



ESSAY

A Declaration of Interdependence

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A Declaration of Interdependence

In an appreciation of teamwork and diversity, DI Managing Editor Michael LeFevre calls for empathy and connectors, inclusion and revolution.

Of Self and Others

When I was in architecture school, we were taught to be self-focused. “Hone your design skills. Learn to draw. Learn about building systems, materials and form — you’ll be more capable and visionary. You’ll be great,” they said. In those days, the literature and role models included Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn. All men. All with horrible, traumatic family lives and not exactly attuned to client service. Their consistency extended to their lack of concern for whether their buildings worked or held up over time, and their disdain for the needs of their collaborators. They told their clients things like:

“If your roof is leaking, put a bucket under it.”

— paraphrasing Le Corbusier’s response to Madame Savoye.

“If it [the river] floods [Ms. Farnsworth], you take the canoe to the house. It isn’t much. It’s an adventure, but that belongs to life.” — Mies van der Rohe¹

“I must say that I have come to a stronger confirmation of my aesthetic judgment and I was misled by my willingness to make adjustments.” — Louis Kahn²

¹ Alex Beam, *Broken Glass: Mies Van Der Rohe, Edith Farnsworth, and the Fight Over a Modern Masterpiece* (New York: Random House, 2020), 55.

² Wendy Lesser, *You Say To Brick: The Life of Louis Kahn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

They lived in simpler times. Times when a talented architect could approach having the knowledge *he* needed (pronoun intended, because few women were practicing). That capacity, coupled with some bravado, stellar salesmanship and an oversized, swashbuckling ego was enough in all these cases to create a strong firm cult-ure, and produce “great” works of architecture. Most of us, me included, still admire the works of these masters, despite their buildings’ leaky, troubled lives.

These kinds of comments to clients are evidence of the exclusionary attitudes harbored and deployed by the modern architectural masters we were taught to emulate. And we wonder why the architectural profession has lost respect over the last 100 years.

In countless stories seemingly drawn from the ranks of reality-distortion fields and fictional tales like “Gone with the Wind,” “The Fountainhead,” “The Twilight Zone” and B-movie horror films, architecture was practiced as an exclusionary art. The great designers, the critics told us, knew what (and who) to leave out. “Less is more,” they chanted to admirers agog. But it’s time for reality to be acknowledged — for people and thinking of all types to be included in designing, building and living on this planet, or it will eventually stop its revolutions. The issues of inclusion and environment are finally being connected.

During the socially turbulent 1960s, Robert Venturi concurrently reminded us: “Less is a bore.” His resulting buildings and their messy vitality were dismissed by many, shunned by others. But even while he wrote as a member of the architectural elite, his rejoinders to consider context got us thinking. Half a century later, maybe we’ve realized: when it comes to a diversity of design perspectives, less is to be abhorred.

The time has come. External events have finally convened to convince us, the hard way, that things must change. If architects don’t learn to care about their clients, we’ll soon find we



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don't have any. If we don't learn to be inclusive and to be connectors, our sphere of influence, stature and ability to produce works of architecture in our current contexts will continue to shrink. So will the value we provide and receive.

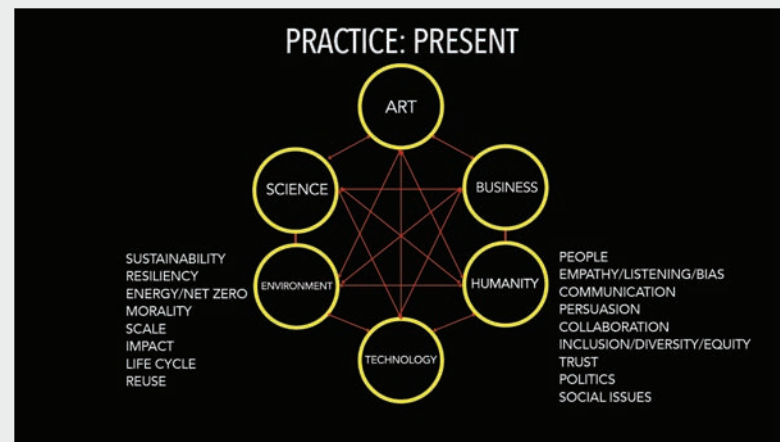
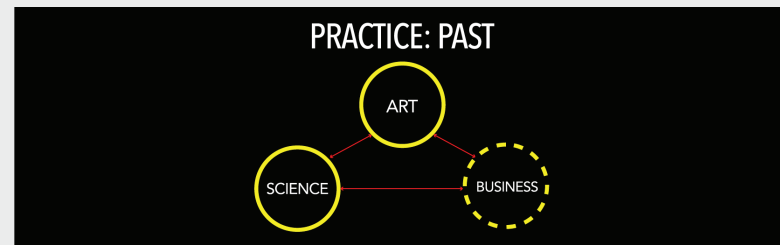
I am heartened by the progress I'm witnessing in this regard in schools and firms everywhere. New positions are being created. Inclusive attitudes are being nurtured in design schools. Amid such transformation, it seems almost easy in retrospect — surprising only in that it took so long to take hold. But change can be slow. We continue as we have until something forces us to change. It has.

Things are different now than when the modernist masters practiced.

No one can possibly know the whole breadth of things we are expected to embrace and include in today's designs. To the triumvirate of art, science — and their distant, third cousin, business — we were taught in the 1970s, we now add technology, humanity and environmental issues, all connected in an ever-growing network of forces and factors as shown in the diagrams below. Who among us can know them all? Just as importantly, do we have the interpersonal skills to aggregate and leverage our collective expertise?

Generalists, Specialists and Connectors

Throughout the recent decades of architectural education and dogma, architects were typically presented with a binary choice: become generalist practitioners or specialize in one or more building types such as healthcare, residential, offices, et al. Regardless of which path we chose, we were coached to be the conductors and choreographers. No one else, we were assured, has the broad education and skillset in the humanities, arts, sciences, design and business that allows the kind of perspective and integral, synthesizing design-thinking required. Most of us believed that and some still do.



diagrams courtesy Michael LeFevre

But in hindsight, there's a flaw in that approach: because of the role models, cultural legacies and failings cited above, and limited time and interest in acquiring business, leadership and collaboration skills, not enough of us architects are skilled at leading. Few of us really know how to collaborate and even fewer have mastered the skills, strategies and risks that attend to business.

With 50 years of perspective in architecture and, across the line, working as a design collaboration liaison and design manager within a national CM firm, I've learned we need a new role.

We need connectors.



We need connectors.

With so many skills and specialties now expected in our work, we can no longer rely upon lone omniscient masters — because there aren't any anymore.

Where and what kind of connectors do we need? Within any organization, we can look at three classic areas of mutual interdependence: people, processes and technology.

People

Now that we have realized the failures of hundreds of years of exclusion of women and minority professionals in design, we are on an accelerated learning curve to adopt justice, equity, diversity and inclusion in our practices. Firms across the world are quickly mobilizing to appoint directors of such human resource domains to remedy the single-minded homogeneity of our past practices, with dramatic results. Our newfound diversity of experiences and perspectives is helping cope with the connected concurrent crises of social, economic, political, environmental, pandemic and informational issues we face.

Similar connector roles are needed to translate languages, encourage listening and add value among the diversities of contractors, trade contractors, architects, engineers, owners, technologists, sustainability experts and countless more — all of whom speak different versions of supposedly the same language (or different languages, in the case of international and global work).

For over 20 years I filled such a role as a connector. Because I could think and speak in two languages, I could translate and interpret to add value, build understanding and keep people

engaged — and projects moving. I performed these skills for those at the table back then, but not for the groups coming to the table now. The need remains.

Current career gurus speak of T-shaped people, those with a broad horizontal base of experience in their field and at least one strong vertical area of expertise. But those T-shaped people can still be isolated until an X-shaped person comes along to connect them.³ Where will the X-shaped people come from? Who will they be?

It matters not. The connectors we need can be architects if we realize our potential and if our schools redirect education to prepare them. They can be contractors if the new generation of collaborative builders can acquire the skills. Surprisingly, while working inside a CM firm, I witnessed many contractor-types become great connectors. They did it because they were better suited to adapt to change. They did it for survival. They did it because the architects and owners didn't (or couldn't), instead simply complaining about the disconnects and carrying on. The truth is we never cared about who was in charge. We just cared that we were working as a team. On many occasions, the leader or connector's role transitioned from person to person and organization to organization as needed. They exhibited those prized skills called teamwork, diversity, agility — and trust.

Processes

In interviewing more than 40 AEC industry experts for my book "Managing Design"⁴ and another 100 luminaries over the past two years at DesignIntelligence, I have continued my quest to understand the new forms the design process has taken. I have yet to find them, but I see them taking shape. In large part, gone are the days of a lone designer self-creating a concept on tracing paper then throwing it over the cubicle to the CADD/BIM technician to regularize, validate and make real. Now, groups are taking part in shaping programs, seeking concepts and contributing expertise in early design phases. More often, these groups include clients, communities and cadres of experts and diverse opinions. Much as cell phones and the internet have altered human behavior, surely the means of creation is influencing its evolutionary process.

³Marty Neumeier, *Metaskills: Five Talents for the Robotic Age* (San Francisco: New Riders, 2013).

⁴Michael Alan LeFevre, *Managing Design: Conversations, Project Controls and Best Practices for Commercial Design and Construction Projects* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019).

What this means is that designers of the future may need process experts to reshape, integrate and connect the parts. Where will they find them? Maybe such new age craftspeople will emerge from the ranks of architecture and design schools. Maybe they will cross over from related disciplines such as computer or process design or industrial systems engineering. Maybe these new kinds of “design” principals will include psychologists and diversity and inclusion experts. Maybe they already do.

Technology

In their book “The Future of the Professions,” Richard Susskind and David Susskind speak to the increasing routinization of tasks previously done by professionals.⁵ Tasks such as designing a stair used to be a rite of passage for entry-level architects. Now, young designers input floor-to-floor heights and Autodesk’s Revit software does it for them, saving real human expertise for larger-order tasks. These kinds of parametric and artificial intelligence learning tools are changing how we work. Author/thinker Ray Kurzweil predicted that “singularity [the convergence of man and machine] is near,” and that it would be here by 2030. Nine years left. With Siri, Alexa, Apple watches and Google glasses, that doesn’t seem much of a stretch anymore.

Now that we have so many machines, we need connectors to link them to us and to link us all together — in clouds, networks, BIM protocols, databases, big data, research, the Internet of Things and all kinds of intelligent systems and alphabet soup like AR, VR, BIM, VDC, AI, IA, SAAS and more. Soon, even the E-I-E-I-O of Old McDonald’s farm will be an acronym for some smart system. How about Environmentally Intelligent Eco-systemic Information Operations? That would be a fine name for the farm of the future. But no matter how many machines and how much automation we have, we’ll always need people to make judgments, set values and decide what to do. To connect and make sense of it all.

⁵Richard Susskind and David Susskind, *The Future of the Professions: How Technology Will Transform the Work of Human Experts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

Choice or Chance?

As we plot our paths into the future, we are constantly faced with options. Do we make choices or let fate dictate for us? What are the possible trajectories from our current state to our desired state? Are we tracking our path or merely keeping our heads down to produce, blissfully ignorant of the change that surrounds us? Are we aware of our potential and the contexts in which we work? Have we established a broadly-based cohort of peers and partners, friends and family to round out our shapes and counsel us on our paths? In counseling others to adopt these techniques in our work at DesignIntelligence Strategic Advisory, we are forever learning the power of working in teams and the magnificent potential of our interdependence. We must re-learn how to respect it.

A Declaration of Interdependence

As we turn the corner on a revolution within the design and construction industry, it’s time to revisit the basics. It’s time to look at what the future is telling us. It’s time to initiate and design our response to the future and declare what’s important. With apologies to our Founding Fathers, Gil Scott Heron, Rosa Parks and countless others who suffered and fought for this cause, I offer this design-and-construction-centric, short-form adaptation of a familiar text, with a few revisions and additions noted **in color**:

*WHEN in the Course of human Events, it becomes necessary for one People to **strengthen** the Bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal Station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to **connect**.*

*We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all **People** are created equal, that they are endowed*

by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, the Pursuit of Happiness—and *planning, design, construction and operation of facilities in sustainable ways*. That to secure these Rights, *project teams* are instituted among *professionals*, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that *bad practices* long established should be changed; and accordingly, to right themselves by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed. It is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such *obsolete ways* and to provide *new models for future practice and value*. Such has been the patient Sufferance of these *professions*; and such is now the Necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems. The History of the present practices is a History of repeated Injuries and Usurpations, all having in direct Object the Establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these *practitioners*. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid World.

We need one another. We are mutually interdependent. Let us cast off the tyranny of “either/or” and embrace the freedom of “both/and” and “the power of others.”

Let us work together to plan, design, build and operate facilities with empathy, civility and respect — for the betterment of all.

There is potential danger in conflating architecture — a historically privileged profession — with social and racial injustice, but the time for conflation has come. It's time for convergence and convening, community and communication, for listening and understanding.

The revolution WILL be televised. And tweeted. And written about. The revolution will be realized, socialized, ecologized, economized and politicized — because we're in it together.

Author's Note:

Heavy storms are passing over Atlanta as I write this essay. It's 3 a.m. Thunder, rain, floods and tornados surround and pound the South. But these winds will subside, the sun will shine and the birds will sing, because we will be interdependent — and connected.

Michael LeFevre, FAIA Emeritus, is principal, DesignIntelligence Strategic Advisory; managing editor, DI Media Group; and the author of the Amazon best-selling new release: Managing Design: Conversations, Project Controls and Best Practices for Commercial Design and Construction Projects (Wiley 2019).