Elizabeth Chu Richter, FAIA  
Candidate for AIA 2014 First Vice President/President-Elect

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 had 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? 

We’re in an awesome but tough profession. We’ve experienced many ups and downs and sometimes losing ground as we try to hang on. As we turn the corner on a down economy, we should focus on efforts to build a more robust practice and to advocate for financial success of our members. Collectively, we can focus on improving our business environment, broadening our practice, and increasing market demand. As a start, we can revisit the fee cap on public works. Over the years, our effective fees have diminished greatly as the deliverables have become more complex and voluminous. It’s a damaging legacy that reaches beyond federal projects and into municipalities as a de facto benchmark. We need to remove the stigma of a 6% fee cap. We should take a hard look at the economic impact the consent decree and the fee cap have had on our profession. We can revisit the decree’s legal rationale within the contemporary context.

In addition, AIA can ramp up efforts to collect and share business intelligence, including international opportunities. A concerted on-going environmental scan and analysis can help AIA members to stay ahead of changes in the design/construction industry and clients’ industries. With knowledge and understanding of macro-economic issues, architects can position to be first-in-line as change agents with creative solutions. On all three levels, AIA should increase efforts to gather input and share best practices to help members improve project delivery and profitability. We need to be vigilant in our advocacy for Qualification Based Selection. We should be broad and inclusive in identifying the value architects bring to the table and highlight our holistic approach to creative problem solving.

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.

A lot of effort is being put in place by AIA to jump start change within the context of the Repositioning Initiative. Much of the recent effort will identify opportunities to bring about quick wins to demonstrate willingness to change. These are commendable efforts to improve organizational effectiveness. To be completely candid, I am most motivated by the aspects of the Repositioning Initiative that orient outward. It is timely to focus on how we can position AIA and our profession to be influential, profitable and in high demand globally. This is critical positioning in order to respond to a fast-paced 21st century
world. Cultivating a knowledgeable public is essential to creating a demand and appreciation for quality and design excellence. We need to take our stories to the streets. By casting a broad net through media and personal conversations, we can share stories that demonstrate our design thinking and the value we add. We should look for opportunities to strike up a conversation about architecture and design wherever we go. Sharing our passion is like sharing a common language with the public. A general public that has a good working sense of design and quality is our best partner in advancing quality of life with scarce resources.

Success is when the value of architects permeates throughout the consciousness of everyday people, in the highest and humblest of settings. Success is when the public can talk about our value better than we can. Success is when AIA architects are the first to be called to the table when dreams and ideas are germinating. This is a long-term proposition and the time is now to ramp up public outreach and go all in without hesitation.

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?

Technology is a tool that will change rapidly, and within this context, we will always be slightly off-balanced. One thing is for certain: change is going to happen, and how we adapt are decisions made by the individuals and their firms. Some ‘seasoned professionals’ have the temperament, motivation and capacity to change and adapt. For others, learning new technologies may simply not be realistic. AIA can provide mentoring to help seasoned members to better articulate and market the relevant (and essential) skills that they have honed over decades of practice. We are fortunate to be in a profession that values creative thinking. It is not an age-specific skill and will never be obsolete. Architecture is complex profession and tacit knowledge is undervalued at times. If we build upon the reality that architecture is collaborative, then there is room for everyone to contribute their best talent in building a sustainable practice. AIA can raise the awareness and celebrate the diversity of skills and talents that it takes to deliver a project from concept to completion.

Technology-based delivery has also increased operating cost to members and their firms. In addition to sharing best practices for technology applications, AIA can help to alleviate business expenses by negotiating group discounts for software licenses and subscriptions. AIA might consider investing in a number of software licenses for use as practice tools for members whether they are emerging or re-emerging professionals. There might even be an economy of scale to share licenses among small firms. The point is that AIA can aggressively look to leverage its members’ purchasing power and know-how to help reduce overhead costs for members.

We cannot afford to be complacent. Lifelong learning keeps us current. In addition to individual continuing education programs, AIA might consider sponsoring rigorous multisession curriculum-based CE courses that bring together academic research and practices. This provides another avenue to raise
quality, add value, and advance the profession in a meaningful way. Substantive continuing education has regenerative power for young and seasoned professionals.

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?

Repositioning affects all levels of the Institute. The state and local components closely touch the individual chapter members and have a better pulse on regional issues that impact their chapter members. State and local components are more directly responsive to specific needs in a region. We should realize that autonomy is a good thing and should look to reduce redundancy and overlap. AIA should be less prescriptive and more outcome-based. We should be a ‘can-do’ organization. We can set the tone that AIA is an organization about people not rules. Realizing that there is diversity in regions, AIA should encourage state and local components to experiment with service delivery and encourage each to share best practices. As a whole, AIA should keep the eye on core efforts that are crucial to the overall success of our practice and the profession. AIA national has conceptually embraced a “bottom-up” mantra, however its culture and organizational momentum are still perceived to be “top-down”. Transparency is important and AIA should peel away layers so that decisions made on a national level can easily be understood. We need to leave to local and regional components all but that which can be explicitly best done by national.

Emerging Professionals

Across all levels of the organization members lament the lack of engagement of professionals both in practice and with 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?

The AIA cannot do all things we wish to do without compromising effectiveness on what we must do. When faced with problems that are a reflection of broader cultural or societal shifts, we may simply be limited in what we can reasonably accomplish. Young people are more mobile and more likely to change jobs than the previous generation. Life/work balance is an important consideration. The culture of mentorship within most firms is unlikely to resemble the past. Hopefully, it will be more collegial as the profession shifts to a more collaborative model. Instead of one mentor, there will be many. Instead of one path to success, there will be many. Seasoned professionals can work more side by side with young professionals as colleagues, at once combining new ideas, new technological skills and well-earned experience to the good of the projects and the profession. The AIA remains the place where colleagues across generations come together to exchange ideas, stories, and learn from each other without stigma or worries about losing the next job to a competitor. The AIA has the ability to (and often does) play an important direct role in the mentorship of young professionals. AIA is a network for
member to member mentorship. It is a rich human resource that we should be encouraged to tap into. Involvement with the AIA programs and activities offers a respite from day to day challenges; it lifts us up, connects us, and inspires us to remember the reasons why we chose this profession. If AIA plays this role as effectively as it can, its value will be evident to members.