Responsibility Redux:
The Architect's Duties (Revisited)

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In a challenge to architects, DI's managing editor considers monkey brains, budget busts, planning flops and panoptics

In the first days of architectural school, students are indoctrinated with the broad responsibilities they will soon hold as practitioners. High duties to society while serving as guardians of public safety health and welfare are the most frequent principles conveyed. These are soon followed by foundational scientific, practical, human and artistic objectives such as firmness, commodity and delight. These lofty expectations usually succeed in getting the attention of most architectural aspirants, but they are not enough. Missing from these early formative lessons are the subjects of designing for budgets, schedules, sustainability and inclusion.

Question: How can architects ever hope to fulfill their social and architectural duties if they lack the basic knowledge required to design to a budget, manage a project or a firm, complete their work on time, care for the planet's resources or include diverse perspectives and expertise in their collaboration? Answer: They can't.

In search of the often discussed and much-lamented return to stature of architects, let's join hands and minds in a deep dive into the reasons for this dilemma. In the course of our investigation, maybe we can find some answers.

Carry That Weight

At its face, responsibility is a heavy word. The word connotes the state or fact of having a duty to deal with something or having control over someone, the state of being the person who caused something to happen, the opportunity or ability to act independently and make decisions without authorization and something you should do because it is morally right or legally required. Metaphors or synonyms we often associate with this word include weight, burden, load, liability, obligation, encumbrance and onus. Just reading this list brings me down. I feel the weight. How to cope?

Attendant rights or privileges to responsibility (seeming benefits from carrying said responsibility) include power, trust, compensation — apparent rewards to the moral, legal or mental accountability responsibility brings.

These two sides of this word parsing can be summed and seen as the cost/benefit ratio of a proposition. In other words, in considering an engagement, an architect finds themselves on the precipice of decision. But these decisions are not always made in the moment. Neither are they made under one-at-a-time transactional lenses. Those who accept responsibilities often make longer-term commitments asynchronously from day-to-day decisions.

Seeing the weighty nature of our assigned accepted tasks, how can we reach equipoise? Can we re-school ourselves to be better equipped to handle our growing realm and reap commensurate rewards? Can we reach a deeper understanding of this delicate relationship between responsibilities and their rewards to puncture our current predicament? The answers must be yes. To help us embrace that conclusion, let us examine some areas of perennial failure of responsibility.

1. Designing to Budgets (Dancing in Chains)

In embarking on a building design journey, architects have been trained to enjoy (and clients have been conditioned to give them) a long leash in performance of their duties. When it comes to design, architects typically enjoy savoir faire attitudes. Deep in the creative process — a process few owners have ever experienced or done themselves — we architects luxuriate in our exploration. We stretch conjecture. We stridently scheme to push boundaries. Devoted to our craft, we revive past notions to test them yet again, in hopes that magic might occur. A synthesis, a new form, an innovation could result after multiple schemes are explored in new contexts.

How we architects work remains a mystery to many, even to some of us who do it for a living. The creative process and project limits that constrain design teams and build the creative tension necessary to design within or against has been called "dancing in chains" by Friedrich Nietzsche. Our eyes are all atingle with the anticipation of developing the emerging design. With little portent of management, we blindly proceed to design concepts. We work with impunity, blind to the consequences that likely await.

Plunging headlong into the maelstrom, we study our work just the same. Seeking synthesis and synopsis, we welcome the comfort of our companions and press on with élan. In the comfort of our conviviality, we seek zingy, zooty designs. Mesmerized by our quest, we are led astray by some inadequate notion that the budget will mysteriously work out this time. This approach is based to a large extent on the strategy that a miracle might occur. This rampant cognitive dissonance drives the design team's reliance on our gnosis and experiential knowledge to guide our work intuitively.

In our clamor to design, we employ a slapdash approach, even to the point of denying in-progress budget checks because they "impede the creative process."

At intervals, when we think we are ready, (design is never "done") we reconvene the group. Analysis, judgment, even diagnoses are exchanged — all in search of excellence in these events called "juries." While there is no judge present in architectural juries, and no one literally gets accused, convicted or sentenced, the parallels are intriguing. As in legal courtrooms, civil discussion and questioning occurs, and the accused — often the fledgling designer — must defend their actions. The jurors, often senior design principals, flaunt their experience and polish their egos by brandishing pithy cutting statements. Too often, these design reviews occur in the absence of time, money and the right people.

These design critiques, as they are called, are often high theater. These presentations and discussions come with centuries of cultural baggage from their European roots in the École Des Beaux-Arts. The charette that precedes the pinning up of the work all contributes to a cultural panorama known only to design insiders.

Bearing up well to our responsibility to be still more virtuous in design, we seek to take it beyond the quotidian. Incisively, furtively, we idea-smith into the night in search of the new.

When it comes to budget and schedule adherence, we find little precedent or lineage to base our behavior upon. With no legitimacy or role models to emulate, we default to base instinctual actions — as we had been educated and encultured — in celebration of architectural form, to the distinct neglect of practical, pedestrian considerations such as cost. There will be hell to pay. Ample opportunities for budget busting remain.

We work with verve, people of principle, in constant torment from the relentless wrestling of conflicting criteria. Our duties never lessen — to cope, we subconsciously relegate some to be lower priorities. Tumult persists. It's design, after all. Grandiloquence keeps us calm. Our internal parlance and common mission keep us connected.

The long game is always the eventual goal: to consecrate the design, to drink in the hubris of the design genius we wrought. In the rhapsody of the moment and the equanimity we enjoyed, we plied our cause célèbre in recursive attempts to finesse the pedestrian, to achieve a Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art. The point of all the self-inflicted cruelty and insanity is to further design. To strive for excellence. To seek the new. But inevitably, the result is no bueno.

2. Petard Foisting, Crashing Plates and New Shackles

What we designers intended as a symphony of elegant proportion and rhythmic bays becomes a cacophony of spinning plates crashing — a months-late, over-budget disaster as evidenced by shattered hopes, fragmented relationships and unmet expectations. Having crashed the budget yet again — the highest crime in the owner's and contractor's eyes — we designers are swiftly dispatched back to our design studio, likely draped in a new set of chains, the shackles of credibility loss we earned by our own actions, and the moniker and shame of the "over-budget designer." We are foisted by our own petard.

These budget busts are sockdolagers, the sort of thing — in the business world — that would bring the fires of hell to your door. They are in design too. It's wildly sad, but it happens all the time. Having lost our tent pole, the design team is left only to retreat and search for new meaning as we rework our hard-fought

creations. There is no elixir or magic bullet. There is no suicide capsule we can swallow to put us out of our misery. We simply have to fight hard to get back in budget, likely in the face of having already spent our design fee.

Our failure to respect and act on our budget responsibility has done us in again. Gadzooks, we are stuck in the design doldrums. As we seek solace in our rework, we wonder deeply what happened. Maybe it was the atrium we introduced that wasn't in the program. Perhaps it was the owner changing the program. Whatever the case, it wasn't our fault, we think again, wrongly. But all that seemed a long time back, back before we hit that puzzling tragic snag: the damned budget. Before our design went kaput.

The good contractor and owner of decided temper told us what must be done. We had had our chance to allocate design expenditures and meet the budget. Now, through our own actions, we've lost that right. In the dim light of our own ashy pallor, we architects return to the studio under the glow of our computer screens and work tirelessly to regain the budget balance.

In the fracas that ensues, we become defensive. We endure desultory statements and unintentional pronouns of dis-ownership ("*Your* design is over budget"), all to our dismay. Reputed to be cost-conscious, our failure to deliver unearths an insouciant attitude, an unwanted counternarrative to the teamwork that had been purported. These contradictory deterministic states defy logic to intelligent observers and narrators. The collaboration of the design and construction team was deemed the necessary connective glue to project success. What now?

3. Designing with People

Our next failure as design professionals is our recurring inability to include the right people in the right way at the right time. We wonder, why? Again, we are told in school that we are the conductors of the design orchestra. But where are the classes, skills transfer, and opportunities to practice these skills? Lacking, to be sure.

Writer George Saunders tells us that characterization is the result of increased specification. In today's complex arena of practice, we need a more expansive view of our project participants and constituents. A panoptic view from on high is one way. But because none of us are a many-headed hydra, and few of us can stretch to become more expansive alone, we solve this challenge by adding more specialized teammates. Where do we find them? From diverse locales, cultures and disciplines.

These days we need people of color, people from all disciplines, expert specialists and the accompanying enablers and connectors and translators. Yes, this is more to manage, schedule and budget, but what's the alternative? Staying myopic, continuing to be late, wrong, over budget and non-inclusive? I don't think so.

As it has always been, the architect's goal is to be synoptic, to bring things together. But to get there we must assume the duty to be inclusive. We must usurp our past exclusionary beliefs and bring a greater breadth and wealth of knowledge into the design fields.

4. Beating the Clock

Why can't architects, engineers and designers get their work done on time? This question was poignantly posed by an architect friend's wife:

Why do all you architects work all the time? Why can't you be like the rest of the world and just figure out what you need to get done and get it done? Then you could get home at a decent hour!

From a distance, correcting this deficiency would seem an easy fix. Simply prioritize your work, list your tasks, assign them durations and connect the predecessors and dependencies. But any design professional will tell you it's not that easy in design. Design goes in circles and explores multiple concurrent paths. A detail can influence the entire concept or cause it to be thrown out, and vice versa.

Understanding the subtleties of design scheduling gives way to the preponderant thinking of many architects: Design *can't be scheduled.* That's simply wrong. Granted, the design process is filled with perplexities, tumult and unpredictability, but it can be contemplated, anticipated and planned.

Only true designers can possibly know the arcana and intricacies of design scheduling expected and demanded by the exacting mind. So why don't they apply that knowledge in scheduling and managing their work? The best designers could create transformative schedules that vividly convey their process. Unlike a dissonant chorus, their design schedules could evolve into wholly different varieties of management tools: adagios, slow movements designed to carefully pace and accompany their finest creative work.

In a personal account of his assessment of his design partner's design schedule, a construction manager described the scene: "They had no schedule! No idea how they would get done in time. Through browbeating about budget, schedule and value analysis, they had resorted to abject civility and passivity."

What set him off was that he had admonished the design team to craft a plan, to cleanse their calendars of the dust and cobwebs that covered them during their neglect. They refused to accept that responsibility.

We can, and should, do better.

Little provisional or conditional thinking had been done. No contingencies had been included. All in the face of data that tell us conclusively that these things will happen on *every* project. Hmmm. Yet most teams have no plan to account for them. Hmmm again. This kind of dissonant, negligent thinking cannot be tolerated. I've worked with stellar global firms who made great strides in developing design work plans. Each showed key events, major milestones, interim steps and identified partner interfaces and decisions in clear cogent detail. Sure, design was messy, and things happened to change the workplan. But because they had a schedule, they could update it and create a recovery plan. The alternative — having no plan — isn't pretty.

Ad-hockery may be required, but only to cope with change, not as a way of life or to run an architectural practice.

5. Designing Sustainably

At the risk of stating the obvious, it seems the time has finally come that design professionals — along with the rest of the reasoning world — have realized we must change our ways when it comes to designing sustainably. Rather than restate the problems or muse on the possible solutions, I'll reduce the essence of accepting this final responsibility (and I do mean final), because without such change our actions will be final: We won't be here anymore. Our planet won't tolerate it. I suggest two actions for renewed responsibility:

1. We must accept responsibility for the system's effects of our design choices on our projects, sites, communities and the planet. No more abdication. No more, "I just design buildings. Beyond that is not my job."

2. We must learn to understand, articulate and persuade clients, partners and constituents of the relative order of magnitude scales of the economic factors for design, construction, operation, people, productivity and the planet. Since each of these escalates in an almost 10X magnitude, each of us must learn to master and deploy this knowledge effectively with skill and in mind of Action 1 above.

Doing the Same Thing Repeatedly

In the space of a few pages, we've looked at five recurring areas in which architects habitually shirk their responsibilities. How can trained professionals — the best in their field — repeat such errant irresponsible behavior so many times? Well, as Booker Prize-winning writer George Saunders puts it, "All of us are flawed thinking machines." And when such unfortunate events happen, "the only non-delusional response is kindness."

As Saunders reminds us, "When we think we're ok is just a temporary construction." Getting better at seeking and acknowledging these critical moments in time are the hallmark of transcendent responsible architects. As craftspeople, we pride ourselves on our ability to connect knowledge and tools with making and thinking. "That's what craft is, a way to open ourselves up to super personal wisdom."

But for designers, genetically predisposed to push the envelope, how do we create the space to notice those thoughts related to budget balancing?

Saunders suggests that we stop the ruminations and use our intuitions, much like the auto response of catching a frisbee thrown at us. That's what mature people do. That's what good writers, managers, budget balancers and accountable designers do. We slow down, acknowledge what we see, pause and reflect

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> It's time for a responsibility redux.
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> What's your response?

upon it, then respond appropriately. To slow down and radically honor these momentary realizations is to cultivate that state of mind. Like an athlete's mind, you're just "there," in "the zone," in the "flow," as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls it. All this is in distinct opposition to primitive brain or monkey mind — that thinking mode in which we react instinctively by lashing out, running or hitting.

Many times, amid these over-budget, late, un-inclusive or unsustainable project crisis stages, we feel so unsafe in our positions, so embattled, that our self-esteem and perhaps our jobs, livelihoods and careers seem threatened. In such times, it is not uncommon to witness the disintegration of personalities, projects, relationships, even our own integrity. How do we protect against these things happening? With practice and old-time discipline.

We must maintain our ability to separate what matters from what does not. While our first-order inclination might be to panic and react, we must resist those urges. Sometimes in these project crisis states, we can feel like we are losing our marbles. But the secret is to keep perspective and balance.

Under rebuke from the owner or the contractor, we might be inclined to default to border-assessing fight or flight responses. "They are an *enemy*! They are *attacking* me!" Faced with conflict, we could even experience the loss of short-term memory. What we need in these instances is an influx of executive function — that frontal lobe job of the brain that helps us compartmentalize, prioritize and decide. At those times we need an influx of one calm judgment, one pithy phrase, or one empathic question.

We don't need a solution of mythical proportions. We will not be able to endow ourselves with messianic properties overnight. We simply need one calm, considered action. That's all. Then another.

First Steps

Where can those of us who have read these challenges and others who have known them for some time look to see how we are doing? How will we know we've made it?

A few benchmarks come to mind. The first might be the moment we feel like we are ready to check out of the ambition hotel. We no longer feel the compelling need to win or be the best. When we wake up in the morning with the goal simply to give and serve others. That's when we'll know we've made it. Celebrities call it *sexy indifference*: "We don't care if we get the part or not, we just want to do good work."

What other signals and metrics can we look for in striving for higher levels of responsibility — a zenith of accountability? Owners are a good source. When we notice them telling us how much they appreciate our stewardship of their resources, that's telling feedback. When they tell us we care and that we treat their organizations and facilities like they were our own, then we'll know. When they no longer have to joke about us, demean us and come to expect we'll be in budget and on schedule, that's when we'll know.

These ideas — and their road signs — are not so oblique. In fact, they are already practiced by the rest of the business world. The canons of being fiscally responsible, meeting schedules and being sustainable and inclusive are part of every business outside the design profession — as are their own versions of our mantras to create beautiful, functional designs. For designers, retooling our responsibilities may seem a protean challenge, but it's not. It begins with the desire to change and then a first step. To become profligate purveyors of trust and responsibility, we must be stalwart in our efforts. Starting now.

Call and Response

Design ... over budget. Design ... over budget. A rhythmic call-and-response chorus that need not repeat. Yet it does, damn near every time. Why? Because it does. Our projects are too often late and fail to include the environmental sensibility and diverse perspectives they need. These stories have replayed all too often in the design profession. Can we reshape them and tell them in new, more optimistic ways? You bet.

Writers often remind us that stories involve a narrative. They are linear-temporal phenomena. To that I add: and so are projects. What then, will your project's story arc be, its narrative? As its author and project manager, how will you anticipate, shape and control it? What is its situation? What is its story? How do the characterizations of its lead players inform it? In foreseeing its conflict, do you, as the project's screenwriter, introduce action and resolution to advance the plot and resolve it? As a primary influencer do you set scenes for harmony, introduce positive foreshadowing, or wait to be blindsided by horrible harrowing events?

To answer these questions, I'll turn to a valued resource, an expert who stands to gain the most from answering them: *you*.

What do you think? You've observed humans on this planet for a while, haven't you?

Let's get started doing something about our broader responsibilities as architects. When we do, our clients and communities will value us more and we will have shifted from complaining to acting and making a difference.

It's time for a responsibility redux.

What's your response?

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