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Reflections of a recovering architect

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Being the founder and executive director of a green building non-profit, most people tag me as an "environmentalist" and assume my motivations for leaving mainstream architecture were to save the planet, protect natural resources and improve public health. While these things are factors, they alone didn't set my path.

My motivations were rooted in business - business planning and strategy of design and construction - and systems thinking - the dysfunctions I observed in the building decision-making process.

Given the challenges inherent in people working together (the human condition), I still found it maddening that the basic concept and design approach to a project could be formulated without fully conceiving of its functional, operational and performance requirements.

This was 1998 and key players, such as facility managers and contractors, were not at the table. Design decisions were made without fully incorporating performance criteria or life cycle costs and I found the design process to be fragmented and inefficient.

Years ago, I was reviewing an engineering package for a large project, seeing that the systems, in isolation, lacked rigor, logic and discipline. Although this was one of the top engineers in the world, the systems were most complicated and costly than was necessary. They didn't reflect the sophistication that the engineers were capable of, and I soon realized that this wasn't due to incompetence but because the process didn't invite them to co-conceive of the design. They were having to shoe-horn their solutions into an approach that didn't take advantage of their expertise to design an optimal system. And the contract structure, fees and deliverables further reduce the potential of the final project.

So what did I learn from this? None of these were unique - this happened on many projects of different types. It was also clear that neither the architects nor engineers were to blame, but that a faulty process perpetuated suboptimal behaviors and practices. Furthermore, owners didn't understand the impact of their decisions on the design team and ultimately the final product. I realized then that the process and contracts that created the decision-making structure have just as much of a negative impact on the project quality cost and performance as one bad player.

When I think back, my perceptions as a designer seem to be influenced by my study and field work in social psychology.

The focus of my work was group interactions and cultural integration, looking at how different cultures adapt and overcome the challenges of different languages, religions, cultural contexts and more. Working in that field emphasized observation and collaboration as means to accelerate synthesis, which is strikingly similar to the integrative design approach. Architects and engineers often joke about each other as being from different worlds (and the Myers-Briggs test proves that). Culturally, architects often think of themselves as creator and visionaries and engineers themselves as to solve problems and make it work. I found myself observing situations repeatedly where

individuals were withholding information out of fear of promoting proven strategies, which were anything but. I saw such behaviors directly contribute to the ability to collaboratively solve complex problems. I also saw that no one validated the connections between these issues and the final cost or performance of a building.

In some ways, the evolution of our organization is a full circle experience for me, and a very gratifying one at that. When I took that first step on the path away from a traditional career, I had no idea what the future held. I had countless doubters telling me I was being ridiculous, that there was no need for what I was doing and that green would be over soon. There were many who asked me if I was doing The Green Roundtable full time (much more than that!). Now, with LEED being ubiquitous, the advent of new tools like the Pharos Project and new verification and certification entities like United Laboratories Environment, and the Green Product Association, there is a sea change beginning that is redefining policies, organizations and transparency. The intention on this sea change may not be thought of as environmental but the impacts of it clearly result in this.

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