

Marketplace Research

Strategy and the Architect as Integrated Service Provider



by *Richard W. Hobbs, FAIA*
Resident Fellow,
Marketplace Research and Trends

Research conducted in conjunction with the AIA national advertising campaign tells us that owners and clients see design as a "noun," a tangible thing, while architects see design as a "verb," a process. This idea also echoed

throughout management specialist Tom Peter's keynote address at the recent AIA convention in Charlotte.

This research and Peters himself also tell us that although owners see design as thing, they do not always see the architect as instrumental in creating that "thing" in its early, conceptual stages. Paradoxically, they are looking for a person who will give them that design-thing from start to finish—if you will, a design "integrated service provider" (ISP).

This demand for services aligns nicely with the AIA's Redefinition of the Profession principles that state "the architect is the integrator and facilitator of the design collaboration process." We architects can view this demand for service as an opportunity to develop for ourselves an integrated strategic process, as our "verb" morphs into the client's "noun."

As a result of our research, the AIA is positioning its ad campaign to show potential clients the advantages of involving AIA architects earlier and more often, starting from the conception of a project all the way through the commissioning and operations. This shift toward a broader interpretation of architecture and the design process will require a combination of new awareness on the part of the client and new expertise and leveraged skill sets on the part of the architect.

Start by defining what you want

"A National Conversation," the videotape produced at this year's Grassroots Leadership Conference, features AIA President Gordon H. Chong, FAIA; President-elect Thom Penney, FAIA; and Executive Vice President/CEO Norman L. Koonce, FAIA, debating the possible ways we can create our preferred future. This tape was sent to all AIA chapters in the hopes that they would hold their own "national conversations," and the response to date has been incredible. Many architects are finding this a valuable tool for defining their current situations and defining where they want to go, as individuals, as the AIA, and as the profession.

AIA Seattle Advisory Board Member Clair Enlow, summed up the feelings of her chapter's national conversation participants as "fear and concern." She said they see a traditional model of practice that has been unraveling for decades, which is making it increasingly

difficult for small and midsize firms to position themselves competitively—or even survive economically. We needn't interpret this as a negative message; we can see it as an opportunity to ponder our future as individuals and as a profession. Taking what Gold Medalist Arthur Erickson, told the convention audience: "It is impossible to teach—students learn because they are in tune with some aspects of what they hear," we can decide if what we are hearing from the National Conversation is something we should learn and act upon.

The Redefinition Scenario matrix (see graphic) is another tool getting good response from AIA members. They look at the practice axis and place themselves in their current position—and then think of a shift, or greater strengthening of a current position. Some question the ability of the architect to get into the project during the "genesis" phase, while others are working on their ability to be there, with the goal of being an "integrated service provider."

So, how do you think of being an "integrated service provider"? Those who see themselves as working in multiple platforms may be ready; those who see themselves as implementing the "product" from a predetermined program might not. You can think about being an ISP working on one particular project or within the broader context of your practice, or even your career. On the matrix, the possibilities stretch along the entire Practice Axis, from the Process/Strategy side to the Practice/Business side.

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Creating a language to help get you there

So, say you decide you want to change the way you work, perhaps toward becoming an ISP. How do you start? Maybe with your words.

Here's a clue on how to start, adapted from the book *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (Jossey-Bass, 2000) by Robert Kegan, and Lisa Laskow Lahey, who discuss "entropy" and "negentropy." With entropy, all dynamic systems—people, organizations, solar systems—gradually fall apart, increasing disorder and dissipation of energy. The very opposite is negentropy: with effective supports, we can create a process that leads to a greater complexity, order, choice, and power. A first step in creating negentropy is to build a language that moves the way we think and talk toward our preferred future. This entails moving:

- From the language of complaint to the language of commitment
- From the language of blame to the language of personal (professional) responsibility
- From the language of big assumptions that hold us to the language of assumptions that we hold.

Case Study: Sparling integrates behavior styles

Peters told us that a successful firm will "integrate a strategy" as the groundwork for being an integrated service technology. Unsuccessful firms add services willy-nilly.

Throughout the design professions, many firms have moved

strategically into being ISPs. One example is Sparling, a nationally recognized consulting firm that integrates electronic technologies: electrical, telecommunications, lighting, security, and "telehealth." They take it as their challenge to integrate the design team fully for the overall project. This integration covers more than just the technical knowledge base to get the project done; as important, it entails integrating differing personal behavior styles of the various experts needed to accomplish in-house work. (You can see this on the y-axis of the matrix.) In like manner, client behavioral styles also must be integrated.

Jim Duncan and Douglas Bors of Sparling say that client satisfaction depends on both client service and delivering value. They are focusing on integrated design within the firm to become an integrated service provider. To further their understanding, they use a self-assessment tool for behavior analysis to increase self-awareness and provide a common language for all—wherever they fall within the matrix. This effort has produced increased performance with the firm and, in turn, Duncan and Bors hope, will create value for the client.

At this point, let me pose some questions for you to ponder:

- What does all this change mean to you?
- Are you acknowledging and perhaps considering taking on the potential role of integrated service provider?
- Are you consciously moving from entropy to negentropy?

Let me know: rhobbs@richardwhobbs.com.