For Whom Should You Design?

In an ongoing exploration of what professional practice is about, Duo Dickinson takes us on his version of the journey by addressing the transition from school to practice. He points out a series of rather common and particularly malignant pitfalls and misconceptions that can be especially dangerous for the young ambitious architect. Most importantly, Dickinson offers his accumulated wisdom on how to "build well."

DUO DICKINSON, a Cornell University graduate, is principal of his own office in Madison, Connecticut. He is the author of six books and over thirty articles in more than a dozen national publications. Duo Dickinson has taught at Yale College and Roger Williams University. His award-winning work has been featured in over forty venues, including the *New York Times, Architectural Record,* and *House Beautiful.*

After you have been out of school and practiced or taught for a while, it is clear that there are two ways architects design.

1. You Can Design for Other Architects

In truth, that is what architecture students do in school. There are no clients, no budgets. The only rules are aesthetic rules; there are only your critics (who are usually architects) to deal with. It is probably impossible to learn how to design a building *without* this level of abstraction.

Unfortunately, the lessons of school are often hard to unlearn when it comes to getting buildings built. The values and goals of young architects when they leave school often gravitate toward the *product* they design, and they have nothing to do with the *process* of how they are made. What criteria do these architects use to judge their success?

Getting Published

Treating architecture primarily as a product encourages its presentation in a two-dimensional format—in other words, publication. More often than not, those architects who strive to be innovative begin their careers attempting to get published by designing their projects around preexisting architectural notions that may or may not have any real meaning to the actual project at hand.

In effect, these young architects, and sometimes those who are not so young, design for other architects. Due to this attitude, clients can become viewed as a necessary evil, providing a bankroll for the architect's ideas. Getting print exposure for a project, built or unbuilt, *validates* the work done by the architect. Utility, functional fit, or affordability are seldom addressed in magazines and therefore not always viewed as important by these architects.

Projects with the hidden agenda of future publication can cost the unsuspecting client thousands of dollars in fees and often hundreds of thousands of dollars in construction costs for final results that they may or may not find either useful or delightful.

In truth, the bitter lesson learned by those who aspire to be published is that publication has more to do with how you fit a magazine's editorial stance than with the brilliance of your work.

Entering Competitions

Other architects spend unending hours entering open-ended competitions. It is a lot like the lottery—you have to play to win, but there are so many players and so many losers that the payoff, more often than not, is a sense of futility. You often compete against those who have either more ability or more time to put into killer presentations that catch a jurist's eye. To these architects, premiation means justification.

But who does the premiating? Other architects. Do personalities and small group dynamics enter into the criteria for selection? Absolutely.

Getting Academic Exposure

Another subset of architects designing for architects are those who make exquisite drawings or models that will find their way into academic magazines or onto the walls of local galleries. This "paper architecture" is a valuable conceptual enterprise and in fact is more noble than the duplicitous nature of real projects being designed for real people based on a hidden agenda of preconceived notions. "Paper projects" have no victims. They are intended for the exploration of new ideas. The validation of the work comes via academic lectures and articles in journals or in design theory classes where abstract notions can be presented with the sanction of "the academy."

But who selects the writings or projects that will be presented? Professors of architecture who are often architects. Can small-scale politics play a role in this exercise? Ask any academician.

The three vehicles for validation—publication, competitions, and academia—have the common ground of designing for your peer group. This closed loop has inherent distorting effects. The alternative can also be problematic.

2. You Can Design for Clients

The vast majority of those who work in the profession are the architects who design for their clients. There is a derisive tone when architects get together and talk about other architects who are building spec projects or doing large-scale, low cost commercial or institutional work. The ongoing sense is that those who actually get a large number of projects built must "sell-out," and become "hacks." The same fervor of the architect-oriented designer can be found in Vincent Kling's unforgettable "three rules of architecture": (1) get the job, (2) get the job, and (3) get the job.

There *are* "plan mills"—offices that pump out projects like so much sausage, projects extruded through the die of extreme low cost and client preconception. The function of this type of office is simply to get it done on time and on budget; if there are aesthetic issues, they are often found in the signage. The validation of the work is seen in financial terms—making money by maximizing efficiency and good firm organization. But how are

architects chosen for such work? Often by the "networking" that allows for a *familiar* choice—not necessarily the *best* choice for the work at hand.

Although almost all architects fall into one of the two categories in general, in practice most of us fall somewhere between the two extremes of self-serving "artist" and compromising "whore." In truth, each and every job we execute has a floating ratio of "whore" versus "artist" concerns.

"Artists" disregard their clients' needs, the local ambiance, cost, and the weatherability of their designs in favor of a "higher truth." "Whores" do whatever others (clients, builders, building inspectors) tell them to, without regard to the consequences.

But what are the *real* aesthetic issues when buildings are designed for other architects and, alternatively, when buildings are designed for clients? These issues all involve interchangeable sets of values between client and architect. It occurs to me that the basic element involved is faith—or the lack of it.

If an architect has faith in his or her ability then a client's bias is not a threat. If a client has faith in him- or herself, then there is no danger in listening to an outsider, in this case the architect.

What aesthetic consequences does a lack of faith have? Typically fear (what I consider to be the opposite of faith) forces us to look to the past for answers. Architects who have little faith in themselves and fear failure often use the Xerox machine to create buildings by mimicry. Clients who fear looking foolish look to existing buildings or magazine features to ensure that their project will not have to justify itself but sit on the firm footing of a graspable precedent.

If an architect fears losing control of a project, he or she can use design presentations to "sell" ideas—often to the point of deception. Often the hidden agenda of publication causes architects without faith in the latent integrity of their ideas to use exaggerations and cheap thrills window dressing to push style over substance.

Perhaps there is a coastal distinction as well. I know the East looks to antique stylizing for solace, and I suspect the West uses a futurist or nihilist outlook for distraction. In the East, Colonialoid buildings give comfort because they touch something familiar. The West Coast seems to have a different perspective. Could it be that a futurist building gives comfort because it changes the channel of our perspective? Either way, we are taken *out* of our present day and time.

Faith in the truths of the present day makes buildings that do not need captions or footnotes to be understood. Faith in the motivations of your client or architect allows for the exchange of perspectives. When people can share their perspectives and make a building, the world is enriched.

I validate myself as an architect by letting the client see what I have to offer, warts and all, up front. If hired, my goal is always to get the project built. I charge more than most but gear contracts to the owner's ability to pay. I will work for *anyone*—I *am* a whore. But I will only work for someone who knows what I have to offer—I am an *artist.*

Ultimately, my bias is to build. My office builds over 70 percent of the commissions we get. My own research tells me the average office like mine

ultimately builds about 30 to 50 percent of what they start to design. It is too easy to play in the sandbox of my own mind. If I do not work with builders and clients and Andersen Window reps, I am not in the world at large. And if my buildings do not exist in *this* world, *now*, then they cannot stand on their own merit.

Generally speaking, projects built with trust between client and designer evidence the sort of integrity and spirit that ultimately leads to the publication, premiation, and academic validation so fervently sought by so many who design for other architects.

There is no free lunch. If you do not build well, you are simply chasing fame. If your work is *product* oriented, the *process* will be skewed. If you judge yourself by the paper of the printing press or the balance sheet, you are missing the point.

If I cannot be judged by what I build, then I am at the mercy of those who deal *only* in the world of ideas. I find that open-ended world too confining for my craft.

The Cephas housing site (Figures 1-1 and 1-2) was a classic "leftover" piece of land, a quarter acre that had once been the site of a parochial school that had burned down in the early 1970s, a site that had become an informal garbage dump. The adjacent Catholic church purchased the property from the city for back taxes and through a crusading priest, John Duffell, proceeded to determine within the context of the neighborhood what was needed in terms of housing and how that housing should be built.

It was via this client's deep convictions that my office proceeded to make this building, one that not only responds to all the relevant codes but also facilitates dignity and a sense of ownership and pride for these rental units. Some of the input from our client included making units that were larger than normal (mostly three bedrooms) but including no common corridors, no central lobbies, no separate laundries, no central mail room—in short, no common areas that could become the staging areas for the urban guerilla warfare that has plagued public housing projects throughout the country. The by-product of all these design criteria were units that had natural light on all four sides, front doors that opened to individual stoops, and massing that complemented the townhouses across the street.

It may be said that client-based design criteria can mitigate the aesthetic impact of projects, while playing it "safe" and pandering to the lowest common denominator of aesthetic familiarity. However, this particular project has been selected for national publication in several books and for a traveling exhibit of the National Endowment of the Arts, as well as receiving local AIA (American Institute of Architects) awards and publication in several national trade magazines. This project's essential core organization is due to a client's vision, integrated and applied in architecture in a way that is fresh but rooted in its context.

The bottom-line lesson is that you do not need to sell out to include a client, and by including a client in the design process, the project's utility is enhanced to the point where it becomes virtually aesthetic in its final realization.

Figure 1-1 Cephas housing in downtown Yonkers, New York. Duo Dickinson, architect. Photo © Mick Hales.

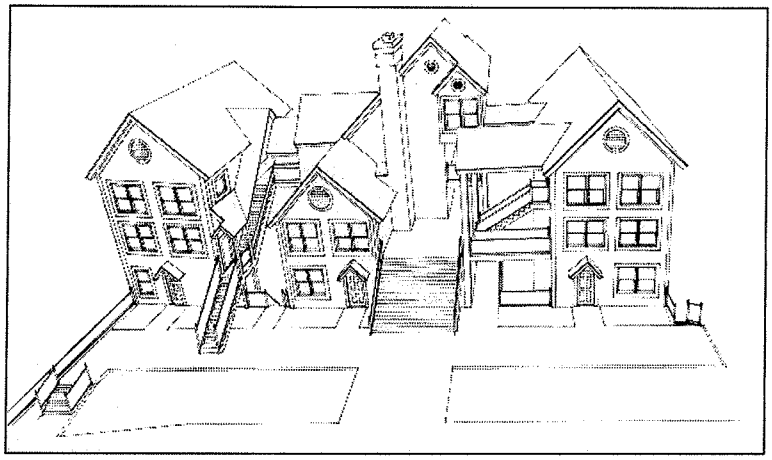

Figure 1-2 Drawing of Cephas housing. Courtesy of Duo Dickinson, architect.

Are You an Artist or an Architect?

Roger Yee extends our investigation into the flavor of professional practice with his incisive and hard look at today's economic incentives, which have resulted in the substitution of cost-efficient technologies for time spent with clients. Yee reminds us that the cornerstone of professional practice is still