AIA California Council Questions

Helene Combs Dreiling, FAIA Responses – Candidate for 2013 First Vice President/
2014 President-elect

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?*

   Concentrating resources on the most important member benefits would mitigate mediocrity, promote excellence, and alleviate redundancy. In contrast, continuing to try to offer a broad range of benefits waters down everything, and more importantly, exposes the AIA to more and more competition, usually of a type that is focused on a single product or service (to wit, USGBC). As advocated by the Component Partnerships Committee several years ago, a clear definition of roles and responsibilities for each level of the AIA (local, state, and national) needs to be understood and practiced by all components if we are to be as effective and efficient as possible in delivering member service and value.

   The document that addresses this most specifically is the Component Compact, which I am proud to have had a major role in preparing (along with AIACC’s own Paul W. Welch, Hon. AIA, among others). The Compact “articulates key organizing principles fundamental to fostering an environment that encourages collaboration among the local, state, and national components,” including partnerships, collaborative planning, the member/value proposition, and organizational issues. Further, it suggests a framework for making significant decisions on AIA initiatives and programs while carefully considering the implications they may have for other AIA components. I encourage all component execs and leaders to read and heed the unifying principles in this document. If we did so, the trust, understanding, empathy, and support between and among components - especially with national - would be greatly enhanced.

   As with many previous studies and reports which have not been fully implemented, employing the recommendations offered by the CPC would go a long way to addressing and solving these core concerns.

2. **Competition in a Global Market**

   *During the Grassroots Leadership and Advocacy Conference the profession was challenged to look outside U.S. borders 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?*

   In July 2005, as a Team Vice President on the national staff, I prepared a report on practice and marketplace trends for then EVP/CEO Norman L. Koonce, FAIA, as seen through the lens of AIA Community, my portfolio of responsibility. As one of my points, I included: "As 'the world becomes smaller,' firms and individuals - and the organizations representing them - will need to be prepared for practice within the societal, economic, and cultural climate of
foreign countries." Today, I would add "political" to the list of those influences that will "climatologically" affect opportunities for American architects to successfully practice abroad. I, along with others on the AIA Board of Directors, have already called for a comprehensive look at International membership, and this study should include not only membership issues, but practice issues for all aspects of creating architecture in a global market.

So many architects in the United States tend to be critical of the AIA in lots of ways. What a shame! I wish each and every naysayer could travel abroad to an event held by an International component - as I had the opportunity to do last fall - to see what those members say about the AIA. I was amazed by what PATRIOTS they are for the AIA; they're extremely dedicated and I was further taken with their high level of collegiality. They possess a keen sense of devotion to the organization and to the other individuals within the design and construction industry overall; this is something from which we could all learn.

In fact, it is just this sense of compatriotism that the AIA's International Committee Advisory Group (IC/AG) promotes. The individuals who make up this committee represent firms within and beyond US borders that have established successful business markets overseas; they are joined by the presidents of the five International components (AIA United Kingdom, AIA Continental Europe, AIA Hong Kong, AIA Japan, and AIA Middle East). At this year's Convention, at my suggestion, they are offering a pre-Convention workshop on developing work overseas; they are willing and anxious to share what they have learned with their colleagues, and more of these types of expert-led programs will benefit the profession and the organization as a whole - as many firms prepare to expand into these worldwide markets.

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?

The very best thing the AIA could do to help advance the professional position of these 'older' members is to prepare them to accept change more readily and to be courageous in doing so. Young professionals are adaptable and nimble, attributes which have helped them be more flexible in this tumultuous business climate. (Though many of their traditional practice jobs have evaporated, they have found creative and resourceful ways to be successful in other, related endeavors.) However, seasoned professionals are a bit less elastic … although being so would have allowed them to expand and explore other markets and specialties that could have helped them continue to thrive. So … we need to help them be 're-emerging' professionals; architects seldom retire but unlike the past, they will need to re-invent themselves (several times, perhaps) to ensure a brighter future, and the AIA should be their go-to place for this preparation.

Additionally, these well-seasoned individuals are the very ones who could be the strongest faces and voices of the profession in the eyes of the public … as Citizen Architects. Their doing so would elevate not only their own value to their communities, but also the stature of the entire profession in the public realm - the rising tide lifts all boats. Again, the AIA is the logical entity to empower and enable its members to feel comfortable and prepared to serve in these civic and community roles.
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?*

   Not long ago, many members of our profession attained licensure and never looked back. Thankfully that attitude towards future architects has greatly diminished in recent years, since this generation of emerging professionals has so much they can teach the veterans of the profession. There has thus been a renewed interest in mentorship with the realization that learning can ‘go both ways.’ Architects will get more serious about mentoring (and will make the personal commitment to do so) if they are incentivized by receiving more AIA continuing education credits for time spent either preparing for or engaging in mentorship activities.

   We are at a unique place in the history of this profession, where the knowledge and expertise held by incoming professionals is of greater value than ever before, particularly in the use of graphics programs, networking media, and other emergent technologies in architectural practice. Seasoned professionals must now realize that new graduates and young architects have valuable skill sets that can be beneficial to them individually and to a firm collectively.

   While the rigors of architectural education, experience, and examination have not decreased, significant changes to the requirements allow more flexibility in the pathway to licensure. Several emerging professionals have asked me about licensure in recent months and I have encouraged each to hang in there. Why? I am a believer in licensure, though once one becomes licensed he or she should pursue any career direction that might be more fulfilling or lucrative, whether mainstream or alternative. I encourage them to get the credentials, so they'll be more valuable; they will carry the credential forever and be proud of this achievement (and right now, self esteem is a good thing)! Please also see number five below …

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?*

   At the rate we are going, we are not replacing those who retire or otherwise exit the profession later in life. Our only choice to overcome this trend is to assure that we are not only relevant, but essential, to our emerging professionals, whether they are within mainstream practices or in fields beyond architecture by our traditional definition. The profession and organization should recognize how many young architects and emerging professionals were ‘lost’ in the last recession and assure that we do not let that talent shortage occur again.

   The best way to bridge this generation gap is to bridge the technology gap. Unlike the way we have operated as an association in the past, where the member came to us, I envision that the new paradigm will respond to up-and-coming professionals who expect the association to come to them. That will happen largely through new delivery systems that optimize current and future technologies including database utilization, digital communications, and social
'media-tion' (my word). Through these systems, we will be able to provide a new breed of delivery of member value in such areas as education, networking, communication, and information. While these will not replace personal relationships, they will be essential to the way emerging generations interact with individuals and institutions into the future.

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?*

The penchant to be all things to all people is inherent to associations, and the AIA seems to be especially good at it! (This is natural for a professional society, though.) We want to provide more for our members' dues dollars; we wish to increase the value of belonging to the AIA; we hope to respond to diverse member needs by offering diverse member programs. We also seem to add more and more without ever taking anything away. And ironically, the more things we are up to, the harder it is to keep our members abreast of all of our service offerings; their awareness of all of these benefits is limited.

In reality, our resources would be wisely directed if we were focused on a tighter menu of services and benefits, initiatives and programs. In an April 2010 *Associations Now* magazine article, Martin Sirk, CEO of the International Congress and Convention Association, said, "I have concluded that my association can never be more than a small segment of its members' lives, so we strive to make that slice of time as valuable, enriching, and constructive as possible."

In short, our job as a professional society is to meet the actual and factual needs of helping our members succeed in delivering architecture - as broadly defined. Truthfully, with every decision we make and every action we take, we should ask the question, "Does this support our members in their practice of architecture?"

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?*

This point constitutes the core of my platform as a candidate for First Vice President | President-elect in 2013 and influences my desire to be President in 2014. In this regard, I advocate that we become the architects of change … the architects of community … the architects of culture.

Simply put, we need to think in terms of "culture" rather than "sculpture." There is no question that design is important, but the answer is that our definition of design needs to be expanded. Based on my own experience of participating in the AIA in a host of volunteer and staff positions for nearly two decades, I have observed that our narrow view of architecture as a discipline and architects as professionals has been detrimental to us as a profession and an organization. Whether it was because we were risk-averse or for other reasons, we have allowed other professionals to chip away at our areas of expertise, when we hold the capacity and capability to excel in all of these tangential fields and forays.
If we alter our own professional culture (the manner we act and behave), not only will we enhance public awareness (the way we are perceived by the public), we will enrich societal culture (the appreciation of and expectation for good design). Doing so means: (1) Understanding that the creation of architecture is an activity where parts can be played by architects in a host of design capacities, all of which contribute to design in its broadest definition; (2) Realizing that our design efforts should be beyond just buildings, utilizing the greatest array of professional skills and talents of our members; (3) Ensuring that our contributions - our projects - are responsive to our clients' needs and beneficial to the communities in which they are placed; and (4) Honoring the projects and persons who exhibit these expanded beliefs. Only by viewing architecture in this larger context - and credibly demonstrating our principles to the public - will we realize the full measure of our attributes and abilities.