

## Walk a Day in the Contractor's Shoes: Your Clients Will Benefit

Contributed by the editors of *AIArchitect*

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### SUMMARY

The AIA and Associated General Contractors (AGC) have started a program designed to expand trust and understanding between architects and contractors. First at the national component level and later emulated by the AIA and AGC Michigan chapters, "Walk a Day in My Shoes"—a one-day visit by the AIA and AGC presidents to each other's office—opened the eyes of even these seasoned professionals.

### THE ARCHITECT'S SHOES

The architect creates an intricate array of puzzle pieces, and the contractor puts them together, notes 2003 AIA President Thompson E. Penney, FAIA. Penney participated in a "Walk a Day in My Shoes" exchange with John F. Kelley III, president of Nickerson & O'Day Inc. and the 2003 AGC president.



Kelley's visit to Penney's architecture firm LS3P in Charleston, S.C., in late July included a senior-management meeting, briefings on three projects on the boards, and a visit to a building under construction in which LS3P will set up one of its offices.

"LS3P is a visionary, progressive firm doing all the right things to move into the 21st century successfully," Kelley says of the experience. Looking at the firm's processes for marketing, cost and quality control, resource allocation, and risk management, Kelley surmises, "The people who will

really benefit from this visitation process are the owners and users of the completed facilities."

By understanding how each other works, the connection is strengthened. "Jack saw firsthand some of the problems we encounter when all you have is a blank piece of paper and the owner wants to know how much the building is going to cost," says Penney. The design process is decidedly nonlinear—two steps forward, one step sidewise, three steps sidewise the other way, and one back—always working to move forward. This is eye-opening to a contractor, because they are used to a very linear decision-making and implementation process."

### THE OTHER SHOE DROPS

"I had never gone to a contractor's office the day of a bid opening," confesses Penney about his visit to Kelley's office. "What I learned is that our decisions have a very direct effect on the contractor during bid day. The number of alternates that we request, the detail information on the form, and last-minute changes as the contractor is pulling together subs, material suppliers, and prices create barely controlled chaos, which can lead to misunderstandings. Misunderstandings lead to compromises, questionable decisions that negatively impact the quality of the work, and disputes. These also can lead to higher costs for the client and diminish the quality of experience for the client and the public."

"We went to deal with the organized chaos of working on the bid, which lasted till 2:30 in the morning," Penney says of his visit to Kelley's Bangor, Maine, office. "And I thought only architects worked late! The next morning, at 8 sharp, we picked up where we left off, with the tempo increasing as the day went on.

"Jack and his partners were working the phone, suppliers, subcontractors, rapid calculation. I was drafted to help with the number crunching, but, in fact, much of the calculation was going on in the heads of the firm members: prices of materials, prices of various subcontractors, and calculations about risk and reward.

“It looked like a game of four-dimensional chess with all the pieces in motion at once, each moving in a different direction at a different pace. Every change affects every element, all of which is tracked by every individual in the office. The stakes are high, and trust is paramount.

“I saw firsthand the trust that any given supplier or subcontractor will deliver the goods at the quoted price. And I saw firsthand the impact that our requests for detailed information, like unit prices or alternates, have on the process when the contractor doesn’t know which sub is low until the last possible moment.



“The bids were to be opened at 3 that afternoon. At 2:45, the final cost comparisons were in, decisions made, and the figures added up. We raced off to the bid opening with the bid form only partially filled in, leaving space for the final, final number. Karl called Jack on his cell phone as we sat in the car parked outside the client’s office. The bid now complete, we entered the room with three minutes to go. I could only describe what I felt in the pit of my stomach as empathy, as the architect started opening the bids.”

“The first bid opened turned my nervousness to disappointment,” Penney says. “We were not low. But we sat professionally and politely until all the bids were opened and read. As we drove to the airport, Jack called his partner. He congratulated his team for a job well done and told him that we had the right price, but not the low price. We were exactly in the middle of five bids. After he hung up, he was surprisingly calm. He looked at me and said, ‘Bidding is like life. You prepare as well as you can, do the best you can, then don’t look back.’”

#### **FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION**

Penney exhorts all architects to spend time in the offices of their constructor partners, he says. “I had walked a day in Jack’s shoes and came away not only with empathy, but with a great deal of respect. I defy anyone to share that experience and not come

away with a profound understanding and respect for the role of the general contractor as a creative, innovative, and essential element of a successful building project. I believe a true understanding of the challenges, limitations, and opportunities of our respective roles serves our industry, our clients, and the public.”

“To take one example, are our schools temples of learning, lasting for generations? Or are they simply temporary warehouses for our most precious resource? The same question needs to be asked about everything we build, from the transportation infrastructure to low-income housing.

“In my experience, fundamentally, architects and contractors alike are of one mind. No building profession is proud of the lowest-common-denominator process that permeates our marketplace. But that’s exactly what clients seem to value. Is it enough to say that, as building professionals, we are, in effect, simply following orders? Do we not, as professionals and craftsmen, have a greater responsibility to society because of our education and training? What about the advocacy role? Are we challenged simply to keep the rain out and the walls up?

“This is a vision, I believe, of the men and women who provide the fabric of brick, concrete, steel, wood, and stone that serve human needs—to focus on what divides us, weakens us. So much depends on it, we must all pull together. And the first step is to go beyond the closed circle of our egos to open-minded understanding of what each of us brings to the table.”

#### **LESSONS LEARNED**

Penney and Kelley benefited from viewing a day in each other’s office and agree this type of interaction can positively affect the construction profession.

#### **More Best Practices**

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

- 17.02.04      Consultant Compensation
- 11,04.05      A Sample Preconstruction Conference Agenda
- 11.04.08      Navigating Change Orders

#### **Feedback**

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#### **Key Terms**

- Practice
- Project administration