1. **Impact of the Economy on the Organization.**

   The economic downturn coupled with the changing demographics within the profession has had a significant impact on the AIA at all levels. Fewer resources are available and membership recruitment, retention, and member services and delivery are suffering. This is further evidenced in increasing competition between local, state, and national components over non-dues revenues, and has inhibited collaboration within the organization. How can the AIA respond to these challenges?

   I can answer that question with perspective from my own region. Michigan is one the states hit the hardest by current economic conditions, and until only recently has seen net job losses every year since the post 9/11 downturn in late 2001. Our membership mirrored that downward trend, and eventually we saw our status as a single state region called into serious question. With virtually no resources available for much of anything, we made a bold decision. We recognized that a circumstance where an AIA Detroit member paid dues more than $100.00 over the national average was untenable, indeed, unconscionable, so we made acted. Between Michigan and Detroit we reduced dues by over $100.00 per member, so that we are now below the national average. We coupled that with something we had discussed repeatedly but never actually done – a comprehensive membership drive. Despite investing nothing other than volunteer time, we had remarkable success. We stabilized membership and began to reverse losses. Reduced revenue demanded a re-evaluation of virtually everything we did, to make certain the resources we did have were applied most effectively. Relying on members to produce more of what we do programmatically and managerially created member buy-in, which in turn advanced recruitment and retention at virtually no cost. By bringing emerging professionals into the process, we have addressed membership sustainability as well. We look different, but we are more engaged and successful by any non-financial measure than we have been in years. Out of necessity, we have become self-reliant.

   To me the answer is straightforward. First, we owe to every member the obligation to maximize those resources we do have. Second, take every opportunity to engage members firsthand in the delivery of program services. Third and finally, we engender and encourage self-reliance at all levels. Self-reliance is a necessity in this new economy. Self-reliance creates security and confidence. Conversely, collaboration, particularly where there is a fear of competition, understandably engenders trepidation. It is essential that we overcome that trepidation and learn to adapt to the new economic paradigm, but as creative professionals we are equipped for that challenge. Creating self-reliant components will bode well for AIA at all levels over the long term, and is in my view a must if we are to survive.

2. **Competition in a Global Market**

   During the Grassroots Leadership and Advocacy Conference the profession was challenged to look outside U.S. boarders for new opportunities to export architectural services. Is the AIA structured to adequately support members wanting to engage in international practice, and perhaps more importantly, the challenges of design and delivery in foreign marketplaces? How can the AIA best support its members who want to practice abroad?

   I would initially challenge the premise of the question in that I believe that we must broaden our thinking beyond traditional architectural services. As such, I would urge members to
look for opportunities to export “professional services” (as well as perform those broader services locally) and not just the traditional “architectural services”.

That said, I would say AIA isn’t currently as well structured to support members to engage internationally as it can be or should be. We don’t currently look to export AIA. Instead, our international exposure is a series of ad hoc components created wherever a sufficient level of interest jells. If we don’t export AIA, we can’t effectively support members who are striving to export their expertise. The first step therefore is to establish a clear, defined framework within which the AIA brand can be marketed internationally. The international member category discussion over the last few years has made plain that we have legitimate but differing opinions as to how that should occur. Whether or not it manifests in the form of the bylaws proposal considered this May, I believe it must occur in some manner before the Institute can offer meaningful support to members offering services abroad. Absent that, our abilities will be limited.

I believe that knowledge of a foreign market, indeed, any market, is critical for success. Many countries have unique bureaucracies and unique laws affecting development. For example, Brazil has a universal, publically funded health care system, but there is no prohibition on private care. An emerging middle class has dramatically expanded opportunities for health care design specialists in the private arena. While that market may be flush with projects, the ability to negotiate the local bureaucracies rests primarily with the local Architects such that US firms usually establish a foothold by collaborating with local practitioners who have the ability to work within the local structure. Relationships are therefore key.

Recognizing an emerging market is easy. Penetrating that market requires the ability to work within the establishment, and that is most easily accomplished by developing a working relationship with someone who brings that skill to the table. AIA can best support members practicing abroad by engendering those relationships. That is of course much easier if we have local chapters and a profile within the international community through which those relationships can incubate. While it isn’t impossible for AIA to support international practitioners absent a defined place for international membership within the Institute, in my view it will be markedly more difficult.

3. **Member Resources**

    *Conventional wisdom suggests that at the conclusion of the recession, the architectural profession will be forever changed. While the economic climate has been challenging for all in the design and construction industry, it has been especially difficult for “seasoned” professionals who are often times unable to compete in today’s technology-based delivery environment. How is the AIA positioned to support these members?*

I believe that to be true. The economy is changed forever and rather than a sharp increase in economic activity that punctuates the end of most recessions, I believe this one will end with several years of very slow growth. I believe the economy is also changing in fundamental ways that will have broad impacts. For example, clients will increasingly self-fund projects, in effect becoming their own banks. That climate will press economics even further to the forefront and the sensitivity to overall project costs will heighten ever still. Technology is a useful cost control tool, and reliance on it will increase exponentially. Where technology is now often viewed as an option to varying degrees, it will increasingly become a part of the basic standard expected of every practitioner.

In every profession, a practitioner has the obligation to upgrade their own knowledge and skills to meet changing market demands. As with international practice, if an Architect can’t
develop the necessary skills themselves, the primary option becomes developing a relationship with someone who holds those skills – to learn from to the degree possible – and to rely on to the degree necessary (again, relationships are key). It would therefore appear we have at least part of the solution in hand – engendering relationships between technologically savvy emerging professionals who have skills necessary to negotiate a technology driven delivery environment and the “seasoned” professional who may lack those skills firsthand, but nevertheless need them going forward.

Traditional mentoring is based on the idea that the established professional has experience and wisdom that should be passed on to the emerging professional. This question presents what for lack of a better term can be described as an opportunity for “reverse mentoring”. We have long viewed the internship process as integral to the creation of a “good Architect”. Here, the emerging professional in many instances has technological experience and wisdom that can be passed on the established professional to ensure he or she remains a “good Architect”.

Whether or not the “seasoned professional” actually learns the technology driven skills in demand in today’s economy, or whether he or she simply relies on emerging professionals for those skills is immaterial. The question posed is “How is AIA positioned to support these [“seasoned professional”] members? The answer is simple . . . . we have a group that needs support and a group that has the ability to provide that support – both within our existing framework. We bring those groups together.

4. **Mentoring**

*Across all levels of the organization members lament the decline in the number of new licensees. Some suggest the lack of a culture of mentoring within firms and the profession is to blame. What can the AIA do to effect a cultural shift among the profession and encourage those educated and involved in the delivery of architectural services to stay connected with the organization?*

This question presents a dichotomy. The decline in new licensees doesn’t necessarily drive a disconnection with AIA as unlicensed professionals do remain engaged. Likewise, there are numerous licensees who are disconnected from AIA. It isn’t apparent that one’s level of connection with AIA is derivative of one’s status as a licensee.

I believe that over time we have encouraged the emerging professional to work within a firm structure and that we have discounted the role of the sole practitioner. I graduated into the middle of a recession at start of the 1980’s. My contemporaries and I viewed a license as our ability to earn a living and develop a meaningful career (the “twin undeniable truths” As I have referred to them). We knew that with it, we could do both under our control. We also knew that without it, our ability to do either would be controlled by someone else. Getting the license at all costs was therefore the singular goal. Simply put, the economy eventually punished those who didn’t have a license, we knew it, and sought to avoid it.

That recession eased and we entered into a long period of relatively stable economic growth. While the twin truths remained, the thinking that spurred pursuit of the license dissipated. Firm culture likely did shift as those without licenses were afforded responsible positions, promotions, etc. without favoring licensees. While some of those trappings may have suggested that success in the profession was possible without a license, management control of the firms remained firmly in the hands of the license. Barring a paradigm shift in legal thinking (something on the order of deregulation of the profession – not impossible but extremely unlikely) the twin truths remain. However, creating a cultural shift to value licensure will not likely be an easy task to accomplish.
That said, the question does not seek methods to accomplish a cultural shift necessary to value licensure—it seeks thoughts on how to keep those educated and involved in the delivery of architectural services connected to AIA. That starts with a few easy tasks. First—we remove all barriers to equal access to any part of membership and we encourage all practitioners to participate on a full and equal basis in any and every way. From there, we determine what might appeal to the broader range of practitioners, and we create opportunity within the Institute to address it.

5. **Changing Demographics**

*Evidence shows the architectural profession is “aging,” and this will have a significant financial impact on the AIA in the very near future. How can the AIA position the organization to mitigate this impact while continuing to provide value to existing members?*

I would refer to some of the thinking I outlined in my answer to question 1, above. Initially, we owe it to members to maximize our current resources, no matter the level at which we enjoy those resources. While we often think we already do that, we fall short in that obligation equally often. Beyond that, I challenge the basis for the question as it presumes an aging profession will have a significant impact on AIA finances. If we do nothing that may well be the case. But why should we do nothing?

Statistics suggest that market penetration in terms of Architects who are AIA members varies greatly from something over 80% in some states to less than 50% in others. There is ample room to grow membership within that base (while I dislike equating the terms “membership” and “revenue”, I concede the two are to a degree related). The fastest growing membership segment is international membership, which suggests that exporting the AIA brand internationally is all the more critical. To the extent growing membership is tied to maintaining revenue, we look at two things; 1) what can we do to make AIA membership appealing to those who currently aren’t members, and 2) expanding into what we know are is a growing international market. Pursing those goals now will create replacement revenue as the aging profession removes it, mitigating the overall impact.

Given some of the recent economic shifts, it is also apparent that while the traditional practice model will remain, it will not continue as the dominant model for most members, a trend which will in all likelihood accelerate into the future. In order to stabilize and grow membership, we must look at ways to bring those Architects who don’t practice under that traditional rubric into the mainstream of the Institute does. While that requires some rethinking, I believe it also offers great potential.

6. **Governance**

*Despite the focus in recent years on strategic planning, some argue that the AIA still lacks focus, which reduces its effectiveness on any one priority. Recognizing there is a myriad of issues and priorities facing the organization, what are the priority issues that AIA should focus on?*

AIA cannot be all things for all members. We should focus on those initiatives that elevate the Architect and/or the role the Architect plays in our broader society.

The purpose for Advocacy initiatives is to elevate the role of the Architect, while easing at least some of the rigors of practice. Whether we do that through the traditional government channels or in the broader context, members consistently recognize that advocacy is a critical part of the value AIA delivers. That must continue. Public awareness is tied closely to
advocacy, and in many respects serves the same purpose. While public awareness results are more difficult to quantify, it does elevate the perception of the Architect, and again it is valued by members.

Beyond those core issues, I think everything should be considered with an eye towards leveraging the Architect into a respected and responsible role. For example, do we continue with disaster assistance initiatives as they are per se, or do we develop relationships with first responders and the like (the Red Cross, FEMA, Habitat for Humanity, etc.) so that we can bring the knowledge and expertise our members hold to bear in responsible, leadership roles without incurring the cost associated with maintaining our own disaster assistance management plan and network? The latter would increase our exposure, would build relationships we don’t currently have that could be useful for other purposes, and would leverage our members into high profile positions without undue expense.

That is but one example, and there are many others. I believe it is necessary to resist the tendency to try and be all things for all, and to instead look to maximize our exposure where we get the best return for the investment. In my home state, we have conducted what amounts to a top to bottom review, we have sought to turn as much as possible over to volunteers, to maximize resources, to engage members in program development, and eliminate what isn’t within our core charge. It is time to take a hard look at AIA national with a similar view.

7. **Value of Design**
   
   There is increasing concern among AIA members that the value of architecture and design is being differentiated by a focus on “design” in the absence of the context of “practice.” What can the AIA do to bring attention to the problems of practice and project delivery in an environment of growing complexity? And, in what ways can we better recognize the majority of professionals, who are seldom published and little recognized for their efforts?

   The AIA Gold Medal is awarded “by the national AIA Board of Directors in recognition of a significant body of work of lasting influence on the theory and practice of architecture.” While the criteria embraces practice, and while some recent recipients accomplished things other than or in addition to great aesthetics (Samuel Mockbee’s work for example was aimed largely at demystifying modern architecture and exposing architecture students to extreme poverty in their own backyard), who was the last recipient rewarded with a gold medal for his or her work in “practice”?

   “Design” and “Practice” are of course inextricably intertwined concepts. Someone could be the next Frank Lloyd Wright and unless he or she can translate the design into reality while keeping their office open (i.e.; unless they can practice) no one would ever know. Design is important, but practice is equally so. Thinking of them as separate concepts diminishes and devalues both.

   I believe that any problem we have with the differentiation of the two concepts is of our own making. We elevate the design Architect, and we recognize (appropriately so) that they have immense and unique talents. On that same front, we virtually ignore those who work quietly behind the scenes to bring those visions and aesthetics to reality, most of whom have talents equally as immense and unique. That pattern has persisted for decades and until it changes, the inequity will remain.

   In terms of bringing attention to practice relative to design, I think much of the work is currently underway in that regard is beginning to close that gap. As for recognizing the
majority of professionals for their efforts, until we are ready to move away from theory and aesthetics as the basis for most recognition (either that or broaden the term “recognition” to the point where it has little meaning), we likely won’t recognize the unsung majority. While that is unfortunate in some respects, it is likely no different than is the case in most professions – not better perhaps but certainly not worse.

We have tools to solve this problem – simply view exemplary practice accomplishments in the same light we view exemplary aesthetic achievements - we just have to use them.