

Being a real architect means being a conscientious practitioner

By Hugh Hochberg, The Coxe Group



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PEOPLE BELIEVE WHAT THEY WANT TO BELIEVE (which is particularly evident during a political free-for-all as we are now experiencing). Architects are no different. There are those who, facts and respectable opinions of others notwithstanding, will look in the mirror and are not likely to conclude that this article is addressed to them. But it very much is.

At the same time that most architects are diligently practicing – bringing perspective, ideas, experience, knowledge, skill and wisdom to their clients and projects – there are some noteworthy examples that indicate some practitioners do something decidedly different.

A conscientious practitioner – a *real architect* – serves as an architect, not merely as a drafter of clients' objectives. Raising the value that architects provide requires, not surprisingly, that they actually *practice architecture*, yet look around and many completed projects indicate that clients have overwhelmed their architects.

An unfortunately commonplace example is the condominium developer who instructs the architect to maximize floor-area ratio, achieve the maximum

saleable space and provide enough on-site amenities to enhance pre-sales. These developers too often have short-term financial objectives and, not infrequently, they increase the pressure on themselves by having inadequate financial wherewithal. The consequence is that they lack even a mid-term vision. For them, a long-term vision is out of the question.

A conscientious architect wouldn't accept an assignment under such constraints, and wouldn't rationalize accepting such an assignment under the guise of "doing a better job than another architect would do" or "we need the work to keep our staff occupied."

Imagine what would happen if every architect brought clients to "a place they wouldn't otherwise get," in the words of Jud Marquardt, FAIA, founding partner of LMN Architects in Seattle. Imagine what would happen if no architect accepted an assignment whose outcome is predetermined to blight the cityscape. In this same context (and, in fact, in the same conversation), Jim Jonassen, FAIA, a partner at NBBJ in Seattle, refers to the "clean canvas" with which an architect starts a project. He adds perspective when he says, "...the architect must understand the client's needs and goals."

Note that understanding the client's needs and goals differs considerably from blindly accepting them. Bringing clients "to the place they wouldn't otherwise get" and taking advantage judiciously of the "clean canvas" can occur only when the architect has not subordinated his role to blindly fulfill a client's intent.

Imagine what would happen if all practitioners learned from contemporary examples (Vancouver, B.C., for example) and historic ones (Paris, for example), and realized that long-term value starts with good planning, good design,

respect for urban context, regard for social well being and good execution. Rarely does long-term value start with expediency. Architects are obligated to serve more than their clients; they are also obligated to serve the society their projects impact.

Architects diminishing their own role can occur in all project typologies with private and public sector clients. When influential clients (influential by their volume of work and/or by the visibility of their projects) are moving in questionable directions, practitioners must intervene by advocating articulately.

For example, current discussions within the General Services Administration about the importance of design and the role of technology in its projects warrant strong advocacy by practitioners. So do many public school systems whose goal seems to be getting a roof over the heads of students quickly and cheaply rather than also giving necessary attention to the learning environment. The list of examples in other client and project typologies is extensive.

To be a good practitioner certainly requires talent. It also requires *courage*... courage to challenge clients, courage to challenge norms, courage even to *offend* those whose goals are contradictory to social well-being. Not every offered solution is going to be good; bad ones that spark constructive dialogue and creative tension serve a purpose as well.

The same Le Corbusier who created the spectacularly spiritual Chapel of Notre Dame in Ronchamp advocated demolishing the d'Orsay train station in Paris that has since been transformed into the magnificent d'Orsay Museum. Was Corbu selling out to a prospective client in advocating the demolition? Perhaps. More to the point, the ensuing debate resulted in the opposing view gaining enough traction to preserve the building and give us the museum.

Similarly, the entitlement processes in most jurisdictions provide an opportunity for practitioners to weigh in with supporting and contrary views. There are far too few examples of practitioners voicing their opinions either in support of or in opposition to projects on the table for consideration.

One noteworthy exception is the Portland architect who recently advocated for a project in a design review in one of Oregon's coastal counties. What is particularly significant is that he had nothing to do with the client or the architect of the project. He simply wanted to voice support for a project that was at risk because of loud, but not necessarily valid, opposition. Partly because of the project's good design and also because of this third-party architect publicly and persuasively voicing an opinion, the project is now proceeding.

Our communities need more input from practitioners whose primary concern is helping society benefit from the perspective and wisdom that architects can provide.

Yes, we believe what we want to believe. Certainly the overwhelming majority of practitioners believe they have perspective and value to offer their clients and their communities. It is time to act on those beliefs by not aligning with clients' inappropriate objectives, but rather trying to persuade them otherwise. It is time to be thoughtful and insightful. It is time to offer opinion publicly.

In the long run, when architects function as "real architects" in their work and when architects advocate intelligently they elevate awareness of the value architects can – and *should* – provide. This heightened awareness not only benefits the world around them, it also self-serves the profession. ■

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