

Architects in Commerce **Executive Summary**

Introduction

Over the past decade, there are several key trends that have converged to potentially transform the way the architecture profession is practiced.

Regardless of market segment or size of their client's organization, most architects are grappling with one or more of the following: technological advances in documentation (specifically Building Information Modeling), the acceptance of sustainability as an understood goal, the utilization of outside owner's representatives, and the accompanying shift towards alternative project delivery methods. Of course the backdrop to these major developments has been the economic decline that began in 2009, one that has only recently shown signs of slow recovery.

What has all this meant for the architect? AIA Minnesota has taken on this challenge through a series of efforts designed to provide some answers for their members. The Recovery Task Force Report, completed in partnership with the Carlson School of Management in 2010, made it clear architects were feeling undervalued and underpaid, with greater cost demands placed on them, but with less project control. To gain further insight into how real change could be addressed, it was necessary to get on the other side of the desk – to talk to owners, developers, contractors, and owner's representatives.

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Purpose

AIA Minnesota’s Architects in Commerce Initiative Committee commissioned a survey in July of 2012, with the purpose of better understanding the following:

- The perceived role of the architect
- The relative importance of contributing to the owner’s mission and vision
- The value-added architects can potentially bring to a project
- The trend toward bringing in third-parties as owner’s advocates
- Challenges, barriers and frustrations in the design and construction process
- How the role of the architect may be changing
- What architects can do to bring greater value to clients

Process

The process began by hiring a third party, Cameron MacAllister Group (CMG), a consulting firm specializing in the design and construction professions to nail down the particular objectives and decide on the process. It was determined the survey would include a wide variety of types and sizes of firms, all of which had some dealing with architects. It was also determined that the identity of the respondents would remain confidential. Each respondent would be contacted by email requesting participation in the survey project and, if given consent, would be scheduled for a 15-20 minute telephone interview to be conducted by CMG. The questionnaire, or discussion guide, was written by CMG and revised and approved by the AICI Committee as well as AIA Minnesota staff.

A list of 112 owners, developers, contractors, and owner’s representatives was developed through a variety of resources, including AIA Minnesota members, the *Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal Book of Lists*, and AIA Minnesota contacts. Once compiled, the potential respondent list was further broken into seven market segments: Construction (including Owner’s Representatives), Corporate, Development, Education, Healthcare, Not-for-Profit, and Public/Civic.

The list was classified by scale (size) - determined by number of employees: Small (*less 100*); Medium (*100-500*); Large (*greater than 500*). The content of the list was kept confidential from the AICI Committee and all members, and was known only to certain AIA staff and CMG.

A total of 52 interviews were conducted by telephone. The survey sample was exactly proportionate to the larger list in terms of firm size and type.

Key Findings:

The Role of the Architect

In a very broad sense, clients feel the role of the architect is to understand their unique needs and to met them – whether that is in the form of a set of plans, a conceptual design, documentation, advocacy, or specialized expertise. Many of the clients we interviewed perceived architects as having the capacity and potential to help them view options, flesh out possibilities, and to think more strategically about their facilities. This might include how to build in more future flexibility, how to think differently about workflow and/or how to repurpose facilities as industries evolve and change.

“...I expect the architect will have visions and ideas that exceed whatever we can come up with. That’s the value added with architects...” Medium Public Agency

“Bringing a vision to life.” Medium Corporate

“...They’re the hub of the wheel. They provide direction and cohesiveness.” Large Developer

The Value Added

Apart from creativity and critical thinking skills, clients recognize the value added that architects bring from working with other organizations in their industry or from other clients in entirely different industries.

“...What we want to know is what are other world-class organizations doing that we can implement? That, to me, is one of the ways we benefit from using architecture firms that have experience with other organizations...” Large Corporate

Owner’s Advocates

Third-party advocates are brought into owner’s projects for two key reasons: the organization lacks expertise to manage construction projects or the project is of significant scope and/or complexity that the in-house group needs to be augmented.

Within these two key reasons is also the perception that the third-party does a better job of managing the project overall than any of the team members, including estimating and handling bumps in the road.

“... We needed an independent voice – someone who could navigate the terrain between the architect and the contractor...” Small Not-for-Profit

Trend to a More Integrated Process

Looking to the future, clients are considering, or are actively engaged in, a more integrated process that demands greater collaboration between the architect and the contractor from the beginning.

“...The most successful projects are the ones in which you can’t tell who is working for who.” Large Contractor

“...I think you’re going to see a more integrated process in which the architect’s goal will be to orchestrate, direct and coordinate in a much more integrated dynamic process...” Large Developer

Creating a Partnership

Despite what architects may think, the majority of clients want them to function more as a partner than a vendor. They want the architect to listen and help them translate their needs into design, which might include restraining the architect’s own design goals. It means being proactive, an advocate for the owner and honoring the budget.

“...The more they can spend time understanding what makes the owner’s company unique and special, and what makes their business successful, the better. They can take that on in the value chain instead of the downstream focus on document details.” Large Contractor

“...I’ve never had an architect come back a year later to find out what worked and what didn’t. That would really be a powerful message!...” Medium Education

Being the Leader

Some clients felt much of their frustration during the design and construction process could be alleviated if their architect took better control of the project. Whether that meant time management, fee management, documentation, coordination, or just plain communication, clients would like to see architects providing more leadership throughout the process.

“Take charge and don’t be afraid. Don’t take any projects you can’t control and don’t be controlled. Step up and be the leader. It’s first among equals....” Large Healthcare

Bringing Innovation

Clients look to the architect to bring them new ideas, trends in their respective industries, best practices, and technological innovations. Clients can become insular in their respective organizations and it is often the architect that brings them up to speed and into the future.

“...I want to see what others are doing, see what’s having success elsewhere and allow us to benchmark what we’re doing. I see firms that can bring us that as having greater value....” Large Corporate

Advocating Value

Throughout the interviews, clients spoke about their appreciation for the value an architect brought to their projects. On the other hand, they didn’t see architects doing enough to call attention to that value or to better leverage it in the client’s eye. Nowhere was this perception stronger than among clients who themselves were architects.

“...But I think it comes down to the ability to prove our worth as architects and to stake our territory. The social function of what our professiona does is not talked about much and yet it is really the source of our worth.” Large Education



AIA Minnesota

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