

Houses: Architects & Street Cred

by Duo Dickinson, AIA

Money reflects what we value. In the last two years, the overvaluation of houses in America for the prior decade ended up deeply threatening our economy. While 5% of new 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?

Our public perception as residential designers suffers from how we've been conditioned to practice our profession. We are trained as artists first and purveyors of a process second, so architects designing houses has been largely perceived as a boutique profession. Its hard to be taken seriously as an objective arbiter of value when so much of our publicized persona as house designers in the professional and popular press emphasizes an elite providing product design for an equally rarified elite

Five years ago I and two other AIA members, Dennis Wedlick, AIA and Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, created a national organization to connect architects designing houses to our consumers and collaborators. We founded the Congress of Residential Architecture (CORA – www.corarchitecture.org) to foster relevance for architects who have dedicated their careers to home design by demystifying the process. We have just had our 5th annual national meeting in Austin Texas in early December, and have over 1,000 members in 38 states, involving over 20 chapters.

For most of our members, our reaction to the ramp-up of unsustainable overvaluation was central to our efforts to let the house-buying public know that there were residential architects who listened and thought about budgets. Dozens of talks and articles were presented about homes that were efficient, weather-worthy, responded to their site and environment – and were, dare I say, beautiful. We fought an uphill battle against the spec house hype machine used by vast majority of new homebuyers and the overwhelming public perception that architects were the building world's equivalent of fashion designers – providing couture for a wealthy few. Of course some of us are heroes. Post Katrina efforts, the Rural Studio and Public Architecture are shining examples – but are either after-the-fact or not part of the academic or professional mainstream.

By presenting a Star System in education and professional promotion, what we gain in fame we lose in street cred. In light of our collective no-show during the first worldwide crisis triggered by one building type's grossly flawed valuation – houses – it is time to look in the mirror and see how we architects could have been in a better position to limit the market distortions before everything imploded. There are ways we can use this national economic crisis and building industry meltdown to give our profession a wake up call.

We could listen to how we communicate and try to edit the "buzz words" my editors rail against on every level. More of us could work on local boards and commissions to demonstrate our creative usefulness. We could nurture a pro bono ethic so common in medicine and law but less so in our profession – do you belong to Public Architecture's One Percent Solution? Or Architecture for Humanity? When we are forced to deal with the lowest budgets and the toughest problems we show our community that we can see the potential in the problematic.

If we had the relevance of a Legal Aid attorney talking about immigration reform or a Doctors Without Borders physician talking about AIDS in Africa, we might have been able to speak truth to the power of greed presenting the last decade's disastrous manipulations of one of our most essential commodities – our housing stock.

Our country has been buffeted by an unprecedented series of events over the last 10 years: 9/11, two wars, the real estate bust, and now the economic crash. In the past, architects have either been bystanders or tilting 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.