



President's Perspective

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Communicating Value

Architects build more than structures. Architects build value.

"Architecture is defined as the design of structures, but it's more than that."

The design of a building can inspire rapture or provoke disgust. It can start conversations that continue long after the building has outgrown — or no longer fulfills — its original role.

Buildings have a purpose and a place in our lives. Some provide the most basic function of architecture, that of shelter, while others move beyond to embody broad philosophical trends that have changed human history. Others aspire to the artistic, and their designs resonate through time. ...

Tell me what local architecture moves you, turns your head, makes you wonder.

We're surrounded by architecture and its legacy. Let's learn about it, and learn from it, together."

I wrote those words 10 years ago in my first article as an architectural writer. When first approached by our local Gannett-owned newspaper with the opportunity, I couldn't wait to tell my local community how strongly I felt about the value of architecture — despite being a bit intimidated by the journalistic challenge.

Certainly, as architects, we know that we solve problems on every level, and we create better places to live and work. We are convinced architecture positively affects the quality of life. So, while we as architects can fluently discuss program, function, materials, toilets and exits with our clients, we find it nearly impossible to communicate the valuable role of a design professional.

At university, we focus on design. We've all had the painful experience of standing in front of our peers and professors, sharing our thoughts and ideas in fluent "archispeak" — using expressive words like "fenestration," "tectonic," "horizontality" and "planar." We learned to enthusiastically complement this discourse with grand conceptual spatial thoughts presented and explained systematically and in great detail through a variety of nonverbal visual skills: drawings, models, renderings, illustrations and 3-D animations utilizing computer wizardry and photomontage. Sometimes, we might even use enigmatic background music — or at least I did.

Unfortunately, we honed these presentation talents on the wrong audience — ourselves. Then, we were set free into the world, armed with an abundance of different abilities but with verbal skills that resonate only with other architects. Similar to our lack of business education, little in our formal architectural education prepared us to communicate the benefits of our profession or its value to society.

Our professional jargon, coupled with a lack of simple verbal proficiency, has instead morphed us into curious professionals called architects who are loved but underappreciated and utterly misunderstood.

If we can explain in plain English (not archispeak) the responsibilities we bear and the benefits we offer as architects — that our core skills are vision, planning for the future, formulating solutions, and simply making better space and place — the public will begin to appreciate the value we add.

As a part of the 2017 AIA Florida Board of Directors retreat and strategic planning

session, we engaged a communications and media expert. She shared insights on media relations (person-to-person relationships) and storytelling tips for communicating succinctly with both the press and the public. We learned we don't need to make it complicated, but we do need to make the effort to reach out, introduce ourselves and make ourselves available as subject matter experts who can communicate or even translate for the media on behalf of the profession and to the public.

As a simple starting point during our session, each Board member was encouraged to develop a simple elevator speech that *communicates value*, perhaps even as basic as: "Architects build value, not just structures." I'd suggest that each AIA Florida member adopt such a statement and work in a handful of supporting, unique thoughts as a first step.

I firmly believe each and every member of AIA Florida needs to advocate the value of architecture and the profession to the public at large — the people who live in your local communities. To that end, it is my 2017 goal as president that each local AIA component conducts a media workshop so all our members have the opportunity to gain or polish their ability to advocate for our profession.

It may seem difficult to "sell" our worth to the public, but I am convinced it is a mission worth pursuing. We are the only ones who can tell our story and thereby promote and demystify our beloved profession, which is inherently respected by the public but isn't really understood. ■