

Architect, Heal Thyself!

'Starchitecture' vs. Street cred:
One practitioner urges his
colleagues to get real

By Duo Dickinson, AIA

Award-winning architecture and construction is by definition worth of recognition, and the work that is on view in this edition of *Business New Haven* is inspirational on many levels and represents many of the highest and best aspirations of the design and construction professions. However, there is a greater story to be told. As in many other professions, architecture (and thus architects) has different ways of being perceived and thus ultimately used by our culture.

Money reflects what we value, and how much. In the last two years, the overvaluation of residential real estate in the United States over the previous 15 years ended up deeply threatening our economy. While just five percent of houses are designed by architects, we are the only "expert witnesses" who can be called upon to objectively comment on any given building's value. As a profession we had zero impact in effectively warning housing consumers how insanely out of whack home values had become before the boom burst and hype gave way to truth.

Why?

In the minds of many lay people, architects are the fashion designers of built form. Because we are trained as artists first and purveyors of a process second, we have largely become a boutique profession when it

comes to houses. So very few people listened to what even fewer of us were saying. A significant number of us would rather create beautiful designs than useful buildings, and see the usefulness and budgetary fit of a project as being secondary to its publication and veneration by other architects.

Because of this predilection of ours a "star system" — dubbed "starchitecture" by critics — has been the public face of what architects do for most people. What we gain in fame we lose in street cred. Despite the fact that many of us have dedicated our careers to serving homeowners, architects have yet to change the perception that we are not a relevant or credible resource when it comes to how people evaluate their homes.

There are some ways that any (or all) of us can affect how the world perceives our profession and make what we do have more relevance:

1) Renew our professional commitment to understanding

costs. Not just the fashionable "green lifecycle" costs, but the actual costs of building what we draw, and working with a renewed respect for the knowledge that the people who build our work can give us.

2) Listen to our clients. The way people use our buildings should be the armature around which we conceive them. Our enhancements and interpretations should be options to those who use them versus declaring that our insights are exclusively "right."

3) All of us should dedicate at least one percent of our office output to performing pro bono work. We need to actively and frequently engage the people who have had the least access to our profession (because they have the least money for

building or designing anything) but could benefit from it the most. This grounding is practical not only in the knowledge it will impart (on both sides), it will also help shift our profession from a product-based model to a service-based one.

4) Volunteer for a board, commission, or other municipal governmental entity. Your insights and experience will take that is conceptual and transform it into something that is aesthetic and innovative. Don't just scream at the darkness.

5) Actively work to encourage schools of architecture to engage the real world. The abstractions that are necessary to learn to design anything are fine, but when the inspiring realities around us of site, client, cost and (dare I say it?) context are part of a design education,

everyone benefits.

6) Volunteer to give a talk at your local library that is aimed at non-architects. Living in a bubble means you know a lot about the bubble and nothing about the surrounding stew that is 99 percent of our culture. Step into the world and describe in unpretentious language and attitude how buildings can be made better for more people. Preaching to the choir may help to harmonize our close group, but it doesn't open anyone's mind.

Our country has been buffeted by an unprecedented series of events since the dawn of the new century: September 11, two wars, the real estate bust, and now the economic crash. In past times of crisis, architects have been either bystanders or tilted at windmills, often with the unacknowledged hidden agenda of self-aggrandizement versus social benefit. But the past does not have to be prologue. As a profession, we don't have to continue to contribute to the disconnect that allowed this economic collapse to happen.

An architect for 30 years, Duo Dickinson of Madison has designed 500 homes in 12 states. He is a co-founder of the Congress of Residential Architecture (corachitecture.org). He has written six books on residential architecture and is working on his seventh, Saved by Design, for Taunton Press. He is also contributing editor in residential design for Money magazine.

