

Thinking Like a Client

Adapted from *The Client Experience*

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SUMMARY

A client goes through five phases when working with an architect and has some perceptions about the architect before the project begins.

THE PERCEPTION GAP

The Client Experience was produced for the AIA by the Context-Based Research Group. This research study shows that clients can clearly articulate what architects are and what they do—and that their concept does not match how architects perceive themselves and what they actually do. Conversely, architects' perceptions of how the built environment is created do not match the reality of the client experience.

Clients view "design" as the core competency of architects. Clients view "design" as a product—a noun—whereas architects view "design" as a process—a verb. As a result, clients do not recognize the value of architects until it is time to produce "the design," well after the formative stages of a project.

THREE CLIENT TYPES

Architects tend to think of clients in terms of market sector or building type: commercial, institutional, government, multifamily residential, and single-family residential. The study revealed that a more accurate indicator of client values and behavior is "mind-set," whereby clients belong to one of three distinct groups: government, builders of a product, or owner/operators.

Government

These clients value voter feedback, public approval, and stakeholder satisfaction. Relationships with architects are prescribed and limited by legislation and bureaucratic procedures.

Builders of a Product

These clients make money through the sale or long-term lease of buildings, and value the "salability" of buildings above all else. Like government clients, they tend to work with architects according to set procedures, but those procedures vary by company.

Owner/Operators

These clients will occupy and use the buildings they build. They place high value on long-term usefulness and durability of buildings and the needs of the people who will inhabit them.

FIVE PHASES CLIENTS GO THROUGH

As clients create their built environment, they progress through five phases. Neither the names nor the time spans of these phases match an architect's common understanding of the phases of a design project; genesis, focus, design, build, and operate.

The client's comprehension and perception of each of these phases is remarkably consistent across all client types.

Genesis

Months or years of research and discussion culminate in a decision to build something new. Architects are typically absent from this research phase, because clients do not readily see a role for architects.

Focus

A vision of the project begins to take shape, and the team dynamic begins to develop. The project is defined—scope, program, principal features, purpose, and so on. Though architects perceive themselves as vital at this stage of development, clients' attitudes about the value of the architect during this phase vary widely. Some recognize that architects bring essential skills to this planning phase, while others think it is not yet time for "the

design," and so do not understand why architects would be needed.

Design

With a firm notion of "the design" as the actual plans used to create the built environment, clients recognize the essential role of the architect in this phase. Though they do not recognize it as "design," clients also recognize and appreciate the creativity, flexibility, communication, and collaboration skills that architects apply in analyzing, synthesizing, and articulating the client's vision for the project. Clients often feel a rush of wonder when they are able to see their vision realized in drawings, models, or built form. But clients often talk of the synthesis of their vision as a value added by architects beyond "the design," while architects, of course, consider this an inseparable part of the design process.

Clients also believe that most architects' primary motivation is to "build a monument to themselves," and that the client's needs, wants, timeline, and budget are only secondary. To the extent that they hold such a belief, clients guard against involving architects in the critical research, discussion, and planning phases leading up to design, and they would seek to narrowly circumscribe the scope of the architect's responsibilities even in the design phase. Lack of participation in the focus phase can tremendously hamper the architect's ability to tease out the ultimate vision of the project.

Build

When construction begins, the contractor takes over as the most active member of the team. Most clients would like architects to be heavily involved, because constant communication is critical to this phase. Many clients report that architects demonstrate their value in unexpected ways during the build phase through flexibility and creative problem solving.

Clients feel that architects tend to abandon them during the build phase. They report that either the architects are not available at all or they send in a "B" team once the design phase is complete, with a resulting loss of the detailed knowledge of the project that the original architect team possessed.

Some architects admit that they frequently exceed the budget in the early phases of projects, leaving too few hours available for the build phase. This frequently results in a climate of tension between architect and client that sours the positive relationship established during the design phase. Equally important, architects do not tend to regard

their involvement during the build phase as important to the project or the relationship.

It is also common for communication to break down between the architect and the contractor when plans must be changed to accommodate unexpected problems. As the architect and the contractor argue over culpability, the client is placed in the uncomfortable role of mediator, or, worse, "babysitter."

Operate

This phase begins with occupancy, and it never really ends. Once a building is operating, both the architect and the contractor complete their contracts, and a new team takes over on the client side. Architects often fail to establish a relationship with the new team. For their part, clients tend to think of architects during the operational phase only when problems occur.

Clients are extremely appreciative of architects who "keep up with" the buildings they've designed. They interpret the architect's continuing interest as a reflection of being truly invested in the project, and as a commitment to designing buildings that work.

UNDERLYING PERCEPTIONS

The public generally perceives architects favorably. Clients' negative perceptions of architects as "monument-building" artists with little practical or technical expertise are based largely on actual negative experiences of working with an architect. Interestingly, however, clients are likely not to hold the individual architects with whom they have worked responsible for these deficiencies. Instead, most clients perceive architects as having been inadequately prepared during their architectural education to work collaboratively with clients, properly manage a business, and understand the construction process.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

These perceptions present both formidable challenges and promising opportunities. Negative attitudes and beliefs rooted in experience, not assumptions, are firmly held and difficult to change. However, the fact that clients hold "the profession" and not the individual responsible for perceived deficiencies means that clients' perceptions are highly amenable to change as a result of positive personal experience. The research reveals that architects have significant opportunities to meet and exceed client expectations. Expanding on

recognized strengths, architects can transform clients' perceptions and come to be recognized as long-term partners who add value at every stage of the process.

The build phase is the source of the greatest "disconnect" between architects' and clients' perceptions. It is also the phase when clients learn that architects can add the most unexpected value, and therefore it presents the greatest opportunities for improvement.

The research points to specific, tangible steps that architects can take to achieve these goals:

- Cultivate and foster relationships
- Demonstrate flexibility and proficiency in design
- Become a master communicator
- Emphasize specialized skills and knowledge
- Strengthen business skills
- Increase knowledge of construction
- Partner with construction experts
- Manage change
- Educate the client

Cultivate and Foster Relationships

Clients place extremely high value on relationships, chemistry, and the ability to get along well with others on the team. Clients are willing to pay more for architects with whom they can maintain good relationships. Strong relationships, in turn, can pave the way for expansion of architects' involvement throughout the building conception, design, construction, and operation process.

Demonstrate Flexibility and Proficiency in Design

Architects who are flexible and open to change, and who produce sound documents during the design phase, can overcome clients' negative perceptions of architects as "technically challenged monument builders."

Become a Master Communicator

Clients already believe that architects are good communicators, as shown by their ability to form good relationships with clients and end users during the design phase. Architects can leverage this positive perception to broaden their role and the range of services they provide. They can

demonstrate their value beyond the design phase by becoming "master communicators."

In particular, overcoming communication gaps with contractors can position architects as crucial to the success of every phase of a project, by demonstrating that the flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving skills applied in the design phase can improve every phase of the process.

Emphasize Specialized Skills and Knowledge

Architects who emphasize their industry specialties (e.g., health care, business, education) and their knowledge of industry trends are valuable during the genesis phase. By emphasizing communication and team facilitation skills, as well as the ability to frame an individual project within a "big picture," architects can demonstrate their value in the focus phase.

Strengthen Business Skills

Managing your own business well, and conducting yourself in a businesslike manner, is the best way to communicate to a client your competence to manage the client's assets, whether the client is a single-family homeowner or a multinational corporation.

Increase Knowledge of Construction

It is essential that architects increase their practical knowledge of construction. Many architects are ill equipped to design realistically and are uncomfortable on construction sites. This timidity and lack of knowledge makes it difficult for architects to communicate effectively with construction workers. Diligent and consistent attention to relationships with contractors during the build phase can help close this gap, enabling the architect to incorporate knowledge from recently completed projects into future projects.

Partner with Construction Experts

Some architects feel that their core competency is in design and do not wish to become construction experts. Architects can satisfy clients' wishes for greater technical expertise by establishing long-term relationships with construction professionals (either as subcontractors or as consultants) to inform the architect's design perspective with construction knowledge at every stage of the process.

Manage Change

All projects are triggered by some underlying change. In addition, regardless of how clear a

client's vision or the project plans may be, changes occur constantly through the course of a project. Change creates stress. As expert problem solvers and communicators, architects are perfectly suited to working under changing conditions and to helping others adapt to hectic, constantly changing environments.

Educate the Client

Architects have a tremendous opportunity to educate clients during the design phase and help them understand that the skills that enable architects to flourish during design would enhance the project as a whole if applied to other phases.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

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

- 05.01.01 Evaluating Prospective Clients
- 05.02.02 Ten Things You Should Know About Prospective Clients
- 05.02.06 Marketing Intelligence: Know Your Clients

For More Information on This Topic

See also "Understanding Client Values," by Kevin W. C. Green, in *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 1, page 9.

See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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Key Terms

- Practice
- Marketing
- Architect selection