

How to Organize a Component International Knowledge Community

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SUMMARY

The global practice of architecture is on the rise. Some firms are entering the international practice scene for the first time, and others are seasoned veterans, perhaps with offices worldwide. In either case, these firms could benefit from an active international committee in their local AIA component. At present, only four national components have active international committees: Boston, Chicago, New York, and San Francisco.

MOBILIZING AN INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

How does a component establish an international committee as part of the knowledge community structure? Mobilization requires the initiative of individuals with a passion, not just an interest, in international practice. If you are such an individual, the first step would be to contact colleagues who have projects in foreign countries to see if they share your interest or to contact the executive director of your local component to inquire about firms that practice internationally.

Since it is a voluntary effort and requires both time and energy, it is best to establish two to three practitioners to share the responsibility of organizing and maintaining a committee structure. This is particularly true if the participant's practice involves international travel and off-time commitments to clients or colleagues in other countries.

COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

An international committee can be a small organized group that accommodates visiting international guests. Or it can be a multidisciplinary committee that accommodates guests, organizes programs for member firms, writes articles for the component news, and helps members understand the laws and codes of international practice.

The structure for a strong and long-lasting committee would include AIA and associate AIA members from small and large firms, engineers, and

allied consultants. The AIA San Francisco International Committee, for example, also includes a member of the U.S. Department of Commerce. Such a multidisciplinary committee structure offers a diverse perspective on international practice issues as well as a wider network for sharing news and business development opportunities. It is best to have a cochair or chair/vice chair structure to balance the support needed to run a volunteer committee and to rotate the chair position every year or two.

MISSION STATEMENT

As a formal committee of your local AIA component, it is wise to develop a mission statement or set of goals that will define the role of your knowledge community. A clear mission statement provides focus for organizing appropriate programs and establishes a basis for communicating the committee's function and role within the component and AIA National. For example, the AIA San Francisco International Committee's mission statement is that it acts as a

1. Clearinghouse for international marketing and practice information
2. Network and forum for exchange of knowledge
3. Point of contact for international protocol functions such as reception of foreign professionals, response to foreign inquiries, foreign internship placements, and international relations
4. Liaison to the national AIA International Committee

All new incoming members of the committee should receive a copy of the mission statement so they clearly understand its goals and purpose.

PROGRAM POTENTIAL

What kind of programs and activities should your knowledge community provide? Many architecture

firms that enter the global practice arena seek information on issues related to practicing in foreign countries. A good beginning for a component international committee is to organize continuing education programs that respond to these basic practice issues or to a predominant world region where practices are focused. Here's a simple topical breakdown of potential programs:

Getting the Work

- How to market internationally
- The go/no-go decision
- Market profiles of countries
- How to work with multinational banks
- Following a client overseas
- Videoconferencing to enter foreign markets

Doing the Work

- Digital collaborations
- International contracts and negotiations
- Intellectual property and copyright issues
- Outsourcing production Work
- Travel do's and don'ts
- Multiculturalism in international practice
- Incorporating feng shui in your designs

Sharing the Work

- Guest speaker programs
- AIA convention programs
- Young architects/foreign practice
- Videoconferences with foreign architects
- Cross-border partnerships

Enjoying the Work

- Travel anecdotes
- Interpersonal relationships

When organizing and setting up programs for your component members, offer a relevant topic that will interest the architects of your area, have a diverse panel of speakers, advertise to the appropriate audience, and offer AIA/CES credits for every program.

For example, the Boston Society of Architects' International Committee conducts an annual "Response and Responsibility Roundtable" and is an

integral part of the program and product selection for Build Boston. The AIA New York Chapter has a liaison with the Royal Institute of British Architects USA (RIBA-USA) and hosts regular events and meetings with notable guest speakers to focus on design and practice issues in different parts of the world.

OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS

It is important to create a channel to disseminate information about activities and resources as well as a method to share knowledge gained from the program. An obvious avenue is to have an international knowledge community Web page—or Web link as part of the chapter Web page—that identifies the goals of the committee, announces programs and other news, and becomes an open bulletin board for component members interested in international practice. Appoint a committee member to make monthly or quarterly news item updates to the Web page in order to remain current as a knowledge community. It is also advantageous to network with other international groups in your community, such as the Chamber of Commerce, U.S. Department of Commerce, the Japan Society, engineering associations, and other trade organizations.

The AIA San Francisco International Committee has gone one step further and has established bilateral agreements with three international organizations: ALA Assoarchitetti and Ordine degli Architetti di Alessandria, both from Italy, and the Vietnam Association of Architects. These partnerships call for cooperation to promote and strengthen the component's cultural and business ties with these architecture organizations.

IMPACT ON NATIONAL ISSUES

It is advisable for your knowledge community to become more familiar with the activities of the national AIA International Committee. This will provide a platform for your committee to network with other international committees worldwide and offers the potential to jointly develop programs either at the chapter level or nationally at the annual AIA convention.

The AIA International Committee, in addition to providing CES programs for AIA members, acts as an advisory group to the AIA president and board. It maintains a liaison with the International Union of Architects, the Architects Council of Europe, and the Pan American Federation of Architects and is the

clearinghouse for practice protocols. Through the efforts of the International Committee and the foreign chapters, the AIA now has an international director who represents all overseas members. It is also a valuable resource for learning about other components' activities, AIA international relations and contract issues, and news about global programs and competitions.

HOW TO SUSTAIN AN ACTIVE COMMITTEE

The long-term success of a local international committee depends a great deal on the way it is organized in the beginning. Keeping it simple, focusing on educational programs, and fostering a culture of knowledge sharing are key to sustaining an active committee. To cast a wider net and expand the sharing of knowledge, keep the committee diverse, rotate the chair, and recruit younger architects. A final suggestion for committee sustainability: *Keep it fun*. For example, the AIA San Francisco International Committee has an annual December holiday party where members bring foods from around the world, hosting guests from selected foreign consulates. The event illustrates that the AIA can be an ambassador for international issues and personally bridge the gap between what governments aspire to do and what architects can do to help them achieve their goals.

Getting involved in your local international committee in a leadership role is good training ground for getting involved at the national level. To learn more about the AIA International Committee, contact the AIA director of international relations, the current committee chair, or visit the committee Web page at www.aia.org/intl_default.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

William J. Higgins, AIA, founded Architecture International in 1994. He was 2004 chair of the AIA International Committee Advisory Group and has served as chair of the AIA San Francisco International Practice Committee from 1996 to 2001 and from 2005 to the present. Higgins is a lecturer at the University of San Francisco and the California College of Arts and has served on the advisory board of the Institute for Energy Conscious Design. He has a bachelor's degree in architecture from Louisiana State University and a master's degree in architecture from Harvard University. He can be reached at whiggins@arch-intl.com.

More Best Practices

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

- 06.04.10 Preparing to Work Overseas
- 06.04.06 Managing Expectations of Foreign Clients
- 22.04.01 Starting and Running a Successful Local IT Group

For More Information on This Topic

See also "Practicing in a Global Market" by Roger B. Williams, FAIA, and C. Richard Meyer, FAIA, in *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 6, page 100. The *Handbook* can be ordered from the AIA Store by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending e-mail to bookstore@aia.org.



Keywords

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