

Teaching the Entitlers:

an Interview with John Schlesinger

In arcCA 07.2, “Design Review,” John Schlesinger, AIA, briefly described two programs of AIA San Francisco—the Advisory Design Review Panel of the early 1990s and a series of design workshops presented to the Planning Commission in recent years—both intended to better inform the entitlement process. Here, arcCA sits down with John to learn more about what led to the development of each of these programs and their challenges and successes.

Part I: Advisory Design Review Panel

John Schlesinger: There’s been a long, very gradual change in the last twenty-some-odd years in terms of how the entitlers—I’ll use your term—perceive their role in reviewing proposals for development. Very often there is a self-described role as gatekeeper, that they’re protecting something that is sacred. It’s familiar to them or fellow citizens. As a result, there is an air of suspicion for something that is new or that is different. Very often, it is the result of a building boom or a change in development practices that occurred before and had upset a lot of people. “We need reform!” they would say. “We need to give greater scrutiny to these projects, because they’re changing the character of the city; they’re changing the transportation patterns.”

My entree into this realm was noticing that there was this adversarial relationship between a project sponsor with his or her architect and those who were going to be the decision-makers, both the city staff and those who were appointed or elected to commissions to review these projects. That level of friction, both on a professional basis and very often on a personal basis, made for pretty bad planning and some pretty bad architecture, as well, because when you come into a situation where you’re presupposing that you’re going to fight, then what you do is you ask for the world, and you know you’re going to get cut back. And that’s not the greatest way of designing a project.



Likewise, on the other side, it's going to be, "What do they want, and what can I get from them to do that?"

arcCA: Did your interest in this subject come from being an architect who ran up against these problems? Or was there something else that prompted you?

JS: It was not personal, because I didn't have any projects that were in the mix yet. What really prompted it was that, when I started my own practice, I all of a sudden had the time to be an advocate. What drove it more than anything else was that, when you drove around, and you looked at the lost opportunities—a development that was done that was poorly designed and you knew who the design professional was, and you knew they were perfectly qualified. You knew the history behind the project. You knew that something had been cut or changed against the better wishes of the architect or the developer because of some compromise. So: how could we change the dynamic, so that the premier professionals who really are at the top of their game can deliver a project without being encumbered by the nonsense that very

often occurs in the deliberations for entitlement?

If we could get some kind of communication with established neighborhood organizations, who are often driving the argument in a public forum, they wouldn't necessarily become our allies, but at least they would have a better appreciation of what we do, and we would have a better appreciation of the reasons why they are in opposition to certain approaches.

Similar to a mistreated child, they felt that they had been beaten up so much that they trusted nobody. The result was to think that, the more restrictions you have and the more limits you put on something, regardless of the virtue of what is being done, at least it won't be as big and terrible.

It'll be small and terrible. I was told time and again, "Just keep it as small as possible, so the burden will be less." So we went through a litany of proposals, trying to show why something small isn't necessarily better. A bold step in a project may protect more than something that is piecemeal.

arcCA: So how did you get the seat at the table?

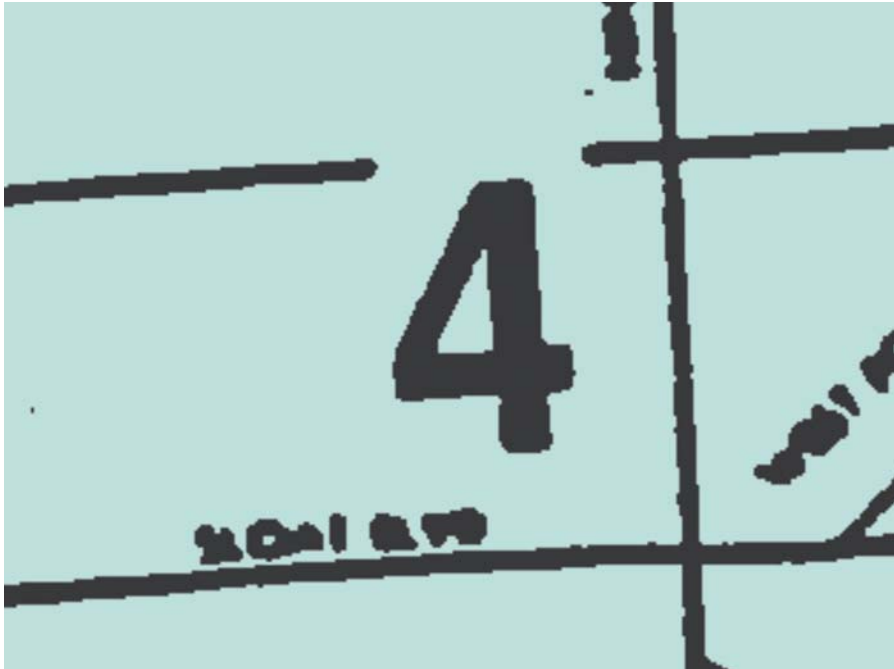
JS: It was always under the auspices of AIA

San Francisco. We established an advisory design review program, something that I did not invent, but I was one of the three co-chairs. We tried to show that there are different ways to approach the design problem, that if you have mediators among these different sides, you can break down the friction and can reach some consensus and come up with a better design solution, rather than just making it smaller.

arcCA: Did the AIA go to the city and say, "We'd like to help," or did the city come to the AIA?

JS: We approached the city, because at the time the entitlement process was really, really problematic. There were two planning commissions per week. The planning commissioners were there until ten o'clock, eleven o'clock at night reviewing projects both large and small, and there were so many small projects. You'd have a deck review clogging up the works, so that somebody who had twenty units they wanted to develop was at the back of the line.

And nobody was getting careful attention, because it was like traffic court. It was just awful. So we approached the planning depart-



ment, and they were really, really resistant, because the feeling was that we were venturing on their turf—and that we, as architects, would have a prejudiced eye, because we worked for the people who were building these things. We would not be able to take a more objective view.

This was in 1987, which was before I came on the scene. Through some magic, they convinced the planning staff to at least do a series of trial sessions. The whole process was outlined as something voluntary. If we were going to have this mediation service, both sides would have to be willing to volunteer to do it, and the architects who were mediators would provide the service *pro bono*. It was not something that precluded them from appearing before a public body to plead their case. We were there in an advisory capacity and had no jurisdiction. We could not take over any of the responsibilities of the city staff.

I chaired the first case that came before us. You can see the very gradual change that occurred. There was originally an enormous amount of opposition toward us. But within two years, if people volunteered to participate in a mediation service, it was resolved in our offices and never went to the commission; or,

if it did, the commission almost always took our position.

And so the word on the street was, “Go to the AIA, because they will help you resolve this, and you have a better chance of getting a better product if you’re a developer and a better chance, if you’re a community person, to make sure that your voice is heard.” That’s the track record that we had. Unfortunately, after about three years, it was killed because of some political issues.

arcCA: In that period, I would imagine one thing you might run up against is some people who think of themselves as stakeholders feeling like they’ve been cut out, because a more immediate stakeholder had entered into this process with the AIA.

JS: Right. The people who had the most power, the most political power at the time, were left out of the process, because the more consensus-building we were able to do the less power they had at the table to fight for their principle, whatever that might be.

arcCA: Or to have a bargaining chip.

JS: Right. As you know, it is still as politically contentious as it could possibly be. It’s not as though we solved the problem. But we at least introduced a different way of approaching the entitlement process. That was the first step.

It was a big learning experience in terms of how you both educate and learn from community groups in a much less pressure-ridden, controlled session and make something work. So, while our process died, it actually gave birth to a lot of changes in the way the department began to react.

Part II: Design Workshops

JS: When that activity ended, I thought that an opportunity to partner with the professional staff of a municipality might be another tack. Once we won over the city staff, and they realized that we were not stepping on their turf, we could help them in those areas that they would rather not deal with or didn’t have the experience or the skill sets to deal with.

In 2004, former planning director Dean Macris was brought back into the San Francisco Planning Department on an interim basis by recently elected Mayor Newsom. We realized that we had somebody that we could



talk to, because we had dealt with him before. We were able to start from where we had left off the last time.

That was when we launched the education program for appointed officials. We recognized that the root of the problem very often wasn't just the chronic friction that occurred between community groups and project sponsors and city staff, but also that those people who are appointed are thrown into the deep end of the pool to start rendering opinions on projects, which they themselves confess they are not qualified to do.

We felt that it was incumbent upon us to take an objective approach and say, "There are different ways that you can analyze the design of a project." We did this with the Planning Commission, and we did it with select members of the board of supervisors who were willing to talk to us.

We had a solid catalogue of successful projects that our members had done, so we could say, "This is something that works in the neighborhood that otherwise would be rejected, because it's contemporary architecture, and it doesn't fit into what is considered a static and sacred context in San Francisco."

These were successful projects that people had grown accustomed to and actually liked and that had become icons in their neighborhoods. You can use these kinds of projects to ask a number of questions: Why is this successful? What are the features of this project—independent of the fact that it's contemporary—that make it work? So we entered into a two-year education program.

There was a group of us in the chapter who wrote the material together; I was the editor. Two of us did the first session; the subsequent two I did myself. Each time, we had a dry run with the senior staff of the Planning Department, using them as a sounding board to help us understand what the focus should be at that particular time.

For the fourth presentation, we went back to a group dynamic, in which several people gave their own presentations, because we were using their projects as examples. Rather than me using a whole panoply of international projects, we used local projects by local design professionals, addressing a particular problem within a specific district of San Francisco.

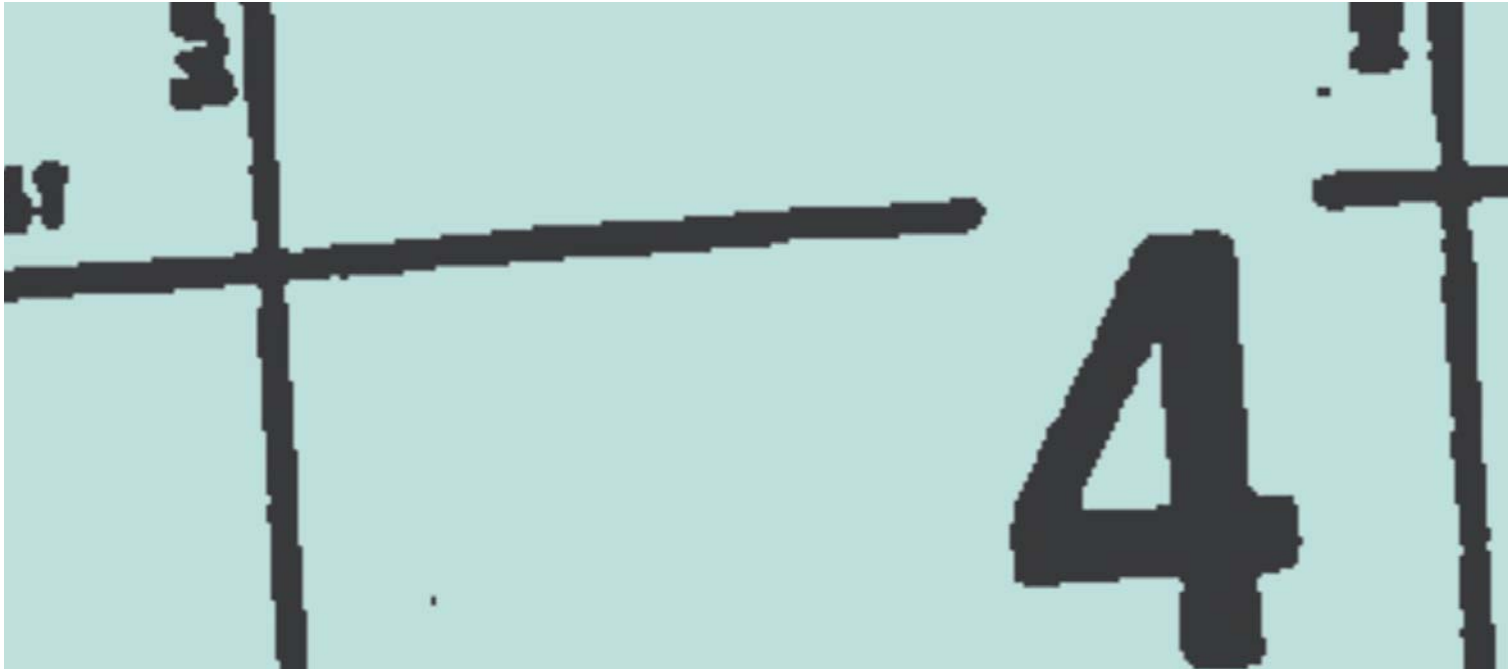
Just to show you what had happened over the twenty-year period, we were *asked* by the

Planning Commission to give the fourth presentation—whereas for the previous ones we pushed our way through the door. We had come from meeting an enormous amount of resistance to the point where the Planning Commission has asked the chapter to do this.

And just lately, towards the end of the year, there were some design guidelines being presented by the staff, having to do with how you make emerging neighborhoods in a city pedestrian-friendly. When this question was first being heard, one of the commissioners said, "I'm not ready to think about this. I want you to go to the AIA and have them provide some kind of formal response to what you're doing and to give you more examples from their realm, either to encourage what you are recommending, to enforce what you are recommending, or to take issue with those things." That's an interesting change of dynamic.

arcCA: So, what's the next chapter?

JS: With this downturn in the economy, in which projects are being postponed for a number of months or maybe a year, it's a good time to develop a library of successful local



examples. One of the most difficult things that we had was developing good examples of an emerging building type that is really going to take hold, probably for the next ten years, outside of the downtown district: high-density, sustainable, infill residential developments in the eastern part of the city. They are going to be scrutinized, particularly as preservation districts are being developed throughout the city. And other municipalities are going to look at San Francisco as a model, to show how projects can increase in density and be successful architecturally. So that's the next focus.

arcCA: When you're putting together a library of examples like that, how do you determine what has been successful?

JS: We quite candidly don't take into account the traditional neighborhood activist's or community group's perspective on what is successful. We do take into account the professional planner's and staff person's perspective, because they get the feedback.

But we also count on our own in-house scrutiny and what the design professionals we talk to consider a successful project—not

personally successful, but as objectively as we possibly can: "This project weathered the entitlement process relatively unscathed and came out at the end being pretty successful." What we don't do is look for award winners.

We look for projects that push the envelope. We're not being shy. We actually want to challenge the commissioners, to say, "This may seem shocking, but these will become familiar icons."

arcCA: Do the planning commissioners listen politely and thank you and leave? Or is there discussion?

JS: It differs tremendously. Sometimes it's the pat-on-the-head syndrome: "Nice job. Thank you very much. See you next time." Other times, it has caused interesting conversations to occur. In the first session, there was a whole new vocabulary that they were not familiar with. Subsequent to that meeting, we noticed that they were beginning to use those words, which was great to see.

In the last session, in which there were more local projects that commissioners were familiar with, they would say, "I know this one, and I like that one. I didn't realize that

the thought process was based on these strong design principles. Now I have a better understanding for scrutinizing a project."

So, being more specific and more local with premier projects that we were comfortable with from a staff point of view or a design professional's point of view developed a dialogue among commissioners about where policy stands on this kind of building, where the policy thwarts this kind of innovation, where it doesn't. It opened up a lot of conversation. And that was really satisfying. ●