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?

My partner and I founded our firm, EVstudio, in 2006, right before the economic downturn. We not only survived, but also flourished during the economic downturn because we are a designed for the new economy. Our secret is fairly simple in that we are flexible in our project types, we plan our finances, we are multidisciplinary and we are client focused. The future will be different but I think it’s a very exciting future for architects.

The question specifically asks about networking and creating opportunity. That is a local chapter issue and ultimately will be answered with variations in each location. For many of our members their networking needs are with other architects, but all of our members benefit by networking beyond the AIA.

Chapters will need to reach out to organizations with potential for networking whether they are closely aligned like USGBC and AGC or more broad scope like ULI and BOMA. Ultimately people from these types of groups need to be at the events with our members and the events need to be potent. I recently attended a roundtable in Denver put on by AIA, ACEC and AGC where owners came and talked about delivery methods. Not only great networking but also great information that directly informs getting work.

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.

We need the AIA to be a flexible and nimble organization. That’s the first change and essential before we can make any real improvements to the Institute. The current setup is large and cumbersome with many layers and a bureaucracy that inhibits the speed required in these times.
The reality is that times have changed and we need to keep up. Think about the massive changes in your own practice in just the last 5 or 10 years. How can the AIA plod along at the old pace and hope to stay relevant? The short answer is that we can’t continue on this path.

We need to take several steps as soon as the current system will allow to make this one big change. We need to reduce the size of the National Board and move to a board based on competency over tenure. This isn’t meant as an affront to the current board, but rather to say that with a small board the selection of the absolute best people becomes very critical. This might even mean eliminating my own position, but I’m running for the members of the Institute, not for personal gain.

Then we need to reduce our number of programs and layers and focus on quality over quantity of programs. Not only will focused programs better serve our member but it will also give us significantly more freedom to move the AIA to react to changing member needs. We already have the data on which programs provide value and we need to act swiftly and decisively.

I know that this sounds like a radical change in the short term, but it makes up for years of not changing to reflect the times. We’re jumping back into the fast lane.

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?

We need to first recognize that there are many roles within the architectural profession and mastery of a particular piece of software isn’t a prerequisite for employment. At the same time as we advance in our career we need to develop specialties that are not easily interchangeable with other architects. Architects should be encouraged to develop their talents and these specialties and to be lifelong learners.

This is another issue that I see being addressed primarily at the local level. The local chapters should provide continuing education and access to resources for our more seasoned professionals. Architecture is not a profession based on seniority but it is a profession that benefits from a significant amount of experience.

I would also encourage the local chapters to facilitate reciprocal mentoring programs. The traditional model of mentoring is a senior architect handing out advice to an intern. A better approach is to create relationships where both mentor and mentee are expecting to learn from each other. Our profession benefits when we share good ideas and this is a change readily accepted by the newer generations.
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?

Before I answer the question, I wanted to address the will needed to make real change. I am running for Vice President because I saw that will at Grassroots. I also saw a slate of candidates for VP who have already been on the National Board and in order to improve we need to bring some new people in. If the voters put me in, I think it’s a mandate for pushing real change and an answer to any questions about will.

The current delivery model is not working because there is a significant disconnect between the National level of the AIA and the membership. I think that the members are best served by strong local chapters. This is where our members currently see most of the value and where we need to reinvest our efforts. Flipping the organizational triangle makes perfect sense to me. We can cut down the National level of the AIA to its core purposes, reconfigure the chapters and better serve our members.

I’d also like to set up a system where each of the staff who work at the National level are loaned out to local chapters so that they can see that part of the AIA and bring the knowledge back to improve the model. Staffing at the local level allows you to see waste and inefficiencies that negatively impact the members and we need to cut that out.

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 licenses. 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?

I am actually very excited about the future of the profession and the professionals who are up and coming. My candidacy is only one small example of the real excitement that emerging professionals have about the architectural profession and the AIA. I was a juror at an event put on by our local AIAS a couple weeks ago and blown away by the excitement there. Not only were the projects excellent, but the students put a first class event together on their own volition. I see that same excitement in my office from the interns and young architects.

At the same time I know the realities of the emerging professional. We are busy people with many competing items demanding our attention. In any given week I’ll be a
business owner, a landlord, an AIA director, my son’s scout leader, my daughter’s soccer coach, my other daughter’s playmate, caretaker of the dogs, a husband, a son and somewhere in there I fit being an architect. AIA programs and our positions need to slot into the emerging professional’s life, not expect them to mold their life around the AIA calendar.

Firms that see a perceived lack of engagement from their emerging professionals need to take a hard look at their culture. Are the younger people not involved or are they just involved differently from previous generations? Are the firms open to new ideas and adaptable to rapid and ongoing change?

Changes are happening and both architectural firms and the leadership of the AIA must evolve to meet these challenges. It will take vision and it won’t be easy but we are the profession of solutions and if anyone can design the organization of the future it is the members of the AIA.