

Beginning to Take the Architect's Registration Exam

AIA Intern/Associate Members of the Lower Rio Grande Valley

Goals for the year 2012

Prior to taking on the role as Associate Director for LRGV chapter, I was of the strong conviction that Rio Grande Valley architecture could be in serious trouble. If our emerging professionals (interns) do not begin showing greater numbers of serious ARE Candidates to help grow our next generation of young architects, and the future of our great design firms in South Texas, our region may eventually be unable to compete with the growing number of professionals north of us. My primary goal for the year is to drastically increase the number of Dedicated Testers before the year is up. I plan to do this by encouraging everyone to take the first necessary steps toward taking your first exam section. I myself have just completed the ARE in its entirety in just 34 months. I've taken various seminars by renowned lecturers specialized in the ARE. So with each of the individual sections somewhat fresh in my mind, and being well versed in their content area, I believe I may be able to bring more transparency to the ARE for each of our Exam Candidates.

Beginning to take the ARE

The most critical step in taking the ARE is getting started. Often times our anxiety over the test and its importance on our lives, in itself plays a major factor keeping us from taking this step. We begin to believe that we are too busy; our lives are too complex; we haven't enough money; enough support; NO TIME! We think these are "excuses", but that's wrong. The fact is that anyone can come up with at least a dozen reasons not to do something. Everything is easier said than done, or it wouldn't be worth doing to begin with.

To start this critical shift in our mentality you must start to shift your day to day actions. When I started my first steps it was after someone expressed to me the importance of tending to things that are important to no one but *you*. They told me to make it a point everyday that I did something for Me and my future. So I started researching what were the most cost effective study materials. When I settled on one (Ballast/PPI) I bought the review manual right away. When I received the manual I began to read the overview. This was in fact the most critical step of all because I had officially begun preparing for the exam.

The Natural Order

Most examinees are unaware when they first begin testing that in fact there is a natural order to the exam itself. NCARB does state that a candidate may take the exam sections in whatever order they feel comfortable. This is misleading candidates to believe that it does not matter what order the exam is taken in. It may not matter to NCARB, but it does make a difference in your ability to study efficiently.

Of course we all know that the exam is broken up into seven parts. The NCARB exam overview lists them in this order: Programming Planning and Practice, **PPP**; Site Planning and Design, **SPD**; Building Design and Construction systems, **BDCS**; Schematic Design, **SD**; Structural Systems, **SS**; Building Systems, **BS**; Construction Documents and Services, **CDS**. Again they only state that they may be taken in any order. But, they mention the overlap of exam content. One underlying principle the candidate must understand in moving forward is that by not properly compensating for the overlapping content areas the examinee may fall victim to blindsided questions. To take advantage of the overlap the sections must be taken in the proper order. The proper order is this: **CDS PPP SPD SD SS BS BDCS**.

While it is very important to understand this order, it is also beneficial to visualize the entire EXAM in two parts:

First half	Second Half
CDS>PPP>SPD>SD	SS>BS>BDCS
Subjective	Objective

Why is it good to see the Exam this way? Because it removes some of the anxiety that comes by seeing the Exam as *one long road*. We can look at it in two parts because one half of the ARE has little (if anything) to do with the other half. This makes our goals feel more manageable and realistic. It is best for most to begin with the **first half**, especially if you have been out of school for a few years. I refer to this as the subjective portion of the exam because very little math is involved, you are more likely to encounter history questions, and you are less likely to deal with specific systems in any detail. Because of this fact you will spend far less time studying for these individual sections of the test. This is because you only need to read about and understand the information and concepts. Contrast this with the **second half** (the objective half), where you need to know the concepts and systems, and be able to apply them both mathematically and in terms of design. This takes longer to prepare for. But, if you are right out of school, much of this information may still be fresh in your mind.

So, how does the natural order allow us to take advantage of overlap? There are really three exam sections that overlap greatly: **CDS PPP** and **SPD**.

CDS - Deals with a lot of contract language & organization, major concepts also prevalent in **PPP**

PPP - deals with a lot of contract language and organization, plus major concepts dealing with urban planning and site design that are very prevalent in **SPD**.

SPD - while coupled with the same contract language and urban planning concepts, also goes into greater detail of site design with regard to specific systems, and so is a little more objective in this area.

So, in this order when you begin with one exam section, you are simultaneously preparing for the next. The Schematic section **SD** of the exam is entirely graphic, so it falls naturally at the end of this order. Since by this time you are much more familiar with the Vignette Software, you will not need as much time to prepare for this section (only a couple of weeks).

In the second half of the exam Structural Systems **SS** and Building Systems **BS** are interchangeable in the order, however, Building Design and Construction Systems **BDCS** draws content from both of these sections, plus contract language and site development, on top of its own content area. So, by taking **BDCS** last, you are taking advantage of content overlap from both of the previous two sections **SS** & **BS** as well as **CDS** & **PPP** & **SPD**. Hence, **BDCS** is considered to be the most comprehensive.

Staying On Target

While it is a major step just to begin the exam, it is equally important for the Examinee to set a few different goals: How many months the exam will last; how much time you will dedicate to studying; and when you will take the next one.

The first goal is generally set after asking oneself *'How long before I want to be finished with this exam'*?. Look at the constraints. The one constraint we all know is the 5 year rolling clock, and this would seem to be plenty of time (TBAE seems to think so). But, if you set a goal of taking one exam every six months, then you are setting a time frame of forty-two months for the entire exam. That is three and a half years. Then realize that you may not pass every section the first time and you must wait six months before you can retake a section. If you fail just a couple of sections then you can easily spend five years, and the clock can begin to roll over on you (we hear this all the time). Don't worry though, this can be easily avoided by setting realistic but ambitious goals. Planning on one exam every four months is very realistic. It's also important to remember to set your exam sections close enough together that you retain concepts from the previous sections, as well as your study habits.

The second goal to set is *'how much time you plan to dedicate to studying'*?. Of course this is the toughest goal to set because you are forced to look at all the elements of your daily routine and decide what you can do without, and what you must dedicate less time to. The most important thing to remember when deciding what to do without, is more baggage. As time goes by, most of us begin to take on more baggage. Baggage of course means the things we bring into our lives that we can control, like relationships, commitments of our time, and preoccupations. These are the things that need to be reduced or eliminated. Of course, the things we cannot control or do without include things like our families, our good health, and our jobs. These are the things which must be attended to. Once you have set your priorities, you

can look at how many days per week and hour many hours per day you will spend studying. I have found that five days per week and two to three hours per day is very reasonable and flexible. But, you must decide how it will work for you. I first tried getting in three hours each night at a coffee shop or bookstore. This did not work well when there were busy nights or if there was loud music. Find the quietest place you can imagine. The local library worked very well for me. Getting up early to study an hour every morning also proved to be very productive.

'When you will take the next section' is the last goal you must have in mind. Whether you're studying for your first section or you just completed an exam, you should always have the target date in mind. These dates may move back when you decide you need more time, or forward when you feel confident to take it sooner. But it's important to always have target dates in mind, otherwise, it's very easy to let time get away from you and you may fall off course. Remember that when you decide to reschedule with prometric, you have to give three days advance notice and it costs thirty five dollars.

It's good to have some idea how many study hours you will dedicate studying for each section. From personal experience, and agreeing with what I've learned from others, you can probably count on spending the following minimum hours studying for each section:

- **CDS** = 40 hours
- **PPP** = 40 hours
- **SPD** = 40 hours
- **SD** = 20 hours
- **SS** = 100 hours
- **BS** = 60 hours
- **BDCS** = 70 hours

So, when you decide how many hours you're going to dedicate to each week studying you can also gauge how many weeks of studying you have ahead and hence what goal test date you should be shooting for. For example, if you're studying for **CDS** and you believe you will spend 2 hours and day studying 5 days out of the week, then you can figure your exam date will be 4 weeks away. Keep this date in mind from the first day you begin studying again so you can know when and how you should adjust your pace.

Books to have

- ARE Review Manual (Ballast, or Kaplan)
- ARE Practice Test Booklets (Ballast or Kaplan)
- Building Codes Illustrated; Francis D.K. Ching
- Building Construction Illustrated; Francis D.K. Ching
- A Visual Dictionary of Architecture; Francis D.K. Ching
- Graphic Standards
- Image of the City, by Kevin Lynch
- Architect's Studio Companion, by Edward Allen
- Mechanical and Electrical Equipment for Building (MEEB), by Benjamin Stein
- 'Modern Architecture' a Critical History, by Kenneth Frampton

Many of us may already have these books left from college, but most of them can also be found for very reasonable prices on Amazon.com. The AIA LRGV office also has a complete library of both Kaplan and Ballast Study Manuals, and even a few sets of Archiflash. Of course, there are other readings and information you will need to pick up that's available online, but you can find some of this information by picking up tips from other candidates on AREforum.org or by following references out of the ARE review manuals. You can also contact you Associate/Intern Director (myself) if you want to start scheduling study groups with other members or if you would like to request dates for seminars.

Christopher R. Collins, AIA - Architect
LRGV AIA Associate/Intern Director