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Sustainability Beyond Practice

There is a dichotomy when it comes to the relationship between architects and the framework for policy and the building codes and standards within which we work. In one camp, design professionals have a view of this framework as “other”—as something created and established by separate entities and organizations and that we must abide by without the ability to influence.

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In that camp, architects either decry codes as “the minimum” that don’t go far enough, it’s the worst building allowed by law, or they rail against codes that aren’t flexible enough, don’t allow creative solutions, or that seem draconian, arbitrary or subject to the capricious whims of enforcement officials. But in the other camp, architects have the same compulsion to drive change, to make improvements, to constantly reshape codes that we also experience in their relationship to the built environment.

Given the nature of architects, it is actually perplexing that this latter group of meddlers in policy, codes and standards is in the minority. The AIA has recently increased its efforts to seat architects on the various committees for the current code cycle of International Codes Council (ICC) and architects now comprise fourteen percent of total committee representation—and this is one of the highest years of participation. Why is it that some design professionals feel the need to design and shape everything around us—the environments in which we live—but not the very regulatory framework in which we are allowed to build?

We are looking at a present in which we are already experiencing some very significant changes to our climate and our environment, and there is no doubt that any architecture (of the future as well as existing building stock) will have to address resiliency and adaptation as much as mitigation, but our codes aren’t catching up with what our profession

already knows. Of course, we’re not obligated to build *only* to the code, and many would argue that our standard of care should *exceed* the code, but do we have a professional and ethical obligation to actually engage in the codes and policy process, to push the codes forward in continuous and more rapid improvement?

The First Engagement Is Local Engagement

Codes and policy can be influenced on multiple levels. At the local level (city, district, county, state), model codes can be modified, expanded and incentivized with aggressive standards and stretch goals. There are boards, commissions, industry advisory committees, technical committees, public hearings and public comment periods during the adoption process. Many industry advocacy organizations (for design professionals, developers, contractors, property managers, owners, etc.) aggregate stakeholder comments and submit them during open comment periods, but these are open to individual comments as well. Local codes and policies are the easiest place to get engaged, because design professionals know their own communities and climate, and they know the challenges, constraints and natural hazards as well as the vision that may be set for future resiliency and climate neutrality.

For example, in Washington, DC, members of the architecture and development community advocated for the landmark Green Building Act in 2006, requiring LEED certification for

both public and private sector buildings. I became engaged in local policy, codes and standards by supporting the District in its implementation of the Green Building Act starting in 2008, then by joining a multi-disciplinary technical committee—including architects—who adapted the International Green Construction Code (IgCC, 2012), leading DC to be the first jurisdiction to adopt it as mandatory for both public and private sector projects in 2014. In 2017, I joined a similar technical committee to review and facilitate adoption of IgCC 2015 and write a new energy code for the District (based on ASHRAE 90.1-2013 and Chapter 7 of 189.1), with the inclusion of an Appendix Z Net Zero Energy stretch code.

Engagement and advocacy can start with simply reviewing proposed draft code changes and providing positive feedback and endorsement, which is even more critical than negative feedback. Sometimes significant or dramatic changes to codes or policy require advocacy which may mean contacting council members, forming advisory committees or participating in hearings. For example, in 2007 Montgomery County, MD, passed legislation requiring LEED certification for public and private sector construction. In 2008 Ralph Bennett, FAIA, developed a course for the University of Maryland School of Architecture, “Measuring Sustainability,” that taught students to explore various sustainability codes and standards. When Montgomery County decided to explore the adoption of IgCC 2012 (with local adaptation), Ralph Bennett’s class supported the county’s efforts by evaluating two levels of stringency of the code for the county to consider. Between 2014 and 2017 stakeholders in the design and development community advocated for adoption of IgCC with an alternative compliance path (ACP) that continued to recognize LEED in lieu of IgCC as it was already recognized in the Federal and commercial marketplace in the region. Advocates participated in individual and group comments, public hearings and other activities, and influenced Montgomery County to adopt IgCC 2012 in September 2017 with the LEED ACP. Local stakeholders continue to remain engaged in the financial incentive updates for the county.

Local advocacy also helps to remove barriers or perceived restrictions within the code. Amanda Tullos, AIA, wrote an appendix to the City of Houston construction codes to clarify

the reuse of materials beyond finishes and to help expand opportunities for use of salvaged structural members while reducing barriers to permitting.

Michael Malinowski, FAIA, advocated specifically for changes to the permitting process by convening a group of regional code officials and design professionals once a year to share issues, concerns, ideas and challenges across the many jurisdictions of northern California. This effort evolved into PASS (Prequalified Architectural Submittal System) now in use by eighteen different jurisdictions to increase efficiency by streamlining the permitting process.

“The rapidly changing needs of our society that require the advocacy and leadership of the architectural community now more than ever.”

In the City of Atlanta, Ryan Taylor, AIA, worked with local advocates Robert Reed from Southface Energy Institute and Ted Miltiades from the Georgia Department of Community Affairs to facilitate a zoning ordinance tweak and adoption of a building code amendment that allows tiny houses. Tiny houses are limited to 400sf, though accessory dwelling units in Atlanta may be up to 750sf. ADUs located near transit, education and work centers may help increase density without substantially changing the character of a neighborhood. The rental income from an ADU may also allow a family to buy a property that would otherwise have been out of reach—for the buyer and renter of the ADU.

But There Is a Need to Engage Further at a Broader National Level

Historically, architects who are passionate about improving the codes have led significant changes. In the 1970s, the AIA formed a Blue Ribbon Panel to explore the future direction of codes. The recommendations for “One Code” led to a common code format, and the terms that came out of that exercise are what helped lead to the ICC and a suite of codes that are used across the U.S. and internationally today.

At the national level, ICC model codes are updated every three years through a technical committee development, public comment, hearing and voting process. Anyone can apply to join a committee and anyone can attend and speak at hearings as well as participate in the creation of or debate on the public comments. Everyone is permitted and encouraged to participate in hearings, and the eligible voting members are encouraged to vote on final versions of the codes. Not all proposed code changes are adopted; in fact, the majority are not. In some ways, it may be good that our codes don't change too dramatically every three years, but in other ways, this stagnation or reluctance to change may be a signal that we need greater advocacy for the changes that matter.

Advocacy and code activism undertaken by architects like David Collins, FAIA, occasionally lead to the development of entirely new codes that address a particular need that isn't adequately met within the existing ICC framework. Examples such as the International Existing Building Code (IEBC) and the International Green Construction Code (IGCC), or important change codes that more accurately reflect the changing needs of our society, allow for Live/Work facilities, enable gender neutral restrooms for more equitable design, and more.

Advocacy Is a Function of Design and a Functional Role of Designers

Code and policy advocacy are inherently a lifelong professional commitment and responsibility. I remain locally involved in Washington, DC, by serving on the Mayor's Green Building Advisory Council and code committees. I have become nationally involved by joining the AIA's Codes and Standards Committee, AIA Blue Ribbon Panel on Codes and the International Energy Conservation Code Development Committee. Getting and staying engaged is a drum I beat daily to colleagues and peers.

The rapidly changing needs of our society require the advocacy and leadership of the architectural community now more than ever. We need to build a culture of engagement that starts in design education with the understanding of how codes are created and continues with the expectation that

part of our professional path occurs outside the studio with participation in code development and advocacy.

We have an obligation as designers and as professionals who respond to and shape our environment, to leverage our knowledge, our experience, our talent and our skills to shape the policy and code framework within which we build our communities. It takes several years for new ideas to germinate within technical committees, to withstand public comments and hearings, and to endure through a voting process that favors little change. And once a model code is formalized, it still takes years to be adopted by states or local jurisdictions, and when adopted it may be adapted or weakened.

We are staring at the headlights of a rapidly changing climate that is bearing down on us, and we need to be planning for our changing environment *today*, not to mention the future. Natural disaster is our new normal. Are codes the minimum? Yes. But that minimum should be continuously improved and elevated to address our changing relationship with the environment, including mitigation and adaptation, resiliency, human health and well-being, equity and social responsibility. We need the participation and advocacy of architects who are passionate about raising the bar with the sense of urgency that the issue deserves.

What is the architect's standard of care? If codes aren't meeting our definition and *aspirational* goals for public health, safety and welfare, then we should exercise the same passion and commitment to influence the regulatory environment that we do the built environment.

Contact information to get involved in code advocacy through the AIA: codes@aia.org; www.aia.org/codes

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Common and Effective Use of Language Across the Green Community	DAVE GILMORE
How Green Becomes Green	SCOTT SIMPSON
Rethinking the Future of Sustainable Design	PABLO LA ROCHE
Evaluating Sustainable Design and Design for Health in the Graduate Presentation Program	LYNN BARRETT
Lessons Learned from Resilient by Design: How Designers Can Engage Communities to Think Forward	SANDY MENDLER
The Impact of Distributed Leadership and Non-traditional Partnerships	ERIC CARBONNIER, EERA BABTIWALE AND BRUCE BOUL
Made to Fit: Procurement at World Bank	DESIGNINTELLIGENCE
The Price of Water	CINDY WALLIS-LAGE
Part of the Solution: Defeating Climate Change	DESIGNINTELLIGENCE
Sustainability Beyond Practice	ANICA LANDRENEAU
The Practice of Governing: An Interview with Dan Watch	DESIGNINTELLIGENCE
In Search of Zen	LEILA KAMAL, TERESA RAINEY AND LEIGH STRINGER
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