

New York Construction News

Another View by Michael Zenreich

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It seems like the recession is not going to disappear as fast as we would like. With half a million jobs already gone since 1989, for the local economy we are in a period of Darwinian creative survival.

Architects are particularly sensitive to economic cycles and therefore need creative business skills to survive in these times. Upon reflection on my first dozen years in this profession, it appears to me that architects are partially responsible for their lack of work.

True, architects do not control the economy. The marketplace is controlled by the government and financial institutions. Architects do control, to a large extent, the kinds of services they provide to the society and the marketplace.

For as far as my memory recalls architects have complained that their role keeps getting diminished and that their value to society is not respected or financially rewarded. I also recall architects complaining that other disciplines are taking over their traditional responsibilities.

Perhaps these recessionary times should be used as a time of reflection. During the recession of the 1970's, architects had time on their hands, and with their hands, they discovered the joy of making seductive drawings of their ideas and projects. I submit that this time we analyze the position we have in society.

What does society expect us to do to safeguard and enhance construction? How much are they willing to pay us for this service? Furthermore, we should think about what services we provide to satisfy society's demands. And lastly, how much of those services do we provide in our office as opposed to subcontracting out to consultants or losing to other disciplines.

The dictionary defines an architect as "A person who designs and directs the construction of a building and other large structures."

Despite this seemingly vital role, architects have tried to reduce their role to one of irrelevancy as far as the market is concerned.

Architectural schools have taught us to do pretty yellow trace drawings and speak metaphorically about architectural design intentions. They have not given us a basic education in understanding our role in society.

Business and consumer clients have little or no regard for pastel drawings of their project or the symbolic words assigned to their design.

Businesses want a service professional (I believe that is what an architect is) to be on their wavelength and to respond to their real and perceived problems and needs. Most of all they want us to be respectful of their bottom lines.

The interior designer (sometimes decorator) has taken over this portion of the design service. I recently heard at an American Institute of Architects (AIA) convention that to be an architect is a perceived liability when trying to secure an interiors job.

Why is this?

The discipline of construction management, controlled mostly by civil engineers, has pushed architects out of providing traditional full construction services.

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Why do clients think that civil engineers are better at providing this service? Why don't architects have up to date cost data at their fingertips? Have architects forgotten how to assist in the preparation and award of contracts?

There must be valid reasons that we need to explore to address this problem.

Well maybe our roles have been limited through the years by having been driven by liability protection.

Architects are still the most qualified professionals to manage the construction process.

I submit that if this prime role is to be eliminated, it reduces drawings to something to be referred to, used for guidance, but not to be taken seriously. Why pay attention to what is on the drawings if a construction manager can value engineer different systems or recommend (with weight) that materials be changed for cost effectiveness?

If the architect is truly the master builder, why doesn't he employ in his office a person who specializes in this critical aspect of the building process? He should be part of a team providing services rather than a competitor trying to establish his critical need and diminishing design. For that matter, why don't architects maintain their own construction management team in-house to design-build their own small scale projects?

Perhaps architects do not want to be cost conscious. Perhaps that is why businesses do not respect architects. Perhaps we should rethink our function on the building team.

Let us assume that economy is not the only trait missing from the architect's primary concern as far as our clients are concerned. Architects are truly a self-righteous lot!

Our training in modern history has been demonstrated that we know better than our clients. We work (live) to design and produce monuments. Not for our clients, but for ourselves. We do not give clients what they want. The corporate interior designer does. The home decorator, however base we may consider this discipline, does.

If architects want to recapture a position in this market, we will have to provide a product that the market place wants.

In New York City, government approvals of architectural plans are a major architectural service needed by the building industry. This "profit center" usually does not belong to the architect but rather to a breed of enterprising individuals who call themselves "expeditors"

Often times the fees charged for obtaining approvals from the various city agencies exceed the fees for basic architectural services. This profit opportunity should be retained by the architect for various reasons. Typically, architects do not want to bother with this red tape, or I submit, simply never take the time to learn the bureaucratic procedures associated with this service.

There are over 1,500 licensed expeditors in New York City. Perhaps in a darker time this service was needed because being a "bag man" was considered necessary to obtain approvals in a timely fashion. This is simply not the environment anymore. These "expeditors" sometimes call themselves "Building and Zoning Code" consultants.

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Understanding zoning and codes are a basic responsibility of the licensed architect. Having experience with government approvals, I submit that doing this service in-house not only is a profitable task and a good marketing tool, but it teaches the professional the laws regulating the built environment.

When one relies on another to share this responsibility, it lessens the obligation to learn for oneself. It is better to demystify the approval process and learn the codes and procedures firsthand.

Life becomes more interesting and one's practice expands. It is time for architects to start to roll up their sleeves, dirty their hands, and provide the full range of services.

Along this line, there are other "land use review" agencies that provide special permits (i.e. Historic Commissions, Special Permits, Variances).

Architects and engineers used to do these types of applications. Now they are mostly handled by attorneys. I don't really understand this. Are these approvals a matter of law or architecture?

There is another disturbing trend that I have noted among architects. In order to accommodate an unrealistically low fee, architects sometimes reduce their drawings to dangerously low levels of information.

I saw one set recently that asked the contractor to hire an engineer to design the HVAC systems and submit them to the architect for approval. This seems like a case of the tail wagging the dog. How is one to evaluate a competitive bid if it requires the successful bidder to design and engineer a mechanical system after the bid is awarded?

Architects should not be afraid of getting higher fees to do the work that rightfully belongs to their trade.

Recently, I was talking to a friend who is a general contractor about this architectural crisis. He agreed with my conclusions in general and added that the usefulness of an architect is viewed as one needed to stamp drawings.

I am sure there are many decorators, interior designers, and developers who would agree with him. If there is one shred of truth to this perception, we had better put down our "colored pencils" and pick up a mirror to do some self-reflection.

I do not mean to diminish the importance of the services traditionally supplied by other disciplines. They came into existence because they were needed, but over the years, they have assumed many of the roles traditionally performed by architects.

The architect has lost his central position as the "orchestra leader," the person responsible for the overall vision and coordination of the project. Whether that loss has resulted from increased concern about liability or lack of competitive sales skills, we need to reevaluate and reassert our key role in the building process.

By reducing rather than expanding our scope of services, we are strongly reminiscent of the great Russian reformer Mikhail Gorbachev, who was the architect of his own demise and ultimate uselessness.