Earlier this year, I was in the Emirates to give a lecture and was invited to visit the school of architecture where one of my hosts taught. Segregated by gender, the place was a Foucault fantasy made concrete. On one side of the building lay the studios and classrooms for women students and on the other – in mirror image – the rooms for the men. Between them were faculty offices, all of which had two doors, one to each side. The dean – natty in Armani – explained to me (as if the whole thing made sense) that the office doors were locked on the women’s side on Mondays and those on the men’s opened so male students could enter for meetings. On Tuesdays, the configuration was reversed. When my colleague proposed an academic exchange, I demurred, unwilling to contemplate the discriminatory logistics.

In June – the 40th anniversary of my college graduation – I thought back to those halcyon days and remembered that one of the reasons I chose the college I did was for its “co-education.” As a progressive-minded teen, I thought it was absurd that places like Yale and Princeton were simply for boys. I couldn’t imagine living in such a weird environment for four years, marinating in a pool of upper-crust testosterone. This recollection arrested my bien pensant liberal bile at the Gulf school’s setup, reminding me that it wasn’t long ago that our most prestigious universities were predicated on an even more extreme form of gender separation. A little of my self-righteousness ebbed, not at the thing itself but at the idea that such an arrangement was cast in stone and intractable. Indeed, we use such notions to demonize the Muslim other, as unsusceptible to change, forever fixed in its ways.

The bubble has burst
The Gulf states offer profligate lessons in uneven rates of modernization and change and serve as a museum of the weird cultural forms that come from their extreme hybridity: The Guggenheim and the mosque; the megamall and the burka. You know the drill. Dubai is, of course, the locus classicus of this over-the-top style, and my recent visit was both jaw-dropping and depressing. The bubble has burst in a big way and craning towers – including a fairly fabulous-looking rendition of the world’s tallest – stand incomplete and empty, blowing zillions of BTUs to keep the square miles of carpet cool off-gas undisturbed. And yet, down the road in Abu Dhabi, Masdar city rises, as lavish an experiment in urban sustainability as any on earth. While the planetary implications of the region’s potlatch of (mostly) antisustainable practices are clear, the fallout from the crash has far sadder implications. The economies of the Gulf are enabled by imported labor, and most of these states have populations that are at least 80 percent foreign. And when jobs disappear, so must their holders. We’ve all read the tales about the laid-off ex-pats abandoning their leveraged Mercedes in the airport parking lot as they split for home. The story making the rounds during my visit was about the Bangladeshis and other South Asians who form the backbone of the construction industry and who work in conditions of near servitude. Made redundant in massive numbers, many are too humiliated and desperate to let their home villages – dependent on their regular remittances to survive – know that they are unemployed and are too fearful to reappear empty-handed. While it may be an urban legend, the tale being told was about workers standing by the highway, waiting for the approach of a fast and expensive car, and throwing themselves under the wheels in the hope that some of the insurance might find its way back to their families.

Intimate links
I repeat this story not to belabor the cruelties of the Gulf’s capita-feudal system but to evoke its ragingly complex dynamism, the intimate links so visible between culture, environment, development, and human success. The segregated architecture school in the midst of the most fabulous display on the planet of what currently passes for architectural “invention,” and the downside miseries this volatility engenders, suggest more fundamental issues for the condition of architecture, how we conceive of it, and how we convey its values. This is not a random collection of observations raised to clarity by the designated weirdness of this particular place, but a summary of the expanded site
of architecture's production: education, finance, construction, culture, place, sustainability, history, politics. We have not moved swiftly enough to embody such consciousness and knowledge in architectural education, and Dubai stands as a particularly clear object lesson in our own confusion: This is an environment designed by the world's best and brightest, and for many, a paradigm of global inevitability. The fetish for form that has characterized the profession and the schools for the past few decades has slighted much more urgent matters, and it will come as no surprise to regular readers of this column that issues of the environment and social justice (linked inextricably) are those I feel must foreground both the ideology and the pedagogy of contemporary architecture. Just as gender-segregated education must be interrogated, so the received organizational formats of architectural education need to be questioned and revised. Having taught in dozens of schools and visited hundreds, I remain struck by the antique model of the design disciplines that still informs education: variations on the trivium of architecture, planning, and landscape. These ossified rigidities seem increasingly incapable of coming to grips with the real state of the planet.

There are some small signs of movement, especially in the stirrings of fungibility on the part of planning and landscape. Although I run a program in urban design, I have a fundamental disbelief in any unitary discourse of the city and try to offer access to many. Originally conceived as a way of recuperating physical design from a planning profession that had fallen in thrall to the social sciences, urban design is often taught simply as big building andfixates excessively on his-design and planning: it stands, in theory, for a more holistic view of the environment and the indispensability of an integrated perspective in thinking about projects that exceed the architectural scale. And it suggests a strategy of inclusion, rather than an endless consideration of what the disciplines are not. Still, from the perspective of education, it feels a little like rearranging the deck chairs while preserving distinctions that have outlived their usefulness. As environmentalism becomes more and more the central authority for all design, why retain any boundaries at all?

I've been dreaming about a school of design that takes the unity, not the autonomy, of disciplines as its predicate, a way of opening the field to the real possibility of its diversity. Our boldest experiments haven't gone us too far. The Bauhaus focused, in varying degrees, on social production but retained disciplinary compartments and continued to see architecture as the eternal mother. It had indifferent ideas about the city and virtually nothing to say about the environment. More idiosyncratic, homegrown experiments like Taliesin or Arcosanti also fixated too much on the leading role of architecture (and the infallibility of their particular popes), and were passionately unscientific, though they did have deep commitments to craft and the earth. Alas, architecture's historic and dangerous contamination of megalomania with the big scale led them to social and organizational dead ends.

Our divided professions tenaciously guard their turf and look disdainfully at neighboring disciplines. How tiresome this is! While I am not suggesting that each designer be an impossibly learned polymath, I am arguing that the common ethical and environmental basis for design is becoming more and more apparent and more and more urgently part of the necessary equipment of anyone who aspires to take an active role in shaping the planet. One solution is to give each student entering a school of design a common ground on which to build later specialization. This would include rigorous introductions to the environment and natural systems, deep immersion in the social and economic modes of production of the built world, and a vivid grounding in the global histories of physical responses to the question of habitation at every scale.

New kinds of schools
Providing this foundation will take time. Just as so many undergraduate architecture programs are formu-la for fundamental literacy (too much time spent learning structures and CAD, none on Shakespeare, Oceanic art, or The Tale of Genji), so this reform of the design curriculum carries risks. If the years devoted to education aren't expanded, then something crucial must be eliminated. Or we can begin to think that design education might be dedicated to producing activists who are prepared either to step into the design environment in a literate and engaged way or to continue to deepen a particular specialization. I don't argue that the professions must die as autonomous pursuits, rather that we recognize -- with new kinds of degrees and new kinds of schools -- their deep common basis and the need for new and refreshed syntheses.

Received wisdom prescribes isolating the men from the women at that school in the Gulf without any particularly satisfying arguments -- beyond obedience or human frailty -- and so does it keep our own practices and people apart. Witness the appalling state of the earth; we clearly need to educate designers differently. This will mean focusing on what brings us together rather than what keeps us apart. Designers should be equipped with the knowledge of what makes a building sustainable, what drives construction workers to despair, what makes the city humane, what deepens our connection to the landscape, what gives us a sense of real connection to each other.