LISTENING TO:

Clients

WHAT DO THEY THINK OF ARCHITECTS?

Perhaps nothing affects an architect's career more profoundly or is more deeply irritating to a client than the inability to achieve mutual trust. For the client it results in unnecessary design and construction problems; for the designer it can spell failure.

Maybe that is why the roundtable of architectural clients convened by ARCHITECTURAL RECORD last April in Atlanta kept spiraling back to issues surrounding the client-architect relationship: How has it changed in recent years? What are the most valuable abilities the architect can bring to it? What are the most frequent causes for its rough periods and breakdowns? How can it be improved? One of the panel's most striking revelations was that clients in all sectors of the economy are increasingly hiring in-house architects to plan, manage, and coordinate their building efforts. For many architects this has meant changed expectations on the clients' part, in terms of the services they need and the manner in which they want them carried out.

In fact, four of the 10 client panelists were also architects: Daniel Sniff (4 in photos opposite), director of planning, University of Georgia; J. Bradley Satterfield (9), AIA, director of campus architecture, Georgia Institute of Technology; Charles Andrews (5), assistant vice president for space planning and construction, Emory University; and Ken Gwinner, AIA (3), vice president for planning, architecture, and construction, Turner Broadcasting. Also representing the corporate sector was Joyce LaValle, president and CEO of Prince Street Technologies (10), in Cartersville, Georgia. Two Atlanta developers participated: Grant Grimes (2), president of the real estate company Ackerman & Co., and Earnest M. Curtis III (7), vice president of Carter Healthcare Facilities. There were also three government clients: John R. Butler Jr. (11), acting director of the construction division of the Georgia State Financing and Investment Commission; Carol J. Stewart (8), director of library services for Clayton County, Georgia; and Charles Pete Wood (6), a councilman from Smyrna, Georgia. The panel was moderated by Robert Ivy (1), FAIA, editor-in-chief of RECORD.

According to our panel, clients in all sectors of the economy are increasingly hiring in-house architects to coordinate their building efforts.

Let's begin with the good news: Joyce LaValle, for one, confirmed that architects can benefit their clients in unexpected ways. She recounted taking the helm at Prince Street Technologies in 1995, when the floor-coverings manufacturer was, she said, "in deep trouble." After acquainting themselves with every aspect of the business and its problems, the Atlanta firm of Thompson Ventulett and Stainback (TVS) helped LaValle reevaluate her company and forge a more productive marketing strategy. TVS architects persuaded her, she said, to create a new building that would exhibit the company's products and its benevolent attitude as an employer. As evidence of Prince Street's egalitarianism, the architects created a fully open office plan that brings views of the outdoors and natural light even to the least prestigious clerk and makes manufacturing spaces visible from the office area [see RECORD, December 1996, page 44]. The message, said LaValle, is that "we're all in this together; there is respect for everyone." The architects also persuaded LaValle to incorporate "environmentally responsible" features, and they convinced her to redirect advertising dollars to bring prospective customers to see the building. Her experience with TVS, LaValle said, made her "a strong advocate of the idea that how [good] the building is often reflects how [good] the business is" and showed her that "really good architects can bring benefits you never expected."

Equally enthusiastic, though for different reasons, was Carol Stewart, Clayton County's Director of Library Services. When she selected Atlanta's Scogin Elam and Bray Architects to design the first of three new county libraries in 1985, Stewart was an inexperienced client and only 36 years old. The architects undertook an ambitious, nonconservative design that, Stewart said, "shocked the county board of commissioners. They wanted something simple and functional. When they got what they didn't expect, they were comercially unprepared. Our job was to talk them into something that was not even remotely typical of most library design. And it's been very successful. People say it's the best library in the state; it has a great climate for reading and learning. A big surprise was the attendance; we fill it up with all sorts of programs. We were told such things couldn't be done in public libraries, but that's just because we were told the library was too small. They were not prepared to deal with what we had already committed to in architecture."

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years old, but she had strong convictions about design. Maybe it was growing up near the Frank Lloyd Wright–designed Florida Southern University, she said, that convinced her she wanted something unique and wonderful." She is certain, 15 years later, that Clayton County’s award-winning libraries have lifted the predominantly blue-collar citizenry’s opinion of libraries and of itself [RECORD, May 1992, page 86].

The University of Georgia’s Daniel Sniff recounted a range of experiences. He credited Ayers/Gross/St. John of Baltimore, which created and implemented a new master plan for his university, with challenging him and his staff to redirect their thinking about campus planning and design "to where the emphasis is on memorable people spaces." But Sniff faulted other architects for their deaf ear to clients’ needs and their arrogance. No complaint was echoed more frequently during the morning’s proceedings or in follow-up telephone conversations. "We know our systems and our campus and our infrastructure, but for some reason architects don’t believe us," said Emory University’s Charles Andrews. "When the architect stops listening and begins to think that he knows more than we do about laboratory design, for example, it all begins to crash and burn."

Another frequent source of frustration, said John Butler, who heads the construction division of Georgia’s State Financing and Investment Commission, is with "constructibility problems." He testified to buildings in which "the actual details don’t go together" and lamented that too few designers have up-to-date knowledge about materials. Many architects don’t realize, he said, "that today’s concrete block is a different material than it was 10 years ago." What he needs, he continued, is that architects are able and willing to answer his questions quickly and completely and can make decisions rapidly. Too often, he said, architects "just defend their position, defending, defending, defending, until all of a sudden it’s too late to easily correct the problem."

Also singled out was specifications writing. Asked about its importance, whether it remains the job of architects, and how well they carry it out, the panelists agreed: specs are vital and architects are usually in charge, but many do the job carelessly and incompletely. Several clients complained of being presented with boilerplate rather than specifications tailored to the particular project.

Similarly problematic, said Butler, is a tendency among architects to install systems that are up-to-the-minute but too complex for his operations and maintenance staff. Stewart related how her relatively unsophisticated county maintenance people "simply tore new-fangled electronic thermostats off new library buildings. You put some high-tech gizmo on a building, and your staff says, ‘Wot is thatay?’ the librarian director drewled. By the time she began work on Clayton County’s third new library, she insisted that the workers charged with the building’s upkeep approve its systems before installation. "The level of technology should not exceed the ability of the building’s caretakers to deal with them," she concluded.

Ken Gwinner, frustrated with architects who don’t know his company well enough and are unwilling to take responsibility for their decisions and for completing projects on time and on budget, says he has "brought more and more people in-house who have the capabilities we need. We now tend to think of the outside architect as one of the players, but not the player." Gwinner explained that he, as an architect, and his staff do a lot of planning and feasibility studies. "Only when the time is right do we bring in the architect," he said. "That’s certainly not the way it used to be, but I think a lot of corporations moved to this method because they weren’t getting what they needed. When you hire architects who work for the company, they [need to] know what the corporation’s perspective and culture is."

Carter Healthcare’s Earnest Curtis, who also has an in-house staff, insisted that “most architects are not close enough to the specific market to be able to fully interpret it or have never been in a position to be helpfully accountable. Owners and users are always accountable for the end product.” Like Turner Broadcasting and Carter Healthcare, which employ architects who serve as clients, Prince Street has recently hired an in-house designer. The majority of employees who deal with construction at Ackerman & Co. have an architectural background, according to Grant Grimes. At Georgia Tech, reported J. Bradley Satterfield, because funding and contracting requirements necessitate separating design and construction services, an in-house professional group has assumed the role of coordinator. And when Butler was asked whether he relies on architecture firms to coordinate state construction projects, he replied, “definitely not.” In fact, nearly all the panelists reported taking an increasingly active role in design and construction.

Surprisingly, perhaps, corporations’ and institutions’ use of in-house architects can depress architects’ fees. Grimes pointed out that when architects are brought in to function as clients, “they’re going to do everything to bring down the fees of the outside firm. It’s a competitive thing,” he said. “They figure, ‘I’ll do the conceptual work, and I’ll only need the outside firm to draft the documents.’” Yet all the panelists agreed that architects are underpaid but held out little hope for a significant change. Because architects have a low opinion of the services they provide, “we don’t value their services enough,” said Satterfield. When architects are willing to accept low fees, that’s what they get, he said. Together with other panelists, he urged designers to begin fee negotiations early rather than saving their protests until late in the job. Butler told how the State of Georgia is trying to provide more equitable compensation by replacing the standard percentage of costs with a lump sum settlement, arrived at through negotiations that begin by establishing a percentage of costs.

What capabilities or qualities do clients who have in-house architects value most in the architectural firms they hire? LaVelle, Sniff, and Gwinner stressed how important it is for the architects they commission to thoroughly familiarize themselves with the client’s company. Listen to us, Andrews emphasized. Satterfield elaborated, “It all begins with good programming, during which you form an ethic of dialogue.”

Several clients reported that they are increasingly using outside architects in new roles. Satterfield, for example, described having asked a designer “to come in and look at the economic feasibility and the program, show us two or three options, and lobby various constituencies for approval.” At other times he expected an architect to meet with Georgia Tech’s
The advantages to the client of having the uninterrupted attention of a single architectural firm were underscored by Pete Wood, the city councilman from Smyrna. In 1985 the town of 35,000 set out to build a new downtown and hired Sizemore Floyd Architects, Inc. of Atlanta to create a master plan and implement it in phases, completing a community center, a library, and a village green in 1991, a city hall and municipal court building in 1996, and a police facility in 1997. Unlike most of the other Atlanta-area clients, the city counted on the architect for construction supervision. "They've been there, they've been consistent, and they've kept us informed. We've counted on them to tell us what the problems are and where we are on budget," Wood said. He relied on his architects' ability to work with a variety of committees and with neighborhood, special interest, and nonprofit organizations, and he was especially pleased when the designers went beyond their traditional duties. For instance, he said, they represented the city in meetings with privatized downtown developers to make sure their designs were suitable, and they undertook a search for retailers "who would be compatible with pedestrian-friendly, family-oriented downtowns."

When the panelists were asked how many of them relied on traditional design-bid-build method, six raised their hands. Among those using alternative approaches was Curtis, whose company brings the contractor in as part of the design discussion to "find ways to reduce design costs." He was not alone in preferring fast-track or design-build because it's "more owner-involved and more of a team approach."

Paradoxically, although a majority of the Atlanta panelists stressed that architects' roles and responsibilities are shrinking, the most enthusiastic clients were those who relied fully on their architect to design and deliver all aspects of a project: Pete Wood; Carol Stewart, for whom Scogin Elam and Bray designed all three Clayton County libraries; and Joyce LaValle, for whom TVS created Prince Street's headquarters and a plant. In the end, all the participants agreed that architects should supervise construction and that "if they want to continue in the profession and keep their reputation, they have got to accept some responsibility for what they do," as Butler said. That doesn't eliminate the need for an owner's representative on site, pointed out corporate clients Earnest Curtis and Ken Gwinn, both of whom are convinced that only an insider will have the information and authority to make rapid, credible decisions.

A final question to the panel: Was there a message that they wanted to impress upon the architectural profession? There were several. "Do what you do best. Focus on your core competencies of programming, design, and construction," counseled Curtis. "Get things set up with everyone working as a team up front during programming and be receptive to ideas that may not include the latest widget," said Grimes. LaValle stressed that "every other industry in America" has gone through a process of reevaluating and revamping the way they do business: "I wonder if the construction process doesn't have to be taken apart and put back together again, rethought altogether." In the end, Andrews spoke for everyone when he said, "Listen. Listen. Listen better. Understand the client's culture. Get immersed in what we do, who we are."