Déjà Vu: Ethics of a Gentleman’s Club

MARC MAXEY
University of Nebraska

This paper serves an autopsy report of the AIA’s relevancy from late 19th century to present day as the ethical stance of the profession was transformed under free market competition. The architect’s relationship to the client and the general public was debated throughout the last century in response to a changing field of practice. The AIA’s code of ethics serves as an archival road map illustrating market forces brought to bear on an indecisive profession. Documents associated with an architecture project are no longer limited to the drawing set but expand to include financial instruments like the proforma, while real estate itself emerges as a distinct academic subject.

To speak about money in architecture is taboo. For the dignified architect the matter is impolite and unprofessional, for the critical academic anything but resistance is suspect. The architect as a figure of respect and a front-man for the built environment was manicured by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) for more than a century to be professionals; stewards of wealthy patrons’ interests and boosters of public good. Such evidence exists in the AIA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, which distinguishes architects as providing professional services for the greater benefit of the community. Yet, the ethics of architectural practice under the AIA’s client-based, fee-for-service model avoids an ethical position by allowing architects to operate at arm’s length to the source of money, labor, politics, and in many cases the architecture itself. Charting the AIA code of ethics, from its first draft of 1909 to the present offers evolutionary evidence of the architect’s ethical crisis in a changing discipline and profession.

In the eyes of the AIA, any notion that an architect produced a commodity in a business-like fashion was absurd—tradesmen and salesmen did that—not professionals. The fees for service that an architect would charge a client were not readily up for negotiation and instead members would refer to the AIA’s minimum fee schedule. While this was the prevailing model through early and late modernism, radical changes to the architecture profession and discipline during the 1960s and 1970s disrupted the figure of the architect and ushered in a new era of architecture. Although postmodernism is often read through the building as image (or style), new procedures in the production and governance of architecture are more telling of architecture’s transformation. Several important dates relating to the AIA code of ethics (1964, 1970, 1977, 1980, and 1987) track new modes of architectural practice including design-build delivery and architect-as-developer, most notably exemplified by John Portman. While Portman’s association with architecture and real estate is often pigeonholed as corporate-capitalist, this methodology was also performed at smaller scales in architecture schools such as Yale during the same time period. The 1960s offers new definitions and concerns of real estate in both academia and practice. Not only does the AIA Code of Ethics offer historiographic evidence, the documents associated with an architecture project are no longer limited to the drawing set but expand to include financial instruments like the proforma, while real estate itself emerges as a distinct academic subject.

Since the first Code of Ethics was established in 1909, only two subsequent revisions were made until 1964, marking the beginning of a dramatic shift for the AIA’s concept of architecture practice. For the AIA, Standards For Professional Practice were established to prevent unfair competition between other architects, and to prevent hosts of architecture competitions from receiving any ‘free’ work from pining architects. Furthermore, architects were not allowed to self-promote through advertisements or endorsements unless it was on behalf of their local AIA chapter. In December of 1964, the AIA issued a memo regarding the revisions to The Standards of Professional Practice adopted earlier that year at the convention. What stands out in 1964 is the AIA is wrestling with an ethical dilemma of a changing landscape of practice as architects branched into the acquisition of real estate and the production of buildings. The AIA forbid architects from acting as contractors deeming it “a conflict of interest which would be untenable.” In all the nuances the AIA’s attempt to suss out where conflicts of interest would arise, exceptions were made if the architect was the owner of his own project or offered a comprehensive architecture service to a client, which would now include “...feasibility, financing, site acquisition, etc. [which] -represent new concepts for the architect’s role.”

For the architect John Portman, his expanded role into the development process meant becoming a developer himself. His forays into real estate development began in 1959 with the Atlanta Merchandise Mart where he assembled a team and sought financing to convert a parking garage into a furniture showroom. His efforts proved successful, paving the way for his own significant architect-as-developer projects in the 1960s including the Regency Hyatt Hotel and further expansion of the Peachtree Center in Atlanta. However, his projects were
The article championed his entrepreneurial spirit: Involvement, with his second beach house nabbing the cover. were featured in Progressive Architecture’s July, 1967 issue, of graduation, Gluck had completed several houses, which ski cabins near Sugarbush in Vermont. Within two-years Sellers and Gluck each purchased vacant land with the ambi- house for his parents in Westhampton, NY. Upon graduation, favor to Gluck by assisting with the construction of a beach and entrepreneur to develop a project and hire himself to be the architect? Not only did this create a crisis for the figure of the architect as professional steward, it destabilized the notion of architectural production as a translation of drawing to building by privileging the procedures of development: studying urban growth patterns, marketability, feasibility, cost, income projections, and financing, ahead of architectural design itself. However, Portman maintains that his architecture is not solely governed by the bottom line and instead informs and comple- ments his development proforma in order to be a master coordinator of the city. In his own words:

“If architects can anticipate the future by understanding growth patterns, if they understand real estate values, if they understand market conditions and market feasibili- ties, and if they understand the financial climate that makes it right to do something or not do something, then they will be able to design the city and not just individual buildings.”

Portman was critical of the modernist agenda championed by Corbusier, Niemeyer, and others, citing his 1961 visit to Brasilia as a turning point away from traditional modernism. He would later argue that his buildings created a new type of urban environment privileging human experience, which is cor- roborated by Fredric Jameson’s account of the Bonaventure Hotel decades later.

Although Portman’s ambitions as architect-as-developer were grandiose, similar efforts were being rehearsed in schools of architecture at a much smaller scale. Two Yale School of Architecture students are credited with creating a design-build culture at the school beginning in 1962 when Peter Gluck and David Sellers (class of ’65) took time off to build a house for Sellers’ brother. A year later, in 1963, Sellers would return the favor to Gluck by assisting with the construction of a beach house for his parents in Westhampton, NY. Upon graduation, Sellers and Gluck each purchased vacant land with the ambition to build and sell their architectural designs. Sellers teamed up with former classmate, William Reinecke, to build for-profit ski cabins near Sugarbush in Vermont. Within two-years of graduation, Gluck had completed several houses, which were featured in Progressive Architecture’s July, 1967 issue, Involvement, with his second beach house nabbing the cover. The article championed his entrepreneurial spirit:

“Gluck, like many of his Yale contemporaries (May and November 1965 P/A), is plunging head-on into architec- ture—designing, building, developing—without wading through a long apprenticeship, or waiting for the client to come to him.”

Although Gluck achieved early success in getting his work built, the article is misleading because the three built houses featured (the fourth never made it past the model stage), all were client-commissioned—whether he approached the client or the client approached him is unclear—but nonetheless his achievements were unusual. Perhaps the optimism of the writer comes from the promise of Gluck’s acquisition of 100 acres of ski country in Warren, Vermont, likely pur- chased on the heels of his former classmates David Sellers and Reinecke’s success, who were more exemplary of the architect-entrepreneur model. They were written about thirteen months earlier in Progressive Architecture with even greater enthusiasm for their Prickly Mountain project: a 600- acre tract in Sugarbush, Vermont where the duo would sell for-profit ski cabins. After completing their first cabin, The Tack House, Seller and Reinecke had five more cabins in the works, and sold several lots to other young architects, two of their former classmates from Yale. The writer’s excitement is hard to contain in his opening paragraph of the article:

“Are you ready? Two lumbering mountaineers just out of Yale Architecture have a project going called Prickly Mountain, which is a Budding Sun-and-Ski area near Sugarbush and Mad River, Vermont, and they’re putting down the Establishment by acting as entrepreneur and speculator, and contractor and craftsmen, as well as architects, and doing the whole blooming thing them- selves. It’s architectural blast-off.”

Politically, the anti-establishment sentiment came from many sources during this time period (and is extensively written about elsewhere), but as fresh graduates of architecture school, unlicensed and circumventing apprenticeships at corporate offices, they undermined the professionalism the architecture establishment stood for. Although the 1964 revision of the AIA’s Code of Ethics permitted the type of contracting work at Prickly Mountain on the grounds that the architect was also the owner, Sellers and Reineke were not yet ‘architects’ in the eyes of the AIA. This technical misalignment in architectural ethics exemplified the struggle for relevancy the discipline and the profession would face over the coming decades, and still faces today.

AIA ethics aside, it is rare that one can place a figure like John Portman and privileged hippie-students from Yale in the same sentence, but they were each trumpeting a similar message to architects: learn and understand finance or you’ll be left behind. For Sellers, when asked about his interest in economics, he quickly responds:

“I’m not ‘interested’; I have to know it. I think that the archi- tects who don’t know how things are paid for, and who don’t know why things have got to make money, I think, are irresponsible to their field. Architecture has got to be a profit-making thing; there’s no question about it. It’s a com- modity; it’s a saleable item; and its gotta be made to work
for somebody, or else he’s not going to spend dough on it. But most architects can’t make anything that his client can afford even though any half-wit speculator seems to be able to make something that doesn’t leak, stays warm, and you can see out of, and he usually does it so people can afford it—and he gets rich. That seems out of the scope of most architects.” 14

While Portman’s interests were focused on urban development at a time when city centers were struggling, much of the ecocentric design-build movement exemplified by Yale students operated at the scale of the house. Though each camp would argue for similar social goals of making better spaces for people, their divergence was a question of how best to achieve it. For Portman, it was gigantic atrium spaces, which cost upwards of $500,000.00 to heat annually, while Sellers and Reinecke were happy to huddle around their wood burning stove in a diagonally-pointed hut they built themselves with local lumber. Portman had multiple ‘people-movers’ or elevators taking visitors hundreds of feet into the upper strata of his lobbies, while Seller’s argued for sharp pitch of The Tack House’s roof with this:

“We may pitch a roof because it’s more economical and efficient, but also so that when you’re at the top of your building you know you’re at the top. And these are real things—how you live—rather than what somebody is going to think of the thing as a picture.” 15

To be sure, Portman and the young Yale students were very concerned with human experience while operating at vastly different scales. In each case there are entrepreneurial architects entering into real estate: one living off the land and the other syndicating millions of dollars to build towers.

Mediating between the scale of the atrium hotel and ski cabin is Sea Ranch, featured in the very same issue of Progressive Architecture as Seller’s and Reineke’s Prickly Mountain project, developed by Al Boeke, planned by landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, and designed by MLTW (Moore, Lyndon, Turnbull, and Whitaker) along with Joseph Esherick. Sea Ranch was an ambitious residential development of 10,000 acres along Northern California’s rugged coastline, and was meant to offer an alternative to suburban development. For the purpose of this paper, what stands out is that the developer, Al Boeke, was first an architect, though far lesser known in the architecture world as Portman. Boeke worked for Oceanic Properties, developer-subsidiary of the multinational conglomerate Castle & Cooke, also responsible for Dole Pineapples among other products.16 Boeke was also unique in that he turned to a landscape architect to masterplan the community. Halprin emphasized environmental conservation in his planning through deed-restricted parcels with form-based design codes. These were new tools and devices for the architect to consider as both a constraint but also a design-instrument to govern architectural space.

While these transformations illustrate new challenges for the practicing architect, schools of architecture were adapting as well. Perhaps inspired by the successes of recent graduates like Gwathmey,17 Gluck, Sellers, and Reinecke who immediately built projects right out of school (and often with their own hands), in 1966 under the chairmanship of Charles Moore, Yale faculty Peter Millard, Paul Mitarachi and Felix Drury ran an advanced studio course designing and building a cabin for disadvantaged youth at Camp Farnam in Connecticut. A year later, Moore formally established the Yale Building Project, pursuing similar socially-minded issues through full-scale design-build projects.18 Pedagogically, the program was designed to inaugurate first-year students into the world of architecture through the challenges of designing and making a building for a real-world client who was not wealthy but economically disadvantaged.

The design-build frenzy at Yale did not spread as readily to other schools aside from minor student-driven alterations to their studio space as seen at MIT in 1967 and UT Austin under the leadership of Yale alumni Howard Barnstone. However, real estate emerges as a distinct field of study separate from business or law at NYU in 1967 with the founding of The Real Estate Institute, which addressed concerns about how committed professionals could further their education.19 It would be a decade and a half later that MIT followed suit with their Center For Real Estate founded by real estate developer and MIT alum Charles Spaulding in 1983.20 Several other Ivy League schools, such as Harvard also established one-year master degree programs that same year, which I will return to towards the end of the paper.

Real Estate enabled architects like Portman and the Yale graduates to establish new roles for the architect through development and building. Within three years of the 1964 AIA Code of Ethics release, the document’s position on contracting was in crisis leading to a 1967 revision, prompting a special task force to be assembled under the chairmanship of Jack D. Train. Their findings, published in 1970 showed a confused and frustrated profession debating language and words like constitutional lawyers:

“It took very little examination before the task force uncovered the basic difficulty with all rules and regulations: do the words have clear meaning, and does the rule deal with the real issue; or is it an accommodative regulation that only accommodates the issue as it was seen at the time the rule was written? For instance, what does the word ‘engage’ mean in the 1.3 statement? Does it mean to perform, or to own a company that does perform? If it means to perform building contracting, should there be any distinction between performing as building contractor on projects for which you performed as architect and those for which you had no architectural role?” 21
Ultimately, the task force’s proposed standards of ethical practice made no mention of building contracting, and instead stressed the matter of conflicts of interest in paragraph 7 of ‘obligations to client’:

“An architect shall not undertake any activity, have any significant financial or other interest, or accept any contribution that either compromises his professional judgement or prevents him from serving the best interest of his client or employer.”  

Upholding professional dignity in service of the client was the AIA’s primary objective. However, the design-build debate continued over the next decade, and the architect-as-developer model ushered in by Portman saw great success, rendering the semantics of the AIA’s wording ambiguous and ethically fraught. Who really was the client? For Portman, it was technically himself along with his investor Trammell Crow, the Dallas real estate developer, but from Portman’s disciplinary perspective, it was the public and his building’s users who were soon to experience downtown Atlanta remade. Promotion of the public good by any means necessary would later become the AIA’s defining rhetoric of a transformed profession.

During the tumultuous years of AIA’s ethics debate, Portman completed the Regency Hotel in 1967 and essentially established a new typology for hospitality design. Architecturally, the atrium hotel was a big deal, yet he received little recognition from the profession. While Portman is often pegged as just another developer, the amount of public space he devoted to the lobby and atrium defied the typical proforma, which illustrated a measureable translation of space into dollars. In other words, it was Portman the architect who was behind the atrium lobby, using the proforma to substantiate what would have been discarded by most developers as wasted space. Until this point, the tools to communicate architecturally relied on drawings or models, but for Portman as an architect-developer, his spatial argument took the form of a financial document insisting on an unprecedented architectural space to his permanent mortgage lenders. Portman’s model was well in motion and though his professionalism was in question by the AIA, other practitioners were following suit. In 1969 Progressive Architecture released an issue titled “The New Master Builders Crowd The Architects’ Domain”, which mocked the AIA’s struggle for relevancy against package-builders, construction management firms, technical consultants, and developers who were rapidly displacing architects.xxiv Then, a year later in 1970, Progressive Architecture published an issue “Architect-as-Developer” spelling out in detail the nuts-and-bolts of real estate development.xxv The opening editorial by Forrest Wilson addresses the AIA’s ethical dilemma with a cartoon of architect split down the middle; one half in a drafting coat carrying a T-square, and the other half dressed in a plaid business suit.

The following year, in 1971, the AIA held a workshop titled Architect as Land Developer.xxvi

Between task forces and annual conventions, the AIA continued to debate questions of the architecture profession engaging in land development, construction, and real estate investment. Much of the AIA’s ethics were left open to interpretation by the members themselves albeit with a hail-mary decree of serving the public interest above all else.xxvii What was really at stake here is an architect’s relationship to the public and other architects. Until the 1960s, the AIA served as a club of professionals where the possibility of free-market promiscuity leading architects to bid against one another was deemed fool play. However, by the 1970s the gloves came off, not only amongst the profession itself, but also through the antitrust crusade of the US government.xxviii Architects were among other professions including doctors and lawyers that could no longer collude to set minimum standards for fees, which the government deemed akin to robber-baron monopolies and felt that free-market competition was the public’s answer.xxix

While the AIA 1970 Task Force let go of wording preventing architects from engaging in contracting, they upheld several decrees that architects shall not self-promote, solicit, or compete amongst each other. By 1977, after another major revision, the AIA suspends the mandatory code of ethics for a better part of a decade, leaving the document as an ethical guidebook instead. Marketing activities in the 1977 version show a profession in desperate need of self-promotion with the permittance of newsletters, brochures, phonebook ads, and the ability to donate money to public causes, although the AIA stopped short of allowing architects to purchase ads in public media.xxx With the restriction of self-promotion loosened for the first time, architects were free to market themselves like never before.

In these intervening years, the design-build excitement waned due to increased liability concerns. For the AIA, even as early as 1964, the issue of professional liability insurance was identified as the lynchpin for the newly expanded roles of the architect because the risk is far greater for the person who builds something than it is for the person who imagines it on a drafting board. The AIA’s debate would finally settle down with architects in charge of construction management, and perhaps in regrettable hindsight for ambitious young architects wanting to get their hand dirty in actual construction. This is an important point for several reasons. First, the work undertaken by Yale students in the 1960s (and many back-to-earth commune movements thereafter) was primarily concerned with building architecture themselves. While the term design-build still conjures up the Howard Roark’s of the world welding steel and cutting rock from quarries, very few contemporary design-build architects actually swing a hammer. Construction management or general-contracting...
is more accurate in describing someone overseeing a group of subcontractors who actually build architecture. In the managerial role of constructing buildings, the AIA was less anxious of the relationship between architect-as-manager-of-design evolving into architect-as-manager-of-construction because it was already par for the course for on-site architects carrying out construction administration, and certainly upheld AIA's idea of the architect-as-professional. In terms of risk, the construction manager could seek damages from the subcontractor, ultimately shifting liability elsewhere when problems arose. For the architecture profession, assuming the role of construction manager was an easier sell than pouring foundations.

For David Sellers, the ambition of being an architect and master builder led him to teach at one of the first design-build programs at Goddard College from 1972-1978. Sellers continues to be involved in design-build education through his affiliation with Yestermorrow, a design-build school in Vermont, where he sits on the advisory board in addition to teaching.31 While design-build continues to be a popular project delivery system in the construction industry, it has been less attractive for practicing architects, though dozens of architecture schools today now offer design-build studios.32 However, real estate as an academic discipline readily enters into schools of architecture as mentioned earlier with MIT establishing a one-year master’s program in 1983 along with Harvard, Columbia, Texas A&M, and University of Southern California by 1986.

While the study of real estate is formally established in architecture schools, the 1987 AIA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct marks the last major revision for decades to come. While minor revisions were made thereafter, no sweeping structural change has occurred since.33 In the 1987, version no mention of marketing is made although campaign contributions to public officials are deemed acceptable if they conform to state and federal law.34 Comparing this document to previous iterations 23 years earlier, reveals a radically changed account of the website Archbazar.com that allows the public to upload a competition of their own, while (potentially) thousands of architects compete for a three-way split of the prize

The Ethical Imperative

...
money.9 Although Gage stops short of speculating on what a new model of practice might be, it is clear the profession is experiencing deja vu, again. In 1959, Henry Saylor began his chapter on Competitions and Ethics in The AIA’s First Hundred Years with a look in the rearview mirror:

“From the viewpoint of a century afterward, it is difficult for us to accept the fact that the whole question of professional ethics in the The Institute’s early days centered about competitions. We have become so accustomed to the minor role played by the competition in our architectural practice of today that it is hard to believe that the competition idea in the days of The Institute’s early youth was perhaps the most disturbing factor in the relations of architect to architect and architect to potential client.” 38

Clearly, Saylor and his peers were still safely protected by their Code of Ethics, and were seemingly unaware of the transformations to come within a decade. To help situate late nineteenth century architectural concerns to those reading his book in 1959, Saylor recalls when AIA President (1857-1876) Richard Upjohn, addressed a crowd of members regarding the New York AIA Chapter’s referral to enter a competition for the city’s new post office:

“It is not my purpose, in general address of this nature, made in a corporate capacity, to give an ‘ex cathedra’ utterance to individual opinions, or to anticipate the results of individual reflection and judgement on the part of others; but I feel as if I should not fully discharge my duty to my younger professional brethren, if, after extensive opportunities and long experience, I should omit all allusion to a subject, the effects of the facts of which have, according to my observation, produced much evil, and only evil, to the profession. I allude to the competition—general competition—a sorry subject for architects. It burns the fingers of those who meddle with it; it is a chronic infatuation, an ‘ignis fatuus’, a Will-o’-the-Wisp.” 39

While Mark Gage and Richard Upjohn differ in prose, their message is the same: competition be damned. For young architects struggling to find work, the architecture competition offers the promise of a lotto-ticket—statistically fraught, but mythically beyond measure—that is, if you win. What Upjohn saw as the antidote to pure evil, many architects were happy to ignore. Perhaps Howard Shaw, the AIA’s 1927 gold medalist, said it best in his response to the Canons of Ethics: “Be a gentleman if you can, but for God’s sake be an architect.” 40 With seemingly all the market-restrictive barriers removed from the 1964 AIA Code of Ethics, many architects still find it difficult to practice today. Sadly, for Mark Gage and the rest of the wishful up-and-comers, history tells us that an architecture club will not suffice. However, the 150-year legacy of the AIA illustrates a profession slow to adapt while displaced by external competition. Only recently, and in hindsight, have architects like John Portman emerged as a relevant figure to contemporary practice.41 But instead of inspiring the next generation of architects, Portman has had more influence on a generation of developers.42 For the Yale students pursuing design build, Peter Gluck stands out with his continued success under Gluck+; a design-build practice based in New York. While there are many contemporary but lesser known examples of architecture practices pursuing design-build and development (El Dorado, Jonathan Segal, Heyday, to name a few) and a dozen architecture schools have added real estate MSRE and MSRED programs since 2000, architects have not regained the professional relevancy they once had. Architects in both academia and practice still suffer from a common pathology: we don’t talk about money.

ENDNOTES

2 Henry H. Saylor, The AIA’s First Hundred Years (Washington DC, 1957) p.64.
3 Saylor, The AIA’s First Hundred Years, p.98.
4 The American Institute of Architects, Memo #308 regarding The AIA Standards of Professional Practice, December 14, 1964 (questions related to obligation 1.4) p.4.
5 AIA, Memo #308 (questions related to obligation 1.3) p.3.
6 AIA, Memo #308 (exceptions to obligation 1.3) p.4.
8 Portman and Barnett, Architect as Developer, p.136.
9 Ben Loeterman, director “John Portman: A Life of Building” 2011. Film.
10 Frederic Jameson “Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism” New Left Review, no.146 (1984) p.80-85 Jameson describes the Bonaventura hotel in great detail as a totalizing environment and contrasts the space it creates as vastly different from the monuments of International Style.
17 Gwathmey graduated from Yale in 1962 and saw early success building beach houses as an unlicensed architect, but like Gluck, his work was largely client driven (Gwathmey also did a beach house for his parents) and it is unclear how committed he was to design-build though one of his beach houses is featured in Progressive Architecture’s May, 1965 issue. With a budget of $15,000, which he allegedly met, Gwathmey may have done some of the contracting work himself.
The Ethical Imperative

32 Most notably among these schools is Rural Studio, founded by Sam Mockbee in 1993 at Auburn University. Similar design-build programs exist Louisiana Tech, University of Kansas, UNC Charlotte, and University of Washington to name a few. The ACSA lists 26 academic institutions with design-build programs on their website: “community design directory” Accessed September 13, 2017 http://www.acsa-arch.org/resources/data-resources/community-design.
33 In conversation with the AIA’s archivist, Nancy Hadley, January, 2016.
34 xxxiv The American Institute of Architects, Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, 198
37 Gage, “Rot Munching Architects”, p.23.
38 Henry H. Saylor, The AIA’s First Hundred Years (Washington DC, 1957) p.98.
39 Saylor, The AIA’s First Hundred Years, p.99 (Saylor does not cite a date for this speech, so I can only offer the date sometime between Upjohn’s presidency between 1857-1876, and the possibility that the post office in question is The City Hall Post Office in New York).
40 Saylor, The AIA’s First Hundred Years, p.105.
42 Ben Loeterman, director “John Portman: A Life of Building” 2011. Film.