

AIA NY Responds to Economic Downturn

Contributed by AIA New York Chapter

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SUMMARY

Not Business As Usual (NBAU) is a professional development series that was conceived by the AIA New York Chapter in late 2008 as an opportunity for architects and other design professionals who found themselves to be unemployed or underemployed and wanted to stay connected with the industry in a worsening economy. The series began in December with a plenary meeting where Chapter leadership, members, and other participants established a five-faceted delineation of the NBAU program: Presentation Skills, Job Skills Training & Professional Development, Non-traditional Employment & Web Resources, Volunteer Opportunities & Government Advocacy.

Not Business As Usual is a free program at the Center for Architecture that is open to AIA members and the public. Thanks to the generous support of corporate sponsors, AIA New York was able to provide boxed lunch at every bi-weekly session at no cost to those attending. Nine months after launching NBAU, the series has put on 18 programs and has drawn audiences of more than 1100 architect members and other design professionals to the Center. NBAU and its off-shoot classes have generated 69 new AIANY Chapter members, of which 63 are associate members.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

Not Business As Usual was developed as a series of lectures and presentations within five subject areas listed above. Each event was designed to challenge participants to think broadly on a number of topics, ranging from policy issues that affect the built environment to the professional skills and training needed to be cutting edge in a competitive market.

To help attendees with their presentation skills and networking efforts, NBAU offered a Speed Portfolio review, a program on public speaking and professional communication, and a workshop on online social and professional networking. For training and professional development, the NBAU series included presentations on Building Information Modeling and developments in the New York State Energy Code and energy audit requirements, presented by the NY State Energy Research and Development Authority. (Energy audits are a source of employment for architects

nationwide, similar to the Depression-era Historic American Building Survey.) Competitions are also a large component of professional development; NBAU has presented a program on such areas of interest to underemployed architects as the Chapter's urbanSHED International Design Competition. This design effort, organized in collaboration with the NYC Department of Buildings, will lead to a new design for the city's sidewalk protection, now totaling over a million linear feet of scaffolding.

Whether breaking into the industry or surviving the current downturn, NBAU addresses the job market from a number of perspectives. It has offered programs tailored to recent graduates and current architecture students; a panel on alternative careers for mid-career architects, and a Volunteer Opportunities Fair for designers of all ages. Representatives from 23 community organizations, non-profits, schools, and training programs, including Habitat for Humanity, Architecture for Humanity, the US Green Building Council, and Engineers Without Borders, came to recruit volunteer architects and design professionals who may have found themselves with more free time since the recession's start, to assist their organizations with design and planning.

In advocacy, NBAU addressed stimulus project opportunities for architects, reported on the AIA's February 2009 Grassroots Advocacy conference in Washington DC, and shared with attendees an update on lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill to bring funding to building projects around the country. While a tough job market usually is characterized by cut-throat competition, NBAU has brought architects together and made a supportive community.

CREATING CAMRADERIE

There have been positive outcomes in all facets of NBAU's program. While professional development discussions were helpful to attendees, presentation and roundtable discussions alone could not offer the means to reach all of NBAU's goals. As a result, a number of spin-off job skills training/ professional development programs have been created at the Center for Architecture. NBAU has been the catalyst for an extremely successful series aimed at helping members update and improve their skills. These

ongoing classes include training courses in the LEED AP exam and Architecture Registration Exam preparation, an Energy Code Compliance Workshop that familiarizes architects with the New York State Energy Code, and computer training opportunities in Revit and ArchiCad, made possible with software generously supplied by AutoDesk and GraphiSoft, and hardware generously provided by SOM. To date, AIANY has organized a dozen classes and is preparing for more. August 2009 acoustical upgrades and other renovations to the AIANY Job Skill Training Center means that the Center for Architecture can host even more classes and training sessions this fall and into 2010.

NBAU recognizes that professional development during a recession can come from thinking outside the box; to this end AIANY conducted a NBAU Call for Designers this spring (open only to members); exhibitions are now benefiting from the skills of young, talented architects from within the membership. A similar call, for graphic design, is planned for early 2010.

A new Web portal, Exchange Point, developed in collaboration with *The Architect's Newspaper* and launched in February, lists jobs, design staffing, and equipment sales, facilitates a rich exchange of resources for the design community. Exchange Point encourages collaboration, assistance, and information sharing about projects and fosters a sense of community for architects. The NBAU presentation on social networking showed how this new generation of communication can be an effective marketing tool. AIA New York's social network is growing—both for Chapter membership and public members. For volunteerism, the Volunteer Opportunities Fair recruited many eager participants, and AIANY has maintained and developed relationships with many of the participating design-oriented nonprofits.

The Center for Architecture Foundation has had another successful year of programming, with help from NBAU volunteers. In terms of Advocacy, as a part of the NBAU mandate, AIA New York has increased its advocacy efforts on behalf of its membership to be on the forefront of issues affecting the built environment and emphasize to key government officials that architects are leaders in the design, real estate and construction industries, and can provide a wide variety of expertise on matters such as building design, land use planning and energy conservation.

By far, the most tangible results of the Not Business As Usual are the improved public outreach and professional development support that AIA New York and the Center for Architecture now offer to members. "Making lemons out of lemonade" is a phrase the AIA NY president coined to describe the success of NBAU, both as a continuing lunchtime

program, and as a unifying, positive force within the Chapter.

While not as easy to measure, the new ideas, opportunities and connections that NBAU has made possible to the innumerable architects who have attended its programs, presentations and related training classes over the last nine months are also monumentally valuable to both individual members and the Chapter as a whole. Not Business as Usual programs are free and open to the public. Everyone from young architecture students to seasoned-but-strained practitioners feel welcome and are able to expand their professional horizons and look to the future.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 22.05.02 Preparation for the Architect Registration Examination
- 22.05.03 A Model for Building Associate Membership
- 22.05.04 Increasing Membership by Focusing on the Firm

Feedback

The AIA welcomes member feedback on Best Practice articles. To provide feedback on this article, please contact bestpractices@aia.org.

Key Terms

- Leadership
- Associations
- Design associations
- Architectural associations
- The American Institute of Architects
- AIA components
- Emerging professionals