FR08: Promoting the Value of Design
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Prefatory thought: Why aren't there more architect jokes?
Maybe people don't know enough about architects and what we do to be *able* to make jokes about us.

Why promote the value of design?
Because it's what we profess, it's what we love. Because of the emotions we feel when we're in a remarkable space, and because we want others to enjoy those emotions.

But also because it's our business, it's how we make a living. And because it's better for everyone if we are paid to do our best. So we promote the value of design to align **busi**ness with **good**ness.

Fundamentally—and this will be the first of several expressions of my own convictions—what we're trying to do is craft integrated lives, in which values, pleasures, accomplishments and profits are in synch. That's an elusive goal, and not always accomplishable. But the better the world understands our work— and the better we understand the world's response to our work—the easier it is for us to judge what is and isn't possible. And I believe that more is possible than we often suppose.

Some Definitions
Before we go further, however, you should know what I mean when I say "design" and when I say "value."

Design
Design is the architect's core competence and the most valuable thing the architect offers clients and society.

Design is not a "look." It is not something added to usefulness or at odds with soundness or economy. Design incorporates usefulness, soundness, and economy, as well as beauty and significance. It is all these things together, with all the marvelous possibilities they bring.

The integration of an abundance of apparently unrelated things—lumens, column spacing, and social space, for example—is the core of what architects do, and it would serve us well if we reserved the word "design" for this integration. We should be prepared to demonstrate, through vivid examples, how design can serve a gamut of interests, from the fiscal to the social to the visual, simultaneously.

And whenever anyone uses the word "design" to mean anything less than this rich synthesis of concerns (for example, when someone says "the design" when what they really mean is "the way it looks"), we should call them on it.

Value
Value is always part of a system of exchange: if I value something, I'm willing to exchange something else of value (e.g., money) for it.

Does good design have value in this sense? Think: iPod.

And value is always value *for someone*. It is judged by *effect* on that someone—on the way that someone receives it. The only way, then, that we can promote the value of design is to address the value that design has for its audience. Which brings us to . . .

Cherishing the Audience

What the Client Wants
Few professions speak as deprecatingly of their beneficiaries (or customers) as does architecture. In part, this tendency comes from an identification with a Twentieth Century conception of art as something necessarily in opposition to the expected, the comfortable, "what people want."

Moralizing
Art's questioning of the *status quo* can be a good thing—consider, for example, *Guernica.* But it might be helpful if we maintained some distinctions. Questioning "comfort" hasn't the moral imperative of questioning "war." Having moralized about not moralizing, allow me to moralize further:

Innovation
Innovation is good when it integrates value into new forms. It is not good when it undermines value.

The Elevation of Reason Over Effect
Of all the art and design disciplines, only architecture depends so much on representations. Painting students make paintings and can judge the response of people to their paintings. Architecture students, on the other hand, don't make buildings, so they are unable to judge people's response to their buildings. Consequently, in school we depend more on *logical consistency* than on *effect* as a criterion for judging our work. But, as we have noted, users of buildings don't care about logical consistency; they care about effect.

Beer and Buildings
All this is not to say that people can't learn to recognize positive effects of which they were not previously aware. If you'd told me in 1974 that the United States would now be chockablock with delicious, micro-brewed beers, I would have told you you were nuts. But it is. Connoisseurship—or perhaps we should say fandom—is a potent social force. Beer, of course, is cheaper than buildings, so we have to work harder at figuring out how to give people a taste. But when we *do* provide a taste, people respond.

Juggling
An old friend of mine, who is a juggler, introduced me to the fundamental fact of communication. He said, "Juggling is only twenty per cent catch; it's eighty per cent throw." It's not that people don't catch what we're saying; it's that we're not throwing it well. Astrophysicists are as baffled by architecture (and architects) as are plasterers.

Multiplicity of viewpoint
Buildings engage different audiences in different ways. We might cultivate empathy for these different forms of engagement. And, as I suggested in the definition of design as an integration of unlike things, we can.

Cherishing Ourselves and Our Role

Oddly, despite our occasional displays of haughtiness, we architects spend too much time putting ourselves down. People, in fact, think we're cool. In its first quarter issue of 2002, **arcCA** *(Architecture California),* the quarterly journal of the AIA California Council, asked twenty-one non-architects from many walks of life what they thought about architects. Here are some of the things they said:

Idealistic

"The excitement lies in the collision of the real and the ideal. More than any other professional in the misnamed 'real' world of budgets and political constraints, the architects are those people who get to remind us, again and again, of the wonders of the ideal. The more of that reminder, the better."

— Jonathan Arons, Chair, Department of Astronomy, UC Berkeley

Usefully Engaged

"Though my liberal arts major was appropriate for the legal career I was intent on pursuing, I used to gaze with envy at the windows of the Architecture School, bright with creative energy. It wasn't just the *esprit de corps* that I envied. It was that these would-be architects seemed so usefully engaged. That impression has been reinforced over the years by architects I have known. They have spent their careers usefully engaged in designing places that are pleasant for people to live, work, play, worship, and learn in. And they seem to have had a lot of fun in the process. What an incredible gift that is."

— Nancy Ann DeParle, Senior Advisor, JP Morgan Partners
[now (2009) Director of the White House Office of Health Reform]

Forward-Thinking

Architects move us forward in time, move our consciousness forward to see and experience the world in a new way."

— Tony Taccone, Artistic Director, Berkeley Repertory Theater

Enduringly Responsible

"Even though every profession has its ideals and exemplars, not every profession requires serving as witness for what a culture can offer of itself for posterity. Even modest buildings are in effect always on stage, always called upon to justify the intelligence responsible for this use of so much time and money and available space."

— Charles Altieri, Professor, Department of English, UC Berkeley

Valuable

"Thirty years ago, we were trying to build a functional academic building for the least cost on a limited campus. The result was useful, but it did not excite either donors or students. I was never congratulated for its low square foot costs or for the building itself. Fifteen years later, we spent a record amount on a grand athletic facility by a firm that specialized in such facilities. They convinced us that its openness and other somewhat expensive features would draw students into higher levels of participation. They were correct, and it also drew donors, excited by its promise. It has generated student activity ever since. I do not remember its square foot cost and am never asked."

— Spencer McCallie III, Headmaster, The McCallie School

Gods?

"I think architects are gods."

— Voltaire Moise, Waiter

So: NO WHINING. We sometimes feel undervalued—and sometimes we are—but if we constantly *tell* people we are, they may begin to think there's a reason for it. Instead, let's talk about the value people *do* find in architecture and architects. *Be proud.*

And here's a corollary: have the gumption to ask for the compensation you deserve.

A Business Foundation

Speaking of compensation: In a good business *for design*, fees, contracts, and investments all recognize the value of design.

Fees

"The insecure architect who sells himself cheap in the expectation of later, more profitable assignments will find that when the client has a more important project, he will take it to 'a real architect.'" — Arthur Alef, Attorney

Contracts

Our contracts should recognize where the greatest value lies: when design decisions are made.

Accept the responsibilities required to assume design authority.

Manage the risks that accompany that design authority.

Investments

Besides the investment in talented designers and in office practices that take advantage of—and further develop—their talent, a vital design practice benefits from investment in:

#### Partners, Staff, and Advisors

The previous advice about fees and contracts is not easy to follow. It is well worth the investment in other people who have whatever skills we lack in contract negotiation, as well as in other practice areas necessary for realizing our design ideas—entitlement, political process, etc. These people may be partners, staff, or external consultants.

Generous Explanation

We architects often do not take the time to explain our ideas clearly to our audiences. We particularly neglect the written and spoken word. Investment in a wordsmith (again, as partner, staff, or consultant) is valuable.

Sympathetic Presentation

Even though we value visual presentations, we often fail to calibrate our images with the audience and situation. For example, a more casual sketch may explain an idea better to a non-professional audience. We need to be willing to invest in a variety of forms of visual presentation, tuned to the occasion.
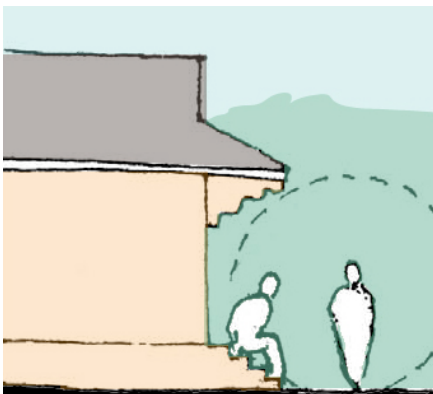
Communication Techniques

There are a variety of concrete techniques one can use to help explain design and to promote its value.

Stages of enlistment

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is that the worst time to try to promote a design idea is when money hangs in the balance. Prior investment is essential.

Introducing an Idea

When nothing's at stake

Conversely, the best time to introduce a design idea is when nothing is at stake—for the client or for you.

The idea vs. *your* idea

So that the idea is valued for itself, it may help to introduce it through an example other than your own work. On the other hand, referring to your own work helps to establish your authority. Perhaps do some of each.

Casual communication

Whatever examples you use, you will want to seek out informal opportunities to talk to potential clients about architecture. In other words, you will be encouraged to undertake one of the more fundamental but often neglected aspects of marketing: casual communication.

Nurturing Investment in an Idea

Once you've introduced an idea to someone, look for opportunities to encourage and deepen their investment in it. (This requires, of course, that you remember what you told them.)

Broadening its reach

You can look for other examples of the same idea at work in different ways, to suggest its broad applicability.

Bringing it home

You can be alert for instances in which the idea could apply to the client's own situation.

Appealing to the competition

You can point out instances of the idea being applied by the client's competitors or by people or organizations the client admires.

Invocation

Now, when you recommend the actual application of the idea to the client, the value of the idea is already established. Cost, of course, can remain a hurdle, but at least there's a value to put against that cost. The appeal to that value can be made in several ways:

What we previously agreed upon

You can simply remind the client that you had previously agreed that the idea has value.

Public relations

You can remind the client that the investment in that value can benefit the client's public relations.

The broader good

Arguing that an idea is worth paying for because it makes the world better is easier to do if you've already agreed that it does, in fact, make the world better.

Formal Presentations

The place of architectural ideas in formal presentations of architectural projects—to clients, public agencies, project opponents, or others—is not always clear. There is often the temptation to downplay the ideas, banking on other issues to carry the argument. But that's not a good idea.

Worst: hiding real ideas behind "necessities."

If you try to justify an architectural idea by appeal to a structural or code requirement that attends it but is not essentially related to it, you not only fail to articulate the idea so that it at least might become a part of the conversation; you also leave the idea vulnerable to any alternative to the structural or code issue that anyone may think of. And you're not being honest, you're selling yourself short, being cowed by the situation . . . . There's nothing good about it.

Bad: revealing real ideas only when necessary to defend decisions.

If you only articulate the idea when a decision guided by it is being challenged, people may think you're post-rationalizing, offering the idea as a defense of your whim. Because, if it were that important, why didn't you say so in the first place?

Good: leading the presentation with well-articulated ideas.

It's much better to take responsibility for your ideas, to present them clearly and with conviction, and to demonstrate how they fit together to form the building.

Better: advance agreement on the ideas, followed by design proposals that realize them.

But it's better still to have achieved advance agreement on the ideas, as suggested above. Even if you've not had the opportunity to instill an appreciation for the ideas in advance of the project commission, it's good to treat the design process as a sort of a two-step: first discuss and gain agreement on the ideas, then present concrete proposals that embody them. (This is also a good model to follow in negotiation with potential opponents to a project.)

Best (sometimes): drawing upside-down: the Esherick approach.

When the situation allows it, the most engaging approach is to allow the ideas to emerge in working conversation with the client. This was Joseph Esherick's approach: to bring a blank sheet of paper to the client meeting and to sketch—upside down, for the client's benefit (and amazement)—the thoughts as they develop. Of course, Esherick was not coming to these meetings with an empty mind. But what he brought with him he only proposed as it became relevant within the context of the discussion, making a compelling connection between the client's intellectual and emotional investment and the ideas themselves.

Over Cocktails

The best time to explain design is when nothing is at stake. Some tips:

#1: OFFER INSIGHT INTO THE NEWSWORTHY. Keep an eye on the latest celebrated (or controversial) project, see what's said about it in the media, and collect your thoughts about what's *not* said. When someone asks your opinion of it—which they will—you can add to or challenge what they've read in the paper. Use the opportunity to throw light on the values and understanding *you* bring to architecture.

#2: APPRECIATE THE STARS—THEN CONTEXTUALIZE THEM. As much as some of them may annoy us, stars are good for the profession. They raise its esteem in the public eye. Be prepared not just to say what you think is good about their work and what isn't, but also to relate the work to current issues in the field, issues of concern to your local audience, and *your own interests and expertise*.

#3: OFFER BOTH "HIGH" AND "LOW" EXAMPLES. That old saw of Nicolas Pevsner's—"Lincoln Cathedral is architecture; a bicycle shed is mere building"—is pernicious, and it's not true, anyway. Many people will be interested to learn something about Lincoln Cathedral, but if you can suggest to them how a bicycle shed can become a marvelous thing, design enters *the world of the possible* . . . for them.

#4: FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS. Prompted by travel guides, people think of buildings as collections of *things:* "bracket," "keystone," "Mansart roof." But we know that it is *relationships* among things that make good buildings. *Describe* the relationships. A handy one is that between a path and a view: "See how this stair leads you to a view of the campanile?"

#5: USE THE NAPKIN. A more complex relationship—say, the one between diminishing column width and increasing window size in Kahn's Exeter Library—gives an opportunity for the thing that so charms the non-architect: the napkin sketch.

#6: RELATE EVERYTHING TO EXPERIENCE. The formal resolution of the columns and windows (and arches and section) at Exeter Library is interesting to architects. The *view* these things provide is interesting to other folks: the way the small windows serve the carrels while the large, upper glazing offers an outlook for students on the mezzanines.

#7: USE ANALOGIES to relate buildings to things people already understand. One of my favorites is *cars*, which are great for explaining how a style can be something more than the sticking-on of motifs, how it can shape an attitude about how parts form a whole.

#8: THINK COCKTAIL CONVERSATION. Give people examples people will repeat, will use at parties—something with a little "hey I betcha didn't know" in it. What's new and exciting to you? BIM? Green roofs? LEDs? *Put something amazing in a nutshell,* and you'll be quoted all across town. (And then there's always gossip . . . .)