

Interactions between contractor, architect fraught with peril



Jason Streb

Communication is key. Ask most people, expert or not, on what makes a successful relationship and you're likely to hear communication as the most important ingredient. It seems obvious that open dialogue and transparency of expectations is a recipe for success. In a construction project, this recipe includes three major players: owner, architect and contractor. Typically, both architect and contractor have a direct relationship with the owner and not to one another. Although the two professions lack a direct relationship, they have a unique dependency to one another.

The triad of owner-architect-contractor has existed for thousands of years, being in essence one who designs it, one who builds it and one who pays for it. While building methods, technology and design styles have evolved, the process and the players have remained relatively constant.

Despite their storied history, another constant has been issues of communication. Problematic still, even in today's hyper-connected, software-enabled world. It may seem strange that two professions so historically and intrinsically linked continue to struggle to understand one another. Both sides most likely acknowledge this rift exists, but do they understand why? If so, are the professions working toward resolution?

There are many reasons why contractors and architects have historically struggled to communicate. For Peter Buckley, project executive at DGA Builders LLC, a prime reason could be inherent cultural differences.

"There are two different cultures there really.... When two different cultures are working together, communication is obviously key that can either be a challenge or an opportunity to do well."

"If you look at the two cultures: one is more artistic, more of a consensus-building culture.

There is a lot of internal critique that happens in the architect's world among their peers. In the contractor culture, it's a culture where ego, lots of times, can get in the way of success. Risk is also a huge factor on the construction side because the financial risks are great... it's a very competitive business. I think it's the only one with a higher failure rate than restaurants...."

Contributing to the cultural misalignment is possibly a shared lack of appreciation as well.

For Buckley, "...a lot of contractors don't understand what the architect has to do and all the effort that goes in, and there may be some lack of respect for that, and I think the same thing happens on the architect vs. contractor side, where the contractor is sometimes seen as a commodity and isn't really valued for some of the expertise and creativity that they bring to the process."

The building design process is also inherently misaligned. For architects—a finished set of construction drawings often signifies the end of several months or even years' worth of effort. For contractors—it's just the beginning. Regardless of timing differences, there is pressure on both sides to deliver for the owner. The culture class and lack of understanding between the professions becomes intensified under this pressure. It's at this point where you see the best and worst from people on both sides. In an ideal situation, this pressure or risk is shared equally among the principal stakeholders (owner, architect, contractor). Buckley points out that when this distribution of risk becomes lopsided in some way, the pressure increases disproportionately and conflicts become more common.

"You start to see problems on projects when that equilibrium is too far out of whack—if the contractor has to take all the risk, for what might be shortcomings in drawings, or the owner says, 'Hey my expectation is no changes. The cost is what the cost is.' If that all gets pushed onto the contractor, that's where you see things go out of balance, and behavior gets out of balance."

Architect Jennifer Takatch, principal at Architecture P.C and president of AIA Rochester, agrees. As an architect, Takatch finds that if one entity is shouldering more responsibility than the other it creates a disadvantage and the possibility for conflict.

Where the parties are only concerned about their piece of the responsibility, collaboration can suffer and in turn so can the outcome of the project. The design and construction industry, like others, has become highly litigious and increas-

ingly digital. In turn, this has created an industry of intense documentation. A proliferation of communication tools has become the norm in the construction world. These tools control and monitor every aspect of project management. Not only intended to document communication, these software tools are intended to improve the communication process. But have they?

Takatch finds that technology has hindered the communication process rather than helped it.

"I think a lot of us get emails, and tasks we want to check off. It doesn't give us time to provide the thought that is necessary. I am reverting back to calling people on the phone because the email is like popcorn. It goes like popcorn all over the place. Before you know it, it's gotten out of hand. Someone's feelings are hurt.

For both sides, technology has not only made communication more complicated, but it has also made it more constant.

"The expectation (is) that everybody needs everything right now. But let's understand what the need is and how do we answer it, and how do we arrive at it together...where I think the communication mishaps happen comes from quick emails, people not reading their emails completely, having this expectation they have to get (the task) off their plate. I'm starting to take one step back to get all of my answers before I respond. I think that's going to be a better way of dealing with it for the people who are getting it, and therefore they won't have to send multiple emails to get the essence of it.

We have so many tools to communicate with people I think we're having a harder time doing it."

Despite a cultural history of misunderstandings and appreciation, both Takatch and Buckley agree that for a project to be successful, everyone needs to be on the same page. Technology can't replace human interaction where all parties are working toward a common goal. Problems and unknowns are bound to arise in construction. Problem solving is what most people in design and construction do best.

For Buckley, "both sides must maintain honest, open lines of communication...."

What this means, he says, is being able to look critically at one's own work and address it as problems arise.

Buckley notes that at the end of the day, construction is still a human endeavor, so that comes with all the benefits and challenges of it being one.

Jason Streb is an architect and associate at CPL and past president of AIA Rochester.