

Marketplace Research

From Theory to Reality: How Are Firms Redefining the Profession?

by Richard W. Hobbs, FAIA

Resident fellow, marketplace research

So, how is the design community reinventing the profession? We recently set up an “Off-Broadway” run of interviews, talking to six firms as we traveled 3,000 miles across the country. (In the next few months, we will bring the total of interviewed firms to 25, so stay tuned.)

All of the firms have a reputation for being “progressive.” They are leveraging from the client project-centric (centered only on the building) to client service-centric (offering broader services). Here is what three of them had to say.

Herbert Lewis Kruse Blunck Des Moines: Providing facilitation services

Herbert Lewis Kruse Blunck, the 2001 AIA Firm Award winner, has expanded its services into preprogramming facilitation, as their clients come to realize that the firm can do more than design buildings. The architects have shown their clients that they can facilitate initial conversations among project participants and do not need to “control” these conversations. “The client trusts you to do one thing—and in the process sees that you can apply your skills beyond what is traditionally thought of as architecture,” one firm member told us. “In doing so, we operate best when we are talking with management people making expanded decisions, rather than the facilities people making narrower decisions.”

Herbert Lewis views this preprogramming activity not as a separate service, but as an adjunct to their primary interest of designing buildings. They consider it a sort of “performance art” in which they are “dancing in front of people.” This kind of facilitation is basically drawing out what the client’s issues are, they say,

and getting problems out on the table. The firm considers facilitation inside the scope of architecture, not outside. It is a means of getting to a building as well as securing a return client.

One of the main objectives of the firm is to ascertain that they are helping the client make the right decisions. They want to monitor the productivity of a designed environment and communicate it to clients, even in anecdotal ways, to help clients become shareholders in the architectural service provided.

The scope of facilitation work—independent of the project—is defining the client’s real need, thus meeting the client’s strategy and helping him or her make the right decisions. It also helps the architects avoid working out an elegant architectural solution only to find that solution addresses the wrong set of problems.

As the firm grows, the principals find that management is an issue, not just something that happens. “We are not growing for growth sake,” the principals maintain. “The firm was defined as a family in 1991; the culture of the firm will change—maybe to one of about 40 close friends. That we must maintain.”

CTA, Missoula, Mont.: “We’re in the communications business”

CTA has determined that in addition to the design of a wide range of facilities, they are going to deal with energy, utilities, grants for fuel-cell technology development, and indefinite delivery contracts for both governmental and commercial clients.

When describing their holistic approach to architecture, they mention “full-service” and “value-added” and realize how dependent they are on the talents and attitudes of their staff. For in-

stance, their director of marketing has the title “Director of Innovation,” and his strong relation to the design/construction industry is considered an advantage because he is “outside” the profession. The firm principals report that they would like to have more non-architect project managers. That way they could have a business manager handle the budgets and schedules, and let the architects handle the design and design-related details.

If you ask CTA’s principals, “What business are you in?” they say, “We are in *business*, and architecture happens to be a part of the business.” As they realigned their work to fit their growth strategy, they removed “architects and engineers” from their company name, realizing they really are in the communications business.

To align knowledge management within the firm to their business strategy, they have implemented a “university,” an extensive and uniform program of leadership development throughout the six-office firm. They have implemented an 18-month comprehensive leadership development program (created by Martin-Simonds Associates) that helps them connect strategic thinking and market leadership. The university serves as just one example of the investment in human resources firms are willing to make to connect all their employees to the firm’s future success.

The firm principals say that seeing how much the firm has changed in the last couple of years, it’s a challenge for them to imagine where it is going. “We have seen the architect losing ground out of fear, especially fear of liability,” they say. “Here at CTA, because our overall philosophy is ‘do the right thing,’ we do not

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have that fear aspect.”

Madsen Mitchell Evenson & Conrad, Spokane: Mutual respect

Madsen Mitchell Evenson & Conrad talks about being in the “personal service” business. Their value statement is: “We work with clients whom we respect and who respect our values and share our respect in relationships.” The principals say their concern for the future is finding the right staff: “people people” who can think and communicate with their coworkers and clients. “The bottom line,” they say, is that we are defining and solving problems as we look for opportunities.”

Madsen Mitchell’s marketing is relationship-based; their market consists of clients whose values and goals are consistent with theirs. Their clients are in rural communities, where the architects are seen as generalists and businesspersons. (In urban centers, Madsen Mitchell maintains, clients see architects as artists who will spend the client’s money—not as business people.)

They consider themselves like a repertory company with different established specialties. Even so, their clients often ask if Madsen Mitchell can perform other, additional services. The firm believes that they have a responsibility to go beyond the short view of a problem, because they have found that this is the way that firms can play a greater role.

Each firm described here is defining a reinvention of their current practice, and in turn will assist in defining a changing profession. There is healthy debate going on—in firms themselves and in the professional community at large. If you would like to participate in this dialogue, contact me, rhobbs@aia.org, or 202-626-7450. ■■