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FROM THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

Sustainability: A Green Tale



by Douglas L. Steidl, FAIA
AIA President

I've just attended a two-day Green Building Summit hosted by the AIA here in Washington, D.C. If summit participants needed any reminder that designing and building green are no longer academic, the 100-degree blanket of heat and haze smothering most of the country has focused our attention.

Whether or not you're convinced that global warming is real (and the evidence grows daily), no one disputes the fact that it takes a lot of energy to keep a meeting room cool. And no one disagrees that what we design and build has a tremendous impact on how efficiently energy is used. The question is how to convey this awareness to our clients and our design team members to make a difference for those who tomorrow will live with the decisions we make today.


Statistics show that over the next 30 years nearly 90 percent of building square footage in this country will be either new or rehabilitated. That means we as architects have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to insure that the building stock by the year 2035 reflects energy-use reductions, renewable materials, and reduced CO2 discharges. These new ways of designing must not just be token acknowledgements, but significant (50–90 percent) accomplishments in energy and CO2 reductions.

The "p" word in a market economy

As I see it, the challenge has less to do with technical data. If anything, we're awash in data. What's still lacking is the will to get on with it. Achieving consensus behind a plan of action depends to no small degree on how persuasively we communicate to our clients both the challenges and opportunities in sustainability.

To find a model of how to speak persuasively, look no farther than the Urban Land Institute: They get it. They understand that for better or worse, ours is a market economy and, as such, is driven by a few simple but fundamental laws that might be crudely summarized as follows: profit = good, loss = bad.

Take the May issue of their magazine *Urban Land*. The article that appears on page 24 is about conservation easements. The page is illustrated by a photograph of 33,000 acres of scenic corridor between Denver and Colorado Springs. However, the point of view of the writer is not primarily aesthetics or virtue (both of which are, to

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be sure, of importance), but the following: "Developers can focus on nature—and make an even greater profit."

There it is: the "p" word—Profit.

Or this from a headline in the June issue: "A Green Tale: For green development to become mainstream, the development community has to figure out how to make spec projects viable." Of course, for "viable" read "profitable."

Engaging the economic imperative

No doubt a magazine whose primary audience is developers is going to focus on the art of the deal. But don't dismiss the insight. Don't dismiss the understanding about how things work in the real world—or at least the world designed by market forces.

To refuse to engage the economic imperative with verifiable facts and figures leaves the levers of power in the hands of those who understand profit in the crudest, short-range terms. If we want to make sure a broader view is taken, we have to learn to respect and use the language of the marketplace. Instead of lamenting the ugliness of sprawl, we need to pull out our calculators and add up the cost in health and time wasted associated with the daily commute. We have to lead that discussion, since auto makers are not likely to draw attention to the connection between traffic and air pollution.

We need to be able to spell out the cost/benefits of what we are advocating, because you can be sure advocates of the status quo have figures to support business as usual. If, for example, the AIA were able to announce a stunning breakthrough in energy conservation by design—and let's be real visionaries—that we could cut our dependence on fossil fuel by 50 percent (and this is easily doable today), would the people who extract oil and coal and the shareholders who are heavily invested in energy stocks be applauding? We'll be tuned out unless we are able to make a solid case for a different way of doing business, a case backed up by real dollars.

At a sustainability roundtable led by the AIA Center for Communities by Design this spring, owners and developers sat in the AIA Board Room to tell those gathered that the cost to meet significant standards in the "greening of buildings" was minimal: 2 percent or less increase in capital investment. But the returns are significant: an 8 percent increase in rental rates. Would you pass up such an opportunity? And this didn't even include the savings from reduced energy use over the lifetime of the building. The new data make it clear: Sustainability equals profit.

Soon owners will be asking, "Why isn't my architect showing me how to increase my profits?" And the next sentence will be, "I need to change architects. I need someone looking out for my profitability through designs compatible with ecology."

A language that inspires

One more thing: As we try to address the profit and loss concerns of those whose livelihoods are likely to be affected by our good intentions—and be assured, there will be a negative impact on those comfortable with the way things are—should we not also rethink how we talk about what it is we're advocating?

Our profession's word of choice is "sustainable." To our ears it's a useful shorthand for a worthy, indeed, necessary goal. But is that how the public and our clients hear

it? If ever there were a word more calculated to evoke misgivings in the marketplace or, at best, a yawn, it has to be “sustainable.” Whatever it means to us, the public reads “sustainable” as “making do with less.”

We cannot let ourselves be boxed in by our own language. We cannot sound like we are advocating a society frozen in place, or a return to some imagined hand-crafted past. Architects are a force for life. We need language that inspires.

The marketplace has its word—profit. It has real power. Design also has power, tremendous power. We need a more persuasive way of saying it. I’m open to suggestions that link profit, growth, opportunity, and vigor with a vision of healthier, safer, and more beautiful communities by design. I haven’t found the right word yet that says it all, but I haven’t stopped looking.

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