DesignIntelligence®
Quarterly

Professional INTERACTION

2021 Q2

DesignIntelligence® Quarterly

DesignIntelligence Quarterly is a publication of DesignIntelligence LLC which comprises the Design Futures Council, DesignIntelligence Media, DesignIntelligence Research, DesignIntelligence Strategic Advisors and DesignIntelligence Leadership Institute.

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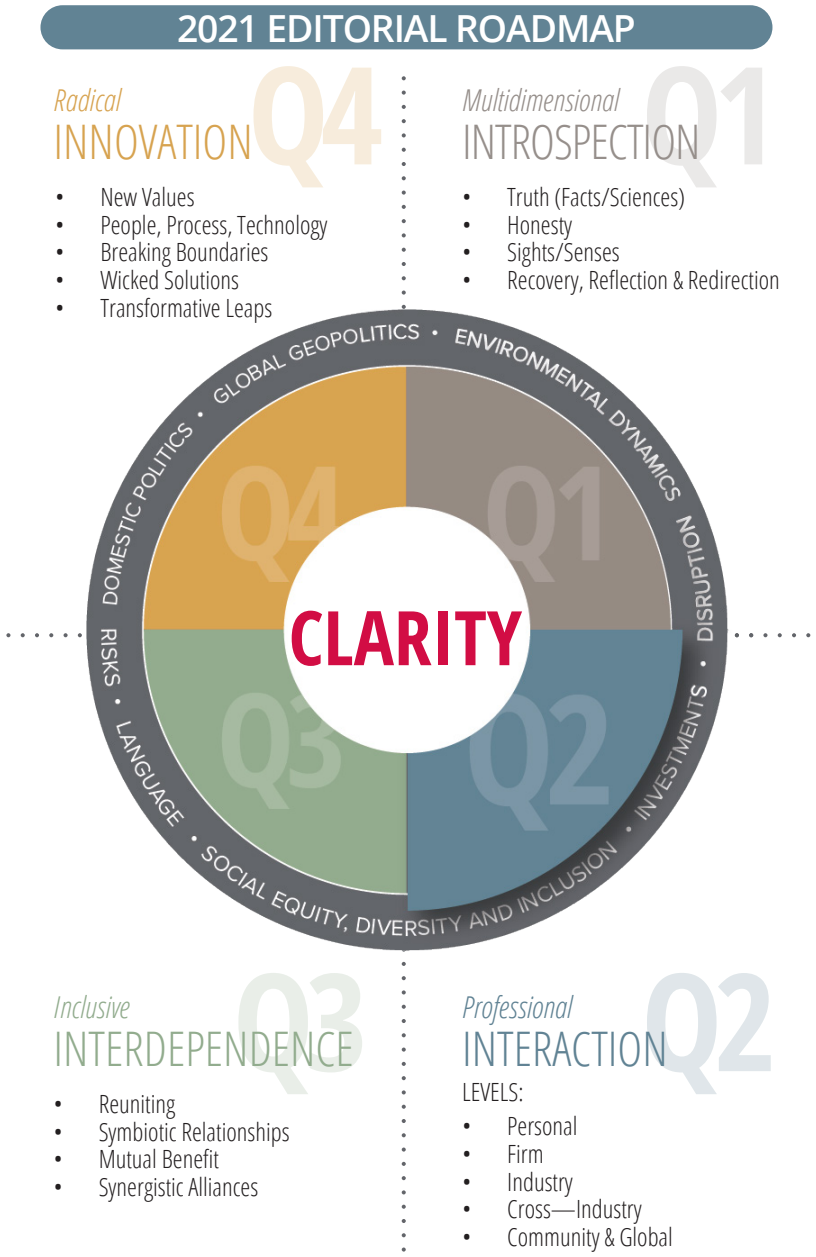
CONTEXT: Professional Interaction

As we continue our year-long investigation of human dynamics, this Quarter focuses on Professional Interaction. Concurrently fueled by parallel global movements in social awareness, equity, the pandemic and environmental concerns, we revisit basic principles to hear from colleagues deeply invested in soft skills. DI President and CEO Dave Gilmore's essay Essential Interaction shares the principles of agenda-free interactions and other essential enablers of open, constructive interpersonal exchange.

Continuing his 25 years of contributions, frequent DI writer Scott Simpson wonders: Can You Hear a Pin Drop? You can if you are listening. In Cracking Culture, Snøhetta Managing Principal Elaine Molinaar reveals proven collaboration tips. University of Illinois Dean Francisco Rodriguez-Suárez discusses international perspectives and bias in his interview entitled Leading Collaboration. HKS' Director Yiselle Santos Rivera expounds her broad agenda in justice, equity, diversity and inclusion within the firm and beyond in Adopting the "J.E.D.I." Mindset. In The Heart of the Matter, a conversation with Deans Karen Nelson and Beth Lundell Garver, The Boston Architectural College's integrated approach to professional interaction is revealed. In Places of Purpose, EDSA Principal Marco Larrea shares his secrets of international collaboration – and envisions a project startup. My essay, Connecting: The Power of Others explores listening, empathy, technology, inclusion, scheduling and situational awareness – on-project, learned skills not formally offered in architecture school curricula of the past, but so needed now. Finally, in another of his reflections from the U.K. Paul Hyett offers Professional Interaction: A Higher Calling.

We hope this investigative collection around connection helps you relate.

Michael LeFevre, FAIA Emeritus
Managing Editor, DI Media Publications



ESSAY

Can You Hear a Pin Drop?

DesignIntelligence Quarterly

SCOTT SIMPSON

Senior Fellow, Design Futures Council

Can You Hear a Pin Drop?

Seeking Clarity Amidst Cacophony

The world is teeming with messages of all sorts, swirling around us as if we lived in a giant blender. Visual media include film, broadcast and cable TV, and signs of all kinds telling us what to do, where to go and how to get there. Aural media include radios, telephones, formal speeches and presentations, music of all kinds and routine conversation, not to mention random background noises like the sound of an approaching car or the chirping of bluebirds overhead. Graphic media include books, newspapers, email, texts, tweets and websites of infinite variety. Advertising, of course, is ubiquitous — it seems to permeate the air that we breathe. All of this screams for our immediate attention. How in the world are we to make sense of it?

Fortunately, the human brain is equipped to distinguish between the urgent and the mundane, at least to some degree. Still, it's often hard to separate the signals from the noise. Effective communication, not to mention our sanity, requires that we prioritize. The irony is that in order to take it all in and make sense of it, we have to filter most of it out.

And that's just the signals we receive. What about the signals we send out? All of us clamor for attention. We want to be heard, but even more importantly, we yearn to be understood.

The first rule of communication is to be truly observant. Listening is more important than speaking. Why? Because to respond effectively to the situation at hand, you must first understand the context.

We are constantly broadcasting a stream of messages: through our appearance, our posture, how we behave, how we speak, how we listen and how we respond to others. To compound the confusion, most of the time we broadcast conflicting signals, full of ambiguities and contradictions.

Is it any wonder that there is so much confusion in the world or that people are so frequently misunderstood? In truth, it's amazing that we communicate as well as we do. Effective communication requires simplicity and clarity. The first and most important step is to engage the attention of the audience. How will people know we have something useful to say and that it's worth listening to? Why should they care? (Here, it helps to remember that what's important to us is unlikely to be equally important to others.)

The problem of communication in the design and construction industry is particularly acute because we use many different languages during the life of a project. There are written and spoken words, of course, but there are also graphics (both hand-drawn and computer-generated) that compress the three-dimensional qualities of space into just two dimensions. The graphic language of design — plans, sections and elevations — is an abstraction that requires a certain skill to decipher, and very few clients are truly fluent in that language. While clients are highly intelligent, they are also frequently confused as to what is meant by "design intent." Then there is the language of finance: budgets, spreadsheets and balance sheets.

These are things most clients understand quite well but are baffling to many, if not most, architects. It is just as difficult to translate design value into business terms as business value into design terms, yet both languages are crucial to the success of any project.

On top of that, the skills of many different people are required to bring a project to life: clients, architects, engineers, consultants, suppliers, contractors and subcontractors, not to mention financiers and the authorities that have jurisdiction over the project, such as zoning and planning officials. Each of these experts has his/her own special language, acronyms and folklore. All of them bring their special expertise to the table, but it's a challenge to communicate effectively across the silos.

How do we make sense of all this?

The first rule of communication is to be truly observant. Listening is more important than speaking. Why? Because to respond effectively to the situation at hand, you must first understand the context. There are lots of ways to do this, many of which have nothing to do with the spoken word. If you doubt this, just imagine that you're in an airplane watching a movie without the sound on. Can you follow the story line? Do you know who's happy or sad and why? Can you sense which of the characters are friends and which are the antagonists? Can you anticipate what's likely to happen next? Do you know how the story will end? That understanding comes from being attuned to the context; none of it comes from the soundtrack.

The second rule of communication is to have something useful to say. In a world where we are all clamoring for attention, this is surprisingly rare. We are often tempted to "clarify," "amplify" or "echo" a point of view offered in a meeting without adding any real value. There is no need to repeat what is already obvious. Before you speak, consider if what you are about to say will really contribute useful information or change the course of the discussion in a meaningful way. If not, keep quiet. Remember the proverb: "Even a fool is thought wise if he remains silent and discerning if he holds his tongue."

Good communication starts with careful listening and a true economy of speech, but there's much more to it than that. Here are a few tips:

1. **Take it slow.**
   Most people have a limited capacity to absorb new information, not because they are dull, but rather because their heads are already chock-full of stuff and they need to make room for more. You will be better understood by your audience if you let each point sink in before proceeding to the next one.

2. **Use the preferred medium.**
   Some people respond best to one-on-one conversation; others are more comfortable with phone calls or email. Some people are visual, in which case sketches are a good way to get a point across, while for others those scribbles are baffling or confusing. In short, if you are traveling in France and wish to be understood, speak French.

3. **Listen more than you speak.**
   The rule of thumb when meeting with clients is they should talk more than half the time. When this happens, you have a chance to learn something. That is not the case if you are hogging too much airtime.

4. **Say it once.**
   Multiple versions of the same message often lead to ambiguity. It's OK to repeat the same point for emphasis, but waxing poetic is bound to sow confusion (or worse, boredom). Do your audience favor — make it easy to understand your message and don't waste their time.

5. **Be clear, concise and convincing.**
   This is the best way to get your point across. If you present for half an hour, your audience will remember that you gave a speech. If you speak for five minutes, they'll remember what you said.

6. **Consistency counts.**
   Stick to the message. If you deviate too much, it dilutes credibility, and people will stop paying attention — or worse, stop caring.

7. **Speak loudly through silence.**
   Being quiet is one of the most powerful forms of communication. Allow time for your message to sink in. Wait before you respond to a comment or a question. A thoughtful pause will focus attention and serve to tee up your next point.

8. **Confirm receipt.**
   Did your audience really understand what you said? How do you know? Body language speaks volumes. Are your listeners leaning forward? Is there good eye contact? Are they nodding in understanding and agreement? If not, you've missed the mark.

Above all, keep it personal. The most effective communication occurs when people are truly on the same wavelength; messages are sent and received with total clarity. That is not to say large-scale communications cannot be effective, but the most meaningful are those that involve a personal connection of some sort. What's truly important to you? If you want people to care, let them know how you really feel and why. That's how to achieve true commonality of purpose. When that happens, anything is possible.

In this noisy, confusing and raucous world, can you still hear a pin drop?

You can if you are paying attention.

Scott Simpson is a Senior Fellow in the Design Futures Council and a regular contributor to DesignIntelligence.

Leading Collaboration

DesignIntelligence Quarterly

Leading Collaboration

University of Illinois School of Architecture Director Francisco Rodríguez-Suárez discusses international perspectives, synergy, bias, translation and regaining a place at the table.

FRANCISCO RODRÍGUEZ-SUÁREZ

FAIA, Director, University of Illinois School of Architecture

DesignIntelligence (DI): You have an amazing background, having served as dean at the University of Puerto Rico and as guest critic at schools all over the world, from Paris, to Rome, to Asia, Latin America and across the U.S. Your welcome message at Illinois talks about current student programs in Africa and Asia. What have your travels suggested for future directions in collaboration among the design professions?

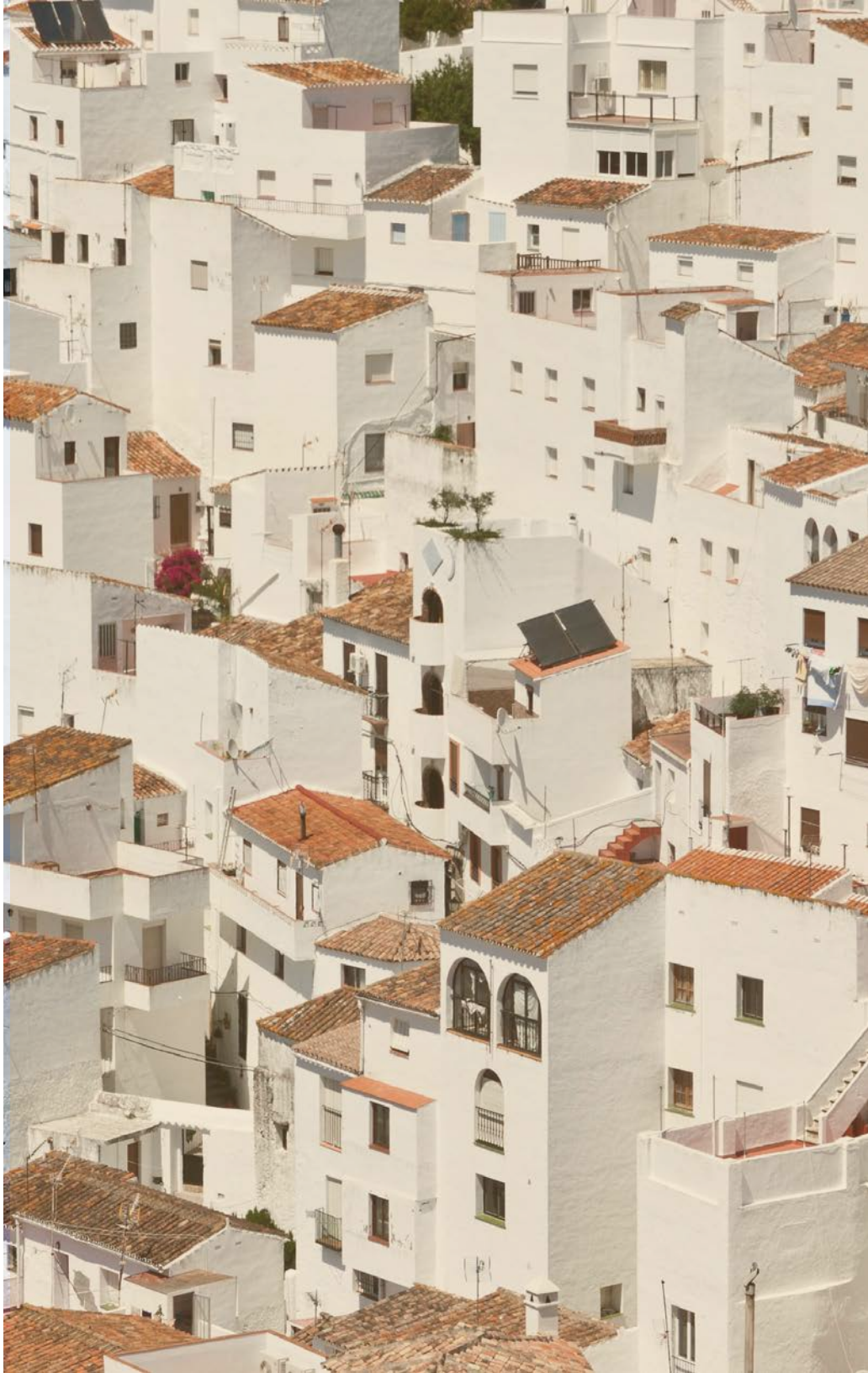
Francisco Rodríguez-Suárez (FRS): Normally, we have resident studios in Chicago and Barcelona. We are currently also exploring some exciting studios in Tokyo and Johannesburg. Last semester, we investigated Buenos Aires, Argentina; Lagos, Nigeria; and Volterra, Italy. Next semester we are negotiating studios in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, both of which are framed as collaborations with private industry. It is important that we expand our international footprint and relevance, and our possibilities for interdisciplinary and professional collaboration. This semester, Professor Sara Bartumeus is offering a hybrid architecture and landscape architecture studio collaborating with the ETSAB and the municipality of Barcelona. Our current Plym Distinguished Visiting Professor is Mark Raymond, the director of the GSA in Johannesburg, who is leading a joint studio between our two institutions. At Illinois, we are committed to providing and facilitating more of these unique experiences, closer to the realities that shape the contemporary practice of architecture in a world that is smaller and more connected than ever.

DI: You have several other significant interests that give perspective — as a recent past president of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), as a writer and editor of five books and through your own practice at RSVP Architects. Do any of the threads from these roles connect with your current role as director of the program at Illinois?

FRS: I couldn't practice without teaching and I couldn't teach without being able to practice. It's a calibrated balance, a pursuit of a unifying paradigm between theory and practice where one constantly informs the other. Aside from being a professor, writer and editor, I have worked in urban design projects, interior design, graphic design, landscape architecture and industrial design. The education of an architect should synthesize a variety of disciplines and allow their development in an array of scales and contexts.

DI: Architectural educators and practitioners have struggled with how we are perceived over recent decades. Our clients and contractor partners have told us we need to improve in caring about our clients and partners in lieu of or own aesthetic missions. How do we effect those kinds of changes, and are you implementing any of those ideas in the curriculum at Illinois?

FRS: First and foremost, I see myself as a designer in an administrative position: designing programs, solutions, possibilities and collaborations. Designing new platforms. We are here to design, create, facilitate and implement the future. Educators and administrators have to find a way to say yes, to make things happen, to move away from the "impossible" label, to transcend our physical boundaries and export stories others will want to relate to and be a part of.



DI: How would you describe the mindset around collaboration within ACSA schools? Do people care about interacting and collaborating more broadly? Are they teaching it? When can we look back on the Howard Roark model and declare it over?

FRS: When I presided over the ACSA, I said architects needed to sit at the table with other disciplines and direct the discussion. We lobbied for our inclusion within STEM. Whenever I teach a design studio, we stress collaborating in teams. This generation is changing. It is less about heroic individuals like Howard Roark or starchitects, and more about making a difference beyond the traditional reach of architecture. After my time at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, I went back to my hometown and spent five years working on its urban core when everyone else was looking to work in London or New York. I taught at our state university and was able to lead it for almost a decade.

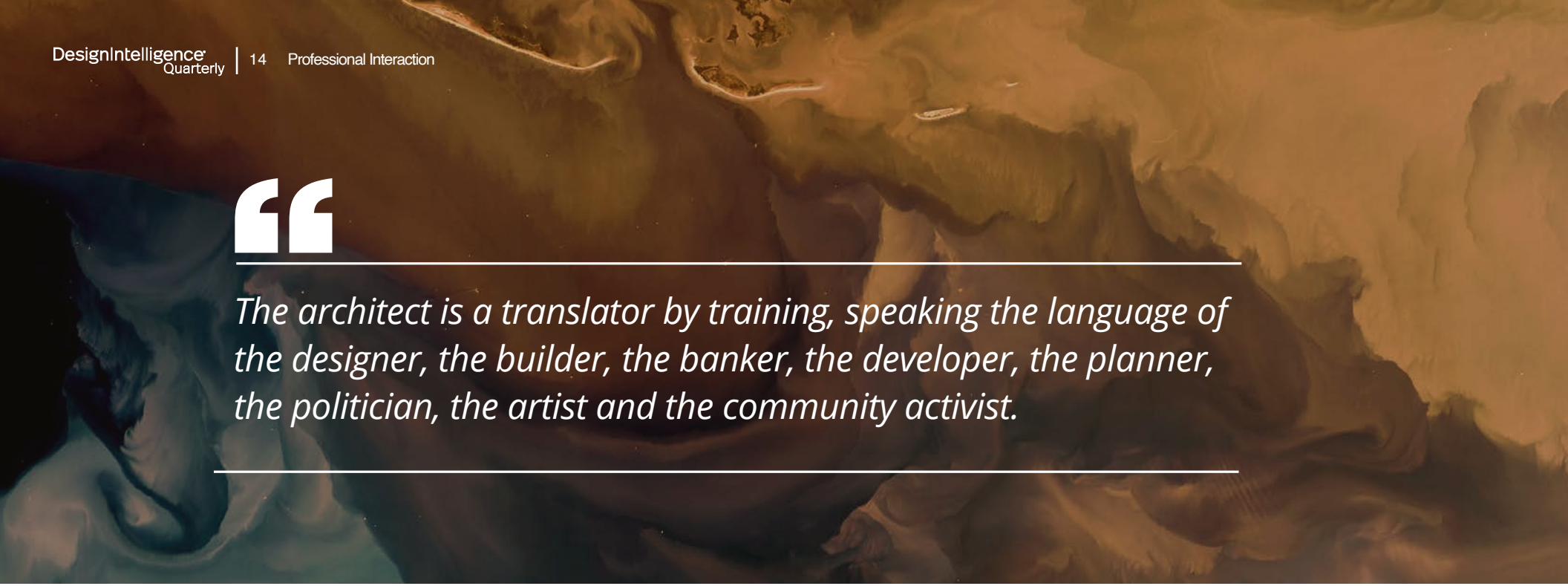
DI: What kind of pedagogy and curriculum are you deploying to teach empathy and better social interaction and communication skills — and the new motivations that go with them? In my education in the '70s, our only exposure was being given a group project, but we lacked science and skills training in collaboration.

FRS: I conducted a research project for over a decade that resulted in dozens of interviews, various international symposia and a publication titled "Chronologies of an Architectural Pedagogy." We visited and documented architecture programs in five different continents and explored various ways that gravitated away from the idea of the starchitect into one where students understand they will be part of a larger team, each with a stake and an understanding of the city, neighborhood and context. Right now, we are collaborating with Johannesburg, Barcelona, Chicago and with a real architect in Champaign and on the Solar Decathlon. We are even collaborating with the campus image and branding office in a campus wayfinding proposal.

DI: Communication always seems to be at the root of team issues. Lurking behind that are psychological biases and default behaviors. Going back to the welcome video on your college's webpage, dozens of faculty members spoke in a variety of international languages. Do we need translators on teams? For example, I spent 20 years working as one in a national CM firm. My role was to translate, interpret and add value between the languages of "design," "construction" and "owner."

FRS: The architect is a translator by training, speaking the language of the designer, the builder, the banker, the developer, the planner, the politician, the artist and the community activist. I am convinced architects are uniquely qualified to be the translator of the teams that are tasked with the transformation of our physical context. Our education should take into consideration the desirability to be eloquent and articulate in the various languages that will be spoken at the project table.

Most degrees in a university are strictly about the world of the arts or the world of the sciences.



The architect is a translator by training, speaking the language of the designer, the builder, the banker, the developer, the planner, the politician, the artist and the community activist.

Architecture is the only one that proposes a unifying paradigm between the arts/humanities and the sciences/technology. This is extremely important and invaluable, but we do not talk about it — or take advantage of it.

DI: Beyond the international perspective of diversity, Illinois has traditionally adopted an integrated view of school and practice. Randy Deutsch talks about teaching students to wear multiple hats: design, technology and manager, simultaneously. Does your school's tradition of an "integrated practical approach" continue under your leadership?

FRS: Absolutely. It is a privilege to have a professor like Randy in our school, who is a leader in the intersection between the profession and the discipline. Illinois has ostensibly developed a solid international reputation through its Building Performance Programs, from the Structures concentration to the integrated approach. I intend to provide a wider platform for their development locally and internationally.

DI: Could your reach include relationships with builders, scientists and more?

FRS: It could. I recently had a conversation with Rachel Switzky, director of Illinois' Siebel Center for Design, about the possibility of forming a creative board composed of various game-changers, thinkers and disruptors from different schools and faculties at Illinois, including the arts, sciences and business.

DI: Why have architects faced obstacles, biases or issues in collaborating? What can we learn from those experiences?

FRS: For a long time, architects were reluctant to sit at the table and lead where important decisions are made. They shied away from developers and politicians and assumed an impenetrable bubble of a righteous self-referential discourse.

As a result, our roles were defined by others based on their misconceptions and particular biases. In some cultures, the architect was little more than an aesthetic consultant who provided the frosting for the cake developed by a group of respectable engineers.

I have worked in such environments where it was incredibly difficult to enroll everyone in a vision, when no one was ready to accept your leadership role. I believe we are now designing our own platforms for the development of our discipline and projecting its agency and potential as opposed to its limitations.

I'm very optimistic about the future.

Francisco Javier Rodríguez-Suárez, FAIA, is the Clayton T. Miers professor in Architecture and director of the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois. Professor Rodríguez-Suárez studied architecture at Georgia Tech, Paris, and Harvard GSD, where he earned a Master of Architecture with Distinction, winning the American Institute of Architects Medal, the Portfolio Award and a Fulbright Fellowship.

For nine years, he served as dean of the University of Puerto Rico School of Architecture and has taught and lectured at various universities in Europe, Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the United States. He has been invited by the American Academy in Rome to be a visiting scholar and by many prestigious universities to be visiting critic, including the AA, MIT, Harvard, Penn, Cornell, Barcelona, Seville, Toronto, Madrid, Barcelona, the Glasgow School of Arts, Tulane, Rice, the Istanbul Technological University and the University of Johannesburg. He served as the director of (in)forma, an award-winning academic journal, and has edited five books including "Alma Mater," "Aula Magna," "Chronologies of an Architectural Pedagogy," "De Buena Tinta" and "Contemporary Architecture in Puerto Rico 1992–2010," a joint effort with the AIA.

His practice, RSVP Architects, has earned over 10 AIA-PR awards and citations and several BIENAL awards in seven different categories. Rodríguez-Suárez is a Fellow of the AIA and was selected by El Nuevo Día newspaper as one of the ten most influential pioneers in Puerto Rico in 2008, when he collaborated with artist Ai Wei Wei on the Ordos 100 project in China. He recently finished his term as president of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA).

The Heart of the Matter

DesignIntelligence Quarterly

KAREN L. NELSON
Dean and Faculty
Boston Architectural College
School of Architecture

BETHANY I. LUNDELL GARVER
AIA, NCARB, Dean of Practice and Faculty
Boston Architectural College

The Heart of the Matter

The Boston Architectural College School of Architecture Dean Karen Nelson and Practice Dean Beth Lundell Garver share an integrated approach to professional interaction.

DesignIntelligence (DI): Karen, you have a background in architecture and cognitive science. What brought you to the BAC?

Karen Nelson (KN): The BAC's educational mission drew me in: "to provide excellent design education emerging from practice and accessible to diverse communities." I am inspired by the institution's promise to address anyone interested in design and to address the whole student — not just intellectual curiosity, but also a student's aspirations and financial realities to make a meaningful life in design. That includes professional practice, research, leadership, construction and a host of other areas.

DI: How about you, Beth? What brought you to the BAC?

Beth Lundell Garver (BLG): My first time sitting in the BAC's Cascieri Hall, I was joined by practitioners, educators and thought leaders from across the country called together by ArchVoices, a nonprofit think tank for architectural education and internship.

The brainstorming began with remarks by then-BAC President Ted Landsmark on radical changes in professional practice and persistent disconnects between architecture schools and design firms. At that time, I was in the thick of it at Rafael Viñoly Architects in New York City. The greatest connection I could find between my education and professional growth was the grit required to sustain the long hours, sleepless nights and disregard for my personal well-being. On the other hand, the BAC erected and protected a rare bridge between education and practice — a bridge that promoted knowledge exchange and mastery by supporting self-directed students along a path between the two experiences on a daily basis. This astonished me. A decade later, I was called to return to the BAC and dedicate my own career to furthering the bridge between education and practice.

DI: The BAC has had a strong identity of integrating design education and practice for 130 years. I believe that to be a minority position. In my own experience as a faculty member at another university — granted it was 45 years ago, but things haven't changed much — suggestions to offer hands-on experiences and practical experience were frowned upon and dismissed as "trade school" or "vocational." "We're a design school. There will be plenty of time for students to get experience after graduation. This is the only place they can learn design theory." You've heard this before.

How has taking your stance shaped your belief system, mission and curricula? Have you had to react to criticism for this stance?

KN: My belief system, which is still evolving, emerges from the places in my own education and young professional experiences — and what would have helped me navigate the professional field. Teaching at the BAC helped me bring the entire student into focus in my work developing the curriculum. The BAC's curricula holds that a student learns in both settings — in classrooms and in professional practice. Our aim is to have the student integrate these experiences through their educational journey, through active reflection and through portfolios that are assessed qualitatively at important milestones in their program.

It seems to me that while our model of education has been critiqued by many, there are increasing numbers that are turning toward our model, as it better fits a more diverse student body.

BLG: The BAC is a place where many different people convene to engage in work they are called to do. We are mission-driven and resilient. The city — and the world — is our campus. We welcome everyone — students, faculty, staff, alumni, community partners and employers — who come to us ready to offer their gifts of experience and expertise in ways that set the stage for transformation of old, oppressive paradigms into new living systems. Adult learners are at the heart of this, as they bring a breadth and depth of insight to design education that demands an understanding of how our curricula can be immediately applied to their lives outside the classroom. In supporting this relevance, the BAC creates and cares for a productive flow between challenge and ability by dedicating curricular space for students' self-directed learning.

The BAC emboldens students to seek their own learning advocates outside the curated and controlled environment of the traditional classroom. We do this through the practice component of our curricula, shaped to unite learning advocates from the academy and the field by together promoting students' search for agency and purpose as designers of their own lives, careers, communities and futures. Our practice-integrated curricular model challenges BAC students to be change agents now — change agents who commit every day to evolving the architectural profession from the inside out, with us, striving to shift toward practices that are more entrepreneurial and, at the same time, more committed to public interest design.

DI: Has your integrated approach offered an advantage in coping in response to the COVID-19 virus?

KN: We have 14 years of experience teaching architecture online. That helped us meet the new circumstances with confidence that our expert faculty could help the entire community — and design faculty across North America. The pandemic has exacted a more serious toll on populations of color and those with low incomes. Many of our students became financially responsible for relatives who could not work or had to juggle their education, their employment and their families.

BLG: While we have seen student employment impacted by the pandemic, we have also seen design firms step up to intentionally protect and broaden opportunities for BAC students working on financially secure projects. One student told me that virtual client meetings are actually helping them engage more with the practice since they now get to listen in. Another student is using COVID as a time to reflect upon how public health and financial crises impact some sectors more than others. Our integrated approach emphasizes how soft skills like adaptability, teamwork, creativity and communication help keep students employed by preparing them to swiftly pivot to new paths in practice, when necessary.

DI: Is it evolving in response to the current crises (e.g., economic, political, social, environmental, misinformation)? New objectives? A reshaping of mission?

KN: My BAC colleague, Scott Harrison, associate vice president of academic affairs, points out that the conversation around privilege, civil rights and structural racism has shifted. It is now in focus. It has moved from the margins to dinner table conversations everywhere. We have been aware of structural racism in our curriculum — and have offered electives for many years that address spaces of the incarcerated (by faculty and alumni Jana Belack and Rand Lemley) and designing for cultural differences (by faculty member Hyacinth John). We have been examining the choices we share with our students and making certain that they are more inclusive. This has accelerated in the past few years. Much work still needs to be done. As an institution, we are working on being more socially just — not just in curricular endeavors, but systemically.

DI: In reviewing your website, I was encouraged to see practice assessments as a part of student mentoring and evaluation. Can you explain that process?

BLG: Practice assessments are incremental one-on-one meetings between a student and a practitioner faculty where the student's work-based experience is documented and learning outcomes in specific knowledge areas are measured. We use a rubric called a Student Learning Contract (SLC) to qualitatively evaluate students' performance. The SLC is a set of competencies that serve as a guide for students who are drawn toward many different practice-integrated experiences that range from professional project delivery to entrepreneurialism, project management, public interest design and research. I talk about the practice assessment process more in the Public Interest Design Education Guidebook (2018).

Practice assessments have a long history at the BAC. In 1971, we became the first and only NAAB-accredited architecture program in the United States to be offered outside of a traditional university degree program. At that time, the BAC was an 80-year-old grassroots organization called the Boston Architectural Center, not yet an official college. We were informed that reaccreditation would require "quantifying and qualifying" the experiential learning happening in students' offices. So in response, Don Brown, AIA Emeritus, was hired to develop a new system of practice assessment that had yet to exist anywhere in the world. The BAC model was closely observed by the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) who adopted our system, in part, to create what has evolved into the Architecture Experience Program (AXP) required for licensure today.

DI: What's your position on professional interaction? The implication in my question is that we need to become better at it. In all senses — racial, gender and other biases; listening and empathy skills; new technologies; all to end the lone wolf design practices of old. Has that thinking been a part of the college's thinking historically? If not, is it now?

BLG: Part of our mission has always been to expand upon and transform professional practice. In doing so, we need to do better at acknowledging key differences between monochronic and polychronic work cultures. As we grow increasingly global, considering intercultural acceptance and adaptability in the way we approach practice-integrated design education remains top-of-mind.

DI: How are you implementing these new areas of emphasis?

KN: We have instituted two courses in each student's first year (foundation) that ask students to work in collaborative teams. These teams celebrate and integrate each student's identity first through a collaborative credo, then a community meal, then through a series of exercises that bring forward (through consensus) shared values to create a firm to help a community client. We also help students negotiate salaries, help them with tools for networking and in advocating for themselves and for clients larger than the people in the room.

DI: Are you practicing what you preach in terms of removing bias and knocking down barriers? For example, if a student wants an internship with an engineer, contractor, owner or manufacturer, is that OK? How far does it go?

KN: The BAC endeavors to remove bias and put forward BIPOC students for positions in firms, as teaching assistants and as educators once they have graduated. We are fortunate to have many firm partners who are actively trying to undo years of structural racism by hiring, mentoring and developing diverse student employees.

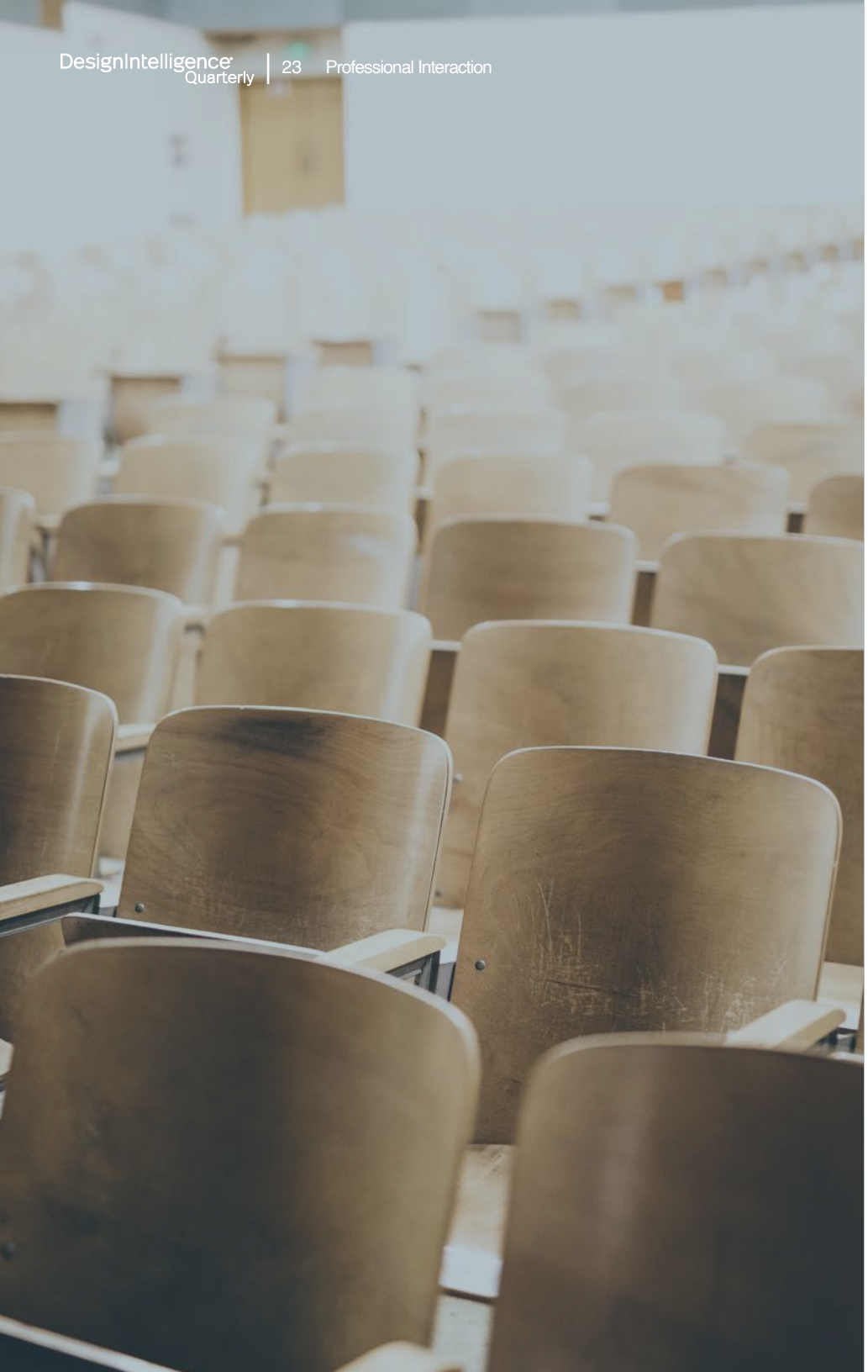
Students are very self-directed in their pursuit of practice. Each student determines the kind of practice or research that they hope to participate in. Some students engage in community work, while others are involved in master planning. Some students enjoy envisioning virtual reality (VR) meeting spaces, while others are meeting with clients and designing buildings. For those students who aim to become licensed architects, we help them advocate for AXP hours in areas needing development. For those who hope to work with communities, we connect students with opportunities in our networks. Working in construction is recognized as being related to architectural education.

DI: Do you teach collaboration or social skills? If so, how? Surely it requires faculty with skills beyond architecture. Do they have enough sense of design process and thinking to apply it in context?

BLG: We believe collaboration and social skills do not reach beyond architecture — they are the heart of it. As such, we created a full-time faculty position, the director of collaborative practice, dedicated to spearheading first-year, foundation-level courses and programs that creatively develop these cognitive skills and competencies through community-based, public interest design collaborations. Starting students' first semester, architecture and allied disciplines are introduced as a social, transdisciplinary practice in a core intensive course called CityLab.

CityLab teaches design stewardship through neighborhood walks, interviews, observation, sketching and the courage of conversation. The final assignment involves developing team credos that use film to celebrate the way BAC students' differences strengthen our community through "we are … we believe … we hope to … and we know this to be true" calls to action. Collaboration and interpersonal skills are again reinforced during the second-semester Community Practice core course. Community Practice scaffolds lessons in communication, collaboration and community engagement that complement and enhance other practice-integrated learning experiences at the BAC, including students' full immersion into community-based projects offered through the BAC Gateway Initiative.

Since 2008, our Gateway Initiative has connected over 1,500 BAC students to more than 80 nonprofit organizations and municipalities through hundreds of practice-integrated, community-based projects. Currently, BAC Gateway student teams are working on several sponsored projects ranging from the creation of a master plan for public art, lighting and projection mapping in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, to engaging public participation processes guiding visions for a new civic center in the heart of Uxbridge (also here in Massachusetts) through the adaptive reuse of a vacant school. BAC Gateway faculty bring an array of expertise in architectural practice powered by collaboration and civic engagement.



Faculty members include Killion Mokwete, Abby Gordon and Rob Freni, founders of the nonprofit, community-rooted architecture and planning firm Adaptiv; Rashmi Ramaswamy, co-founder of Territory, a nonprofit providing skill-building programs in urban design, public art and community-engaged planning for Chicago teenagers in at-risk communities; Ben Peterson, community design director at the Boston Society for Architecture; and many more deeply committed and talented civic-minded educators and design practitioners.

DI: Do you offer education on the use of new interaction technologies? Gaming, live collaboration, central data, AI and augmented reality as new interaction forms? Because despite the hype, very few owners or contractors are deploying these tools on real-life projects. Who will take the lead in learning this new "craft"?

KN: We have been offering courses in VR that use gaming technology for more than five years. The college initiated a group of educators, students, professionals and alumni who are imagining how mixed (MR), augmented (AR), and virtual reality can extend the space of learning, explore iterative design ideas, create spaces of community and offer new ways into design education.

Submitted photos

Student Testimonials

"Coming to the BAC, I was told by Dean of Students Richard Griswold that you should prepare a list of five architecture firms that you aspire to work at. I set up what I consider a rather ambitious list, with some of the best firms in the city, before walking into my first-ever meeting with the practice department. After showing Beth Lundell Garver my list, she took one look at it and my schedule and told me that both of my studio instructors for that semester worked at one of the firms on that list. At the end of the semester, I found myself and fellow classmates presenting our studio final in the lobby of Perkins&Will's Boston Studio. The following day, I was asked to return for an interview and one week later I landed a position as an architectural designer. Since then, I have had the opportunity to work on a wide range of project types in various project phases across multiple market sectors. Practicing architecture while studying architecture has allowed me to bring the latest skills and techniques learned in studio or class and directly apply them in industry. It has also allowed me to bring my research and schoolwork to coworkers in order to gain further insight on design ideas or direction. Working with the BAC's practice department has been a refreshing, stress-free experience, as they put the BAC's vast vibrant network of alumni and practicing faculty to work for their students."

—Sergio Riccardi, M. Arch candidate

"As part of a UNICEF project in Somalia, I served as lead designer to Support Strengthening Health Systems in Puntland. The overall objective was to increase access to quality and affordable health care services for over two million residents in the Puntland Region of Somalia. The scope of the project includes twenty health centers and two regional health offices that targeted both urban and rural centers. This is my first project in Somalia, and it gave me the opportunity to visit the proposed sites personally and understand how vital they are to these communities. I am happy that I had the opportunity to be able to see how these resilient communities functioned and that I am able to give back to my community that is still recovering from the civil war."

—Naimo Bakar, M. Arch candidate

"During my time at the BAC, it was a really tall task to successfully maintain a good academic record as a full-time student while simultaneously working full-time at an architecture firm and performing at a competitive level. I am glad to look back, however, and realize that the many skills I developed during that time allow me today to have the flexibility to practice on my own. These are some strange times we live in, and the value of independence is highlighted more than ever. At graduation, it felt as if the long hours and extra hard work were coming to an end as we left academics behind. The truth is — I know now — it was simply the beginning. If you truly want to make progress in the architecture world, learning never stops. The long hours and the extra hard work never do either. The best thing you can do is hit the ground running as you come out of that graduation hall. And I'm happy to say, the BAC gave me the chance to do just that."

—Erion Nikolla, B. Arch alumnus, 2017

"One major thing I've learned from my practice experiences is how to balance the amount of time spent and my vision of perfection for the project. In a practice setting, there's always a need for efficiency — as a result I cannot spend the amount of time I do with studio projects and try to perfect every detail all at once!"

—Kailin Zhao, M. Arch alumna, 2020

"My practice experience at the BAC has been a fairly rewarding one, to say the least! I came into this program already working at an architecture firm, knowing that I wanted to go back to school to get my master's degree and become a licensed architect one day. The BAC helped me to reach out to my firm for evaluations of my work in the office and helped facilitate the process of putting together my work portfolio. It was so beneficial for me to have all my work and hours processed through the practice department, as this helped me understand which categories my budding experience was divided into, so that I could branch out to other areas for further growth as a young professional.

My BAC practice instructor, Mark Rukamathu, has been a great support — since our very first conversation — and even way back to when I was first looking into the Boston Architectural College as the next step in my academic journey. His help and guidance over the years during our meetings (semester-based evaluations and many calls regarding portfolios); his understanding of my 'Type A' personality; and his professional advice has helped me grow as both a student and a young professional."

—Hayley Fazio, M. Arch candidate

Karen Nelson is the dean of the School of Architecture and faculty at the BAC. In 1994, Karen began teaching design studios at the BAC and at Rhode Island School of Design, followed by theory seminars and faculty development courses. Karen practiced architecture working on housing for people with AIDS in New York City, a school building in Massachusetts and on small commercial projects. Karen's passion for people, contemporary architecture, and art, travel and linguistics inform her teaching. In 2012, Karen received an NCARB grant to explore collaborative global practice. In 2018, Karen lectured on bento and architecture at the Japanese-German Center Berlin, and in 2020, she participated in three panel discussions about design education and diversity. Karen holds a Master of Architecture degree from Columbia University and her B.S. in Art + Design from MIT.

Bethany I. Lundell Garver, AIA, NCARB, is dean of practice, director of applied learning, and faculty at the BAC, where she leads college-wide efforts to bridge architectural education and professional practice. Leveraging her 15 years of professional experience in architecture, urban design and planning, Beth's on-site and online teaching explores the city as the classroom through experiential learning, civic engagement and reflective assessment initiatives. She has been elected to serve on the board of directors for several national organizations including the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), Root Division (a community-based visual arts education nonprofit) and, most recently, the American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS). Prior to joining the BAC, Beth worked with Rafael Viñoly Architects in New York and San Francisco, managing large laboratory and healthcare projects, including several years of full-time, on-site construction administration. She holds a Master of Architecture in Urban Design with distinction from Harvard University and a Bachelor of Architecture magna cum laude from Auburn University.

ESSAY

Connecting: The Power of Others

DesignIntelligence Quarterly

Connecting: The Power of Others

DI Managing Editor Michael LeFevre suggests new skills for connecting teams

MICHAEL LEFEVRE

Managing Editor, DesignIntelligence

Why Do We Need to Connect?

Why do we need to connect? Isn't design an act of synthesis?

In architectural school, the AIA canons and in practice, the notion of serving and protecting the health, safety and welfare of the public has been ever-present. So have architectural patrons. For most, architecture has historically been a luxury — experienced and afforded by a privileged few. While architects are taught to consider and include all factors, along the way, some factors get weighted more than others. The idea of serving our neighbors can sometimes get lost; so can that of working with them.

Separate but integral to the consideration of who we serve is the understanding of how we design and who does the designing. We're taught that "someone has to decide" — and that the decision is the architect's province. "A camel is a horse designed by a committee," the saying goes. By contrast, good architecture is the result of a singular vision, a work of art. But who can do it all? Certainly not me. In fact, the design of contemporary buildings now takes a village, an army of experts. It's about "we," not "me."

But who leads the village? And do they know how?

A World Connected

In a world now reeling from economic, social, health, environmental and political crises, the design and construction of a building has become a complex undertaking. Gone are the days of the lone designer's singular vision, comprehensive competency and simple scope. To live up to our mandate to protect society and serve multiple concurrent crises, designers need a growing phalanx of team members. Most would agree with this premise. More difficult is realizing that most of us need help in learning to lead teams.

The Science of Teams

Business schools around the world have taught collaboration for decades. Capstone projects, group assignments, and syllabuses have long shared the science of realms such as organizational behavior and industrial relations — now likely renamed to suit new media, forms and technologies. As early as 1965, Bruce Tuckman's research outlined forming, norming, storming and performing as group development stages. Students in many disciplines and professions, including business, psychology, medicine and law, have had exposure to the science of group dynamics and possess the capacities for psychology, communication and empathy, which drive collaboration. Such personal development includes acquiring the ability to admit when you're wrong, being vulnerable, considering alternatives, welcoming diverse input and skillfully drawing out engagement by less practiced, less comfortable team members.

"We see the project context as an informing element that suggests a juxtaposition of 17 contrasting and conflicting facade systems, an enclosure materiality that yields a multi-geometric mosaic of water penetration and cost-overage opportunities."

But unless they acquired them in their pre-architecture education on their own, most architects don't have these skills. Perhaps that explains how many of them act and interact. The prefix "inter" means between. It implies the need for, presence of and engagement with others.

New Skills

To cope — even thrive — in the new connected world, built environment professionals need a host of new skills. Skills they likely didn't get exposed to in school and maybe not in practice. What new skills do we need?

Speaking Skills

Seeing these needs 20 years ago, I stepped outside the design profession to work in a position of my own creation — as a design liaison and manager within a leading national construction management firm. This gave me ample opportunities to listen to countless design principals from leading firms struggle through never-ending, boring, jargon-filled design presentations. With little thought having been given to structure, outline, message, timing or what the client and CM team wanted or needed to hear, the presenter would launch into the dreaded design-principal-presentation-diatribe:

"We see the project context as an informing element that suggests a juxtaposition of 17 contrasting and conflicting facade systems, an enclosure materiality that yields a multi-geometric mosaic of water penetration and cost-overage opportunities."

When they were done presenting, we all thought: "OK. It's wonderful that you have an abstract, intellectual design idea. But what are the materials? Are they in budget? Will they leak? Are they local, sustainably chosen and maintainable? Will they help the client do their work?" Enough about "we," meaning the architects. How about some discussion about us, the client, the builders and the rest of the team it's going to take to get this done?

As a 30-year design-focused architect, I could speak this language. I had honed my skills to speak the lofty, design-encoded lingua franca over decades. I could sympathize with how it originated and why it was proffered — a desperate attempt to cling to and uphold design quality and integrity — but even I came to dread it, and it was hard to turn off my bias as the design sermons unfolded.

Strategy and Messaging Skills

To stave off the inevitable credibility loss that would result from such presentations, I offered to coach teams in advance. But even that posed problems. First, the architects saw me as a "contractor." What could I possibly know about the mysteries of design? Their bias and conditioning, despite my prior actions to give, offer help and be their advocate, wouldn't let them get past who they thought I was, who I worked for, and how they perceived my motivation, as they had been encultured to for years.

Second, even if they had wanted my help, they were incapable of managing their design process to allow time to finish design early enough for practicing and honing their message to be more targeted and effective. They were still designing, documenting and coordinating right up until midnight the night before the presentation. It's what their education, experience and firm culture conditioned them to do.

In contrast, consider the process we used to produce what we called the "shelf document" at Holder Construction. For each pricing proposal, option analysis or presentation, a work plan would be prepared showing substantial completion of the effort and its documents several days before it was to be presented. It was ready to be put on the shelf, hence "shelf document." Religiously meeting those shelf dates allowed us the benefit of having time to check, refine and hone the message before we delivered it. The facts — and the price — were unchanged. But we allowed time to practice the message and give courtesy calls to our design partners and the owner to give them a heads-up (contractor lingo) courtesy call in advance so there were no surprises or teammates "thrown under the bus" on presentation day. Quite a difference.

> *Thinking keeps us strangers from one another; prevents empathy."*
>
> —Philip Lopate

Those of us interested in communicating with others should remember to consider their context and redirect our language in terms they understand. If speaking to a CEO, consider tailoring your comments to the kinds of things chief executives care about their facilities, like ROI, employee satisfaction and productivity, building and energy performance and sustainability. If addressing an entry-level BIM coordinator, it's fine to roll out tech-nospeak, because it's required and expected in this context. Different audience, different approaches. Before you open your mouth or start to tap out an email, pause and reflect. Think first: who am I sending this to and where are they coming from? What do they care about? How do they speak?

Listening Skills

Even more important than speaking in the right way to the right audience is developing the skills and motivation to listen to them. The adage tells us: we are born with two ears and one mouth for a reason. Too often our task- or self-focus has us forming our next thought, defense or argument while someone else is talking. We're thinking instead of listening. We are failing to give our most important gifts: our attention, our care, our empathy.

"Thinking keeps us strangers from one another; prevents empathy."
- Philip Lopate

What's the secret to listening and caring? Curiosity. We need more of it — and more of turning off our brains at the appropriate times to let the words and thoughts of others come in. Listen. Play back what you hear. Build trust. Learn to extract meaning from others, particularly the introverts. Just listen.

Empathy Skills

In my self-sought role as a design manager, I had to teach myself to do precisely the opposite of what I had learned to do in school and in my prior career as an architect. I had to learn to care about others first. The client first. The project first, in its broadest collective sense. To put others' issues first, over design, good documents or my own or my firm's own agenda.

Having traversed the design-construction Maginot Line, I was enlightened to find that most contractors I worked with — even young, entry-level staff — had developed empathy skills.

Their default to self-focus did not exist as it had so prevalently among architects. Young construction graduates were open to the needs and ideas of others to a greater degree than most architectural principals I had known. Maybe it was our strong firm culture, an aspect nurtured for 60 years within Holder Construction Company and a big reason for our valued reputation. Maybe it was simply a natural outgrowth of contractors' advanced ability to consider and manage risk — as a firm, as teams and as individuals. To do that requires turning off thought, bias and answers in favor of listening empathically. It means admitting and considering information that may be contrary to your own default beliefs and behaviors. Imagine that: not thinking for a moment as a way of making collective progress.

Technology Skills

I wish I could say we've evolved past these biases. It is true, things are different now. A growing number of architects are learning and practicing inclusive design. Some are even being exposed to it in school. And now, beyond good listening, good speaking and the desire to include diverse expertise, we have machines! Yes, we have at our disposal new, simultaneously liberating and enslaving toolsets to collaborate live online in central, shared, accessible databases. But do we have the skill sets and mindsets to use them? Do we want to? We can work in radical new ways thanks to technology, but not all of us know how. On my last project, a $1.6 billion-dollar facility, the owners' reps and architects used decades-old communication platforms.

To cope, the construction manager took the lead in introducing BIM; live BlueBeam studio coordination sessions; BIM 360 Glue; model-sharing; co-location of trades; drones; laser-scanning; and decision-tracking logs and databases.

In her research at Stanford University's Center for Integrated Facilities Engineering (CIFE) Kathleen Liston, a co-author of the "BIM Handbook", shared noteworthy findings on the social dynamics of BIM. Her work and images of design and construction teams offer compelling examples of the powers of empathy and team-building enabled by technology and shared, live information. In the first slide, traditional team entities (e.g., architects, builder, owner, trades) are shown seated around a table with their own copies of printed cost estimates in front of them. Huddled together within company silos in defensive groups of two or three, they whisper and strategize over "their" data. In the second shared example, teams' eyes, minds, faces and body language are alert, focused in unison on the single, "live," current dataset being shown on a screen at the front of the room. They function as a team, together, with no data loss, time lag or room for bias or interpretation to cloud the waters. They are present and focused — together. Such a difference a screen makes.

The data and the discussion becomes "ours" as opposed to "mine vs. yours." Gone are the days of "I didn't get the update" or "I was working off the old estimate." Live, shared data is now available everywhere. It helps build teams. We should use it more.

Inclusion Skills: Diversity, Equity, Race, Gender

Now — in addition to the growing complexity of practice and the connected world — due to some horrific events, we have been refocused on diversity and social equity. Because of these age-old inequities, we face a scarcity of design professionals with minority backgrounds. Many of us will need help from experts to improve our awareness, motivation and skills in the areas of diversity, equity and inclusion. Fortunately, a growing number of firms are developing specialists to help more of us become awakened to the potential of these areas.

Inclusion Skills: Discipline and Expertise

Even before our recent reawakening to racial and social diversity, for years we continued the same ill-advised behaviors with our subconsultants, treating them like afterthoughts, if at all. Too many of us thought "our" discipline or area of expertise as just a little more important than "theirs." Designing an HVAC system? "Here's your ceiling plenum, a 16-inch space above the ceiling tile. Good luck trying to route some ducts through there."

Then, after such dismissive direction, in yet another misdirected dance, the architects would reappear to carefully align the devices on the reflected ceiling plans, in many cases without the knowledge of their expert's engineering rationale or spacing criteria, only to be mis-coordinated or moved again due to data-generation loss, versioning, miscommunication or mismanagement.

On rare occasions when we tried to capitalize on the opportunity to create something integral, creative or groundbreaking, those of us so motivated would call in our expert subconsultants — civil, structural, and mechanical engineers or interior designers — to give them the chance to provide essential input that might shape design at its point of inception. These occasions were rare and in stark contrast to the norm. Under the proven practice model, we architects would analyze the program, develop a structural grid and generate the idea before soliciting one iota of expert subconsultant input. Why? Did we not consider them professionals of equal status to ourselves? Were we taught that way in school? Yes, we were. "It is the architect's job to have the vision," we were coached.

In my years working within a CM firm, I can recount many times in which trade contractors — brought to the table after designs had been conceived, drawn, gone over budget and in need of fixing — saved the day with valuable, insightful, creative alternatives. Why didn't we involve these experts in the first place? Why did we wait for the inevitable conflict to rear its head? We could have avoided the need for rework and redesign altogether. We could have redirected that effort toward studying higher-performing options with better life-cycle costs. Despite what the architect thought they knew, they knew far less than their engineer did about engineering work. Even more so, in almost every case, when it came to cost, schedule, availability, service and performance — call it "reality" — the trades were far more valuable than the engineers. "Your solution won't fit, won't work, is unavailable, is inefficient or will break down too frequently," the trades repeatedly told the engineer, saving systems and designs in the nick of time. They were invaluable and clamored to be included, but our bias precluded it.

Now, in a design and construction ecosystem that has become so much more complex than the one in which I practiced years ago, we face a multiverse of players that includes sustainability consultants, BIM experts, MWBE coordinators, schedulers and many more. If we haven't learned how to manage this multiplicity of experts by now, we better do so quickly, because the group is only growing.

To work in groups and accommodate multiple inputs, we must improve at responsible discourse and discord. As we learned painfully in the politics of recent years, we must avoid bicameralism and polarity. Where's the nuance and the middle — the grey area? This other person is likely to be an experienced professional who cares as deeply as you do. It is entirely possible for you to disagree on an issue without rejecting the person who holds the opposing opinion in their entirety. But in the end, and in a project or business context, not all opinions are necessarily "equal." All may not be worthy of being published or acted upon. But we listen nonetheless, then we moderate and decide. Who will be the moderators of the future?

Scheduling Skills

To the eyes of the typical architect, the average design schedule may appear to allow ample time. But looks can be deceiving.

When you analyze any design schedule, regardless of project scale, and factor in the need for input from all contributors, you'll see that each activity must happen in strict sequence, quickly, or face unraveling the sweater the project manager and her team are trying to knit. The best schedulers care — and ask — about the activities of others. They know the other activities are critical parts of the whole.

Situational Awareness

Situational awareness is a high-level skill. That is, knowing how to read context, the room and people to manage risk. Engage others, adapt and adjust. True creativity in the leadership sense is looking around corners and involving your team to keep us all out of trouble. In my book, "Managing Design" (Wiley 2019), I situated this skill at the highest "Maslov-ian" level of the Project Design Controls Framework, the highest level of self-actualization in leadership terms. Looking for change. Anticipating trouble. Seeing it, taking collective action to avoid or mitigate it before it inevitably arrives. Plenty of my former colleagues at Holder Construction had this skill. In our renovation of the Hayden Library at Arizona State University, Ayers-Saint-Gross project principal Eric Zobrist had it. To work in groups, you should have it too. If your client is frowning when you're speaking, stop and ask why. If you know the project is hurtling toward an over-budget calamity, do something about it.

Connecting: The New Mandate

At the risk of prolonging this Andy Rooney-esque rant about the old days, with hope for the future, I'll simply say this: we MUST learn to connect, interact and depend upon one another. Strong team leaders of the future will know how. They'll have the communication, people and technology skills to do it. True experts will have mastered the connector's craft. One question is: Who will they work for? And does it really matter? Unless designers make a concerted effort to seek, develop and reward skilled, empathetic, creative, technically proficient leaders, the connectors of the future will increasingly come from the ranks of CMs, engineers, and program managers. If that continues, it will further relegate design to the low end of the value scale — a series of task-based, rote sequences — and we will lose the potential for truly creative, highly performing, sustainable architecture.

In our projects, each scene, encounter, decision or judgment has an action and a corresponding reaction or sequel. Anticipating and reacting to those events are the requisite tasks of designers and builders. But they can't do it alone.

In so many ways, our projects are like stories: we don't know where they're going when we start them. They are made up of characters who have wants and needs. They have plots (we call those schedules) and themes. In the universality of their struggles, our projects, conflicts and scenes resonate with thousands of others like us who battle daily for the things they love: aesthetics, budgets, sustainability, work put in place, quality, innovation, craftsmanship — and yes, teamwork.

In the world of connecting, it's the decisions, interactions, judgments, learning, surprise and change that constitute vitality and value. That's where the life happens — the magic and the growth. In the spaces between. In the intersections and crossings, random connection and linkages.

Our projects even have predictable story arcs. They begin by wondering if we can find the answer to the questions: Can we get this project done? Can we work with these

people?
Our projects are enlivened by inciting events: challenging designs, being over budget, antagonizing contractors or uncaring owners.

Finally, they are inevitably resolved by finding the truth: the answer to the question, can we succeed? When they are done, we reflect on the journeys we have just taken. What did we learn? Who did we meet? Did we change and grow over its course?

In our personal, career and project stories — our hero's journeys — we must seek, find and engage those mysterious strangers called "others." Only then will we realize their power and reach our potential.

In the world of connecting, it's the decisions, interactions, judgments, learning, surprise and change that constitute vitality and value. That's where the life happens — the magic and the growth. In the spaces between. In the intersections and crossings, random connections and linkages. In the frontal lobes, executive functions and prioritizations of the many, in the moving between the right and left hemispheres of many minds. To find those wonderful places demands more than one thing or one person. Don't waste your chances to create them. Keep looking. Keep moving. Keep connecting.

For all our sake, I hope we architects can look, listen and learn — to connect.

Michael LeFevre, FAIA Emeritus, is managing editor of DesignIntelligence Media Group Publications and author of Amazon #1 new release, "Managing Design." Contact him at mlefevre@di.net.

Adopting the “J.E.D.I.” Mindset

DesignIntelligence Quarterly

Adopting the "J.E.D.I." Mindset

In pursuit of justice, diversity, equity and inclusion in architecture, Yiselle Santos Rivera discusses her background, research agenda, elevating voices and "connectors" while asking: Do we just "do buildings"?

YISELLE SANTOS RIVERA

Global Director of Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (J.E.D.I.), HKS

DesignIntelligence (DI): You have a dual perspective on the state of diversity and inclusion in architectural practice. At HKS, you're the leader for that subject matter across a large international firm. And you are beginning a new leadership role within the National Association of Minority Architects (NOMA).

Yiselle Santos Rivera (YSR): I was appointed to a new position as NOMA research and development chair, a strategic appointment under Jason Pugh's presidency. The NOMA president has a two-year term, so I will have this position for the next two years. My goal is to embed research and development as part of NOMA's strategy moving forward. I'm hoping after these two years the position becomes a permanent fixture on the NOMA board.

DI: The R&D position is intriguing. Within HKS you call it J.E.D.I., right? For justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. What is your mission in those two organizations? Do they overlap? And are you still practicing architecture while you're doing all this?

YSR: Right now, I'm primarily working on the development of our firmwide J.E.D.I. strategic initiatives, designing for equity measures, supporting our practices and defining my new role in NOMA. This is largely in response to the current climate and the need I see for this work in our firm and the industry. Technically, I am the global director of Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at HKS, but I wear three hats within HKS: championing J.E.D.I., being an architect and doing medical planning.

Professionally, I am the AIADC board treasurer and a member of the AIA New Urban Agenda Task Force. I also serve as advisor to the DC NOMA board and the Insightful Chicago board. Now, I'm adding the role of research and development chair for NOMA.

Last year, I was the AIA national board associate representative and served my second year on the Equity and the Future of Architecture committee. I try to advance the idea that justice, equity, diversity and inclusion is a mindset through which we view the world in the work we do. It becomes an overlay.

As a volunteer in associations, I try to use that same lens with membership to provide value and content for members, so they can learn what it means to design for J.E.D.I. and become ambassadors for justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Then, they can apply that mindset and skill set to their practices and projects.

For the past two years at HKS, I have primarily focused on creating structures of accountability within the firm. This is a four-part organizational framework. I am the director and work collaboratively with 12 council members that span the breadth and depth of the firm. They represent different disciplines, levels and perspectives, with a mix of gender diversity, thought leadership and geography. That group, the J.E.D.I. Council, strategizes on initiatives that move the firm forward.

Many of them, for example, concentrate on developing internal resources to support our staff and our people, content such as: How do you become an ally? How do you understand microaggressions? And how do we celebrate our people, where they come from and their culture?

We also have a network of J.E.D.I. champions throughout the firm — one or two members per office or per studio, the grassroot supporters or champions for the work. They help build workplace culture and share their thoughts and findings with me and the council so we may develop strategies for implementation.

We collaborate to synchronize and move the entire firm forward. We are working on how to better engage with HBCUs, historically black colleges and universities. Some champions are active in AIA, NOMA and local organizations. Others work to celebrate cultural heritage through monthly celebrations or potlucks in their offices. Some of our champions are taking the lead in creating a toolkit or assessment tools to help us build more inclusive spaces. Many champions are focused on education because that practice tends to be at the forefront of this conversation.

How do you create more inclusive spaces? For example, genderless bathrooms have become more prevalent in the industry. We have people concentrated on mental health and health care facilities.

Other groups that are essential enablers or advisors include our marketing team, the talent acquisition team, HR, professional development and researchers. We work collaboratively to build processes and initiatives that raise the equity in the firm, which include how to monitor retention and measure diversity.

These groups collaboratively develop initiatives and create firmwide reporting metrics. As signatories of the UN Global Compact, HKS commits to environmental, social and governance progress by addressing certain sustainable design goals and UN Global principles. To support the UN Global compact and align with like-minded organizations, we created an Environmental, Social and Governance structure, or ESG. ESG is a partnership between our chief sustainability officer (CSO), our citizen HKS (CHKS) directors and the director of J.E.D.I.. The CSO is focused on sustainable design, green materials, carbon neutrality and so on.

Citizen HKS is our public interest, pro bono outreach group. For me, this initiative is the clearest avenue for HKS to design for J.E.D.I. since its mission is to create buildings, provide access to much needed resources and empower marginalized communities to thrive.

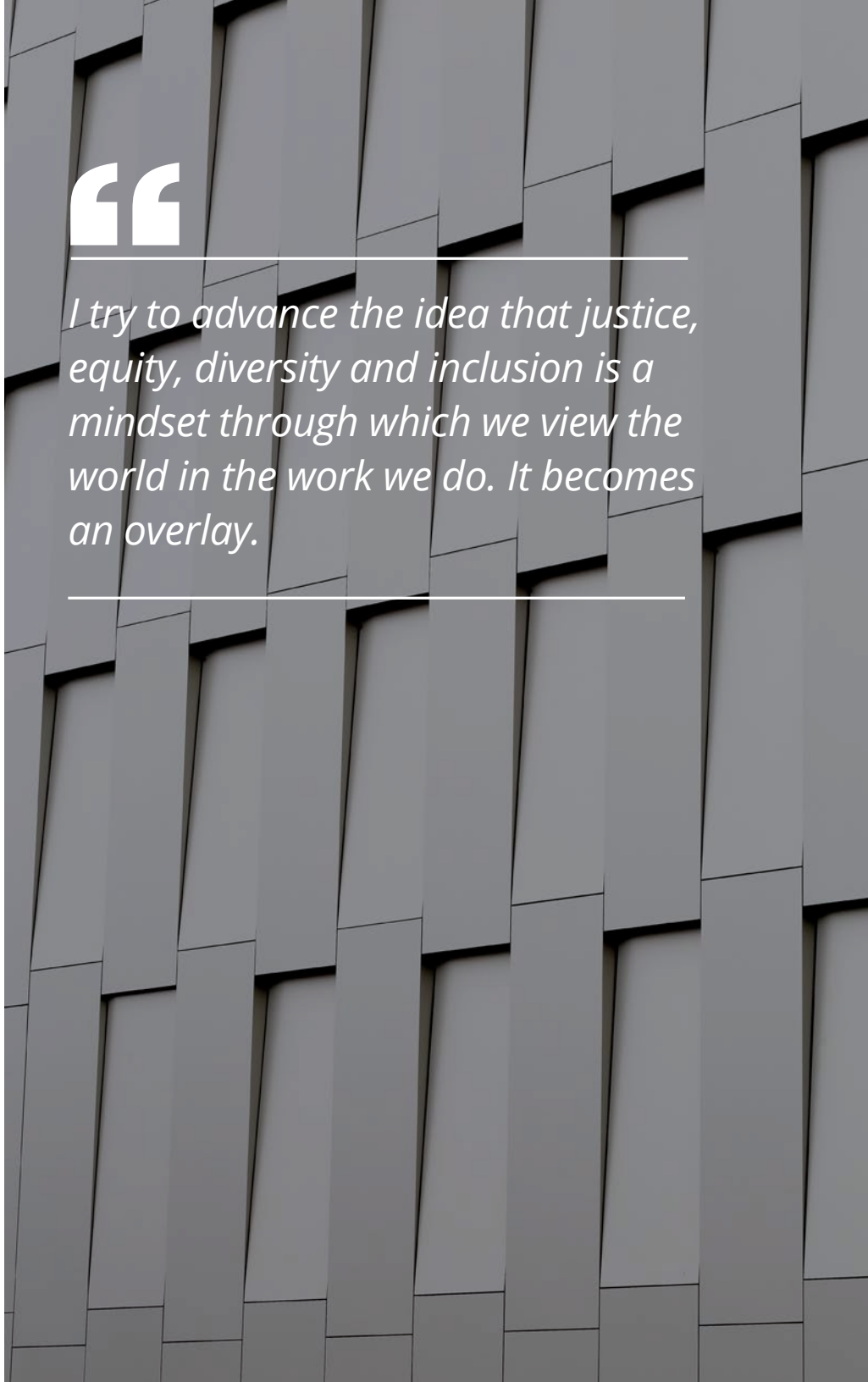
Although J.E.D.I. spans multiple SDGs, I'm focused on reducing inequality and increasing gender parity to elevate representation in our firm. As we know, our industry struggles with reaching parity in gender and representation. To tackle those SDGs, we are looking at understanding our firm baseline, creating strategies to increase representation in leadership roles and highlighting what makes people choose to stay at HKS, be successful and thrive.

There are many layers to the conversation, but my work and many of my initiatives fall under the ESG umbrella, or, as it used to be called, Corporate Social Responsibility. The thread that ties the work I do at HKS to my work as a volunteer in these organizations is to always elevate the voice of underrepresented and marginalized communities so they can have a seat at the table.

DI: The depth and breadth of what you're doing and the momentum you have within HKS is impressive. How long have you been in your role? How long have some of these efforts been building momentum?

YSR: I took on this role in April 2019. There was existing firmwide momentum around gender parity, and that's why my role felt like a natural progression. We already had a program called Better Together that looked to increase women in leadership. We also knew we wanted to engage with our clients in more meaningful ways and find value alignment. This also transitioned nicely into our support for the UN Global Compact. Knowing we wanted to address issues of gender equality, our leadership understood there was a need for clear focus at a firmwide level on these topics. When I took on my new director role, my time was split 50-50 between J.E.D.I. and projects.

For a year, I balanced work, understanding we were creating a baseline as the first strategy for the changes that we needed to implement firmwide. I worked on several hospital projects — small renovation suites — while also learning about existing initiatives and potential synergies with other departments.



> *I try to advance the idea that justice, equity, diversity and inclusion is a mindset through which we view the world in the work we do. It becomes an overlay.*

Thankfully, I always had buy-in, but I have learned since then this is not necessarily the case for other organizations. But things are changing. The climate of the world is changing. I was the second practitioner in the industry to formally have a title like mine. Today, there are certainly more.

DI: And now it's a full-time role?

YSR: Yes, although my ultimate goal is to be able to manage both roles. Yet COVID-19, the tragic murder of George Floyd, and the awareness sparked by these events have taken an emotional toll on society and our profession. I've had to dedicate as much time as possible to this work. It takes time to create and formalize a structure of accountability, create and formalize a framework plan, and then develop an implementation strategy throughout the firm. This is also not a one-woman show. Sure, it may require someone's full-time dedication, yet this work is by all of us, for all of us, and it can only be achieved by working collaboratively together.

DI: How will your role at NOMA — the research and development angle — differ?

YSR: My role at NOMA is part of Jason Pugh's presidential EDUCATE, ELEVATE and EMPOWER platform. Although this new NOMA role focuses on research, the goals are not far removed from my work in HKS. Both are rooted in the justice, equity, diversity and inclusion mindset and look to provide tools that help architects build equitably and inclusively in support of marginalized communities. Success for both roles requires a clear understanding of the principles of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. We must first be "it" to do "it". J.E.D.I. work starts with awareness. My goals are to create content and outcomes that embrace those mindsets, so people can adopt and achieve them.

Today, we are able to move faster because J.E.D.I. language has become more familiar in the industry. It's on social media. More people understand it or at least have heard this language. After almost two years in my HKS director role, I'm now transitioning to research. I believe this is what practitioners need most — tools not only to understand the mindset but to enable the creation of outcomes that employ the principles in designs, buildings and user experiences.

For example, the AIA's design framework for excellence includes designing for equitable communities and designing for change.

In that framework, there are prompts for questions that lead you to consider opportunities for interventions in your projects. In designing for equitable communities, you must think about walkability, community engagement and buy-in. We could be more prescriptive in the tools we provide. At least a base of metrics that enable people to focus on what it means to design for these outcomes. In medical planning, we use avatars. When you consider avatars, when using the J.E.D.I. lens, you must consider who has historically not been at the table. Race, gender, geography, age, access to technology, etc. Not just which stakeholder, client or community member, but what kind of community member? What do they need and how do they need it? How do they access what they need? This a useful tool in healthcare and LEAN practices.

Ideally this could be used in every building type and every practice to encourage inclusive practices.

I would love to create research opportunities that put a stake in the ground for what it means to design with the J.E.D.I. mindset. What is unique about NOMA — because it is the organization that represents minority architects and its mission is activism — is that we have the opportunity to be the voice for those underrepresented in our local communities and be active participants in marginalized communities' ability to thrive. NOMA's membership is representative of the communities we want to serve through the J.E.D.I. mindset.

If we can leverage that wealth and mindset of the membership and the passion members have for advocacy, the research would inherently embody this way of thinking. NOMA's research would also help its members address these issues in their firms, as well as at state and local levels, creating true activism and change.

I was part of the AIA's COVID-19 Health Impact Task Force, led by Molly Scanlon, PhD, FAIA, FACHA, an architect and researcher who works in the public health space. When I shared my interests in social determinants of health, health equity and access to care in marginalized communities, she welcomed the opportunity to address this issue and noted that architects are not inherently at the table when public health and policy decisions are being made.

We both recognized the need to move away from those conversations and statements like, "This is not in our scope." Where people say, "Stay in your lane, architect. You do buildings," I say, "Do we just 'do buildings'?"

I went to school in Puerto Rico, and there I learned architecture as environmental design. Design was taught to be contextual and rooted in community. The work we were doing was related to the communities adjacent to the university. One of my first projects was creating an object for a homeless person that could transform into a habitable space and provide shelter from the environment. Many of the people who lived near the university were impoverished, some homeless, and used whatever they could find to create shelter. The streets and open spaces became their homes. What could we do as designers to provide them a useful artifact? It was a first-year project, but we tried to give them some agency so if they didn't have appropriate spaces, they could create their own. They could populate the space in active ways and form communities.

To me, architecture was never just about designing buildings. It has always been about facilitating and creating collaboration. Activism. A way to understand my community through the lens of design, to provide solutions to have better lives. It was never a pristine building out of context from its environment and community.

DI: I think we can declare forever: We do NOT just "do buildings." Anybody who continues to say that is exposing their problems.

I'm glad to hear your agenda for research, data, metrics, tools, science and education for diversity and inclusion. For too long, the extent of our rigor has been: "We have a problem. I want to be a better person. I want to get rid of bias." Well, how? No, we do NOT just "do buildings." We're beyond that. But the question is, how?

Because of the small number of people of color in architecture, many of us have little experience in the issues surrounding diversity. I'm embarrassed to say it, but most of the bias I've experienced in design and construction has not been related to race or gender. It's been the biases between architects and engineers and between contractors and architects. The issues you're focused on are more far-reaching and serious. But it brings us back to the question for all of us with limited experience exposure: Where do we begin?

YSR: That is THE question: How do I start? There are many ways to answer that question, but you start where you feel most comfortable and then transition to a place where you are challenged. Start by acknowledging that this conversation is difficult and can be personally invasive. But start by asking, being challenged and most importantly welcoming the opportunity to make mistakes and grow.

Start with yourself. Start with understanding your place in this work and in the industry. There's a lot of soul-searching. I hate to use that word, but a lot of self-reflection needs to happen. Self-awareness yields "other" awareness. We must come to the table recognizing we have our own biases and being comfortable with those biases, recognizing nobody has it figured out because we all have bias. We exist in a world of bias — for many reasons.

DI: Reasons like it's in our DNA. It's human to have biases. It's how we react to them and what we do about them that matters.

YSR: Right. For a lot of people this is very political, and they struggle unpacking the work this way — recognizing that systemic racism is real and that we exist within this framework. For better or worse, we all fall under this framework. This is the space we exist in. This is not a shame or blame discussion. This is just our reality. As soon as we can come to terms with where we are in the world and where we've come from, the sooner we can try to understand how to overcome this together. How we make things better. It usually begins with self-reflection and research.

When people ask me where to begin, I say: Start with awareness. Begin by reading books. I didn't grow up in the contiguous U.S., I grew up in Puerto Rico. I have my own bias about American culture, having lived my formative years in a "colony" of the U.S., although we can't call it as such. As a result, there are things that exist in my bias. Frankly, there's baggage. I'm reading a book titled "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents" by Isabel Wilkerson. It has been enlightening to understand the genesis of cultural disparities in this country. Another great book is "How to Be an Antiracist" by Ibram X. Kendi. People have visceral reactions to thinking of themselves as racist or tackling that topic. "White Fragility" by Robin Diangelo is another great book for people a little bit further along. A fourth book is "The Color of Law" by Richard Rothstein. It touches on the impact of segregation through government intervention, redlining, and homeowner associations — how public policy and government policy affected and continue to affect how we build communities and cities.

The book on my mantle I would like to get into is "A Terrible Thing to Waste: Environmental Racism and Its Assault on the American Mind" by Harriet A. Washington. I want to understand where we come from so that we can know where we want to go. Since my role as director of J.E.D.I. exists under the ESG umbrella, I can see the natural intersection of my role and sustainability through climate justice.

Our industry can have a real voice in this space since architects can impact site selection, access to resources, material selection and energy consumption. Energy use is responsible for 40% of carbon emissions.
This is part of our legacy through our stake in the built environment and climate impact.

There is urgency in this work, not only because of what is happening across our country — fires, floods, hurricanes, and tornados — but also because of what COVID has exposed. We know climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized communities. To take it a step further, if climate impact is part of our design vernacular as architects and designers, then climate justice is the next step toward merging the J.E.D.I. lens with what we're actively doing as an industry to mitigate the impact of unsustainable practices.

DI: That's wonderful advice: Start with where you are. Reflect. And excellent references you shared. To frame our discussion, I'd love to find out more about who you are. What kinds of hills have you had to climb that put you on your path?

... always elevate the voice of underrepresented and marginalized communities so they can have a seat at the table.

YSR: Many things have led me to this point. My mother, for example, has and always will be an inspiration for me. She's been a glass-ceiling shatterer all her life. She was the first woman dean of the School of Dentistry, the first woman president of the Puerto Rico College of Dentists, and the first resident of the pediatric dentistry program to pass the American Board of Pediatric Dentistry. She was also the first Puerto Rican dentist to be appointed to the U.S. Department of Health's Advisory Committee on Training in Primary Care Medicine and Dentistry. My mom is very accomplished. That may have been, in part, why I was drawn to another profession. I don't think I could've followed in her footsteps, constantly hearing the accolades echoed in the distance.
Though what was more formative was not necessarily her achievements, but how much it took out of her to get there. And when she achieved success, she still faced negative reactions that led to animosity, anger and frustration.
As a child, you always want your mother's happiness. You see her gain recognition, but it is still not always positive because her achievements are less than as a woman and a woman of color. So many things in my life and career have heightened that awareness. The disparity of not being able to holistically celebrate my mother for everything she is and does. That's in the back of my mind always.

Also, my father is just as accomplished as my mother. He was one of the first Puerto Rican healthcare administrators to receive an executive certificate from Harvard University. At one point, he was the administrator for thirteen prominent hospitals in Puerto Rico. Yet he bought his first car from the money he made shining shoes.

Growing up in Puerto Rico, I knew there was a strong cultural anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric. Knowing I was part of that community was less than ideal. These situations influenced and continue to influence how I show up today. I knew coming out at an early age could adversely impact my parents' careers and my own. I look back on this now and recognize the many things I minimized that resulted in my not showing up authentically to the table. But these things are part of who I am — and always will be. I know we don't truly check ourselves at the door. We carry our experiences into our work. Early on, I would censor myself. I would code-switch. Now, I do my best to show up authentically and hold space for others so they may be able to do the same.
I learned about American culture watching TV. When I arrived in the U.S., I had preconceived ideas of what success looked like in the workplace. Nobody in leadership looked like me. Whether consciously or subconsciously, I hid parts of myself much like I had done since childhood to fit in. Even though I started my career in Washington D.C., an open and welcoming city, and had phenomenal mentors and leaders in the LGBTQ community, I had to confront my own biases and roadblocks before being able to embrace my identities in the workplace.

Another hurdle: few women in leadership, fewer women of color, and fewer still LGBTQIA+ women of color. The journey becomes harder when you don't see yourself reflected in leadership. It can feel like there are no reasons to show up authentically at the table. I equate this somewhat to the colonized mentality — the tension between thinking success is the colonizer yet wanting to own your power while in the oppressed group. Thankfully, there is greater awareness now of the need and value of women in leadership, but there is still long way to go to reach true parity. There are many layers to the conversation, like the disconnect between community engagement and architecture in practice.

When I joined the profession, although not denied opportunities of engagement, I wasn't necessarily encouraged to be an active participant in the community. I was lucky to have mentors visible in associations, but they were not necessarily the predominant group. For me, it was a necessity. It was a way to build community, to build my village.

That's why I became engaged in AIA and built Women Inspiring Emerging Leaders in Design (WIELD). I wanted to create platforms to amplify others' voices, especially of those underrepresented in leadership. I feel these activities should be encouraged in our practitioners but expected of our leaders. It also gets us closer to the communities we serve.

DI: I appreciate your sharing the challenges you've overcome. You had great role models at home but had to minimize who you are so as not to jeopardize your parents' status. But you persisted. Now it's the right time and the right place, and you're finding opportunities to maximize them.

The question remains: How do we better connect? Everybody I talk to lately goes back to your earlier statement. Most of us in school spent our time learning how to draw and design buildings. Now everything's connected.

To practice today you have to be a researcher, a scientist and learn how to shed bias, all while being an environmentalist. You are doing all that. Did you get the skills in school? What are you telling people who are learning to connect all that? Not just connecting as people, but also connecting so many more systems and design factors?

YSR: That's such a good question, and it's a big part of the conversation about the future of academia. What do you teach? What is valuable? What is important? I've been part of many conversations about what I would tell the older generation, people that didn't have the privilege of learning architecture the way that it needs to be practiced now. I feel lucky that I started with the premise that architecture is not just building buildings. Urban design, planning, city strategy and so many other disciplines are moving front and center now because they need to.

This is not necessarily just about how we view architecture, but how we view our systems and ecosystems. To ask: What does it take to design something comprehensive and inclusive? At HKS, this is about systems thinking and integrative thinking. People-centered, human-centered design. It is a work in progress, but we are intentional in this work. How do we find better synergies? How do we find better ways to leverage our strengths so that as a collective, we create something more meaningful and impactful?

DI: Great questions. Synergy doesn't add more complexity and pieces. It reduces them. We have more players and diverse perspectives, we have the potential for synergistic breakthroughs, and with more players and diversity, maybe we have new roles for connectors and synthesizers?

YSR: Absolutely.

DI: I was a connector. I still am. As an architect, I was. And my role working in a construction company was to translate and interpret language and connect designers and builders. You are certainly a connector.

YSR: As I look back, I can see that I have always been a connector and see this as inherent to architectural practice or design thinking. It is about connecting things together, and I like putting things together. Now my work may be slightly focused toward people and relationships instead of buildings, but it is still about creating a connection and a structure to support it.

My goal is to connect meaningfully and strategize how people and constructs, like design, come together. I believe this work requires a unique skill set - an openness to continuous learning, active listening, and empathy toward others to leverage everyone's expertise - in order to facilitate connections and enable success.

What I enjoy most about my current role and its positioning in the industry is the opportunity to increase self-awareness, in myself and in others, and build bridges across our differences. I strive to elevate others, so together we can create truly innovative and meaningful work. We know that high-performing, well-managed, diverse teams are more innovative and more profitable. The work unfolds as we provide tools to increase intercultural competency in our leaders so they may recognize differences, leverage authenticity, and enable connections — meaningful synergies — intentionally.

To build better together, we must welcome the opportunity to challenge and be challenged. We must empower our leaders to be part of the journey towards inclusion and belonging - whether a manager, leader, or a participant in any part of the design process. This shift toward building resilient practices begins with ourselves - how we find our authentic voice and use it to create positive impact in our firms and communities. Let's encourage synergies, systems thinking and connectivity to acknowledge our past, respond proactively to shifts in the present, and be hopeful for the future we can create together.

We are no longer living in the times of the starchitect or isolated practitioner. We serve our communities best when we align in values with our partners, when we show intentionality in who we partner with and in how we partner with others. As a design industry, we thrive when we arrive to the table as advocates, as facilitators, when we build through connections, when we show up equitable and authentically for each other.

Yiselle Santos Rivera, AIA, NOMA, LSSYB, LEED AP B+D, WELL AP is a medical planner and Global Director of Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (J.E.D.I.) at HKS. Yiselle thrives on building equitable practices, empowering the next generation of leaders and creating inclusive platforms for engagement. She serves on the AIA DC Board and is founder of Women Inspiring Emerging Leaders in Design (WIELD). She was recently appointed Chair, Research & Development at the National Association of Minority Architects (NOMA).

Places of Purpose

DesignIntelligence Quarterly

Places of Purpose

EDSA's Marco Larrea shares his secrets to international collaboration

MARCO LARREA

Principal, EDSA

DesignIntelligence (DI): Our focus is professional interaction and your perspective working internationally. Please tell us about yourself and what you do.

Marco Larrea (ML): Born and raised in Ecuador, I studied architecture in country and then attended Louisiana State University to pursue a landscape architecture degree with a minor in urban planning. It was during my college years that I developed a passion for not only design and art, but an unsatiable interest in language.

After running my own company for a few years back home I joined EDSA as an entry level designer. With hard work, commitment and an aptitude for quality design, I became the first Hispanic Principal. When I started with EDSA we were about 80 people and our vision was to continue expanding globally. I worked in the United States for a few years and then we opened an office in France, where I worked for three years. From their my focus gravitated back towards Latin America in an effort to shift sensitivities and transform preconceptions of landscape architecture as a more meaningful discipline and impetus for positive design outcomes. I've worked all over the world, but mainly in Mexico, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Spain, France, Greece and Japan.

In thinking about our international expansion, I recall an early conversation with our Founder, Ed Stone.

He asked me how I felt about the company and I said, "We do so much international work and we need greater diversity in people if we want to design places that are sensible and meaningful for the local populations." Proudly, we have solved this disconnect, with team members representative of 35 different countries. They help marry the relationships on projects with a higher cultural understanding and fluency in language.

DI: How do you collaborate on international projects?

ML: The key is to learn about the culture, the people and the place. Do your research before you go. When we opened the office in France, most of the work was in a rural area outside Provence, where the locals were not fans of development and less so of American consultants. They didn't want regional development because of its potential damage to a naturally rich and stunning countryside. So, we made it a point to learn about the local culture and understand it.

I moved to France more than a month in advance and visited local villages. I drank wine on the terraces, enjoyed great food at local bistros, and sketched while observing, listening, and paying attention to the people, their lifestyles and values – in essence, full immersion. That is key to designing a project that is very much tied to the culture, the architecture and the landscape.

Understanding the context of a place takes a community. It's about partnering with the right local consultants and a visionary client.

Photos provided by EDSA

It was on this project, some 30 years ago, that EDSA started working with Four Seasons and a collaborative team that, together, bridged the layers of history, cultural realities and regional context to achieve the greatest result for that site and every person who will visit, live and enjoy it.

In the end, working internationally or domestically is all about the relationships. How you build those relationships is by being humble, understanding that people take priority, and doing the research.

DI: Do you typically work as a subconsultant to an architect?

ML: In my case, we typically work directly with the owner and are brought to a project early in the development process. The key for us – and I learned this from Ed Stone – is how to serve as the team leader in developing a unified project vision that carries through to the architecture and interiors, the master planning, landscape and ultimate construction of the project.

DI: That's fascinating. My own bias was exposed there. As an architect, I was typically the prime consultant, then we built the team and brought others under us. I'm glad you've been able to lead.

ML: A lot of landscape architecture firms work through an architect or an engineer, but we've been fortunate to have experience in both – as a subconsultant and direct with clients.

As land planners and landscape architects, we come at things through a bit of a different lens. We have an opportunity on every project to do something completely unique, something helpful for the owner, the environment, the people and their culture.

When you have that click with the owner, when you make that connection, then you are called on to build the rest of the team. As planners and designers, we have the knowledge to create the overall vision and develop the master plan before other consultants join. When the landscape architect is added late, you're forced to go in and retrofit a meaningful outdoor experience to the infrastructure and building footprint. Not always ideal.

DI: What a fine model for collaboration. Learn about them and their culture first. Listen, second. Then create the vision together. Since you are typically the lead, how do you draw the best out of your teams?

ML: Our corporate values talk to designing without limits and leveraging our collective brilliance in support of innovation and continuous learning. Within our organization we encourage all designers to contribute their ideas and opinions – everyone brings something to the table. Ideas take form without criticisms or comment. That's the key to collaboration. Everyone sketches. Everyone shares – and then excitement builds towards consensus on the best alternatives.

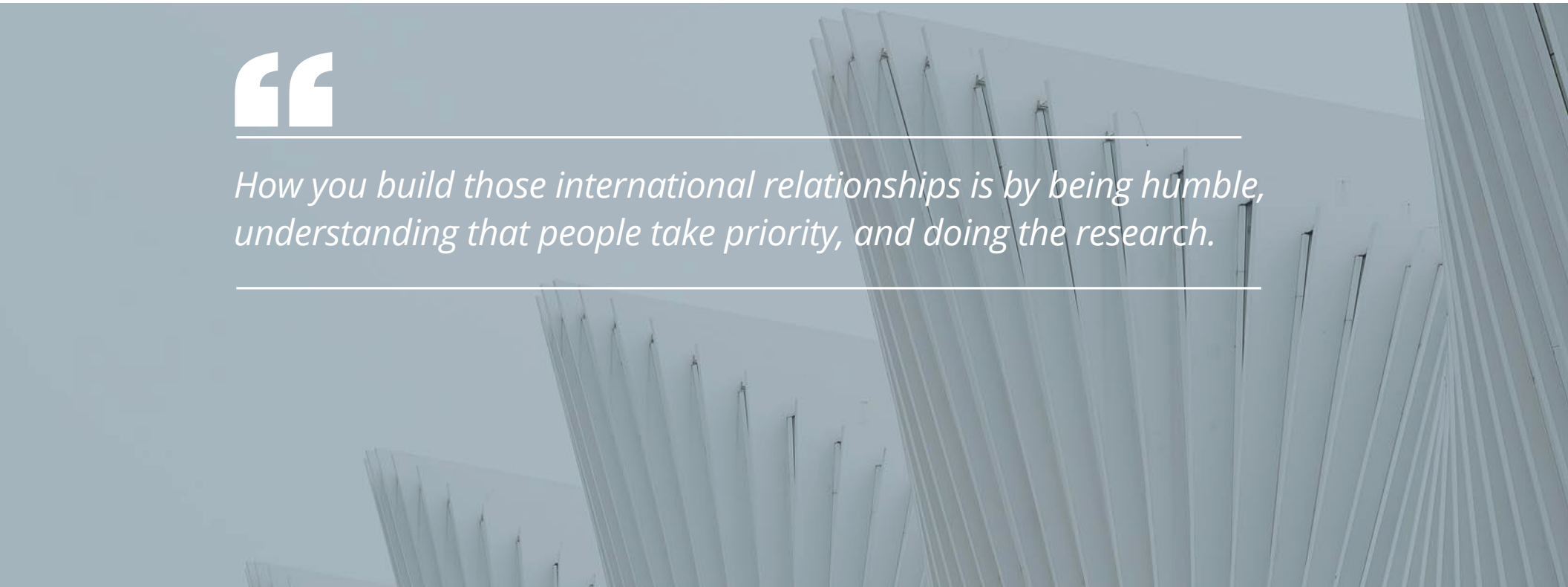
I've been on teams when I was younger where there was only one architect, the guy in charge, and he would tell us what to do, what to think, what to say, how to do it and how to drive. He was harmful for the team environment because he didn't allow people to explore their creativity.

I'm very strong in what I think and do. I design with passion and confidence. But, I also allow my team to experience the same confidence.

DI: You've talked about your abilities to be inclusive. So many of the problems in our industry come from the ways we contract and set up projects. Can you talk about inclusive aspects that have influenced your ability to change the rules of the game, the delivery method or the way the project is budgeted — to get the team to think about the broader impacts?

ML: Can't stress it enough – relationships, relationships, relationships. They build trust and mutual respect at a client leadership level and at the project management level.

During the visioning process for a project in Mexico, we met with the client and project director and aligned their expectations with what was necessary for environmental sensitivity, marketing, natural resources, human relationships, and creating unique communities. After we distilled that connectivity into our project vision, they brought in the front-line project managers that focused on pre-established schedules and costs. Once everyone has the same vision and buys into the project outcomes, consensus and clarity in how things will move forward is possible – because everyone is on the same page and understands the end game.



How you build those international relationships is by being humble, understanding that people take priority, and doing the research.

But that doesn't mean things don't change. Into design development, we had to reduce costs. We suggested adding additional units to generate additional income without compromising design quality. Today, the project is one of the most unique resort communities in the world. Having those kinds of projects under your belt puts you in a different position when you talk to a client who is just starting to develop a property. You gain respect quickly. In this case, we brought alternative ideas that moved the project forward in better ways. We added rooms and were able to balance costs by also bringing in revenue.

DI: You had those strong relationship, the vision, the respect and the experience. Share your vision of a great project kickoff meeting with us. Dream. You're starting a significant new international project. Where are you? Who's in the room? They turn to you as project leader. How do you begin? What do you say? What's your agenda and what's the outcome at the end of the day?

ML: I'm going to Malaysia to an island off the coast. We walk the site absorb it all. The island has power feeding from the beautiful ocean — turquoise water, sand palms in the front — and then the power moves uphill, to beautiful vegetation, large trees, mountains, a ravine with waterfalls. It's at that moment, we begin to understand the concept and the potential for the project. We visualize units on stilts, tree houses, lots of paths and walkways into the jungle, water tours to different locations. We envision buildings designed like leaves or roofs that lay like a leaf. Maybe there's a knot that comes from a local tree that can be shaped into a building or the seeds can be the shape. The leaves can give you shelter from the winds, the environment, and the rain, and that's the roof, with all the vegetation going through it. Maybe the arrival is not typical. Where you arrive is more like a structure crossing over the ravine. You sit on it and you look off to the ocean. You are able to make people feel they're in a special place by using sight, smell, sound, touch and taste to create a sense of place.

DI: Man, you are good at this. So vivid. What happens next? You've had a great kickoff meeting and shared the vision. You've got this great opportunity, your team's assembled on-site. How does the day conclude and what does the team do?

ML: The first thing we do is explore the site. We walk it. We drive. We go by water. We visit the high points, the low points and the ravines. We look at view angles and corridors. We begin to understand where we may place some elements and how we arrive. I always make quick notes about my experiences — the most memorable and most important.

Then we get to brainstorming. Here's when you really capture what people want to do. The idea is to create one of the most boutique hotels in the world. So, maybe we bring in Kengo Kuma, a famous Japanese architect? We determine the overall vision of the project. It needs to be very sustainable and unique within the nature of the terrain without touching any of the vegetation – maybe Six Senses should be approached as an operator?

We should add a local environmental consultant to the team. Additional research is needed to advance the culture of Malaysia. And then we start visualizing. We talk about the program, and we let the clients go away. We sit at the table and start sketching, drawing some of the master plan elements. How you arrive, where the roadway goes, where can we nestle units, the building and supplier area and some of the common grounds. We decide what we want to create that's unique from other places so we can differentiate it from the competition. At the end of the day, we have dinner and talk some more. The next morning, we present the first ideas to the owner.

DI: A wonderful vision. I can see why you do what you do. What are your passions and strengths?

ML: I have a passion for design. To create experiences for people and projects that are completely different, unique and environmentally sensitive.

DI: In today's world, we've got all these concurrent crises happening. Everything seems connected now — diversity, social, economic and environmental issues. One way to cope is to be more inclusive of people. Another way is to use more machinery, perhaps new processes. How are you solving this problem of connectedness in your work?

ML: You're absolutely right. Things are more connected. The pandemic has changed all of us. We've had to adapt quickly and it's not going back to how it was.

We have quickened our adoption of technology to better connect and communicate with each other.

Photos provided by EDSA

We also need to be better at being inclusive which includes having tough conversations at all levels with people across the globe. We have to be aware and bring more diversity to the table – empowering others to lead the discussion, to listen to what's important before speaking – that's true collaboration. Inclusion is so important because we do international work and we're always working with other cultures. We have to understand them – and that starts at home in our own office. We have a great team and are doing really good work. We are talking more than we ever did before.

DI: How do you produce work?

ML: We've proven we can do everything in digital form but it's still challenging to create a vision for a master plan on the computer. A 3,000-hectare site is hard to put on a computer because you're limited to looking at a small section on the screen to see the detail, when the full master plan is as large as a table.

There's no replacement for sound design thinking. We spend a lot of time drawing and sketching and coming up with ideas. Young designers often tend to go directly into presentation mode once they have one idea that they feel strongly about. They're not investigating options on paper, exploring four or five ideas, and asking why this or why that to evaluate them. Technology is helping us do presentations and beautiful 3D models, but we need to be thoughtful as to when and how we apply it. Selecting the right design tools at the right time is important. But so is selecting the right people and ideas.

Marco Larrea, PLA, is a Principal with EDSA. Armed with a natural respect for social and environmental influences, Marco has an ability to discern the essence of a place and effectively distill original concepts and ecological narratives to create harmonious spaces. In considering site history and realities, town interface, implementation strategies, and each property's unique cultural, physical, and environmental characteristics in his designs, Marco advances industry-leading ideas with a contextual approach that has emerged from a passion that intuitively impacts human behavior, economic well-being, and environmental sensitivity. He has a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture degree from Louisiana State University and attended the School of Architecture at the Central University of Ecuador.

Cracking Culture

DesignIntelligence Quarterly

Cracking Culture

Snøhetta Managing Partner Elaine Molinar discusses her firm's attitudes toward structure, respect and food in scaling collaboration

ELAINE MOLINAR

Partner, Snøhetta New York

DesignIntelligence, Michael LeFevre (DI): It's a pleasure to talk to you. I'd like our conversation to explore the issues and opportunities around collaboration and the dependencies upon others. Is that OK?

Elaine Molinar (EM): Sure, these are fascinating topics.

DI: Per your website, your career — and the firm's — was "kickstarted" by your winning design for the Alexandria competition. Now you're the managing partner of the New York office. How and where did you develop the management skills to do that? Based on my understanding of your firm's ethos, I have to believe that "managing" is a self-leveling, self-governing kind of process — a means to an end, that being design. But somebody has to run things; staff projects; pursue work; find, develop and keep great people; keep support systems; and keep the lights on. Your title suggests that is you. What do you really do?

EM: I would say yes to your thought about managing in our firm being a means to an end - the nuts and bolts that enable design work. But let's talk about words first. We're a global company with seven studios across the world. We've adapted title conventions that translate across languages and cultures to the greatest extent possible. Those of us who are managing partners lead studios, and each have their own approach about what that is. My calendar and timesheets suggest I spend most of my time in conversation.

Looking back, I've never had specific mentors in my career or an employer that took a dedicated interest in my professional development, and managing a practice is not something that's taught in school. My work experience had been with eccentric sole practitioners, a couple of small firms and Snøhetta, which had minimal organizational structures for many years. I've never been part of a regimented hierarchical firm.

We hit the ground running when we established our practice in the U.S. to carry out the commission to design a cultural institution at the World Trade Center site. Most of what I've done has been "trial by fire" and finding good references — either in real life or in print. Hindsight is a powerful teacher. I have a network of people who are in similar positions but outside of my profession that I meet with regularly and learn from. I don't work alone. We have dedicated finance, HR, new business and communications teams. I have partners who focus on the quality and delivery of our design work. Without them, we wouldn't have a practice.

DI: As a self-avowed nonhierarchical firm, what management aspects DO you hang your hat on or care about? What do you manage?

EM: My interest in organizational health started to grow once we opened a studio in the U.S. At some point, I moved out of project work to focus on that. How work was getting done (or not getting done) became more interesting to me than doing the (architectural) work itself. We all know that a healthy workplace is good for a bottom line, but it is also good for people. Our profession is hard enough outside our doors, why make it difficult within?

DI: Remarkably, your office organization is democratic, participative and transparent as a founding tenet, even to the point of displaying salaries, I think. Does that openness and inclusiveness translate into design process? If so, can you share how? Your firm has a widely recognized "stellar" global design reputation, extrapolated to a potentially despised word: "starchitect." What's the truth? Your husband, Craig Dykers, one of the firm founders, is one of its visible design leaders. I'm sure there are more. Is it a design meritocracy? How do teams, partners, key consultants — even clients — participate in and engage in a design process?

EM: When you work alone, that's a personal, idiosyncratic process. Whether it's erratic or linear, you know what you're dealing with. Once you add another person, things start to get interesting — and exponentially more so with each additional person added to a team or organization. I find the connections between individual and team behavior and creative output rather fascinating.

Total transparency in all things is not productive and can place unnecessary burdens on people. Clarity, on the other hand, is more meaningful and lessens the burden on others. So, for example, your individual salary may not be transparent, but the context in which it sits is clear. The goal for our design process is to begin with an uninhibited brainstorming. That requires participation from the full team.

Even those who have strengths other than design can be valuable contributors here. We all experience the built environment every day, and I think our discipline is about paying attention. Our education prepares us to take notice and analyze physical relationships so we can recreate new ones. We also recognize when our clients and other collaborators have valuable ideas. Some of our more impactful works have been the result of a very close exchange of ideas with clients and their initial, seemingly crazy vision, such as putting library books in a robotic storage system or building a restaurant underwater.

Do we have a design meritocracy? A collaborative process requires empathy, generosity, risk-taking, trust and leadership. Non-led and unmanaged collaboration can result in what I'd call a "fried-egg-banana-pizza" if it is misunderstood as an assemblage of everyone's ideas.

We strive for works of powerful clarity, and this comes from a collaborative process that employs leadership and defines a clear, common direction that our clients can believe in and put their funds behind. We need to understand a client's needs and desires as well as our own and offer them in a way that captures their imagination. I think communication is the most underestimated skill we don't really learn in school. It's one of the most important skills, and obviously, some people will excel at it more than others.

DI: In your integrated approach to architecture and landscape, I've observed what I might call naturalistic formal tendencies. Certainly not many boxlike forms. Calling it biomorphic or biophilic would be stretching it.

Photo of glass façade of Ryerson University, photographed by Lorne Bridgeman.

Photos courtesy of Elaine Molinar

But from there, it's not too big a stretch to draw analogies to your firm governance: flat, natural, organic, responsive. Certainly not so many human-made structural constructs as conventional "command and control" firms have relied on since the Industrial Revolution. Little hierarchy. Are the parallels between your work and your organizational structure intentional?

EM: I don't think so. First, I'm going to defend boxlike forms! You only have to think of anything by Charles and Ray Eames or Richard Neutra (and many others) to realize that creativity and innovation are not limited by form. Also, there's plenty of hierarchy in nature and natural forms. Even when something seemingly random repeats, it becomes a solidified structure and might be post-rationalized to seem intentional from the outset. You might argue, though, that a rigid, process-heavy, formal routine would stifle creativity in whichever way it emerges.

DI: What are your secrets toward maintaining your firm's culture of collaboration? I've heard about your annual retreats. I love this photo (Above, left).

EM: We've always spent time doing things outside of the studio together, and I think our studio is known for the solid friendships people form. Yes, those retreats have been epic! Size is a factor, and it's never possible for 100% of us to get together at our current size of over 200 globally. Scaling up a culture that works for a small group to also work for a large one has been a revealing experience, and I wouldn't say we've exactly cracked it, but there's a lot of heart in our company.

DI: How do you attract and retain staff who are both highly skilled in design and technical matters and simultaneously can nurture the interpersonal skills to be inclusive and embrace diversity? The stereotype is that talented designers are quirky, sullen, arrogant. As stereotypes, they're wrong by definition. But what's you're secret? Do you hire team players and empathic folks by design? Is there a litmus test? Do you talk about such attributes or just live them?

EM: We take recruiting seriously and have made a conscious effort to constantly tinker with the process to find the best way. While there is no foolproof system, we have developed a type of litmus test based on both skill and fit. The premise is that skills can be acquired (unless you have very specific and urgent needs) but you are either a good fit or you aren't. And by that, I mean a good fit for us versus another firm, because everyone is a good fit somewhere.

Our fit criteria can be summed up as a combination of being humble, hungry and (people) smart, and we've developed a line of questions to use as a guide. Everyone who interviews candidates uses this simple tool. No one is equal in all three, but we look for balance. Being a team player is key to collaboration — being able to buy into and carry forward the ideas of others with the same commitment as if they were their own. Prioritizing team and project goals over a personal agenda will keep design work from going off the rails. But leadership does and should emerge, because I believe good leaders have the experience of having been led by others. It's a process of respect and a respect for a process.

DI: Since Snøhetta is a global firm with multiple offices, how do you find consistency? Do you track it, measure it? Is it simply an invisible part of the culture, or do you celebrate the variations?

EM: Though they are very different people in many ways, our co-founders share a strong vision and similar values about design and the built environment. It hasn't been so long that we've had studios spread out all over the world, but they are led by people who once sat in the same space and worked together. I would describe our company as a "design diaspora," with the homeland being those common visions and values. I see trends emerging from our various locations in the type of work we produce, the type of clients we cultivate, typologies, response to local cultures, etc. Though I think it is all ultimately representative of us.

DI: Beyond mere awareness or attempts to embrace equity, diversity and inclusion, the next level of mastery is to depend and rely upon it, then transcending that to achieve magic. Have you reached that level? Can you give an example of a relationship, person, consultant or perspective that has now become inextricable from your firm culture, design process or results?

EM: We've been working with an EDI consultant since 2019 and have an internal task force, which includes me, dedicated to these issues. Architecture in particular has historically been an elite, white man's profession. Change happens slowly, but it does happen, and that means reaching out to the K-12 crowd if we want to see a broader spectrum of professionals emerge from degree programs a decade from now.

Photo of metal roof of the Alexandria library, by Gerald Zugman

We participate in a program that pairs marginalized middle schools with professionals to expose kids to possibilities they may not otherwise have. So, while one generation moves out and a future one moves in, the middle is messy, which is where we are. Our consultant, Feminuity, has had a positive impact on our studio, I believe. We take a close look at issues and processes, such as recruiting, standard holidays, training, unconscious bias — it's a long list! Are there trends where people are assigned to roles, tasks and opportunities based on gender? What about those who celebrate holidays not traditionally recognized in the United States? Are we reaching candidates from far and wide or just from the usual list of top schools? How we approach these issues and more contributes to the health of our workplace and impact the quality of our work.

DI: Can you cite any examples of better project outcomes due to collaboration, diversity and multiple perspectives or perhaps failures when you didn't? And what you learned?

EM: The first library we built after the Alexandria Library was the James B. Hunt Library at North Carolina State University. The user-client, Susan Nutter, wanted to use an automated retrieval storage system (ASRS). Only a small handful of libraries had used these systems, and she was a champion of this innovative solution. We originally assumed it would be off-site, as others had done before. She wanted it in the library itself, and this posed a significant spatial challenge. These are enormous, two-hour fire-rated, unoccupied volumes.

Librarians are not afraid of challenges and are some of the most innovative clients we've had. The inclusion of this storage element came midway in schematic design, at the same time the state of North Carolina pulled 12 million dollars out of the project. The Construction Manager-At-Risk, Skanska, had just come onto the project at that time. They did their own analysis in parallel with ours and suggested that excavating and submerging half of the large volume would cost less than surrounding it with usable space above grade. We were then able to integrate it into the library program effectively and place a large window into it in the entry lobby so everyone could see the robot at work.

Compacting book storage this way — as opposed to open shelving — left more real estate for people, and we were able to reduce the overall building size as well. Susan Nutter understood that the power of her library should be its capacity to bring people together to learn in new ways. It was a fruitful and rewarding collaboration that combined a broad spectrum of expertise. Every library we've designed since begins with a discussion and often inclusion of an ASRS.

DI: You describe your office organization structure and workspace as having no hierarchy.

Noteworthy is what you call your "communal kitchen table," which doubles as team workspace. It's a physical manifestation of unity and teamwork, equality. We had a similar construct at my former firm Lord, Aeck, Sargent — a single team table that encircled the core of a spec office building — with occasional breaks for circulation. We all "sat at one table."

But I want to zero in on the importance of food as a social connector. Your website says you have a cook. The U.K. design consultancy Pentagram is one of the few other design firms I've ever known who had a cook. Can we talk about food? What does it mean to how you work together?

EM: First, I'd like to clarify that I don't describe our organizational structure as having no hierarchy. We are not an ESOP, and we do have hierarchies of responsibility and liability. Our teams are organized around tiers of responsibility, as is our company as a whole.

A structure is there for support, not to dictate decisions. Crutches help you walk when you have a broken ankle, but they don't tell you where to go.

Our physical space, however, has no hierarchy. Our studios are based on an open landscape, with most people randomly placed and others with meaningful adjacencies. The New York studio is the only one that has an enclosed office, and our finance and HR teams share that space. Part of having an equitable workplace is providing privacy when it makes sense.

All our studios have a communal table, but not all our studios have a cook on site. I'm looking forward to being back in the studio and having lunch together at our big table without the restrictions the pandemic has imposed upon us. It's less important how food gets to the table than the fact that we are there together sharing our mealtime.

I think it's well documented that families who share meals enjoy greater health and relationships, as well as reduced stress levels. It's no different at work. Eating together builds trust and morale and improves productivity. It's enjoyable to get to know each other, and this trust spills over into our work teams, making a collaborative process natural.

DI: You probably don't know, but our paths have crossed before. At my last firm, Holder Construction Company, we did a project together, the Virginia Tech Arts Center. I was on a couple calls with Craig. The client asked us as the CM to provide BIM coordination of some of the complex systems late in the game. I remember a sense of mild tension on some of the calls sorting out turf, building trust, adding new players. Are you feeling the same pressures: encroachment by CMs, program managers, the inexorable getting in-budget and in-schedule? Late-breaking owner changes? How are you coping? How can the AECO and building design and construction industry move past our centuries-old biases? At least, what's your attitude and approach to it?

EM: Ambition and budget alignment needs to happen right up front — before design begins. When this is understood by clients and expectations are within reach, the resultants and process are usually more successful. As you know, the lion's share of the cost of a project is in its size and in the quality of that size. That can only be reconsidered right up front before valuable time is wasted. And it makes no sense to price nuts and bolts during a concept or schematic phase because we're still defining a project's identity. Your phrase, "late in the game" sparks many thoughts. It is frustrating to be asked to do things "late in the game" that we had advised doing much earlier when the benefit would have been significant. New ideas or changes coming from the owner can be accommodated through the process of additional services or schedule adjustments if they are significant. And even though there's a process for working these things out, new solutions do not always reach their full potential when they are introduced late.

BIM is new territory in our industry, still. When deliverables were two-dimensional drawings on paper, coordination required dialogue and what was produced was controlled. Today, 100% of a BIM model can be mistaken as fact, so putting that digital model in the hands of others can be nerve-racking.

DI: Thank you for buying my book, "Managing Design." While it began as an investigation of whether design could be managed, it soon morphed into being about the power of others, empathy and the subjects we're talking about. I'd love to hear your reaction to it and the issues it addresses. Did any of it ring true?

EM: I've just cracked it open, and it's proving hard to put down! I really appreciate the interview format because it's a direct window into someone else's specific world, and there are so many relatable moments. As someone who spent the first half of my career abroad, it's interesting to gain perspective on practice in America. I wish you had interviewed more women!

DI: I wish I had too. Thank you. Where are you going next regarding collaboration?

EM: Exploring the limits of a collaborative process poses questions and opportunities — on team size, firm size, client type, project complexity, etc. Is collaboration for everyone, or are there people who thrive by being given explicit direction? Perhaps a collaborative practice also needs people who have a service provider mindset. We are starting to consider the limitations that using so many digital tools have on our design process.

DI: What's your message? Something I haven't asked that you'd like to say?

EM: We need to figure out how to change the mindset that architecture is a luxury. It's well known that design has the power to influence the way people behave and interact with one another. It is instrumental in creating a just and inclusive environment, not only for people, but for animal life and nature as well.

DI: What else can we learn from you?

EM: My motto: The fun never stops!

DI: Last questions: What brings you joy? What are you hopeful about?

EM: Well, that's another long list! But I am hopeful about the next generation of architects. Right now, they're experiencing the extreme challenges of the pandemic, the economy and social justice very early in their careers. They're starting to lead the action on how best to meet challenges of climate and inequity, and I'm inspired to work alongside so many designers advocating for a more just future.

Elaine Molinar is managing partner of Snøhetta's New York office. Snøhetta is a leading global design firm, including offices in Oslo, Paris, Innsbruck, San Francisco, Hong Kong and Adelaide. She is a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin and serves on the Board of Trustees of the Van Alen Institute as well as advisory boards of the University of Texas School of Architecture, the Penn State School of Architecture, and the online editorial platform Madame Architect. Elaine's focus on issues of social and physical well-being drives her work not only as a design leader but also as an employer and cultivator of Snøhetta's growing practice.

ESSAY

Effective Interaction: Essential Enablers

DesignIntelligence Quarterly

DAVE GILMORE

President and CEO,
DesignIntelligence

Effective Interaction: Essential Enablers

I've been pondering the theme of human interaction for the past several months, trying to understand the heart of it. Like so many words in our vocabulary, we use them (and sometimes abuse them) without grasping the meaning and intent resident within them.

Interaction is an idea possessing the power to connect and transform. It speaks to relationships, as interaction requires more than one party to function. When people come together, they interact by giving and receiving. They exchange signals, content and tangibles. Our interactive relating, one to another, generates all manner of outcomes.

Constructive interaction results in positive relational, emotional, functional and material outcomes. Destructive interaction so often yields diminishment, erosion, separation and a litany of aberrant outcomes. Sometimes what we label as "destructive interaction" is in fact a precursor to constructive outcomes. Sometimes healthy conflict between people exposes mutually recognized contributions that inhibit positive interaction and its close cousin, collaboration.

Over the course of my career, I've assembled an inventory of essential enablers to effective interaction. This list is by no means exhaustive but has served me well in myriad situations where the absence of these techniques might have resulted in less glowing outcomes. Here are three:

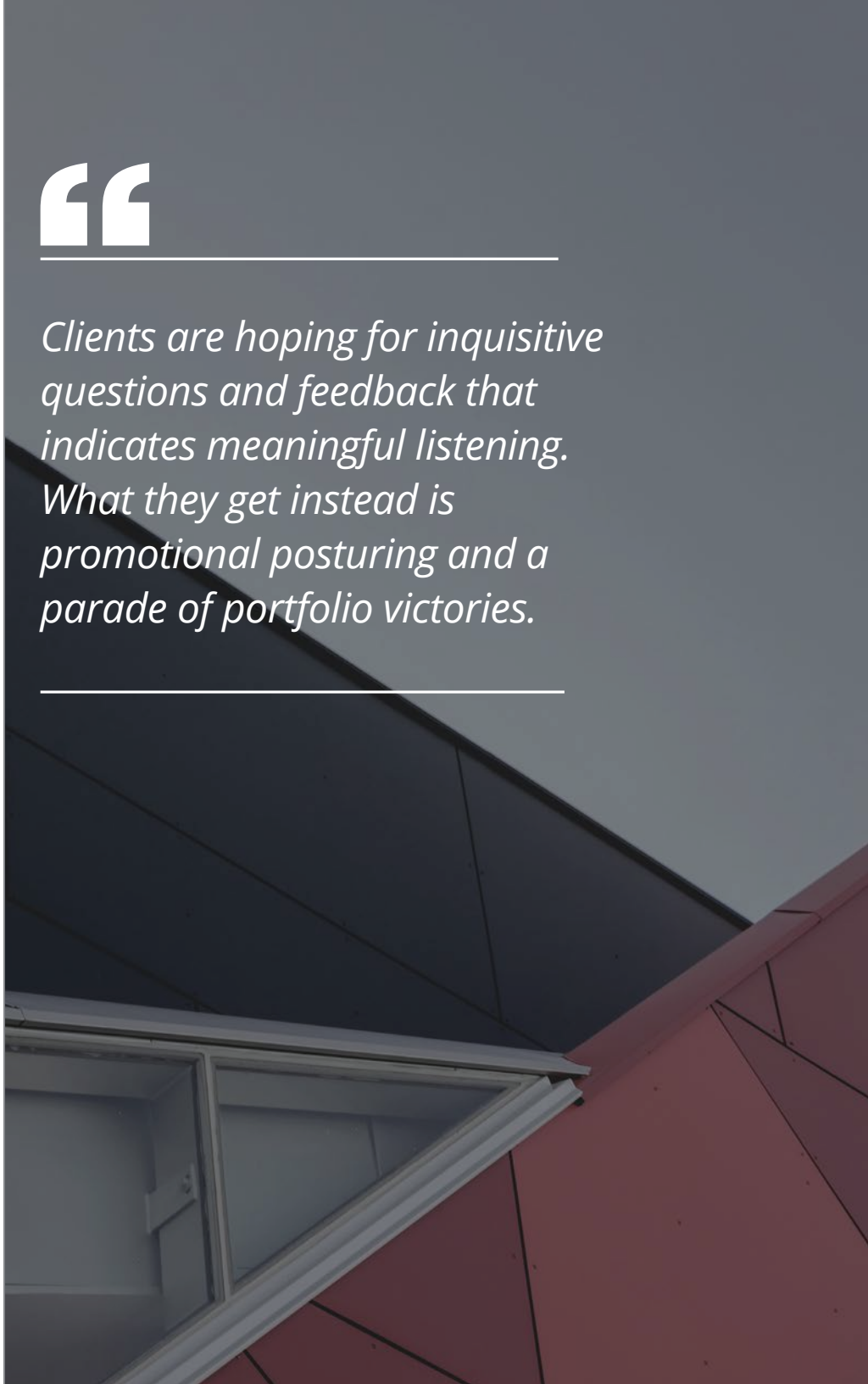
Consciously Open Receptors

God had great wisdom in giving us two eyes, two ears, two nostrils … and one mouth. Our receptors outnumber our transmitters. Why then do we so often neglect the input of our receptors and talk-shout-scream with our mouths and facial expressions when interacting with others?

In a front-of-mind posture, when I consciously lean into listening and fully observe those with whom I'm interacting, the results are far more constructive and meaningful than when I don't. Conscious reception signals acceptance and intentionality to others. And who doesn't want to be accepted and shown the respect of full engagement?

De-Agendizing

A new word. Perhaps awkward, but effective. Entering an interaction with no pre-set agenda is the opposite of what most management efficiency gurus would suggest. But efficiency isn't always the objective. Sometimes such counter-intuitive actions transform relationships and yield better outcomes.



Clients are hoping for inquisitive questions and feedback that indicates meaningful listening. What they get instead is promotional posturing and a parade of portfolio victories.

Meeting with others often requires a structure, usually in the form of an agenda to guide conversation and intended outcomes. But "de-agendizing" has less to do with structure and more to do with consciously setting aside a predetermined position to defend or a personal objective. When we deactivate such posturing and allow an organic freedom of mutual exchange in the interaction, the outcomes are given the liberty to yield multi-dimensional benefits for all participants.

Active Listening

A time-tested practice, active listening extends and enables consciously open receptors. To actively listen involves giving timely feedback within the context of dialogue. It reinforces what was heard yet remains open to being corrected if not right. Active listening focuses on understanding the other party's input and contributions, as well as the intention and motivation behind what they are expressing — the unsaid, "between the lines" information.

Active listening is a forward-leaning mental posture that seeks to put aside intrusive distractions when interacting with others. It's concentrates ear-to-ear, eye-to-eye and mind-to-mind attention to the language spoken and unspoken, seeking the meaning that accompanies it all.

Imagine This

Imagine how the discipline of business development might be radically altered if those pursuing new client relationships applied these three enablers to client interactions. What clients desire above all else is to be heard and understood. And yet, far too many servicers are inclined to promote and present. It's strange, if not disturbing, to witness seasoned, intelligent, talented professionals so often cast off listening in favor of speaking at their clients. Their clients are hoping for inquisitive questions and feedback that indicates meaningful listening. What they get instead is promotional posturing and a parade of portfolio victories.

Usually, in a move to mitigate the confusion of multiple firms self-promoting their "exceptional" design capabilities, these bewildered clients shift the decision-making to a Request For Proposal process, appoint a vetting committee and run through the paces of organized comparing and contrasting. In a sea of sameness where no one is listening, they seek differentiation — good or bad. Most of these investors and owners are savvy enough to discern the difference between pretense and authenticity, but what they want most is positive, meaningful interaction with built environment industry professionals who have their client's interests in mind. Those who can offer such client focus are the exception.

Realms of Possibility

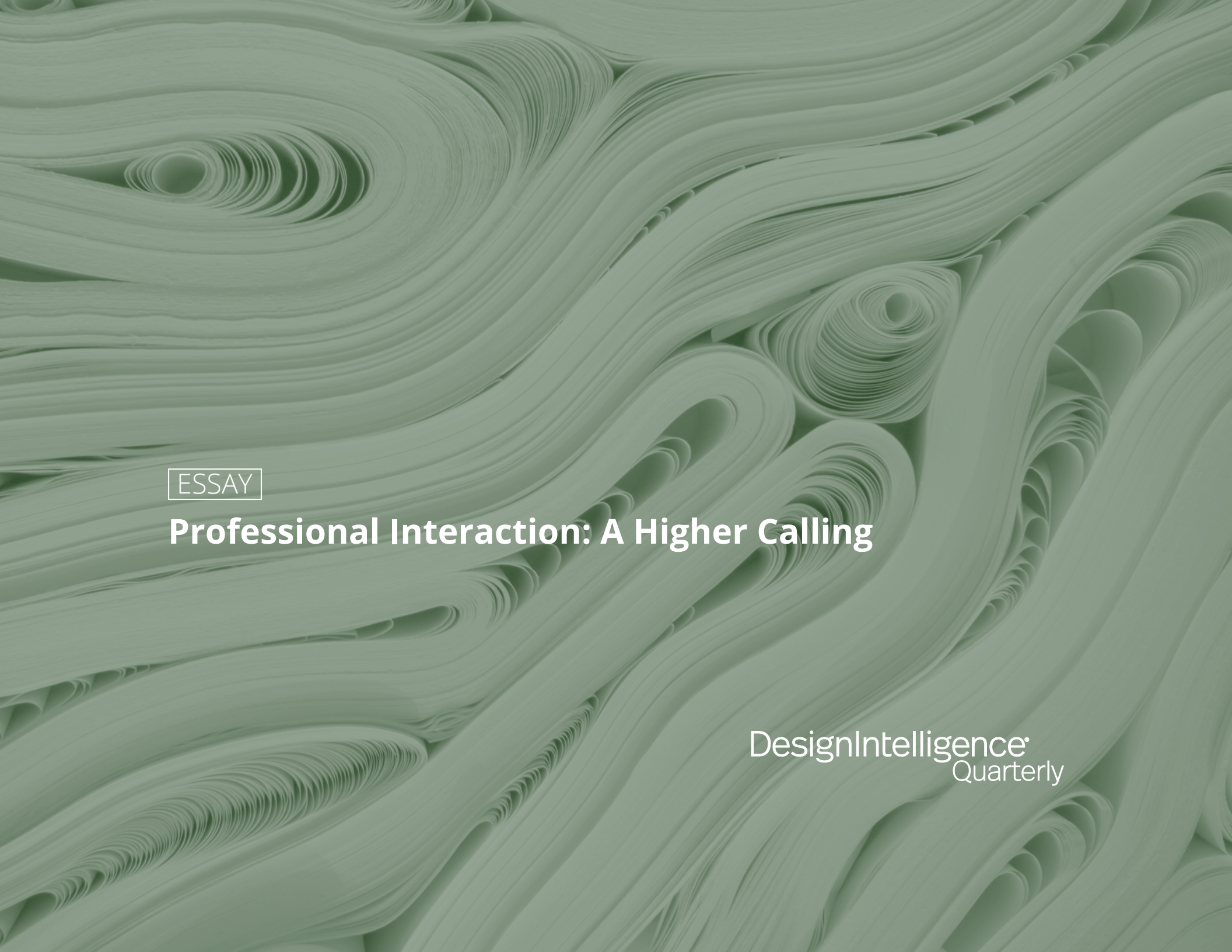
How might you approach each interaction with client prospects while applying these three enabling listening techniques? How might things change in that interaction if you consciously exercised all your receptors? What might result if you didn't come with an agenda to advance your prospects or close a deal? What if you simply approached the interaction with curious questions seeking to understand the who, why, what and more of the client's perspective? How might everything change if you listened purposely and intentionally — really listened — to those with whom you interacted?

Professional interaction begins within the firm. Engaging one another in new and meaningful ways might be the best place to start. If we truly seek to understand rather than be understood, every interaction will suddenly mean more. Imagine what your relationships might look like if those with whom you're interacting were convinced you cared and wanted to understand. If you could feed back that understanding with words that mattered. Might this be the basis of authentic collaboration?

Introspection, when properly shared and responded to, gives access to a new dimension of honesty. This kind of honesty manifests itself as open vulnerability. It openly admits lacking everything it needs and invites contributions by others. Honest introspection illuminates shadowed areas of understanding and helps us achieve with others what we couldn't produce alone.

When my contribution or thinking, incomplete as that may be, is combined with yours and the caring inputs of the many others with whom we interact, all are bettered, all move toward completion, all find the fullness we've been seeking. This kind of multi-dimensional interaction serves as the basis for actionable collaboration and offers the safety and strength of mutual interdependence. This "lean on me/lean on each other" dynamic results in synergy and sustainability not possible otherwise.

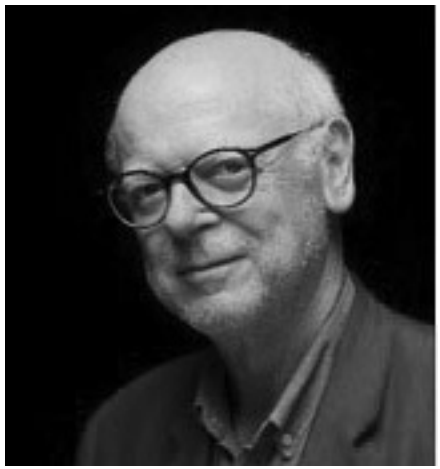
Dave Gilmore is president and CEO of DesignIntelligence



ESSAY

Professional Interaction: A Higher Calling

DesignIntelligence Quarterly



PAUL HYETT

RIBA, Hon FAIA,
Vickery Hyett Architects,
Founder—Partner

Professional Interaction: A Higher Calling

Re-examining the tenets of interpersonal responsibility

"I did not like the tone of your letter — please don't ever write to me again."

So wrote avant-garde architect Cedric Price to Pat Enright, then a director of Murphy, the builder responsible for constructing the new InterAction Centre as commissioned by community activist Ed Berman in London's Kentish Town. The issue at hand, inconceivable in this era of email communication, was Cedric's insistence that Murphy should identify its correspondence by both date (day/month/year) AND the time of day. This he required to distinguish one letter from another when referencing replies to the many requests for information and clarification that were arriving daily during the early stages of the contract
.
General arrangement drawings for that project, as with all others, were drawn on an unusual paper size unique to the Price office (by memory, somewhere around 700 mm x 350 mm in dimension). "Details" were produced on A4 sheets that, after allowance for borders and titles, all too often yielded less than satisfactory space for the image.

Enright had responded to the request by suggesting that the project would progress with greater efficiency if the architect focused on the issue of timely information, rather than becoming preoccupied with administrative processes — hence the infamous "please don't ever write to me again" retort.

I reference this story because, as well as the coincidental word in this article's title to the name of Berman's organisation (Inter-Action) and project (the InterAction Centre), it highlights the importance of constructive relationships in any kind of creative collaboration.

The title's other word raises a second question — what is meant by "professional"? Lest arrogance or conceit be suspected, let me immediately make clear that builders can, and indeed should, conduct themselves in all aspects of their work in a "professional" manner. But in an age where the word professional has been so demeaned as to be virtually meaningless in daily parlance, what, we must ask, is meant by "professional"?

One definition I have used over the years in teaching "professional practice" to architects is that "professionals carry knowledge and skills that their clients do not usually possess. They offer this knowledge for a fee, albeit always with the client's interest placed first and foremost."

The patient therefore assumes, and codes of practice in my country certainly demand, that a doctor will prescribe with only the patient's interests in mind: the medic will not, and cannot, take a second fee or commission from the drug company. Likewise, the architect must select and specify solely in the client's interest and cannot receive gift or favour for so doing. That, in essence, is the distinction between "professional" doctors or architects and quacks or spivs.

And that is why footballers cannot be professionals: they may be paid, and thus distinguished from amateurs, but have only self-interest to serve in the performance of their duties. Likewise, the second-hand car dealer, and so on.

Rewind some 80 years — to the White House. The date: 27 December 1941. Winston Churchill is in bed and worried. "I am so glad you have come", he told Charles McMoran Wilson, better known as Lord Moran, who, as his physician, accompanied him on all engagements. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had laid on a splendid supper, but on retiring to bed, Churchill had suffered chest pains and breathing problems. The prime minister's mission had been to persuade the president to commit America's efforts to the European theatre — a commitment much threatened by the events at Pearl Harbor just 20 days earlier. As the physician knew all too well, the stakes could not have been higher.

"Is my heart all right?" asked Churchill

Moran's professional duty was clear and simple: it obliged him to hospitalise the patient — period. Remember the Hippocratic oath against which doctors are bound:

"I will follow that system of regimen which, according to my ability and judgement, I consider for the benefit of my patients, and

abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous."

So, what did Moran do?

In full knowledge that the correct diagnosis was a mild heart attack, and that correct action was immediate hospitalisation, he told his patient "there is nothing serious." As he later revealed in his biography (Churchill: The Struggle for Survival), "I determined to tell no one." (Not even the patient!) In short, recognising the propaganda coup that would otherwise ensue for the German and Japanese high commands, Moran put the Allied war effort first. In attitude, if not physically, he propped his patient up to enable him to carry his American mission through to its successful completion.

Increasingly, construction professionals face the same dilemma: like Lord Moran, we have a higher calling that demands we put our world first, and where appropriate, ahead of the Developer/Client.

This increasingly requires new levels of professional interaction and shared ambition hitherto rarely seen — certainly outside the theatre of war. Essential to such professional interaction is design intelligence. We need to exchange ideas across professional disciplines; we need to use conflict and competition in constructive ways and as vehicles to test ideas and search out the truths that will inform strategy and direction; and, above all, we need to co-operate, both within our construction professions and across our professional construction disciplines, as well as beyond our traditional industry borders.

Through all this, we, as construction professionals, need to distance ourselves from the path that law and finance have encouraged us to pursue — the path of abbreviated and ever-later information; of short-termism; of packaging and transferring risk "downstream" to those least equipped to assume it, be they suppliers or contractors, whose want is profit at any cost. Above all, away from the real problems afore us.

Striking in this respect is the dismay expressed by a senior executive of China State Construction Bureau 8, part of the world's largest construction company, who once said to me:

"Paul — you all do it wrongly! Your people identify and then pass risk to others 'downstream' who all too often cannot cope. We identify risk and share it together. We solve problems — you pass them away."

The message of this polemic is simple: "professional" conduct has always demanded attention to higher callings — beyond mere self-interest. Interaction with fellow professionals within our own and associated disciplines has always offered rich reward in terms of innovation and execution. But now, as the young Greta Thunberg has so aptly and effectively warned us, we sit at a nanosecond to midnight: the world will see 80 billion square metres of new building in the next 20 years — a built area equal to 60% of the existing global building stock. Now we have a greater calling as professionals, one that mandates a higher level of interaction than ever before seen.

Now we have a greater calling as professionals, one that mandates a higher level of interaction than ever before seen.

Take a look Google Earth's time-lapse video entitled "Our Cities" published 15 April 2021 if you want a visual of what 80 billion square metres means and looks like.

Our struggle for global sustainability will be won or lost in cities. Do we have the design intelligence to solve this problem? Yes! Do we have the social, economic and political systems in place to facilitate the contribution that such design intelligence can offer? No! So, to where should we turn?

Governance aside, I suggest we turn to our instincts as professionals, that we lift our sights firmly towards the territories of collaboration, sharing knowledge and creative discourse that can shape and offer that better future we know we can construct.

The platform for such effort that can connect that higher calling and combine it with the intensity of purpose and disciplined focus essential to any success is professional interaction. There, and only there, lies the combination of ethics and discipline that, together with knowledge and invention, will be critical to any collective success we might achieve.

Paul Hyett is a founding principal of Vickery-Hyett in the U.K., past president of the Royal Institute of British Architects and a regular contributor to DesignIntelligence.

OBSERVATIONS

> As far as playing jazz, no other art form, other than conversation, can give the satisfaction of spontaneous interaction.
>
> *Stan Getz*

> We can see that all the desirable experiences that we cherish or aspire to attain are dependent upon cooperation and interaction with other sentient beings.
>
> *Dalai Lama*

> I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things
>
> *Mother Teresa*

> Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so.
>
> *Douglas Adams*

> Alone we can do so little.
> Together we can do so much.
>
> *Helen Keller*

> No one can whistle a symphony.
> It takes a whole orchestra to play it.
>
> *H.E. Luccock*

> Language commonly stresses only one side of any interaction.
>
> *Gregory Bateson*

> Interplay and interaction are the integral parts of music - they're as important as the notes
>
> *John McLaughlin*

> Human beings are social creatures. We are social not just in the trivial sense that we like company, and not just in the obvious sense that we each depend on others. We are social in a more elemental way: simply to exist as a normal human being requires interaction with other people.
>
> *Atul Gawande*

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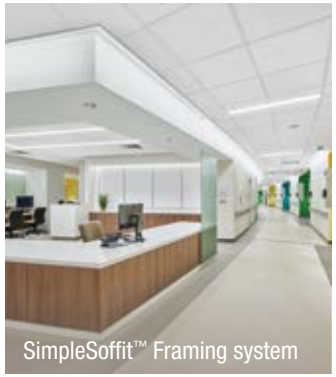

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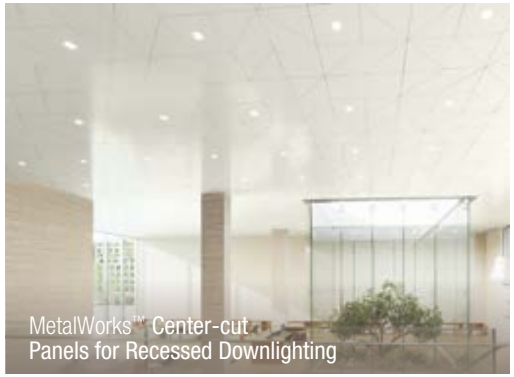

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