

# Industry News

## Large Firm Roundtable Chief Discusses Goals, Agenda



by Tracy F. Ostroff

Associate Editor

Bob Packard, Assoc. AIA, recently became chair of the Large Firm Roundtable, a group of 50 individuals who represent firms with the nation's largest architectural establishments. Packard is managing partner at

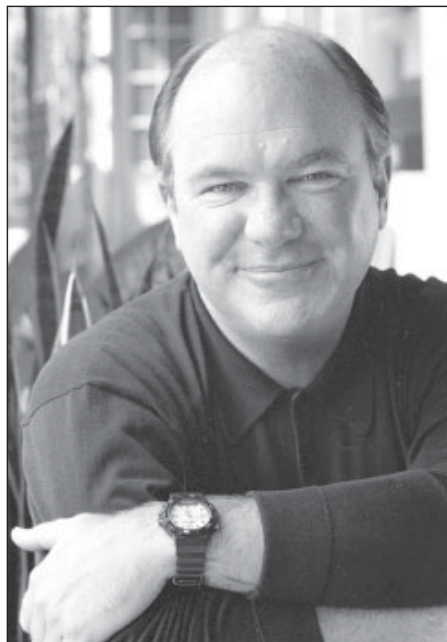
Zimmer Gunsels Frasca Partnership, an architecture, engineering, and interior design firm with offices in Portland, Ore.; Seattle; Los Angeles; and Washington, D.C. Packard is based in Portland.

Packard, whose background is in urban design and planning, became the Large Firm Roundtable's chair after Harold Adams, FAIA, stepped down after leading the group for more than 15 years. Packard said he became the chair after a nominations committee, appointed by Adams, recommended him to the group's executive committee, and his nomination was voted on by the members of the Large Firm Roundtable. Packard said it "has been collectively very easy to support Harold's continued leadership over many, many years.... I am honored by the significance of following in Harold's footsteps and I think about it a lot."

A condensed and edited transcript of a conversation with Packard follows.

**Question: What are the top agenda items you plan to address as chair of the Large Firm Roundtable?**

There is a series of agenda items that the Large Firm Roundtable has been dealing with for several years, and those will continue. One of the beauties of the way we all work together is that there's buy-in on lots of things. We have a major outreach program to the architecture school deans, and that effort will continue to receive a lot of attention, as will the case studies that have been developed for use by them. There is going to be heightened attention given to the AIA contract documents effort to hopefully improve the content of the documents and make them more meaningful for the large firms as well more relevant to today's practice issues.



We have an individual from the Large Firm Roundtable sitting in on the advertising campaign for the Institute, and that's something that we're going to be watching and helping the Institute implement. There are a number of governance issues at the AIA that we're obviously interested in and we'll continue to be involved in.

And then there are a couple of other, softer issues that I am anxious to give some attention to. I'm eager to increase the level of involvement and participation of more members of the Large Firm Roundtable and then, to the extent possible, expand or invite firms that meet the criteria of the Large Firm Roundtable.

And then there are new issues, which in part because of the September 11 events and other things that come up, such as security issues, the economic uncertainties that we're all facing, and insurance issues. We really have the ability to focus

quickly on issues that people think are of particular importance, including outreach to and partnerships with allied groups and related professions. It's a wide range, but we have the ability to really focus in and get things done.

We only meet twice a year, so we're trying to figure out ways that we can continue to keep things moving on all these different fronts. One of the things I'm going to be working on with a number of people is to improve our communication infrastructure and our ability to push information out to everybody and keep our members as up-to-date as possible through all the electronic means that we have.

**Question: What perspective do you bring to the Large Firm Roundtable as an engineer rather than an architect?**

Actually, my undergraduate degree is in urban design and urban planning, which is what my graduate degree is in. So I'm not an engineer.

The perspective that I bring to the Large Firm Roundtable is probably more from my professional experience here at the firm. I became the managing partner here when I was 34—17 years ago. It's really having started at an early age going down that track within the profession and having that as a background. I spent a lot of time working on architectural projects

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and working with architects and engineers.

I have found that there are a wide range of people who are making contributions to the structure and management of firms. Firms are looking for leadership, and that leadership can be found in a wide range of individuals. That breadth of leadership is now more and more reflected in the management of the firms. It's important for those individuals who come out of allied professions or somewhere outside the profession who can make a contribution and dedicate themselves to the best in architecture and engineering.

**Question: In the wake of the September 11, or as a result of fiscal conditions prior to the attacks, have you seen an economic impact on architects or on the profession in general?** We had our Large Firm Roundtable meeting in October. I think everyone has been affected by the economic cycle that we're in, and that may have been exacerbated by the unfortunate events of September 11, depending upon the firm's mix of projects. Everybody has been touched by it, either by a downturn in work or finding that competition for the jobs that are there is stiffer, as well as the need to really figure out ways to help *clients* who are also being affected significantly by the economic cycles that we're in.

It's a cyclical business, so the firms that understand that and respond to it or anticipate it and are smart and strategic will do well. We've enjoyed a period of heightened activity within the profession that has surprised everybody. Now the flip side of the coin is occurring and people must respond.

**Question: Is the Large Firm Roundtable currently or in the future doing anything to address these concerns?**

We don't have any plans as a group to do anything, although clearly a number of individuals are actively participating in economic development activities and identifying candidates for stimulus packages in their own region or on the national level. There are member firms and individuals who are looked upon as great resources within the Institute or within their communities or within the profession for advice in responding to economic downturns. Then there are a number of firms represented that have their primary office or their only office in New York City. All of those individuals are being called upon for advice and participation in response to the September 11<sup>th</sup> events in New York.

The Large Firm Roundtable have given a major financial

donation to the New York AIA Chapter to help them through that effort.

**Question: Other than scale of numbers, what are the unique characteristics of a large firm? How can lessons learned from the experiences of large firms be of value to AIA members in general?**

Our sessions tend to focus a great deal on the management-related issues that occur at a certain scale, whether it be financial or organizational models that come into play or the legal aspects that we are all facing—contractual, liability, or insurance issues. There is a wide range of discussions about human resources and staff—their education, continuing education, and what kinds of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities we have to help them grow as professionals. There is a great deal of discussion about what's happening with technology and where it is going. We talk about ways we as a group can have some impact on where things are headed and how we can provide feedback to manufactures, vendors, regulators, and others who affect the health and welfare of the profession.

There is a lot of room for improvement in the understanding of the global marketplace for architecture, whether it's in building codes or the regulations that affect an architect's ability to practice across state lines and country boundaries. There are areas where we as larger firms in a wide range of areas have experience of value to smaller firms. For instance, if someone is practicing in XYZ state and wants to practice in STU state and they need to know about regulatory requirements that add costs and time. There are a lot of things like that that the larger firms deal with regularly.

**Question: What impact will rising insurance costs have on the profession?**

I think we don't know yet. But it was one of the Large Firm Roundtable's major topics 10 years or so ago. There were many conversations between the Large Firm Roundtable and various insurance providers about what was happening and what the options were for insurance coverage. I think we all have been made aware that both what happened on the 11<sup>th</sup> as well as other economic variables are going to affect insurance rates. We are all now individually beginning to have to deal with that, and I'm sure that will be a topic that will get more attention at our meeting in April.

**Question: Have you encouraged Large Firm Roundtable**  
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### **members to lobby their state and local legislators?**

One has to be a participant to have a voice and have an opportunity to shape those things that are of concern to the profession and the communities that we serve. Not that we are in any way interested in having more influence than is appropriate, but simply want to be able to bring to bear the best of what we all know or can provide. So it's important.

### **Question: How closely does the Large Firm Roundtable work with the Institute?**

The Large Firm Roundtable is technically independent from the Institute, so the relationship between the Large Firm Roundtable and the Institute on a formal basis is really a reflection of the willingness of the Large Firm Roundtable leadership and the Institute leadership to reach out to one another. We don't always agree on everything, but there is, I think, a strong desire on both parts to reach out, and I hope we are able to continue to reach out more on issues that affect the Institute and us. Not being within the Institute gives us some flexibility to stand outside its formal structure and reflect on strategic directions and issues that we are facing and then reflect on how those issues might be manifested within the challenges that the Institute is addressing. That independence is a strength and yet the relationship is clearly an important one that we will continue to want to maintain.

### **Question: There seems to be a spirit of collaboration among the Large Firm Roundtable. When you are competitors most other days of the year, how do you achieve this camaraderie at your meetings?**

I have very much enjoyed being part of the Large Firm Roundtable. It's a daunting challenge to slip into the shoes that Harold Adams has been in for so long. There is a great deal of knowledge, a great deal of expertise, a great deal of professional collegiality that transcends a lot of the competitiveness that we walk out the door and find ourselves competing with firms the next day. But we've also found ourselves, many of us teaming with other members of the Large Firm Roundtable on projects that may or may not have happened had we not had this venue for discussion and friendships and so on. So it's been very valuable to me personally, and I look forward to engaging the next generation of people that are involved in the Large Firm Roundtable over the next couple of years. ■