

Slapped by a File Cabinet

June 22, 2011



When I moved my office a few years ago, I was forced to tackle a passel of lumbering beasts—file cabinets chock full of three decades worth of clippings, articles, notes, and more. It was a bittersweet purge and a poignant reminder of how much my relationship with information has changed. At one time, it actually made sense to accumulate and meticulously catalogue endless tidbits of written ephemera. After all, I imagined it one day becoming critical to a flow of erudite observations on architecture and the human condition. That’s how my college thesis in architecture came to be the development of an index system that could cover the vast breadth of knowledge that touches architecture. Then, like a miner with pick and shovel, I spent years digging out knowledge the hard way—from books and magazines. Obsolescence of all that paper hit me like a hard slap on the face. Ouch!

Today, volumes of information are close at hand to everyone on the Web, which, behind the scenes, is a database. We find it in seconds—and grumble that access is never fast enough for our frantic pace. The challenge: digesting vast quantity so we might determine quality.

Our new Web-centric model at the AIACC is a foundation that allows content to originate from diverse sources. Information management is at its core. With the framework we have set in motion, we are ready to engage the Web more fully than ever before, a step toward a future where most of our interactions will be Web-based.

The AIACC is the voice of the architectural profession. Our Web presence is our most visible face to the world. It must convey a message even before beginning to consider words. With design alone, we strive to communicate that Design Matters to us, to our communities, and to the human condition.

We want our Web presence to do many things, for several different sorts of readers. We want the public to be thrilled by the beauty and grace of design and excited about the contributions of architects to solving business problems or shaping the community. We want members to be able to find continuing education. We want non-members to be interested in joining the party, and so on.

Even with all the attention we have given to who we are talking to and what we are trying to say, I strongly believe that the most important decision made in creating AIACC’s new Web presence was to base it on a Content Management System (CMS) platform. The advantages are huge: it’s easy to update, whether for security or refurbishing our graphics; it’s easy to post, with the potential for distributed content origination (committees, for example, could keep their own portion of the site up to date); and it’s robust in its ability to adapt to emerging trends and new needs.

The AIACC is working on some common sense policies for Web messaging, along these lines:

Pull is better than push. Readers should be able to pull information they most value. We are moving away from a model where our members sort through information pushed out to them. Technology is moving in this direction: RSS feeds and “preference subscriptions” are examples. Menu based organization allows readers to quickly see what content is new and of interest.

Members choose their channel. We move messages through various channels to provide our members and public followers a choice. Readers choose the channel and platform they prefer and choose the content they are interested in. It is our task to make sure we are using platforms that are appropriate to the message and venue. This is a moving target that will constantly need to be tweaked, with an ever-expanding array of platforms.

Email blasts are bad. We reserve them for emergencies only. Any broadcast message has a potential of being more of an annoyance to our members than a benefit.

Brevity is good. We're all in a hurry. The shorter a message can be without losing content, the better. Nuff said.

Our brand is professional. The voice of the AIACC has a personality. It's clear, calm, reasoned, ethical, and trustworthy. It's consistent, thoughtful, and, when appropriate, optimistic and cheerful.

Design matters; that includes graphic design. Our graphic character is consistent across platforms and meets a standard of excellence that reflects our concern for design that matters. We believe in the power of design. We don't forget that, ever.

Consistency is essential. Every message, on every platform and vehicle, carries the same core content and follows our brand styling. Our mission and vision are always reflected in what we say.

Coherent organization. There is one AIA, expressed at three levels of organization. Components are where the rubber hits the road—and the primary connection with our members. The regional AIA takes on issues that are statewide in breadth and thus not effectively addressed by a chapter. The national AIA takes on issues that are national in breadth. We are moving in the direction of one AIA on the web, as technology makes that possible.

Selling or telling? The miracle of Google is the monetization of information organization. There is a big difference, though, in finding information on “dieting” from a site put up by a vendor of diet pills versus the National Institutes of Health. One site is monetized as a primary motive, the other is not. Architecture is esteemed in the public eye; the AIACC must maintain a clear separation from monetization of its Web presence. We are trusted advisors, with the public interest at our ethical foundation. When we give space to our sponsors, it's detached from our message.

The Next Frontier

Surveys of our members make it clear they want us to tackle a tough challenge: broadly increasing public awareness of the important contributions of California architects in shaping great places that inspire and delight us while serving our needs, in leading our communities to a sustainable future, and in solving ordinary problems in the built environment in extraordinary ways by invoking the power of design. Even better: touch the policy makers, the developers who are place creators, and leaders in business and commerce. Public relations are the holy grail of a comprehensive AIACC Communications program. Clearly, our robust and diverse Awards Programs will be a key element in this emerging program. We will also be looking to the success of others; examples range from AIA San Francisco's innovative and successful Architecture and the City program to AIA New York's use of the subway system—going where the people are—to showcase their members' work.

We are at the starting gate in this effort: stay tuned!



About AIACC

The AIACC represents the interests of more than 11,000 architects and allied professionals in California. Founded in 1944, The AIACC's mission supports architects in their endeavors to improve the quality of life for all Californians by creating more livable communities, sustainable designs and quality work environments. Today, The AIACC is the largest component of the National AIA organization.