

What students can expect from a major in Architecture

FAISAL BIN IQBAL

“Drawing, colours, paint, and art fascinated me from a young age. I studied science during my O and A-levels hoping to pursue a medical degree. However, I have been intrigued by architecture since the sixth grade. Being the perfect amalgamation of art and science, this choice came very naturally to me,” says Nuzhat Shama, a Research Assistant at the Center for Inclusive Architecture and Urbanism, BRAC University, and an Executive Architect at Interform Studio RANCON.

Like Nuzhat, many out there are captivated by the field of architecture and all that it has to offer in terms of academics and as a career. What most of these aspirants do not know, however, is that architecture is a lot more than just drawing buildings and designing interiors. Thus, it is a major that many want to enrol in, but only few are aware of what to truly expect from it.

One of the first things you will notice when enrolling in a Bachelor of Architecture program is that the number of credit hours needed for this degree is significantly higher than most other undergraduate programs. Where most undergrad degrees require somewhere between 130 to 160 credits, you have to complete around 200 credits for a B.Arch. degree, but there is good reason for that.

“Building and structure design is the art and science of architecture. The understanding of physics, engineering, and mathematics is needed to produce designs that are both aesthetically beautiful and structurally sound. For developing comprehensive plans for entire cities and regions, many architects also collaborate with landscape architects, interior designers, and urban planners. So, we also need to learn the basics of landscaping, interior designing and urban planning. Thus comes the need for so many courses and therefore, so many credit hours,” says Pantha Shahriar, an Associate Architect at Triangle Consultants.

“Project management is also something we must learn about,” adds Pantha. “Architects are the ones overseeing entire projects these days including costs and materials. We also have to learn the basics of electrical connections and plumbing that run inside the structures we design, making the curriculum more extensive.”

The architecture curriculum often consists of courses covering topics like history, art, music, environment and ecosystem, etc. For someone with little to no idea about the curriculum, this may come as a surprise. They might even think that these courses are unnecessary and are



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA



PHOTO: MAUMITA ADHIKARY

only adding to the burden of completing the already huge curriculum. Of course, that’s not the case. These courses are vital for anyone studying architecture as Nuzhat explains.

“When you are an architect, you are responsible for creating the environment which shapes human beings including their habits, mindsets, cultures, lives, leisure, memories, and so on,” says Nuzhat.

“You are essentially directing their destinies. Architecture continues to contribute to city skylines and entire urban landscapes. Tunnel vision leads to projects which are bound to fail eventually. Objectivity and critical thinking are of utmost importance. An architect needs to be a well-rounded professional, which is why such courses are so important and contribute so much to the making of an architect.”

Then there are the classes themselves. Apart from the typical theory and lab courses, architecture students also have to attend studio courses.

“Studio courses are extremely unconventional by nature,” Nuzhat explains.

“You apply learned-knowledge in the studio during the course of five years. You are encouraged to treat the studio as your own home. You can picture it as a workshop with flickering lights from desktop PCs, cutting mats, NT cutters, papers, and countless other materials strewn everywhere.”

Lectures and lessons aren’t confined to just classrooms and studios. Architecture students often have to go on site-visits to explore various types of architecture. From historical monuments to modern residential buildings, these students take these trips to get a better understanding of how practicality comes into play when bringing an architectural design to life.

On top of that, architecture students these days also have to focus on sustainability and how to ensure it in their work, which they also get to understand through taking field trips and more importantly, through completing an abundance of projects during their undergrad life. Perhaps the biggest project and challenge they take on is their undergrad thesis.

Working on your undergrad thesis is a daunting experience irrespective of your field of study. In the case of architecture students, however, the experience is a lot more unpleasant.

“What makes our thesis defence so nerve wracking is definitely the sheer

volume of work,” says Nuzhat.

“Every single line you draw has to be done deliberately. Every millimetre of material has to be taken into consideration. It is normalised to create and lead teams of juniors and/or seniors to help you out with the workload. From my experience, I had my team working on the project over the course of three months at my place.”

“During the last month, we were pulling in 12-16 hours of work,” adds Nuzhat. “We had to finish drawing the building blueprints, buying materials, distributing workloads, post processing imagery, creating videos, composing sheets, and building the physical models during this time.”

The thesis project runs alongside multiple other projects and models that these students have to work on. What this does is increase the pressure on architecture students as well as drive up the costs they need to bear.

“Besides the tuition fees, there are some hidden costs in studying architecture that many are unaware of,” says Pantha.

“Majority of the cost is generated from the materials for the models, but there are other significant investments an architecture student may need to make, like buying a high-end PC for visualisation, 3D modelling, rendering, and animation. Expensive and rare stationery items for hand drawing, drafting, and graphical rendering are also necessary. Moreover, there is a significant amount of cost generated from sheet printing for architectural jury and presentations.”

The difficulties don’t end there. There is nothing conventional about the way Architecture is taught. Normally, for most undergrad courses, you study for a course, attend a few lab classes, and give exams – that’s not the case here. Architecture is somewhat of a lifestyle. The abnormal workload is also something you have to deal with and eventually normalise if you want to continue studying in this field. Nuzhat’s advice for those looking to study architecture sums up the whole experience perfectly.

“If you love yourself, don’t study architecture,” she says. “Jokes apart, the only way to survive this subject is through sheer grit.”

Faisal Bin Iqbal is sub-editor, and the digital co-ordinator at SHOUT.