



An Open Public Letter

March 5, 2026

This letter was prompted by the discussion held on **March 2, 2026, at the Center for Architecture, “Deprofessionalization? An Emergency Conversation and Call to Action,”** organized by the **AIANY Future of Practice Committee**. The discussion addressed a proposed **U.S. Department of Education rule** that would narrow the **federal definition of professional degrees for student loan purposes**, placing architecture programs under **significantly lower borrowing limits**, and raising serious concerns about **access to architectural education and the future pipeline into the profession**.

This moment reaches back into my own beginnings and forward into the lives of students who deserve the same possibility. It speaks to architects across their entire journey of growth. **I am asked why I decided to run for AIA National President.** I believe **every major milestone in life has a tipping point**. It arrives quietly. At the time, you rarely recognize the layers building beneath it—until they surface. One of those moments for me came **during the Gulf War**. Under intense bombing, I remember the feeling of complete powerlessness. That moment shaped me. **It made me determined to empower myself first—and then to help empower others.**

After leaving Iraq, I arrived in a small town near Frankfurt where I stayed with my aunt. **I worked for one hundred dollars a month** and felt grateful for the opportunity, even though I had already graduated with honors and had nearly three years of experience in my professor’s practice in Baghdad. I painted and sold my artwork, slowly saving **two thousand dollars**. With that money, **I bought a plane ticket and came to Massachusetts during an economic downturn when jobs were scarce.**

I stayed with a family while studying for the TOEFL and GRE and working as a sales associate at Filene’s. **Jobs were scarce and many graduates from the best schools were already struggling.** My degree was often dismissed, and people could not even distinguish between Iraq and Iran despite the war dominating the news. I took a risk and applied to a single program—the **MIT/Harvard Aga Khan Scholarship**. It was the only opportunity that aligned with my circumstances. I was fortunate to be accepted and **awarded a full scholarship**. But tuition was only part of the equation. Housing, books, materials, and daily living still had to be paid for. In 1992, **I took a \$10,500 student loan to support my education**. At the time, that amount felt overwhelming. I had never borrowed money before, and the responsibility was frightening.

During my studies, I worked as **a research assistant, a teaching assistant, and at the café** on the department floor. I could not afford books and relied heavily on the library, often worrying about how I would continue working after it closed. I shared an apartment with a roommate and slept on **a donated mattress in a basement unit with a small window facing the street**. It felt vulnerable at times, especially at night. Food was often simple—pasta with inexpensive tomato sauce, which I did not always feel like eating. I still remember that **a sandwich from Au Bon Pain in Harvard Square felt like a luxury.**

My family in Iraq was living **under sanctions**. My mother worried constantly about my safety. I worried about them. I saved every dollar I could so I could send **vitamins and supplements**, because the food available to them—and to my siblings’ children—under the sanctions was inadequate. My mother never knew how often I returned from the MIT studio late at night, **walking alone from Porter Square station to my apartment**. It was frightening. Around that time, I knew I needed **an internship**, but it was difficult to secure one. **I accepted an unpaid internship** and approached the simple tasks given to me with seriousness. I also remember how close I came **to a fatal accident while driving home from my first job**. I had purchased an old used car because the office in Newton was not reachable by public transportation. One night, exhausted, I briefly fell asleep at the wheel. **I still felt fortunate.**

I worked to prove myself, **pursued licensure, taught, entered competitions**, and worked for the first **20 years of my career in medium and large firms** until I eventually **founded my own firm**. Whether working for others or for myself, I remained committed to **learning, rigor, and hard work**, often working until morning. I worked relentlessly to turn every challenge and every “no” into progress. **And I know I was one of the fortunate ones.**

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