

Theme Presentations

Stamberg Addresses Creating Community *Journalist defines community as “a set of shared values”*

Award-winning radio journalist and former AIA Public Director Susan Stamberg was the keynote speaker for Thursday's theme session. Stamberg—who hosted National Public Radio's “All Things Considered” program for NPR and now serves as the station's special correspondent—drew on her interview experiences over the years to explain the connection between architecture and community.

In preparing for her talk, which was themed “Leadership, Community, and the Built Environment,” Stamberg said she reflected on how NPR broadcasts build a “community without walls or structure,” and how when listeners meet, a bond is formed instantly. “Community happens with or without a built environment,” she said. “Community is a set of shared values.”

There is, Stamberg said, an ever-deepening need for people to come together. She cited an example from her own neighborhood, where a Starbucks coffee shop has taken over a former bank and blossomed to become a neighborhood center, serving a variety of audiences

from young mothers to retired folks reading afternoon papers to job interviewees and interviewees. She said further that it was interesting to note that people came to use the coffee shop as a place for “organizing for action,” and in this way became a closer knit community.



PHOTO BY DOUGLASE GORDON, HON. AIA

Places such as the neighborhood Starbucks have come to take the place of common squares built by our forebears to serve a sense of community, Stamberg noted.

As examples of architect-leaders who have created community in the Washington, D.C., area, in which she has lived for the past 30 years, Stamberg noted:

- **Maya Lin and the Vietnam Memorial.** “She was a leader in how she fought to have her vision built,” Stamberg said. “Built environment—like great art—can move us beyond suffering to a sense of something else.”
- **I.M. Pei and the East Building of the National Gallery of Art.** Stamberg spoke of the acute angle formed in pink marble that visitors are so compelled to touch that it has grayed with fingerprint oil. “The architecture touches visitors, and they touch back,” she said.
- **Andres Duany and the Kentlands New Community in Gaithersburg, Md.,** which has improved with age as people have softened its “perfection” through their own contributions to the built environment.

Stamberg asked the architects present to create places that are flexible enough to take on different uses throughout their existence and are able to “let diversity [created by building users themselves] happen. . . . The community needs you to build well,” she concluded to a standing ovation. ■■