



Managing Quality in Architecture

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In favour of involvement of architects in construction:

American Institute of Architects Ethics Forum Submission

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In 1976, the American Institute of Architects initiated an Ethics Forum to gather comments on changing the AIA's Standards of Ethical Practice. Those rules, amongst other things, prohibited advertising and any involvement in construction contracting.

At that time I was running a design-build business and therefore not allowed to become an AIA member. I did subscribe to the AIA Journal, and when they announced, in June, that the AIA would welcome submissions on these questions for consideration at the 1977 National Convention, I was delighted.

This paper was my response; published along with a number of other submissions in the May 1976 AIA Journal. It was the only submission NOT written by an AIA member.

At the 1977 National Convention, the AIA changed its Code of Ethics, so that architects could advertise and could become involved in construction.

Accordingly, I joined the AIA then, and have been a member ever since.

I have followed with great interest the JOURNAL's airing of the ethics question. It is the most vital reading in any architectural publication today. John McGinty, FAIA, identified precisely the crux of the ethics question in focusing not on "what we do," but on "how we do it." (See Aug. '76, p.31).

The most common stance of AIA ethics thinkers seems to be that of working toward an ethical code acceptable principally to the AIA membership, as opposed, say, to the ethical interests of the client body (without whose support there is nothing to have ethics about) or perhaps the ethical interests of the non-AIA architectural world.

There are many reasons why architects choose not to belong to AIA, but one of the most important, surely, must be the existing unrealistic and obsolete ethical code. Unless AIA wishes to be "elite", as Harley B. Fisk, AIA, said it was in 1950 (Oct. '76, p. 64), then AIA must think in terms of the entire architectural community as potential AIA members, and on this extremely important question should solicit opinion from those on the outside.

In my teaching experience at the Boston Architectural Center, I was struck by the high percentage of students who have evidently thought about the kinds of architects they want to become, and who specifically want simultaneously to gain professional architectural skills and general contracting experience.

They see it, perhaps naively, as a continuous and integral process that should be studied and practiced as a whole. What shall AIA say to these young people?

One of the weaknesses of the profession is that too many architects have an embarrassing lack of knowledge about the methods by which their designs might be realized. I firmly believe that a year in a construction trailer should be a mandatory prerequisite for fourth-year design studio. I find, on reflection, that I agree with those students.

I have returned to direct involvement in construction, partially for reasons of potential financial gain. That interest, however, is clearly overshadowed in my mind by the long-considered conclusion that a complete synthesis of the vision and the fact of building is possible, desirable and even necessary.

In this admission and belief is the root of the question of professional ethics. I don't think it is possible to separate the promotion of one's own needs from one's conception of the needs of those who might fill them. Let's face it: The architect working on a percentage fee has a vested interest in selling his client as much architecture as possible; his enthusiasm is tempered only by what he thinks his client can afford or reasonably use. The architect working on an hourly basis has a vested interest in preparing the most detailed, comprehensive and carefully worked out documents. The architect working on a fixed fee has a vested interest in giving as little as possible to satisfy the client that he has earned his fee.

The architect working on speculation is a kind of gambler who is motivated by desperation, visions of glory and/or mirages.

Actually, the above picture is probably inaccurate - but not because of any professional pious self-proclamations or higher values and moral purity. Perhaps fact lies closer to the idea that architecture is such a hard-scrabble profession that it would never attract greedy entrepreneurs - only visionaries need apply. If any real hustlers wander in by accident, they catch on quickly and switch to being package HVAC contractors or the like.

Perhaps if AIA accepted the premise that it is unrealistic to try to avoid conflict of interest (it is inherent in our professional lives) and then proceeded to design a code of ethics that addressed itself to the resolution of conflicts or interest, we might be better off.

I am troubled by the very idea of the architect setting himself up as the judge and arbiter between two parties who are presumed to have mutually exclusive interests, even though I do this myself with each commission. I find that position intrinsically offensive. For one thing, I cannot possibly see how an architect can assume that he will exercise his best efforts to ensure faithful performance by both the owner and the contractor, not showing partiality to either, when he is paid by the owner. Does one presume the owner would buy that concept if the architect was paid by the contractor?

There is also something reeking faintly of elitism in this position: Architects have a tendency to talk as though they are different from contractors, and the tone is that they are "more moral than ... " Perhaps this attitude is fostered by the fact that architects tend to take the contractors to task for nonperformance more often than they do the owners. If they were truly impartial, obviously they would do so only because the contractors were more often negligent in performance than the owners. I am suggesting that the inherent conflict of interest tends to warp the architect's sense of impartiality.

Prosperous, secure contractors credit their success not to submitting the lowest bids, but to giving full value, to honorable performance, to happy, repeat customers. So do prosperous, secure architects; so do all kinds of businessmen.

Contractors deal with questions of ethics on a daily basis, and architects are too quick to assume that contractors deal only short-sightedly with ethical questions; that is to say that contractors might tend to put immediate financial gain ahead of a reputation for integrity. Architects also face ethical questions frequently, but those in the field probably face them much more often than those cloistered in offices.

The nature of our business is that it is impossible to avoid opportunities for financial gain at our client's expense. The only difference for the designer/builder is that he faces a much broader array of opportunities to cheat the client. His reward for resisting these opportunities will be the growth of a reputation for integrity. His price for failure will be the loss of a chance for that reputation. His fortunes are certainly more closely related to his reputation than to the manipulation of his contracts. Is that so different from the situation of the traditional architect? Do we hang our hat on good design or on fair dealing?

My own opinion is that a person of dignity and pride will exhibit those qualities, whether or not he is in a position of potential conflict of interest. A person without those qualities will not be one iota improved by giving lip service to a neat ethical code.

If we abandon the more or less capitalist attitude that whatever most benefits us also simultaneously detracts from those with whom we trade, and substitute it with the concept that whatever benefits our clients most also benefits ourselves most, then ethics becomes a positive teacher rather than a negative question.

I change hats from architect to builder, sometimes wearing both when it suits the interests of my clients. My experience is that being financially involved in construction is one of the most illuminating things that can happen to the design consciousness.

Architects ought to forget a bout being tempted to take advantage of their clients. They ought to think of the possibility of falling into the grips of greed as a necessary precondition to the greater ethic of reaching for the fullest and most comprehensive inter-relationship of two parties, each of whose interests is best served by the self-interest of the other.

When a design change that no one but the designer will ever see comes right out of the designer's pocket, then the designer thinks twice about the "true" value of that change. Does the designer think so poignantly about the value of a design that comes out of a client's pocketbook?

I am experimenting with single responsibility design-build, performance-oriented contracts. This means that the client says, "I want this effect, I can pay this money." My goal as architect/builder is to create that effect as powerfully as possible, to fill that program fully and to do as few schemes and use as little labor and materials in as short a construction time as possible. On the result rest both my reputation and my fortunes.

This impetus makes all the old dogma about good design seem archaic, even obsolete. Out of this complex experience comes a new sense of the professional ethic: a responsibility to be truly efficient in the use of time, materials, labor, even ideas. And this sense of responsibility is devoid of adversaries and antagonists. When I win, the client wins. I lose, he loses. Mistakes take on a new dimension; no longer can the pointed finger seek a victim. One can only swallow hard and keep going.

I believe that the greater the breadth of responsibility, the greater the chances to abuse and undercut that responsibility. A conniving and avaricious architect will be a conniving and avaricious designer/builder. An incorruptible architect will be an incorruptible designer/builder.

As McGinty says, it is not what we do but how we do it that counts.