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THE OPEN HOUSE AND THE THREE-WEEK UTOPIA

Architects from emerging firms discuss the promises and perils of design leadership—and see light at the end of the tunnel. moderated by C.C. Sullivan | illustrations by Saro Jane Laska

Design leadership is a challenge for any practice, but the hazards are magnified for the small firm: Margins are tighter, projects more scarce, and relationships more critical. Yet it is often emerging designers who make the greatest impact on the future of the built environment, especially on the local level. To consider what design leadership means for today's budding practitioners, Architecture *invited principals from some of the country's most promising young firms for a frank discussion.*

C.C. SULLIVAN: You tend to use your practices as vehicles for accelerating innovation, encouraging social progress, or for offering pure aesthetic guidance. Why do architects take on such missions?

ZOKA ZOLA: I feel that there is a call, a craving, for innovation in design, but the producers—the whole building industry, including all professionals—are not prepared to take it on. So leading is the most effective thing to do.

PABLO CASTRO: They say that you can recognize the leaders by the number of arrows in their backs.

MARIO GOODEN: The public doesn't ask us to be design leaders; it's more complacent now than it's ever been. And the profession is complacent and passive. Everyone's just kind of sitting back, saying, "Feed me information, let me watch television or the new DVD, let me play my Game Boy." It's for us to find a way to challenge the status quo.

RON WITTE: We run a huge risk in underestimating the public and its interest in design. Generalizing a negative sentiment only precludes our ability to be proactive.

CASTRO: And the public as such doesn't really exist. So is it legitimate to base our work on the stated opinion of the public as gathered by statistics, and adjust ourselves to the preconceptions of the day in order to get built?

GOODEN: Leadership implies to me that we should be out in front, not sitting back taking the temperature. It involves working with people and negotiating, but I don't necessarily see that happening anywhere.

TERESA ROSANO: It's not the vast public but the neighbors [of project sites] we have most difficulty with, who are the most complacent—about sprawl, the wastefulness of always using air conditioning—and along with that is fear of change; they go hand in hand. The neighborhoods have quite a bit of power, not so much to do good but to stop projects—to keep the status quo. That's difficult to combat, because you don't have a direct relationship with them.

VINCENT SNYDER: A lot of the disciplinary territories have shifted, and now the contractor is really in the position of having a dialogue with the client.

PAUL ENDRES: There's a big gap right now between the design and what's built. You don't often get much more from the owner than a desire for a project that's economic but still provides some life.

SULLIVAN: It sounds like the client often impedes progress.

WITTE: In fact, clients are quite interested in getting good design, and they'll play an alpha role in the process.

OLIVIER TOURAINE: But we have to force that, no?

WITTE: It's simply a matter of doing it. Everything we do is seeded in a kind of fiction: Somebody says, "I have $10 million to build a building" and there's nothing there, it's vapor. And you say, "Well, here's what that vapor might produce if I were given the commission." That's what I mean by fiction; if we simply learned how to write better fiction, we'd be a lot better off.

TOURAINE: For single-family housing, clients are sometimes ready to go for whatever you design. But then they say, "Well, wait a minute, if we move to Kansas City in five years, we'll need to be able to sell it at market price." This market condition—it's like a retirement fund—makes even audacious people kind of stuck.

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

Pablo Castro
Obra Architects
Established in New York City with Jennifer Lee, 2001

Paul Endres
Endres Ware Architects Engineers
Established in Berkeley, California, with John Ware, 1996

Mario Gooden
Huff + Gooden
Established in Charleston, South Carolina, with Ray Huff, 1997

Teresa Rosano
Ibarra Rosano Design
Established in Tucson, Arizona, with Luis Ibarra, 1999

Vincent Snyder
Vincent Snyder Architect
Established in Austin, Texas, 1995

Olivier Touraine
Touraine + Richmond Architects
Established in Venice, California, with Deborah Richmond, 1998

Ron Witte
WW Architecture
Established in Somerville, Massachusetts, with Sarah Whiting, 1999

Zoka Zola
Zoka Zola Incorporated
Established in Chicago, 2004

C.C. Sullivan (moderator)
Architecture

THE VIRTUAL "OPEN HOUSE"

ROSANO: The client might have that mindset when it's just drawings, renderings, and models. But once it's built, and they're in the space and it feels great, they never want to move. Just last weekend we had an open house for our latest project, and it played a big part in allowing everybody to understand where we were going and why.

TOURAINE: That kind of open house should be open not only to friends and architects, but also to the neighbors.

ROSANO: We had, in fact, given them a presentation on what we were planning on doing, and we invited comments. And when those who were protesting it for months visited it, they understood why it was there—although there's still that resistance to change. But you have to actually build something before you get to that point.

ZOLA: The best would be if people could experience the benefits of architecture on other already-built projects. That way more people would understand what is lost, even in financial terms, without it. Achieving this critical mass should be our common cause.

WITTE: That kind of dialectical model—about what gets produced and its impact on what might be produced down the road—makes me skittish. That's what feeds our own internal restraints and makes us anxious creatures. We've learned a lot from theory over the years and we've learned a lot from practice. It's time to do something with those lessons.

SNYDER: I agree that the polarizing terms frequently used—theory versus practice, rational versus irrational—can be pretty destructive. But the discussion so far has occupied a middle ground requiring both physical and intellectual production, just as the open house presents a physical reality of innovative work that can then be evaluated.

GOODEN: In general, it's a false dichotomy: What appears theoretical at one moment in architectural history may actually have had much more practical implications.

SULLIVAN: What other mechanisms work in support of design leadership?

ZOLA: I'm interested in the Internet for the distribution of ideas, like websites where people log on to find new work and share ideas. They're getting more nimble and organized, producing a more meritocratic system. Architecture is such a visual medium, so on the Internet we could communicate easily and quickly.

GOODEN: Technology offers a fantastic opportunity for us to talk about what's important and to challenge the complacency within the profession.

CASTRO: One wonders if actively networking equates with actually expressing anything meaningful.

SNYDER: What Zoka is talking about is awareness, which goes back to the open-house idea, but this kind of exposure happens much more globally, so a variety of cultures gets engaged very quickly, triggering other design ideas. That's really exciting—and unlike the actual open house, which is very localized.

THE DOWNSIDE OF TECHNOLOGY

CASTRO: Speed is a double-edged sword. We need a little bit of friction in the process, because some things are happening too fast.

TOURAINE: Sometimes there's so much sound that it just becomes noise.

ZOLA: The speed can be adjusted. And people self-adjust.

CASTRO: I don't think that you can control it, or that people are in control.

ENDRES: We need to educate not only ourselves in working with new technology but also our clients and the contractors—everyone we work with. There's a huge technical opportunity for the building process, but the human side hasn't caught up with it.

WITTE: Technology is simply fact: It resides and hums away within the discipline. And of course we're exploiting it. But there is no dark specter or panacea there.

CASTRO: Isn't the destruction of the environment the dark side of technology? And culturally—the way the mass media tries to control how people think, for example.

WITTE: The kind of technology that we traffic in is entirely benign. Its use in our discipline is far behind the use of technologies in the aerospace industry, for example.

ZOLA: Technology can give us not only truly sustainable buildings, but buildings that produce energy and sustain life.

WITTE: Even very small practices can now maintain control over information: Where products come from, how far they're trucked in, what kinds of thermal characteristics they have …

SNYDER: We can even consider the entire life cycle of materials, like what happens after the building is built or when the building is demolished.

CASTRO: The way sustainability has become mainstream has been by legitimizing the continuation of current modes of

Discussing the challenges facing emerging firms today are, from left to right: Pablo Castro, Vincent Snyder, Teresa Rosano, Mario Gooden, Olivier Touraine, Paul Endres, Zoka Zola, and Ron Witte.

consumption. I mean, if every country were engaged in the same level of consumption as the United States, we would run out of natural resources very fast.

WITTE: One thing that concerns me is that we not put architecture in the position of being apologetic: What we produce is good, pure and simple.

INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

SULLIVAN: Then why are many architects reluctant to offer themselves as leaders?

ZOLA: The modernist concept of leadership—of putting ourselves forward to give direction to all the others—may be desired but not necessary. Leadership can be something small, like one project or action that opens doors to something not yet done that leads toward other, sometimes better, things.

SNYDER: Part of the problem is terminology. When we consider innovation, we don't talk about originality, novelty, or invention: Those terms are now somewhat pejorative because of their heroic, modernist origins. So we talk about other characteristics, such as influence.

GOODEN: When did originality become pejorative? Then we settle for mediocrity.

CASTRO: Architecture can be integrated with life in such a way that they become one and the same. Maybe the architect as leader is somebody who has effected that kind of integration in a way that cannot be imitated.

GOODEN: What motivates our work is not to solve problems but to instrumentalize architecture to ask certain questions of the context we find ourselves in—questions that are culturally relevant and have political and social implications. We design and construct the conditions that people live in, and while none of us can solve these problems individually, we have some ethical responsibility as a profession to ask these questions.

CASTRO: George Bernard Shaw said, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

ENDRES: Architecture is really about the process of compromise; to search for one particular idea or one form exclusively really leads you down one track. But there are cases where you end up going off track, where you might have to veer away from something that you feel is not going in the right direction. I can lay out a variety of choices for the client and try to steer him, but if the client chooses another way, there's not much I can do.

SULLIVAN: So is design leadership about experimentation?

CASTRO: The notion of experimenting has prestige because it's an accepted scientific method. Yet it's very different in architecture, because in the sciences, experimentation never addresses the "why," only the "how"; so the ultimate intentions—which a morally responsible practice has to address—are never part of the experiments themselves.

ENDRES: When you go out on a limb and bring something radical and new, you have to go five steps beyond that to really understand it and educate everyone as to how it will benefit them and how it can be done. Experimentation is really just the first step.

WITTE: Experimentation is a pretty open-ended term. We often struggle to make sure we're correctly editing out 95 percent of what we could expend effort on, because it's such a complex discipline. We have particular focus areas: materials, programmatic organization, related research.

ZOLA: Architects, like physicians and scientists, can't do experiments that are tested in the field. Every single angle has to be researched and predicted during the design process, so by the time a project is realized it can hardly be called experimental.

CASTRO: Part of leadership is charting unknown territory. But you have to mediate that with a core of moral intention that pervades everything else. We experiment in our office by

BEATING THE TRAP OF SPECIALIZATION

Is specialization a good thing? Not for architects hoping to make a substantial impact on their communities, contend participants in *Architecture*'s emerging-firms roundtable.

Calling it a "trap," Vincent Snyder observed that architects "are asked more and more what our specializations are, yet we've all been educated to operate as generalists, to control large amounts of information and build those into design opportunities." So while architects need the requisite expertise to produce responsible and innovative solutions, it's their broader backgrounds that allow them to orchestrate their resolution, Snyder argued.

The trend toward specialization potentially narrows a firm's purview, said some panelists. "We're really trying to be eclectic with our projects—not in terms of expression, because that's very consistent, but in terms of topics," noted Olivier Touraine. "We're concerned with being stuck with one type of construction, one type of function."

"An architect has to be able to do many things—such as making cultural connections—to propose a better future," added Pablo Castro, arguing that the question of specialization "has to do with separation."

Drawing a parallel with the traditional division of architectural and engineering services, Paul Endres, whose firm offers both, criticized the lack of integration between the two disciplines at most universities.

"One of the reasons I wanted to teach was to try to integrate the two," he explained. "In my education in the engineering department there was no real discussion; everyone was searching on one path for the ultimate economic and efficient solution. In the architecture department, everybody seemed to be off in his or her own direction."

Castro reminded the panel that even this seemingly normal partition of duties is a relatively recent one. "It's only been this way for about 200 or 250 years," he observed. "Before that, for thousands of years, the disciplines had been one and the same." **C.C. Sullivan**

means of projects that aren't client-based. Eventually you couple these experiments with your intentions and create a narrative that furnishes the "why" in the context of a new "how."

SNYDER: We have projects we designed for ourselves that remain unbuilt or ever evolving; these serve as a common thread, another dialogue, that we have with ourselves and our colleagues. Much of our practice is about experimentation, and the risk is indeed financial. That's where the money goes, right?

RECOGNITION AND REWARD

SULLIVAN: Speaking of which, how are you paid for your work?

ROSANO: We charge residential clients hourly with a not-to-exceed fee for the schematic design, and then set a fixed fee once we know the project scope. But not-to-exceed doesn't mean that we don't exceed: We consistently exceed, and we absorb that cost. Every project is such an opportunity; we don't want to stop before we feel we've found the best idea.

ENDRES: If a project really pushes the edge, you can lose quite a lot of money or go way over budget. But if it's the second or third project in that vein, you can actually realize an economic benefit.

ROSANO: But with each project being unique it seems as though that's never going to happen.

ENDRES: Right. You go on another tack and you're down the road again.

TOURAINE: The process of selection by RFP is often pathetic. We look at those and say, "Does it really make sense to build a team and write a proposal when we don't know who's going to judge it, or what criteria they'll use?" We try to target the good clients.

WITTE: If the client wants a cheap building, and wants it now—

SNYDER: —and they also want five examples of that same type of project—

WITTE: Yeah—we tell them that we aren't the correct match for them. In public work in particular, this is an issue.

GOODEN: In general, our public clients do not necessarily value our investment in time and in how much we're thinking about them. Our private clients come to us because they recognize the value of what we do. It's a big dilemma unless there's an advocate; for a while, the General Services Administration was the only public advocate for good design.

Private clients come to us because they recognize the value of what we do. But our public clients don't always value our investment—unless there's an advocate.

WITTE: Absolutely. The authority of the design disciplines comes from some kind of verification by armatures like that. It's extremely valuable for a practice to have that kind of recognition.

CASTRO: Visibility helps us build a community and recognize other people working on the same issues.

TOURAINE: I wonder if we're really in search of design leadership or just pure survival, professionally speaking. In the United States, conditions are very difficult for small firms.

SNYDER: There's been tremendous growth in design-build firms, and that's a way that many architects have reclaimed territory that has shifted into the realm of the contractor. But the architect traditionally has operated as a check and balance between client and contractor, with our first priority for the public interest, and then for the interests of the client.

ROSANO: And then there's the interest of the site, which we should consider our other client: the people living there, and the site itself.

TOURAINE: Even beyond design-build, a lot of our colleagues think we should be developing more projects ourselves. We're building our own house this way, as client, user, and developer.

In the United States, conditions are very difficult for small firms. A lot of our colleagues think we should be developing more of our projects ourselves.

ROSANO: We are doing a bit of speculative work as well.

THE THREE-WEEK UTOPIA

SULLIVAN: So the pay is bad and the dangers are rife. Then why do you do it?

CASTRO: It's true that it is a struggle, not least financially. But the fact that it is so difficult can be frustrating while at the same time stimulating. It creates a backdrop of possibilities.

WITTE: Seventy-five years ago architecture was undertaken with a very utopian predilection. As taboo as it has become, that driver remains an important catalyst to our professional advancement. It's just reframed: We now work toward, say, a three-week utopia as opposed to a thousand-year utopia.

ENDRES: It's the explorations that really keep you young.

TOURAINE: We're training ourselves, spending all our money on the competitions that we brilliantly lose—or win, but then don't get built. But we need that, even though it's almost masochistic behavior.

SNYDER: It's a huge undertaking, since architecture's always been about slow maturation. But you get to a point where you understand that with recognition come more opportunities, which is great. On the other hand, you become comfortable doing what you do, and know you'll be doing it regardless of recognition.

ZOLA: I think it's our inner makeup: It's good for us.

TOURAINE: We're architects until we die, obviously; recognition and success are secondary.

GOODEN: The largest reward for me is feedback from the user, the client, or the kid in her new school—to see them really enjoying what they now have. The kid says, "Thanks, this is a fantastic new building."

ROSANO: Thoreau said, "To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest art." There's no question that it's a huge struggle, but there are moments when you really feel appreciated and it's worth it. ■