THE OPEN HOUSE AND THE THREE-WEEK UTOPIA

Architects from emerging firms discuss the promises and perils of design leadership—and see light at the end of the tunnel. moderated by C.C. Sullivan | illustrations by Saro Jane Laska

Design leadership is a challenge for any practice, but the hazards are magnified for the small firm: Margins are tighter, projects more scarce, and relationships more critical. Yet it is often emerging designers who make the greatest impact on the future of the built environment, especially on the local level. To consider what design leadership means for today's budding practitioners, Architecture *invited principals from some of the country's most promising young firms for a frank discussion.*

C.C. SULLIVAN: You tend to use your practices as vehicles for accelerating innovation, encouraging social progress, or for offering pure aesthetic guidance. Why do architects take on such missions?

ZOKA ZOLA: I feel that there is a call, a craving, for innovation in design, but the producers—the whole building industry, including all professionals—are not prepared to take it on. So leading is the most effective thing to do.

PABLO CASTRO: They say that you can recognize the leaders by the number of arrows in their backs.

MARIO GOODEN: The public doesn't ask us to be design leaders; it's more complacent now than it's ever been. And the profession is complacent and passive. Everyone's just kind of sitting back, saying, "Feed me information, let me watch television or the new DVD, let me play my Game Boy." It's for us to find a way to challenge the status quo.

RON WITTE: We run a huge risk in underestimating the public and its interest in design. Generalizing a negative sentiment only precludes our ability to be proactive.

CASTRO: And the public as such doesn't really exist. So is it legitimate to base our work on the stated opinion of the public as gathered by statistics, and adjust ourselves to the preconceptions of the day in order to get built?

GOODEN: Leadership implies to me that we should be out in front, not sitting back taking the temperature. It involves working with people and negotiating, but I don't necessarily see that happening anywhere.

TERESA ROSANO: It's not the vast public but the neighbors [of project sites] we have most difficulty with, who are the most complacent—about sprawl, the wastefulness of always using air conditioning—and along with that is fear of change; they go hand in hand. The neighborhoods have quite a bit of power, not so much to do good but to stop projects—to keep the status quo. That's difficult to combat, because you don't have a direct relationship with them.

VINCENT SNYDER: A lot of the disciplinary territories have shifted, and now the contractor is really in the position of having a dialogue with the client.

PAUL ENDRES: There's a big gap right now between the design and what's built. You don't often get much more from the owner than a desire for a project that's economic but still provides some life.

SULLIVAN: It sounds like the client often impedes progress.

WITTE: In fact, clients are quite interested in getting good design, and they'll play an alpha role in the process.

OLIVIER TOURAINE: But we have to force that, no?

WITTE: It's simply a matter of doing it. Everything we do is seeded in a kind of fiction: Somebody says, "I have $10 million to build a building" and there's nothing there, it's vapor. And you say, "Well, here's what that vapor might produce if I were given the commission." That's what I mean by fiction; if we simply learned how to write better fiction, we'd be a lot better off.

TOURAINE: For single-family housing, clients are sometimes ready to go for whatever you design. But then they say, "Well, wait a minute, if we move to Kansas City in five years, we'll need to be able to sell it at market price." This market condition—it's like a retirement fund—makes even audacious people kind of stuck.

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