Learning is a lifelong journey for architects

By Harry Kohn

When you think of what architects actually do, it’s easy to understand the seriousness of accuracy when it comes to designing homes, condos and buildings that are attractive, that work efficiently and safely, and that stand the test of time. This responsibility brings with it the necessity to keep current with ever-changing trends, materials and techniques that can affect all of the above.

In Ontario, a professional can call himself/herself an architect only when licensed through the Ontario Association of Architects (OAA) – and continuing education is a key component of the organization’s strict standards.

OAA’s continuing education program is available in two forms: CORE learning, which provides a fundamental knowledge needed for practicing architecture and addresses current and emerging needs; and self-directed learning, which involves member-selected courses and/or activities that help them develop areas of expertise, improve their business skills, etc. The OAA stipulates how many hours of each kind of education are required of licensed architects, non-practising architects, and licensed technologists.

To give you some idea of the scope of what architects must include in their knowledge base, the CORE topics for the current continuing education cycle include Ontario and National Building Codes, the environment and energy, heritage buildings/restoration, legal issues and legislation related to architectural practice and the construction industry, practice management, project management, risk management, and sustainable design/Green architecture. The education architects pursue must be facilitated by organizations that are OAA approved as program providers. Among these are the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, other provincial architectural associations, specific universities (Toronto, Carleton, Waterloo and Ryerson) and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp., to name a few.

All the learning modules also must be OAA approved, and there is an OAA transcript on which each member has to log learning credentials. This includes self-directed learning courses and activities, which include such things as attending conferences and trade shows, professional tours, discussion groups, professional writing, teaching, presentations, practical research and more. The OAA limits the number of hours acceptable under each category of learning within each cycle. Transcripts will be audited to ensure accountability.

And that’s what all of this is about. The OAA is a self-regulating organization governed by the Architects Act, a statute of the Government of Ontario. The Association administers the Act in a way that serves and protects the public interest. In order to design buildings that are cost effective for clients, and sturdy and safe for the public, architects have to be open to continual learning.

Just look at the “Greening” of the building industry. During the current cycle of our continuing education for OAA, which runs to the end of this year, some of the options we have are to attend workshops and courses offered by Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Canada and EnerQuality. There are also sessions on green roofs, cultural landscape theory and practice, and even an architecture sustainable design tour of Copenhagen.

Continuing education is just one of the many reasons why hiring a licensed architect is wise. The OAA’s continuing education program itself undergoes changes to keep current with a national framework for continuing education programs offered by the architectural licensing authorities across the country. As architectural parameters change, we must rise up to meet the evolving needs of this exciting profession.

Harry Kohn is a founding partner of Kohn Partnership Architects Inc. in Toronto that is active on multiple commercial and residential projects in Canada. kohnarchitects.com