1. Positioning the Profession for the Future

The impact and duration of the economic downturn has impacted the design and construction industry in ways we are just starting to realize. While by all accounts the tide has turned, the architectural profession has yet to fully recover. Firms that have “survived” the recession are now looking ahead toward a very different future, one where they will potentially have to change their business practices, and refocus their energies to be successful in a new economy. At all levels, how can the AIA support members to network and pursue opportunities in a recovering market?

The AIA best supports its members through three primary tools: Advocacy, Knowledge, and Communications.

On the Advocacy front, our best efforts are in the arena of legislative advocacy. Lobbying for the interests of the architectural profession on a Federal, State and Local level is where we see some of our greatest successes. Our efforts tend to be more protective in nature, and we need to move to a more pro-active stance; working to create a more favorable environment for small businesses and to open new opportunities for members is definitely a focus for the Institute. Recent efforts on this front include trade missions to India and Brazil, working to protect fair practices in design-build procurement contracts, and.

Advocacy for the value of the profession is also an area of development for the AIA, although this is currently seen more as an issue under the Communications banner.

The AIA is an overwhelming clearing house of Knowledge for practitioners. Knowledge Communities, Continuing Education programs, technical research projects and networking with experts in every subject matter are all abundantly available to assist members in developing their practices, seeking out new opportunities and competing in the current marketplace. But the amount of information makes it difficult for members to access that which meets their specific needs and the resources available tend to become background noise to most. The effective sharing of Knowledge is another issue that falls under the Communications banner.

The area in which the AIA most needs to improve its service to members is Communications. Whether communicating the value of design to the public at large, sharing knowledge among practitioners, or simply explaining the business of the Institute to members, we need to do better than our current offerings. As part of the Repositioning Initiative, the AIA is analyzing its communications tools and looking for ways to improve their effectiveness. We provide great service, we have great information, and we are doing great work; we need to do a better job of getting the message out.

2. Repositioning the AIA for the Future

The success of the Repositioning requires our collective energy to shift our perspective about what the AIA can do to serve members, advance the profession, and provides a tremendous opportunity for change. If you could make only one change to the AIA as part of the Repositioning Initiative, what would that be? Please be specific in the details and explanation of why.

Although there are numerous opportunities to change the Institute to better serve our members, I’ll try to respond to this question from a finance point of view. The one change I would make is to provide consistency in the amount of dues paid by members and the level of service they receive. With over 200 State and Local Components, 19 Regions, and a National Component, many offering stepped dues or alternative pricing models, there are literally thousands of dues rates being charged for membership in the AIA. This causes confusion among new members, dissatisfaction among existing members, and a great deal of inefficiency and wasted staff time. Add to this the fact that individuals receive vastly different levels of service from their Institute depending on which chapter carries their membership, and you have a guarantee of dissatisfaction. We must restructure our dues model to provide a common framework for all members. This may mean that some components would not have the same resources available and that raises a bigger issue inherent within the Repositioning Initiative. In order to successfully deliver high quality service to all members, we must work together to share our resources. Not just dues income, but access to sponsors, programs, Knowledge Communities, legislative action committees, and many others.

The biggest challenge of Repositioning is that, at all levels, we must put aside the interests of our
individually and come to consensus about the Mission of the AIA, the needs of our members, and the value that is inherent in being part of this organization.

3. Member Resources

While the economic climate has been challenging for all in the design and construction industry, it has been especially difficult for “seasoned” professionals who are often times unable to compete in today’s technology-based delivery environment. How is the AIA positioned to support these experienced members?

The AIA has a wealth of resources available to help professionals at all levels educate themselves about technology in the industry. Knowledge Communities like Technology in Architectural Practice, Practice Management and Project Delivery and the AIA KnowledgeNet social networking platform provide forums to connect with fellow practitioners who are experts in these fields, as well as those who are exploring new tools and have fresh insights into the process. Strategic Partners and Continuing Education providers are available to provide seminars on new product technologies and design innovations. Many local chapters have teamed up with universities and technology vendors in their area to provide low-cost training in the software tools currently being used in the construction industry.

The AIA is also uniquely positioned to provide support to its experienced members by connecting them to its Emerging Professionals. Mentoring is a two-way process and the sharing of knowledge between a seasoned practitioner and a technically savvy younger member benefits both. Stronger ties among members help to build a stronger Institute as well. The AIA must make significant efforts to re-energize a culture of mentoring within the profession and to expand on existing programs like that developed between the Young Architects Forum and the College of Fellows.

But perhaps the best support that the AIA can offer to its displaced, more experienced members is the knowledge that they already have skills of great value. The knowledge of project management, business operations, budgeting, presentation technique, agency processing, code compliance, construction detailing, contracts administration and so much more is largely independent of any specific tools of technology and can only be gained through time and experience. Opportunities to utilize these skills may not lie in the traditional practice environment. Consultancy, teaching, or even public service all make great use of the “seasoned” professional’s skill set.

4. Organizational Structure

While all can agree that a revitalized, relevant, and robust AIA to lead and support the profession is critical, there is still uncertainty whether the AIA has the will to make the significant and substantive changes necessary. In view of the findings of the Repositioning Study, what recommendations would you make about the AIA’s current service and delivery model to the membership?

The Repositioning Study identifies two topics specific to the organizational structure of the National Component: Leadership Tenures & Agenda and Board Size & Composition. There may be some confusion in the study since it identifies one year terms as a problem while directors serve three year terms and elected officers two at the National level and most local components follow a similar structure. That issue aside, I believe that the Institute has begun to make changes at the National level to address the issue of changing agendas among elected leadership. During the tenure of National Treasurer John Rogers, the Institute began a two-year budgeting cycle. Under this process, National Staff, the Finance & Audit Committee and the Board of Directors develop a specific budget for the coming year along with a bigger picture budget for the year to follow. This structure allows the incoming leadership to identify priorities for the future, begin working with staff to prepare for the coming agenda, and align the efforts of the current administration to provide continuity across multiple years. This does not necessarily eliminate the incidence of “new administration, new game plan”, but it goes a long way towards helping the Institute plan effectively for the long term.

I also find the statement that the National Board is too large while not truly representing the range and diversity of membership to be somewhat confusing. The National Board is a representative body consisting of Regional Directors allocated on the basis of the membership count in their area. Reducing the number of Directors would inherently mean that fewer people are carrying information about National issues back to the local chapters and communicating the voice of the membership to AIA leadership. This would be extremely problematic in large region like California where the reduction from four to three Directors has already made it difficult to maintain contact with all of the membership. If the number of Directors were reduced, it would necessitate abandoning the representational model and going to
something more like a senate or a Board consisting of Directors at Large. Perhaps the problem with Board’s size stems more from another priority of the Repositioning Initiative: Inefficacy of Communications. The difficulty in communicating goals and priorities to a membership overburdened with AIA message content makes it nearly impossible to gather consensus and develop a clear plan of action. I believe the AIA must focus on streamlining, prioritizing and modernizing its communications tools in order to create a more effective Board – regardless of size.

5. Emerging Professionals

Across all levels of the organization members lament the lack of engagement of emerging professionals both in practice and within the AIA. The decline of a culture of mentoring within firms and the profession is blamed for the correspondingly low numbers of new licensees. What can the AIA do to affect a cultural shift to among experienced professionals and encourage all involved in the delivery of architectural services to stay connected with the organization?

Mentoring is an inherently personal relationship and any program that seeks to establish a framework in which mentoring takes place is by its very nature, impersonal. This is the fundamental problem in formal mentoring programs. The trust, interdependence, and friendship necessary to a successful mentoring relationship grow organically and are difficult to create through contact databases, checklists, and reporting forms. However, the AIA may already have started a cultural shift towards engaging members at all levels in a culture of mentoring. The development of the Council of Emerging Professionals, and similar organizations within local and regional components, recognizes that there is a continuum of experience from student to licensed professional. By establishing a framework wherein Emerging Professionals share their knowledge and work to find common goals among members with different needs and experience levels, we are beginning to break down the traditional silos of the profession.

The fruits of this change will only be shown with time, as the emerging generation forms its own firms and leads the practice of architecture in the future, but we can accelerate the process by encouraging cross-generational dialogue and removing barriers that prevent Emerging Professionals from taking leadership positions within the Institute. Experience does not have an exclusive ability to form good ideas and youth is no guarantee of passion and energy. By inviting the involvement of all members in the governance of our Institute, we encourage the sharing of knowledge and build a generation of leaders that are invested in the organization and share their passion with colleagues, clients and the general public.