

Does Better & Faster Equal Smarter?

By Barry B. LePatner, Esq.

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During the course of this year's annual three-day program at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, which celebrated its 10th anniversary this year, A. Eugene Kohn, FAIA, the prominent architect and founding principal of Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates P.C., and I engaged in a spirited debate over the increasing effect of technology upon the design/construction world.

My presentation focused on how three controlling factors — advances in technology, the global economy and the increased speed of connectivity — were radically re-shaping the way that real estate and design professionals are managing the design/build process. Mr. Kohn's comment during the discussion that followed, was: "While I am very aware of the many advantages that technology brings to the profession of architecture - in particular speed with which we can communicate, send and receive information on our projects, I am also aware that speed does not necessarily bring the best results in terms of design." Gene argued, "the computer does not provide answers without input from the architect. The human mind has not become any faster in making decisions just because the computer has gained speed."

The attendees, who ranged from principals of major architectural and engineering firms, to marketing directors, to leaders of firms from across the country and several nations abroad, had come to Harvard to hear brilliant presentations from marketing experts such as Roslyn Brandt of Brandt Resources in New York City, Kevin Kelly of Shook Design Group, Charlotte, N.C., Donatella Giacometti of Ten Second World, and Faye Manker of Sprint Communications as well as the silver-haired and silver-tongued Kohn.

The highly interactive program teaches marketing and presentation skills through a range of group discussions, skills training, branding exercises and performance critiques that have, for the past ten years, made this program one of the most highly-rated of Harvard's summer series. Inherent in all aspects of what is taught, is that there is no one right way to market your services; finding what is comfortable for you and your firm is what truly works.

The roundtable held by program leaders and attendees at the end of the first day, gravitated back to the exchange between Gene and myself and his comment on my earlier reference to the growing effect of the latest technology on professional services today. This sparked a lively discussion. Gene expressed his concern that the design professional should beware of blind acceptance of and reliance upon tools that speed up the process and jeopardize the thinking that is an integral part of the design process. "Without the requisite experience," he argued, "the human factor that architects and other design professionals need to develop, cannot be substituted by the speed that the new technology offers." Gene illustrated this cautionary concern for technology and the workplace by considering, "Would you want a doctor who never diagnosed a type of cancer or performed a surgery to advise you? Would you want a lawyer who never tried a case to defend your life in court? Experience allows a professional to perform at his or her best. An architect who has designed and built buildings - who has experience in a building type can more readily see - arrive at - the best solution and achieve outstanding architecture."

Gene was responding to the trend I had described earlier in my speech: the forecast of a serious threat to the older, established design firms from younger, smaller firms who were becoming savvy users of technology that more closely matched the technology being used by today's corporations and institutions to meet their own project objectives. This new generation of professionals is closely attuned to the myriad advantages of marrying quality design with the wonderful new tools that can make the process of designing and constructing a facility exciting and more effective. Gene cautioned that, "while this generation of professionals may be closely in tune with technological advances and are enormously energetic and facile with the computer, they still need experience to serve their client well. Speed in decision-making can lead to excessive costs. Costs will be incurred due to lease expiration or escalation, but speed for speed's sake can lead to serious errors or oversight. Not every project needs to be done at breakneck speed even when technology permits." We both agreed that if the technological revolution continues, as it most surely will, it will be difficult for today's mainstream design professionals to resist the need to "walk the walk" and "talk the talk" of staying in lockstep with their clients' need for faster, better, smarter.

While acknowledging that this trend was inevitable, however, Gene cautioned that there was danger whenever we envisioned a blind commitment to a fast-evolving technology. "We can't afford to have individuals spending the better part of their day in front of a computer." Gene spoke to the imperative that "the human relationship" must remain at the heart of all client-professional interaction. He noted that the age old quote of "Haste makes waste" is still valid.

As a humanist and "people person", I wholeheartedly endorse the critical importance of invoking and maintaining the trust and personal connection of relationships with clients. Furthermore, I agree wholeheartedly with Gene that there cannot be an excellent solution to design problems that does not embrace one's breadth of experience as part of the solution. But as Bob Dylan penned thirty years ago, "the times they are a-changin'." We are seeing a new young generation of professionals who are totally comfortable with a computer screen in front of them which functions as an extension of their daily living experience. They instant message with ten friends across the country, research their school papers, download their favorite songs from Napster, "read" news off CNN.com, book their concert tickets off the Internet, and, yes, at the same time, design new projects totally on CADD - all while talking on the phone, eating and watching TV!

These young professionals, masters of multi-tasking, will in a few short years be leaders in their respective fields, and have a decade or more of high speed connectivity expertise behind them. Equally important, is the fact that gen X-ers and their ilk are rapidly filling the ranks of corporate, governmental and institutional leadership where they will be comfortable relating to their equally computer-savvy design compatriots.

Will all of this lead to a radical way in which buildings and interiors are designed and constructed in the years ahead? Will there be a backlash by the design professionals who will resist the imposition of technology into the process, insisting all the while on the sanctity and value of handwritten drawings and sketches to carry on work? Gene believes that "while virtual reality is quite amazing, it still does not replace reality. I believe that the creative contributions from the hand of people will become even more valuable as technology advances and that it is this balance of human contribution and technology that will truly improve the quality of our lives." Will today's

architectural schools see this trend for what it is and respond to the call for more of a balance in design education?

Mr. Kohn isn't arguing the importance of technology, nor is he arguing for a backlash by design professionals who resist the imposition of technology into the process. What he is arguing is that less time, *i.e.*, the rush to design, may adversely affect the outcome of a building. He states: "It is a fact that almost all new buildings are a prototype but do not have an advantage of testing the product before it is complete and turned over to the owner as compared to the manufacture of cars, TV sets etc. Sufficient time, therefore, is required to consider all the details of a building because all buildings have very long lives compared to TV sets and cars."

While I agree with Gene Kohn on the importance of what time and experience bring to the "right solution" for every project, I believe we are entering an era when there will be new definitions of what the "right solution" will be for tomorrow's clients. We will always need quality thinking and the benefit of design professionals who have been there before. But if that thinking becomes accelerated by a generation of experience that has been trained to do it "better, faster and smarter", will we be the worse off for it? Knowing the caliber of the young professionals I have met around the country, as well as those in our own office, I think we will be just fine.

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