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Lauren McFalls
Northeastern University

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Design, outside the box



Ivan Rupnik, assistant professor of architecture, left, meets with colleague Tim Love, associate professor of architecture. Photo by Lauren McFalls

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Designing beautiful buildings is only a small part of what an architect does, says Ivan Rupnik, who joined Northeastern as an assistant professor of architecture in September.

Looking at the big picture, and planning “livable” communities that include buildings with multiple uses—for example, incorporating a childcare center or a public park in a condo project—are among the ideas he brings to Northeastern.

“There’s no reason we can’t have public access in private land or public programs in private buildings,” says Rupnik, whose scholarship focus is urban design with a global perspective.

Rupnik’s research and international architecture experience focuses on Zagreb, Croatia, and other European cities. With the goal of creating innovative urban design models, he is encouraging his students to do internships in Europe, offering to help them structure hybrid research professional projects.

His Zagreb project, the collaborative volume “Project Zagreb,” grew out of a 2004 graduate-level seminar at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, where he is a PhD candidate. Published in 2008, the project investigates the impact of prolonged political, social, and economic instability on architecture and urbanism.

Among other findings, the research shows how the University of Zagreb’s Borongaj campus historically played a major role in directing the development of the city of Zagreb, particularly in defending public space and directing the development of public transportation infrastructure.

After finishing the project, he was approached by the University of Zagreb to develop a new campus plan that will provide public space and ensure the completion of the city’s tram system and the beginning of a light rail network, he says.

The project required him to research the history of campus planning in North America and Europe. Rupnik benefited from his experience designing Sarah Lawrence College’s visual arts center, a collaboration with Susan Rodriguez, of Polshek Partnership Architects, New York.

The North American college campus plan “is something Europeans are interested in,” because they are trying to foster interdisciplinary studies, says Rupnik. Unlike universities in the United States, European universities are comprised of separate facilities that do not share resources, such as science labs, libraries, staff and faculty.

Architects can help resolve these “nonspatial” problems, says Rupnik, by asking questions outside the normal purview of architecture, such as whether it’s better to change the pedagogy than to change the location of a new building.

Architecture school chair George Thrush sees the role of the architect expanding into a number of different fields—a view, Rupnik adds, that “lets you train a competent architect, but lets the architect hear that he or she may not necessarily be designing buildings, but may be used in other capacities.”

For more information, please contact Lauren McFalls at 617-373-5460 or at l.mcfalls@neu.edu.

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