over more than four decades, Lach built out the architecture program at SIU, helping to develop graduate-level programming and, ultimately, an accredited master's degree that is now offered on campus and online. It is now one of the most acclaimed programs in the nation. "I am really proud of that," he says.

Lach became familiar with precast concrete and PCI in the early 1970s while attending an architecture conference at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. He saw presentations given by Budd Hilgeman and Alvin Ericson from the precast concrete industry, and he was intrigued. "They were a great influence on me and got me involved in PCI," he says.

A few months later, he joined PCI and attended his first Committee Days event. He has been an active member ever since. Over the years, Lach has held roles on the Education, Sustainability, Continuing Education, and Student Education Committees, and he helped PCI understand what architects needed from the precast concrete industry.

"Tom Battles and I used to joke about the fact that we were the only architects in a sea of engineers," he says of PCI events, but he saw it as an opportunity to educate his colleagues on engaging architects and getting them excited about precast concrete.

After becoming involved in PCI, Lach made concrete masonry and precast concrete a core part of his curriculum, making sure his architectural students understood the value and versatility of this material. His current program includes lectures on double tees and hollow-core designs, and he regularly takes students on field trips to precasting plants and encourages them to take advantage of PCI's free student membership.

He also requires students in his senior class to design a specific precast concrete building as their senior project; examples include a National Guard facility and, most recently, the Obama Presidential Library in Chicago, Ill. "It helps them think about how the pieces all fit together," he says.

Lach's commitment to precast concrete has helped introduce a generation of architects to the industry in a way that most architectural programs do not. "If I weren't here, none of it would have happened," he says.

That would have prevented his students from learning about the versatility and performance of precast concrete—and deprived PCI of access to these burgeoning architects who might one day promote precast concrete for their own projects.

Lach is nearing retirement, however, and he cannot do it alone. Educating architects about precast concrete is vital to the long-term growth of the industry, he says, and the best way to do that is through competitions. "Architects don't want to hear about measurements and numbers, they need to have a vision of what they can create."

Competitions help them create that vision and get them excited about what they could create. One of the first competitions Lach's students participated in was PCI's 2011 multiunit total-precast concrete housing competition, which ultimately led to the winning design influencing the structure built at SIU. "The school had paid a consultant to come up with plans, but my students' design trumped it," he says with pride.

These opportunities don't come along often enough, though. "If PCI wants schools to stay engaged in the industry, it needs to support more competitions and give students a chance to win awards," he says. He urges industry members to support these efforts and to create opportunities for students to visit their plants and learn about the material in a real-world setting.

"Precast designs have gotten very exciting with all the new colors and innovations," he says. "It is important that we give students a chance to see what's possible." □