Computers in Architecture or “Are we there yet?”
A short, rambling, personal essay.

Karen M. Kensek
Fourteenth President of ACADIA

Five years ago I was asked to reflect on the nature of digital technology past, present, and future. At that time, I made two major claims: we already had won the computer revolution, and students can still figure out excuses for not turning in their assignments on time. I still believe that those two statements are true, but with qualifications.

We won the computer revolution. I feel like telling some of my colleagues to just get over it. Students use computers. Professionals use computers. Even many grandparents use computers. Digital cameras and sharing of imagery is pervasive among the general public; even Google is making 3D modeling a tool for the masses. For twenty years, I have stressed the use of digital tools. Yet now, I think that it is especially important for us to reaffirm the importance of sketching, model building, and the tactile sense that informs us as we design. I am encouraged by advances in software that view the building as made of materials and not tofu; CAD/CAM techniques that help in the fabrication of building elements; and other methods of blurring/bridging the gap between virtual and real. I am distressed that many students and even professionals still don’t see the world as a complex place where our buildings need to respond to earthquakes and hurricanes, energy shortages and global warming, and those clients who can pay for a high quality of life and those just trying to afford a place to live. There have been real advances in building technology and software, and some excellent examples of built work that can be used as precedents. I am looking forward to seeing further integration of analytical programs and social agendas with the advanced graphics that our students are capable of producing. ACADIA can be a leader in these areas.

Students can still figure out excuses for not turning in their assignments on time. And they have more ways of doing it and being distracted from their homework. Blogs, wikis, podcasts, folksonomies, tagging – are these terms going to seem outdated five years from now because
the world went another direction, or is social software going to provide other options for communicating and in the broader sense, learning about the profession, architecture, and the world? Thinking back five years, did I even have an inkling that iPods could change the way I teach about architecture? Not to mention that I feel like I am missing out on the possibilities inherent in cell phones! I am ready for another revolution that stresses how we teach, not only what we teach. Other disciplines are talking about learner-centric teaching, multidisciplinary approaches, distance learning, synchronous and asynchronous methods, student portfolios, and collaborative work; we have been there already – the studio culture embodies these concepts, and early ACADIA papers on these topics are still relevant today. ACADIA needs to provide advice on shaping a student’s education where technology is a given, everything else (especially computer programs) will change, and good design is still what is most important.

N.B.: Updated “History of Excuses Why Students Don’t Have Their Digital Homework Done”

2001 I thought that I had NURB-ed, but I had purged instead.
2002 AutoCAD still doesn’t run on my Macintosh.
2003 I emailed it; perhaps your mailer labeled it as “junk”?
2004 Turn It In™ suggested that I don’t.
2005 My iPod doesn’t run SketchUp.
2006 The 3D printer was attacked by a virus and is only producing Palladian villas.