



Q1 INFLUENCE: STEWARDSHIP

On Influence: A New Reality for the Profession

DesignIntelligence®
Quarterly



On Influence: A New Reality for the Profession

Michael LeFevre

Managing Editor, DesignIntelligence

Despite its challenges over the past 150 years, architecture has largely been practiced in a state of *toujours perdrix* (French for “always partridge,” or too much of a good thing).

At its highest levels, (elevated status debatable), the profession has been the province of the rich, dilettantes who can afford the luxury of having the best, to rise above mere building and construction to create art. To a large extent, the profession has created its bed and now must lie in it or rise to get out.¹

How lucky for those rich patrons and for those practitioners fortunate enough to win these elite commissions. But what of the rest? Where do they live, work and practice?

This “artist against the world” belief is deeply rooted in architectural education. We are taught to be rebels, to seek the new, to have the courage to blaze new trails, even to the point of having to “educate” our clients (unknowing, architecturally ignorant heathens they are) and serve as the owner’s “conscience” against evil contractors (ill-intended pocket liners they are). Our inherent superiority bias and confrontational, isolationist mentality is expressed well by filmmaker Robert Altman:

The artist and the multitude are natural enemies. They always will be, both ways. The artist is an enemy of the multitude, and the multitude is the enemy of the artist. And when the disguise comes off and they’re both standing facing one another, they’re just there at odds end.

This must change. In school and in practice, we architects set out on a fool’s errand for too long. We swam in a sea of self-in-

*1. For a detailed examination of how the profession created its own landscape of self-proclaimed elevated status while declining in profitability and social responsibility, see *Assembling the Architect: The History and Theory of Professional Practice* by George Barnett Johnston, Bloomsbury Press, 2020.*

dulgent form making — to the neglect of our responsibilities to conserve resources and respect communities and clients. The question is: Can we learn to deal with all that will not be? To accept the fact that as architects we are neither all knowing, nor in full control? To accept the possible loss or changed understanding of the exotica and glamour? To puncture and punctuate it, intentionally, with the hard work of being better stewards? This doesn't mean we have to do ugly buildings. Hardly. But it does mean we have to work more broadly, systematically and inclusively — and care more about others.

Can we learn to do it? We can. Like athletes, scholars or musicians in training, if we go through the exercises slowly, we can rewire our thinking and motor skills. We practice, then we begin to do them more quickly. We get better. We evolve.

We are taught we have great power as realized through our work. But this alleged strength has, in many cases, become our greatest weakness. The litany of high visibility public projects that leak, grow wildly over budget and function poorly is long. Iconic as they are, buildings such as Fallingwater, the Edith Farnsworth House, Dulles Airport and the Air Force Academy Chapel have won the AIA's highest accolades, yet each has suffered a life bereft with leaks, budget issues and unhappy clients. Dubious notoriety. For years, I counted myself among their admirers and still do. But really? It's time for a broader view. We can be artists who embrace the multitudes and realities, not their enemies.

While our instructors fueled us with promises of powerful influential careers, and vast potential greatness through our designs, they were often wrong. A few achieve such stature — all those

mentioned above did. What the rest of us needed then and need now was education and motivation on how to ply real influence. Real influence comes through the ability to communicate, involve others and care about clients and communities, not to continue to support our own selfish, idiosyncratic, dysfunctional artistic indulgences to the neglect of all else. It seems we've misplaced our influence.

Influence Sources

What are the sources of our loss of influence? In general, a failure of actions, not words. Plenty continue to bemoan our lack of power and influence, but few are willing to change their behavior or do anything differently. Let's start by considering one of the basic principles of personal, business, life and planetary survival — living within one's means.²

Budget Boogeymen

When it comes to even simple first-cost budget compliance, it's not long after their opening scenes and the introduction of their characters that most projects become horror movies, complete with monstrous value analysis needs, jump scares, amputations, blood spatters and visceral screams. Then consider the broader scale, longer-term responsibilities to conserve resources and energy, tread lightly on the planet and act responsibly at community and urban and global scales. More monsters emerge from the darkness to dominate the screen. These predictable events are usually followed by dark periods of denial and rapprochement. If we believe the ethical foundations we learned in school, we accept great social responsibility. We must learn to be accountable for first, life-cycle and all related costs. We must

2. In the 1980s, Dr. Eugene Odum, godfather of ecology, explained it to me over lunch: "The Greek root for house is Ekos. Knowledge of house is ecology; management of house is economy. Those concepts are not at odds with one another, they are integral. Particularly for those who want to survive."

slay the monster of accountable design and end the horror. If we believe our own hype, we can do those things and still produce art and architecture. It's time to drive a stake through the heart of fiscal irresponsibility.

Collaboration Lip Service

Directly opposed to the underlying culture of the design profession is the need to collaborate. At the core of what we were taught is the predominance of ego, singular genius — and artistic vision. Secondarily, we were offered platitudes about our roles to be leaders, conductors of the design team orchestra. But there's a problem. For decades, architects have been given little to no training in just how to collaborate. Too many of us lack the listening and leadership skills, the management and organization skills. The ability to be servant leaders. Despite the growing numbers of players, complex, diverse beliefs, disciplines and perspectives — now intertwined with new technologies and concerns — we were left with a trial and error/ learn on-the-job approach to becoming collaborators. I'm hopeful to see curricula and graduates outgrowing these challenges. To harness our influence, we must come to grips with our reliance on others. To become stewards of all we are now charged with protecting, we need our teammates and partners more than ever.

Disdaining Schedules and Long-Term Outlooks

It has become an expectation that designers and their documents will be late. "Client changes, over-budget rework and unforeseen complexities," they cry in defense. Horse hockey. We must learn to manage our work. Beyond learning to manage our work and meet schedules, we must change our design, planning



If you want to bring change, you better be prepared to do it over the long-term, because that's what it takes. It's not the circadian rhythm of Twitter.

– Jon Stewart

and thinking horizons to become long-term. Making project decisions on fee, staffing material or system selection without including long-term impacts will not serve our clients or the sustainability of the project. We must enlist newfound skills in communication, accounting and persuasion to communicate and convince our clients of the need for new longer-term perspectives in design construction and operation.³

Political Skills and the Power of Persuasion

If we are ever to escape from vicious vortex of self-fulfilling influence erosion, we must retool to automate and leverage our minds and processes. I have personally worked for several great firms who focused on "their" design for months, up until three in the morning before client presentations, then, foolishly spent

3. For a compelling argument on the need for us to reshape our next epoch, see *A New Reality: Human Evolution for a Sustainable Future* by Jonathan Salk, City Point Press, 2018.

no time at all considering the strategy or content of the design presentation. In our design hubris, we simply expected our clients to immediately gush with acceptance at our design genius, presentation or strategy be damned. Most often they didn't. Since the first primitive hunter encountered his first tiger in the savanna, humans have had and deftly deployed skills in strategy, intelligence, persuasion and politics. These skills translated to their tribes and villages. The most skilled and savvy were chosen for leadership and survival positions like hunters and leaders. They had wisdom. They could communicate and involve others. They embraced living within their means — not only for their village but for their children and future generations.

Despite centuries of evolution, most architects didn't take public speaking, political science or strategic thinking in school. We didn't study the science of leadership or collaboration. We need these skills now. Our clients and constituents possess them and — if we are to lead the design of physical environments responsibly — they expect us to have them as well. When we continue to display ignorance in such matters by our words, designs and actions, we contribute to bad stewardship and our own eroding influence. When we cry helplessly that our clients are dictating the rules, we fall victim to the very abdication of influence we seek to avoid.

Communication

When it comes to talking to our clients and partners, we architects need to discover how to eschew ersatz intelligence and talk like human beings. Starting now, we need to speak in ways that hold up against the lingua franca of our owners and teams. As we relearn how to talk, we can be motivated by the joy that

comes from having tasted how great it was to truly connect with others. Our new mantra must be to be clear, direct and understood. We must banish the esoteric cadences of the past, such as this composite hypothetical design principal client presentation: The project's materiality is conflated with the contextuality of the site and its landforms and legacy. The juxtaposition of forms is the result or an overt attempt to compromise the plan parti's operational flexibility and functionality, while imbuing the project budget with a bespoke set of conditions to render them unachievable, unaffordable and unsustainable in the marketplace or within budget. We think it's our finest work.

And we wonder why we've lost influence and respect. No one cares how smart we are or how much jargon fills our diatribes. They do care about whether their buildings will last by functioning, offering inspiration and serving their needs. Let's engage the communication clutch and shift gears. Let's learn to listen and act upon what we hear. Down with the dodgy and the arcane. Up with plain speaking, listening, empathy and caring.

Other than these few recurrent flaws — lacking the basic abilities to stay in budget, be on time, communicate and work well with our clients and teams, we architects have plenty of influence and are great stewards. (Sarcasm intentional.)

A New Reality

Amid the design diaspora that now becomes stewardship of the planet and its people for prosperity, we must reengineer our approach. We must school ourselves in those capabilities we neglected in college and return to a condition of equipoise, graceful splendor and balance. As Jonathan Salk advises in "A

New Reality”, we must engage in an instrumental conversation to shape a new epoch. One that leaves acquisition, growth and competition behind to embrace preservation and collaboration. We need a new doctrine that includes real stewardship, a propulsive phase for the profession that transcends dutiful soldier-ship and abject civility to achieve the building of a new world. Down with discordant, self-serving projects and odd conjunctions of elitist architecture. Away with the absurdity of current project process. Let’s learn to create and use our newfound influence and become stewards of careers, resources and the return of resplendent practices.

New skills and processes must be our mantra as we finally learn to be stewards, influencing design in positive collective ways. Through our designs, leadership and influence, we are storytellers, readers of reality and worldbuilders. George Saunders says it best:

the part of the mind that reads a story is also the part that reads the world; it can deceive us, but it can also be trained to accuracy; it can fall into disuse and make us more susceptible to lazy, violent, materialistic forces, but it can also be urged back to life, transforming us into more active, curious, alert readers of reality.

We need a new reality for the profession — one driven by our actions. Let’s get started on our new story.

Michael LeFevre, FAIA emeritus, is managing editor of Design-Intelligence Media Group Publications and principal, DesignIntelligence Strategic Advisory. His book, Managing Design: Conversations, Project Controls and Best Practices for Commercial Design and Construction Projects (Wiley, 2019) was Amazon’s #1 best-selling new release in category.