

## PRACTICE

### Best Practices

## Who Are You?

Defining the architect

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Who are you?

Who, who, who, who?

I really want to know

- The Who

Why is that many people do not understand what architects do? For some reason the practice of architecture is generally not well understood outside the profession. As a result, the expectations of owners and the public do not always align with actual outcomes. A significant part of the problem is that most people think they know who architects are and what they do, but their perception is not entirely accurate.

Merriam Webster defines an architect as, "A person who designs buildings and advises in their construction." While this is true, it does not convey the essence of the actual practice of architecture. Moreover, by its simplicity, it is misleading. It suggests that an architect knows everything there is to know about designing and constructing a building. Perhaps that is one reason why we frequently get sued for the contractor's misdeeds.

Architects have struggled for decades to convey our identity to the public. As the profession has evolved from the non-litigious days of the combination architect and constructor that marked the days of the master builder, we have yet to shed the identity of being the only professional in charge. This lack of understanding of what we do continues even though the AIA has produced literature explaining what

an architect is so that clients can find out more about the services they are obtaining. Meanwhile, to add confusion to naiveté, software developers are running around calling themselves architects, and computers run on "architecture". No wonder the help desk treats us the way they do.



We have pondered whether young people enrolling in architecture school really know what an architect is. Almost to a person, we know that we were somewhat uninformed when we started out. For many, architecture school was not what we expected it to be. Many architects have pondered at some point in their career whether the long hours and relatively low pay during their early professional life was really what they bargained for.

This article will explore the architect's misunderstood status and the challenges and frustrations that it can bring. We will examine how the public has been exposed to architects, and what they tend to expect of us. Finally we will look at some alternatives and potential opportunities for improving awareness.

*Oh I'm just a friend.  
That's all I've ever been.  
Cause you don't know me.  
— Ray Charles*

### The eye of the public

If people in general derive their understanding of architects from what they see in the movies, consider the material that is available. Most everyone should remember *The Fountainhead*, where Gary Cooper is Howard Roark, an architect who blows up his own project because the owner and contractor are not adhering to the design concept. Imagine that? So he takes the law into his own hands and vaporizes his design. Do real life architects do that? Not if they want to stay in business and out of jail.

There is also *The Towering Inferno* where architect Paul Newman stumbles through his fire-engulfed highrise on opening night, discovering construction atrocities committed by the contractor, yet the architect internalizes the blame in the name of poor design. Then, adding to the misinformation and fantasy, he rides the elevators into the inferno, an act that is not only stupid but unrealistic. No wonder the public has doubts about us.

Then there is *Intersection*, where Richard Gere's architect character spends most of the movie having an affair, as does an architect played by Wesley Snipes in Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*. Isn't that a wonderful image of architects! All we need is for the public to believe that architects are philandering losers.

In *The Belly of an Architect*, Brian Dennehy plays an architect who goes off the deep end and messes up his family and career. In the *Death Wish* series, an architect played by Charles Bronson becomes a berserk vigilante.

## PRACTICE

For a profession of well meaning people who just want to create cool places for people to be in and enjoy, we tend to be portrayed poorly or to be overly romanticized in the public eye. It's no wonder our identity is flapping in the breeze.

### Raising public awareness

The AIA goes to respectable lengths to educate the public on architects and architecture. *You and Your Architect* is downloadable online, [[www.aia.org/pub\\_highlight1](http://www.aia.org/pub_highlight1)] and addresses some of what an architect does as well as how to find and hire one. Most of the architect association Web sites around the world provide informative links—such as the RIBA's "What Architects Do" and the AIA's "What an Architect Can Do for You"—in efforts to enlighten and educate the public. Yet what architects are and do continue to be largely misunderstood by many.



This fundamental misperception of what an architect is and the services they provide produces unrealistic expectations which result in dissatisfaction and discord. Although you may



do a near perfect job, if what you do is not what the owner expects, you may still be in trouble. Owners who perceive unfulfilled promises often pursue recovery through legal means.

Claire Gallagher, EdD., Assoc. AIA, an architecture/design educator who has devoted her career to working toward raising public awareness and making architecture more widely understood outside the profession, wrote in *Architecture Week* in June 2001, "It is a loss both to the profession and to society that architectural process is shrouded in mystery."

*But I'm just a soul whose intentions are good  
Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood  
— Eric Burdon and the Animals*

### Perceptions and expectations

Many owners are under the misguided perception that architects are obligated under their contract to search out and find defects and deficiencies in the contractor's work. We explored this topic in detail in the August 2006 AIArchitect article entitled, "Absolute

or Absolution ." [[www.aia.org/aiarchitect/thisweek06/0804/0804bp\\_risk.cfm](http://www.aia.org/aiarchitect/thisweek06/0804/0804bp_risk.cfm)]

AIA Document B141, 1997, in Section 2.6.2.1, states, "The Architect, as a representative of the Owner, shall . . . endeavor to guard the Owner against defects and deficiencies in the Work . . ." This language, "endeavor to guard," has been misconstrued by some to mean that the architect has the ability to prevent defects by catching the contractor's mistakes and making the contractor correct them. Consequently, when problems are discovered in the completed work, the architect may be accused of causing construction defects, rather than the contractor who performed the work, in spite of the fact that the contractor provided an express warranty that the work would be free from defects.

Meanwhile, many contractors do not know much more about architects than owners do; especially if the architects they encounter concentrate their efforts primarily on design issues and issue insufficient or uncoordinated construction documents or take a passive approach to construction

## PRACTICE

contract administration (CCA). When a contractor works with an architect who does not produce adequate construction documents or does not proactively provide CCA, they assume that all architects typically opt to pay little attention to details and construction.

Especially when architects are not visible on the job during construction, the contractor and owner cannot be aware of the services that an architect can provide. It was Woody Allen who said, "Eighty percent of success is showing up." The importance of proactive construction administration was addressed in the June 2006 AIArchitect article, "Visible Means." [[www.aia.org/aiarchitect/thisweek06/0602/0602bp\\_risk.cfm](http://www.aia.org/aiarchitect/thisweek06/0602/0602bp_risk.cfm)]

*Cellophane, Mister Cellophane  
Shoulda been my name, Mister  
Cellophane  
Cause you can look right through  
me  
Walk right by me, And never know  
I'm there...  
— Soundtrack to the musical  
Chicago*

### Alternatives and opportunities

Gallagher's solution to our anonymity is to "... bring architecture and what architects do into elementary and secondary school classrooms." She adds, "... once they begin incorporating design into their teaching, architecture will cease to be a mystery to the public."

Gallagher's systemic approach will likely improve things over time, but architects can help themselves individually by taking action. We must stop acting like we are just another profession, like a lawyer or a dentist, whom everyone automatically knows a lot about. After all, those profes-

als are often portrayed on television or in movies acting as heroes and are not usually portrayed blowing up buildings or committing revenge murders. We must face the fact that people are no more familiar with us than they are with rocket scientists; like the people at NASA who do those mysterious things to get rockets into space. Perhaps, in that respect, architecture IS like rocket science!



We have to accept the fact that generally, *people just don't know what we do*. We must factor this into our daily activities and within our work routines. With sensitivity to avoid the condescending, we must actively work to enlighten people around us to the greatest extent possible.

We should make ourselves completely available to the owner. We can provide the owner with information on the specifics of project issues and our profession. Looking cool, dressed in that black sports coat and matching turtleneck sweater, delivering that crisp, clean 3D model of the project, simply does not enlighten as well as

subjecting the owner to your piles of bumwad sketches and countless red-marked drawings. When it comes to what we do, presenting laser-sharp wiz-bang technologies in the board room is a poor substitute for exposing your owner to the creative power and probing realities of the "back room" where we spend most of our time in search of our designs.



Let's face it, owners are no different from you and me. We like the Mom and Pop restaurant where the menu is on a chalk board, the tables are plastic laminate, and you can see Pop cooking in the kitchen. We like to see the manual innards of a business. When we can see the backroom disarray, we can understand more about the process and we appreciate how the product gets to the table.

Guiding the owner through the document preparation progress in the back room, or traipsing through the dusty formwork on a hot day and laboring over details of the fascia substrate is a quantum improvement over anonymous status reports. If you are there, and if you are responsive, and if you have answers, you can gain trusted-advisor status and actually demonstrate to the owner in real time what an architect is and does, as well as the limitations inherent in the process.

### What they really think

You can truly observe what owners and contractors really think architects do by looking at what they say we were responsible for when they file

## PRACTICE

claims against us. Some of the following language, stylized from a series of actual claims against architects, reflects the unreal views of what others think we do, or should have done:

*“... most, if not all, of the issues noted are the result of nonconforming work performed by the contractor. These problems were exacerbated by the Architect’s failure to observe nonconforming work and require that the work be redone.”*

In this instance the claimant and their lawyer clearly do not understand that the contractor’s obligation to perform the work well is not overridden by placing a stronger obligation on the architect to “catch him if he doesn’t.” They also do not understand that the architect has limited power or authority to force the contractor to correct nonconforming work, but can only reject the nonconforming work. A201 requires the contractor to correct work the architect has rejected.

In another example, the perceived power of the architect is more extreme:

*“At the time that contractor’s defective work was performed, Architect was supervising the work at the site. Additionally, the work was performed while Architect was in charge of the work.”*

In this instance, there are several misunderstandings. Architects do not “supervise” the work on the site unless they have signed a contract specifically to provide such services. The AIA Contract Documents™ define “supervision” as a construction activity, not as an architectural service. The most extreme misunderstanding in this claim is that the architect was somehow “in charge” of the work.



Sections 4.2.2 and 4.3.3 of the A201 General Conditions specifically state that the architect will not have control over or charge of the work.

Both of these instances reflect poor communication of the real duties, responsibilities, and actions of the architect. Although the claims may be defensible based on contracted duties as well as standard of care, the misunderstandings that are the foundation of the claims could have benefited from better communication about what architects do.

### Anything but guaranteed

Architects often seem to have a need to be seen as respected professionals, along the lines that it is perceived that physicians and attorneys are respected. Yet, inherent in the practice of medicine and law is the patient’s or client’s knowledge that success is anything but guaranteed as a result of the professional services that physicians and attorney’s provide.

Although a physician does not frequently ask you to sign a release for a simple office visit, any serious and more complex procedure will nearly always be accompanied by the request that you sign an informed-consent release attesting to your understanding that success is not guaranteed and that there are well-known risks and side effects that may arise out of the physician’s efforts.

Likewise, your lawyer will sit with you and offer counsel about the risks inherent in a legal proceeding or contract that you may be contemplating. You, like other parties, hire lawyers to help you understand and mitigate these inherent risks.

Yet architects generally do a poor job when it comes to being open and forthright about the risks inherent in designing and constructing a building. Whether it be the risk of increased costs or lengthened schedules inherent in the fast-track process (see “Managing Risk in Fast

## PRACTICE

Track Projects," *Architect's Handbook Update 2006*] or the probability, if not the certainty, of errors and omissions committed by the human beings that provide architectural services, architects are reluctant to talk about the things can go wrong. Physicians and attorneys, ostensibly respected professionals, aren't reluctant to set realistic expectations for their clients, while architects, wanting to be perceived as respected professionals, are. Perhaps competition for commissions is a cause of this behavior in our profession.

*Can you see the real me, can you?  
- The Who – Quadrophenia*

### Getting to know you

Who are we? We owe it to ourselves to do our best to reveal our profession to the public. We design the building, we produce the construction drawings, and we administer the construction contract. We make thousands of decisions and spend countless hours toiling away in the obscurity of our back room. Just like every other human being, we are not perfect and

some of what we do doesn't turn out like we hope it will. Nonetheless, most of what we do produces results that are not only sufficient, but exciting. If everyone really knew what we actually do, our work would be more appreciated and better respected.

This problem of unrealistic and inaccurate perceptions about what we do did not happen overnight, and it will not be resolved in another night. We can blame the system and we can blame the players, but we must primarily blame ourselves. We must decide that we want to be understood. We must start by learning to talk about what we do. In the course of delivering our services, we must be able to explain our process and our actions as we go along. We must invite our owners into the back room and let them experience the "moving parts" of our operation. Schedule site visits with the owner and walk the job together. The more of our process the owner can see and experience, the more they will understand who we are.

We must also maintain our presence with the contractors. This can be done by conducting or at least being an active participant in the project meeting, walking the site, and spending time in their back room. We should schedule extra time to spend with the contractor on site visits. These actions represent good project management, but they also enlighten and inform.

As you take time out from what you are doing to walk to the coffee bar, stop a few steps away and look back at your workspace. Contemplate what you see and muse how you would explain to your owner what you have been doing in the past hour. Explaining the benefits of your actions to the client and their project will reveal to them a little bit more about who you are. Go on now and get that cup of

joe, and as you do... remember to be careful out there.

### Reference:

Jim and Grant will return next month in AIArchitect when the subject will be "A Loss Cause Too; Betterment." If you would like to ask Jim and Grant a risk- or project-management question or request them to address a particular topic, send an e-mail to [legalcoordinator@aia.org](mailto:legalcoordinator@aia.org).

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