

Points of View

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

The Crucible of 2001



by John D. Anderson, FAIA

Looking back over 2001, many have told me that it must have been a difficult year to be the AIA's president. I don't agree. Yes, there have been shocks, jolts, bad news, even terror. But each event, each jolt posed incredible opportunities far beyond the initial challenge.

And we seized those opportunities.

That's what being an architect is all about: confronting the challenges; taking risks; giving it our best; and, finally, coming up with innovative answers and solutions that make us better, more relevant, and stronger as architects and as the collective voice of a noble profession.

The challenges came early. Five days after my inauguration as AIA President, it became clear that AECdirect was going to be a casualty of the looming dot-com meltdown. It had not become the viable entity we had hoped it to be. The long and, as it turned out, painful process of cutting losses had to begin.

As the 60 percent owner of the enterprise, the AIA bore the brunt of the responsibility for dealing with the fallout. During the next four months of the new year, the AIA national Board met the problem squarely, and the Finance Committee worked tirelessly on every detail. We engaged special expertise, made dramatic cuts in expenses, and developed a three-year recovery plan, the goal of which was not simply to retire AEC's debts, but also to restore the AIA's net assets to a \$2.5 million level by the end of 2003.

To date, progress in achieving that ambitious goal has exceeded the projected timeline. But initial success has not meant any lessening of the commitment to stay on track. After careful evaluation, some programs have been cut back and new ones that we had hoped to initiate have been postponed. But this exercise, as intense as it was, has caused us to rethink our priorities with greater focus than ever before, and we are already better for it.

Through the spring and summer, we made excellent headway in stabilizing our finances. Slowly but steadily we began to see across all levels of the Institute a return of trust. Simultaneously, our new membership database task force was doing great work. Things were looking up and everyone on the Board and national staff eagerly looked forward to the September Board meeting.

Then came September 11

September 11 abruptly changed everything. The meeting was

cancelled and a whole set of new priorities emerged.

Again, however, we came up with innovative ways to move forward with purpose. Building Security Through Design: An AIA Resource Center became an international clearinghouse for the most up-to-date information about disaster preparedness and response. In early October, we conducted a four-hour teleconference Board meeting to deal with the most pressing issues on the September agenda. We discovered that despite the absence of face-to-face debate, significant progress could be made. With one last opportunity to meet in December and faced with a very crowded agenda, we again met by teleconference in late November. The decks were cleared for what was a lively yet manageable agenda for the December Board meeting in Washington, D.C.

From where I sit, the AIA has not simply met the challenges of this past year, we have arrived at a place where the structure is stable. We have excellent, committed staff leadership and a much more savvy, *focused* Board. We have learned a lot of lessons, and there have been moments of greatness along the way. Three immediately come to mind.

First, our Denver Convention was a great success by every measure—attendance, enthusiasm, and inspired speakers on the timely theme of creating true community.

A global profession

Second, halfway around the world, the AIA signed an accord in October with the Korean Institute of Architects on professionalism in practice that includes a unique commitment to continuing education. It was a moving as well as a delightful occasion for the celebration of a *unified* profession linking two distinct cultures.

Yet the memory that will remain most important for me in a truly memorable year is that of the powerful, single-hearted response to the events of 11 September, a response that came in a matter of hours from our colleagues in 30 nations. It was a response that spoke universally of shock, outrage, and sadness. But it spoke just as universally of compassion, fellowship, and resolute support.

And support us they have. Shortly after 11 September, AIA Executive Vice President Norman Koonce, FAIA; COO Jim Dinegar; and I went to New York City to help ensure that any effort that might be mounted to raise funds to assist those who lost their offices or jobs would be strong, focused, and guided by the AIA's New York City Chapter. Since then, contributions have come in from all over the world, with the architects of Ja-

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pan alone accounting for \$30,000.

Many lessons have been learned in the crucible of 2001. For me, however, two stand above the rest: First, it is indeed possible to run the Institute's national component as a viable and powerfully effective enterprise. And, second, architecture is truly a single, global, and, yes, noble profession.

My deepest thanks to all who have provided solid support when it has been sorely needed and for the unimaginable honor that has been given me to serve for a year as your leader.

President Chong, we are in your capable hands. Godspeed!

Gordon H. Chong, FAIA, was inaugurated on December 8 as the 78th president of the AIA. This is John Anderson's last presidential column, and we, in turn, say thank you and Godspeed to this pragmatic and deep-thinking man of inexhaustible energy! 