



RICHARD A. BROWN
DISTRICT ATTORNEY

**DISTRICT ATTORNEY
QUEENS COUNTY
125-01 QUEENS BOULEVARD
KEW GARDENS, NEW YORK 11415-1568
718-286-6000**

Release #74-2006
www.queensda.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22, 2006

CONTACT: KEVIN RYAN
NICOLE NAVAS
MERIS CAMPBELL
(718) 286-6315

**CITY EMPLOYEE PLEADS GUILTY TO FORGERY; POSED AS LICENSED ARCHITECT
AND SUBMITTED FORGED DOCUMENTS TO BUILDINGS DEPARTMENT**
Scheme Affected Residential and Commercial Construction Projects Throughout City

Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown announced today that a New York City Department of Education employee has pleaded guilty to forgery and scheme to defraud for unlawfully representing himself as a licensed architect and fraudulently submitting official documents bearing a bogus architect's stamp and his signature to the City's Building Department.

District Attorney Brown said, "The defendant preyed upon unsuspecting individuals who believed that they were working with a licensed architect who they paid to examine building plans and permit applications and related documentation. The defendant then falsely certified the documents as having been reviewed by a licensed architect. As a result of his deception, the City had to re-inspect the nearly 30 properties he reviewed to ensure that there were no major deficiencies in the filed plans."

New York State Education Commissioner Richard Mills said, "Today's guilty plea sends a clear message to those who impersonate licensed professionals. I applaud Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown and New York City Buildings Commissioner Patricia Lancaster for their coordination and cooperation with our Office of Professional Discipline in bringing about this guilty plea. Public protection is the number one priority of our Office of Professional Discipline."

Department of Investigation Commissioner Rose Gill Hearn said, "This defendant tried to circumvent City building regulations, and, in the process, defrauded members of the public who thought they had hired a licensed professional. His expected sentence to City jail should serve as a warning to those who might seek to 'beat the system' by submitting fraudulent documents to City agencies. I am pleased that he will be held financially responsible for helping DOB correct problems he created by falsely submitting plans on behalf of clients."

New York City Buildings Commissioner Patricia J. Lancaster, FAIA, said, "I hope that Mr. Arriaga's fate -- jail time, loss of his job and reparation to New York City -- sends a very clear message to anyone else who even considers posing as a licensed professional and submitting false documents to this agency. Your actions will be discovered; you will be caught; and you will be punished. Once again, I thank Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown and his staff, the Department of Investigation and the New York State Department of Education's Office of Professional Discipline for their efforts."

District Attorney Brown identified the defendant as James Arriaga, 51, 416 South Chelsea Road in White Plains, New York. He is employed by the New York City Department of Education as an Assistant Architect in the construction unit. The defendant pleaded guilty earlier today to Forgery in the Second Degree and Scheme to Defraud in the First Degree before Queens Supreme Court Justice Joseph Grosso who indicated that he would sentence the defendant on May 17, 2006 to four months of weekends in jail and five years' probation and order him to make reparations to the City in the amount of \$10,000. The defendant will also be required to resign his City position.

According to the charges, between April 1, 2001 and July 1, 2005, the defendant unlawfully practiced the profession of architecture by holding himself out as a licensed architect and by utilizing a bogus stamp and seal of an actual licensed architect to forge his certification on various official records that were ultimately filed with the New York City Department of Buildings. It is estimated that more than 150 individuals in every borough except Staten Island were defrauded by the defendant.

District Attorney Brown said that on October 17, 2005, investigators with the New York State Department of Education's Office of Professional Discipline and New York City Department of Buildings accompanied investigators from the Queens District Attorney's New York State Police Squad in executing a court-authorized search warrant drafted by the District Attorney's Investigations Division at an apartment at 30-56 30th Street in Astoria, Queens, which was believed being used by the defendant, and seized documents evidencing unlicensed practice of architecture and false filings.

The Education Law requires that architects be licensed by the State Education Department. The unlicensed practice of architecture poses a substantial danger to the public who rely on licensed architects to professionally design and certify the construction to be done on their homes. The practice of architecture often includes vertical enhancements and modifications to older homes and new residences. Unlicensed practice can often result in poor design and construction that can result in tragic consequences.

The public can check professional licensing by calling the New York State Department of Education at 1-800-442-8106 or going to the Department's website at www.op.nysed.gov.

The investigation was conducted by the New York State Department of Education's Office of Professional Discipline (OPD) under the supervision of Director of Investigations Daniel J. Kelleher and Louis Catone, Director of OPD, and Investigators Lesley Higgins and Nikos Koutouratsas of the New York City Department of Buildings, Buildings Special Investigations Unit, under the supervision of Robert Roach, Inspector General for the Department of Buildings, and Dennis Curran, Special Inspector General, Department of Investigation. Assisting in the investigation was Investigator John Pratt of the New York State Police Queens District Attorney's Squad under the supervision of Senior Investigator Joel Downing under the overall supervision of Major Mark Smith, Commanding Officer of Troop NYC.

Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Peter A. Crusco prosecuted the case.

#

Note to Editors: E-version of press release is posted on www.queensda.org)