

*Notes from a presentation by Richard Farson*

## **Embracing the Paradoxes of Sustainability**

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Pleasure to be in the company of those professionals I think will change the world.

I've looked at the roster of participants and I believe I am the resident psychologist. Which suits me fine because I want to talk today about the psychology of furthering sustainability, how architects and designers think about it, and about how they think about themselves. I'm going to encourage you get them to think quite differently.

We have known about the need for sustainability for half a century. It is not new. In spite of the seeming progress made, we have to understand why making it real is so difficult. After all this time, green buildings are still a rarity. There are only 60 in the world that meet the Green Building Council's gold standards.

I have good news. I know what's wrong, what the problem is, and what to do about it!

It's really part of a much larger problem. Sustainability is just one of the areas of architects' proven capability in which they have difficulty making themselves felt. Among them:

The design of community

The design of facilities to promote education

The design of cities to reduce traffic  
The design of criminal justice systems  
The design of homes to improve relationships  
The design of environments for creativity  
The design of healthful situations of all sorts  
The design of experiences that can introduce us to a new way of relating to nature and to each other.

*I am arguing today that architects and all design professionals are frustrated in these areas because they are all now dominated by their clientele.* Not true of physicians, lawyers, professors. It is extremely dangerous for our society to let that happen. Dangerous to our health, to our families, to our communities, to our security, to our creativity, to our prosperity, to our democracy.

The next 50 years will determine the survival of our civilization. I don't refer only to the possibility of environmental disasters, but to the fragility and failures of almost all our institutions.

*We will succeed only if design becomes the organizing discipline of the future, and that will only happen when architects and designers become leaders.*

What will it take to restore architecture's leading role? I say restore because as Dick Swett's new book, *Leadership by Design*, clearly shows—architects once enjoyed tremendous respect. They were part of the higher councils of decision makers, created the Union League Club, took social issues seriously, advocated against slavery, associated with presidents.

It will take some study, some courage, some innovation, and some wrenching changes. Most especially it will require embracing some paradoxes, because ordinary rational thinking has gotten designers into an untenable position. They don't have the impact that they deserve. First of all, they need to think paradoxically.

In human affairs, paradox is the rule, not the exception

I have three paradoxes for you this morning. Seeming absurdities. When I was preparing this talk, I thought I'd start with the easiest to accept, but it turns out none is easy.

First, I need to make clear a fundamental paradox:

The opposite of a profound truth is also true.

Beauty in the eye of the beholder---also in the object  
Less is more---but less is also less

So if you find yourselves disagreeing with me today, just remember that to the extent that what I'm saying is non-trivial, the opposite is also true.

**#1 Business leadership and social responsibility are necessarily incompatible.**

*Give up the expectation that individual business leaders will see the light and become environmentally or socially responsible. Or even that they should.*

I have the good fortune to direct an online think tank composed of influential leaders. Since our product presumably is wisdom, I recently conducted a conference to help us understand what we mean by wisdom. I asked why we so seldom see the word leadership in the same sentence with the word wisdom. We often see courage, optimism, tenacity, vision, humor, decisiveness, etc. but not wisdom.

The former president of a major telecommunications company commented that perhaps wisdom and leadership were incompatible.

I was taken aback somewhat, but as we discussed wisdom further our definitions helped to explain what he meant. If we define wisdom as seeing the larger context of our actions, their long range effects and likely impact on humanity, one can easily understand why a CEO cannot consider all of those possibilities and still have the corporation remain competitive, delivering quarterly profits to shareholders.

They are not stupid, or even unaware. It's because the CEO has a different level of contribution to make to society---to help build a vibrant economy. Without such an economy, democracy is impossible. There has never been a democracy without a successful market system, so we are dependent upon the private sector for making sure we continue to have democratic freedom.

But, aren't we making progress with our approach to sustainability?

Not really. The fact that occasionally a green building happens has actually made matters worse because it reinforces our belief that we are on the right track, when we are not.

In psychological experiments we can give human subjects certain experiences that help them form concepts. Once formed, however, even if we attempt to extinguish those concepts by giving negative reinforcement (continuous "wrong" or "no" responses to their choices based on the concept, perhaps fifty or one hundred times) we find that then giving one "right" or "yes" will bring the concept back in full force.

I'm afraid that is what happens when we hear about a new green building.

Architecture has placed its bets on serving business, the private sector, developers, corporations. That's where the big money is. Wrong.

Since architects only design 2% of the custom buildings in US, (Michael Benedict's book) it's a bit of a stretch to say that big business, the private sector, has been all that supportive.

The more serious statistic I want us to consider today is that architects have designed 0% of the massive number buildings and systems that needed to be built, but weren't because the private sector has no interest, and architects have not made the case—shelter for the homeless, slum clearance, building communities, outreach programs beyond schools, new systems to improve communication, build relationships, enhance learning, conserve energy, promote health, etc.

These can only be built by the people who benefit, the taxpayers, the public.

But even the public sector won't build them until the case is made, creative solutions proposed and designers become the kind of leaders who can carry that message and influence those decisions.

*In its orientation toward the private sector, architecture has become more a business than a profession*

Architecture has commoditized itself. Turned itself into a commodity

Social scientists refer to commoditization as that process whereby a semi-sacred institution or profession (art, education, medicine, ministry, journalism, and architecture, etc.) is transformed into a saleable commodity, a marketable product, with packaging, advertising, market research, etc.

Many social critics believe that the rampant commoditization of all that we hold dear represents the greatest long term danger our society faces.

Take journalism, for example. Journalism is the vaunted Fourth Estate, bringing us the truth, protecting us from tyranny. Without journalism, we lose our democratic freedom.

But journalism, particularly broadcast journalism, where most people get their news, has become dominated by corporations that insist on high ratings, on the news department being a profit center, not a cost center. That has led to a celebrity orientation, loss of investigative reporting, and generally an emphasis on what has come to be called infotainment. As a result, we see situations like the following:

The three major TV networks presented a total of six news segments on the Downing Street Memo, that British memo about our fixing the intelligence leading up to the Iraq war, conceivably an impeachable offense. At the same time they produced a total of 465 segments on the Michael Jackson trial.

That is commoditization.

As a result, architects and designers have developed what Barry Lynch calls a vendor mentality rather than a peer mentality.

Great new book on this—Value Redesigned, by Kyle Davy and Susan Harris.

The consequence is that clients' projects are undertaken even though better judgment (professional judgment) would point in different directions.

If professional judgment prevailed, architects wouldn't design prisons with thousands of inmates, because they know that such prisons increase crime--make rehabilitation almost impossible, whereas units of fewer than twenty inmates have high probability of rehabilitation.

Similarly, they wouldn't design Wal-Mart or other big box stores, because they know that such development leads to the destruction of community.

*A profession is marked by its ability to say "NO".* But one needs the support of the profession to risk saying that.

Must move from business to profession, from market orientation to goal orientation, from meeting wants to meeting needs.

Enormous unmet worldwide need for shelter and healthier environments and for new systems of transportation, governance, education, penology, etc.

Architecture, unlike most other professions, has proven its ability to make a better world.

Architecture can not only protect our environment from pollution and prevent the exploitation of limited energy resources. It can truly improve peoples' lives.

Reduces all the indices of despair.

Through its ability to create community, and through its designs that enable children to grow up in healthy and beautiful environments, looking at greenery rather than cement walls, it can reduce

crime  
illness, mental and physical  
family dysfunction  
school failure  
alcoholism  
addiction  
divorce  
child abuse  
suicide

Other great professions cannot quite make such claims—education and medicine, for example

Yet these professions are underwritten by public financing for hundreds of billions of dollars annually. Their planning is in the trillions.

Designers have this power because they create situations (environments, forms, rituals, experiences, relationships, systems) and situations are far more determining of human behavior than are character, personality, habit, genetics, etc. Nobody smokes in church, no matter how addicted.

Let me ask you: *Is architecture as important as education?*

I think so, but architecture still has to make that case for itself. Then it can address the greater problems that most of you became architects to solve.

Architects, having chosen to be business oriented, have therefore become politically conservative, uneasy about drinking at the public trough.

Sustainability, however, is a public concern. The public must regulate and level the playing field for business to be socially

responsible. And the public must fund the many other ways in which architecture can make a better world.

I realize that requires a major shift in political posture. But think of what you could do with trillions of dollars.

The beauty of it is that with architecture we get that money back. The trillions are only an investment. When we reduce pollution, crime, divorce, addiction---and improve education, innovation, family health---our investment comes back to us.

That is why it's vital that architects become both professionals and leaders. As a byproduct, they will also increase their influence with the private sector. Indeed, they may be in a position to transform the private sector into a force for human growth.

**#2 Practices intended to increase respect for the profession actually lower it.**

Six ways architecture shoots itself in the foot. Becoming leaders is made difficult as long as these practices continue. They work in ways just the opposite of their intention.

### **Licensing.**

My experience as a licensed psychologist. I am uneasy about defining myself as a licensed psychologist. I think I'm much better than that. Licensing sets a minimum standard, but who wants to be there?

As for protecting the public, remember that the dangers are almost always from within the profession. The only psychologist to lose a malpractice suit in California in years back was at the time the chairman of the licensing board!

Counterproductive to limit use of the title “architect.” A person who uses the title scientist, artist, minister, professor, teacher, writer is not a threat to the people who are the real thing. Psychologists were more respected when anyone could use the term psychologist.

I would never refer anyone to just a licensed psychologist...and you wouldn't refer anyone to just a licensed architect.

George Bernard Shaw: “All professions are conspiracies against the laity.” Licensing doesn't protect the public. Keeps the profession small and expensive.

Graduates not getting licenses.....When I joined the AIA board about 50% of graduates planned to seek licenses, then it dropped to 30%. Recently an outstanding architecture senior, who had decided to become a kindergarten teacher, told me her studies suggested the number was more like 12%

Some of the best architects haven't been licensed—Wright, Fuller  
And some of the worst have been.

Does the public have to be protected against architects? What does that say?

## **Accreditation**

Accreditation is an exercise in accountability.

Ambrose Bierce, author of the Devil's Dictionary a century ago defined it: “Accountability is the mother of caution.”

Damper on innovation and creativity--always lags behind the cutting edge. Produces conventionality and does not foster education for leadership

Penalizes the most independent and possibly most imaginative programs.....and further penalizes the student

*Must distinguish between training and education. We can evaluate training, but not education*

Training is skill oriented, where we want everyone to be able to do the same things the same ways. But education is the wedding of the student's experience with great ideas and new concepts, in the hope that the student will integrate them and become a uniquely educated individual. So training makes people alike, but education makes them different. We can evaluate training, therefore, but not education.

Moreover, we want our students to transcend us, leave us behind. How can we evaluate that? Maya Lin received a "B" for her design of the Viet Nam veterans' memorial. Fred Smith was told that his plan for the creation of FedEx couldn't be submitted as a paper because only realistic projects were acceptable. And those were experiences at Yale.

We know that truly creative, paradigm-shifting breakthroughs are predictably responded to with ridicule, then hatred, then grudging acceptance. How then do we evaluate those breakthroughs?

The real problem with accreditation is not with the personalities or style of the committee, whose members are usually most considerate, but with the rigid rules they must enforce. So the problems come with the self-censorship that takes place before the committee ever shows up.

As long as this is how accreditation works, how are leaders going to emerge from accredited programs?

## Honors and Awards

Giving honors and awards is the sacred cow of architecture.

Architects get so many awards they count them like home runs. Stanley Tigerman, prominent, but not a superstar, has 110 awards. SOM has more than 800, The superstars can't even accept all they are offered. The Almanac of Architecture and Design devotes more than 250 pages to honors, awards and fellowships—doesn't include local awards. There are about 3,000 Fellows in the AIA (some are not even good architects, but have served the profession—been a member of a licensing committee, or put some interior designer out of business.)

When I became a psychologist, there were essentially no awards. One did not apply to be a Fellow. But we have changed and now operate the same way as the AIA and other design societies. We psychologists should know better, because all the research on A grades, gold stars, prizes, awards, plaques, ribbons, even praise, shows them to be counter-productive.

People work for the reward and no more. Prize winning becomes the goal.

Lawyers, physicians, professors, don't have award programs.

I'm not opposed to a pure, genuine, spontaneous, heartfelt honoring of individuals or organizations. But if it were free of ulterior motives--politics, favoritism, economic motivation, a sly way of advertising—free of orthodoxy, fashion, fads—free of any exploitation of the honoree, “Let's invite him to give a commencement address and give him an honorary doctorate rather than a speaking fee” I'm afraid when we apply those criteria,

eliminating the hidden agendas, there will be few honors and awards. There is a story behind almost every award to tarnish it.

Honors tend to position architects as serving only elites. Photos of honored work have little to do with how most people live, or how you might improve life for humankind

Wells Rich Green, the advertising agency, won't let its staff apply for awards because takes focus off serving the client

Isn't their something strange about applying to be honored? Apply to be a Fellow? Hardly the basis for leadership.

Two kinds of rewards—extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic rewards are counterproductive. Intrinsic rewards, coming from the work itself, are more motivating. Maybe the work of architecture is currently not intrinsically rewarding enough. Perhaps that's what we have to work on. .

Ralph Keyes and I were asked to write an article for the Harvard Business Review based on our book about success and failure, *Whoever Makes the Most Mistakes Wins: The Paradox of Innovation*. The article discussed, among other things, the counterproductivity of awards. We were given the McKinsey award for it.

## **Mandatory Education**

An oxymoron if I ever heard one.

What philosophy of education supports mandatory education?

It has no effect on improvement of practice.

What does mandatory education that say about architects? Are they so bad they need to be forced to take courses?

The Bush administration today decided that every member of its staff with a security clearance has to take a mandatory ethics course. Does that raise or lower our confidence in their practices?

Mandatory education is not just ineffective.....it's demeaning

Lifelong education, yes, of course. Mandatory education, no.

### **PAC Lobbying—financial contributions to legislators**

#### Legitimate Bribery

We must realize that giving money to reactionary legislators, who will vote to confine interior designers, will also enable them to vote to increase urban sprawl, environmental degradation, rupture communities. The process backfires, undermining architects larger goals.

The AMA paid millions to Neanderthal legislators to vote against national health plans, but these legislators also voted against racial integration, nutrition programs in schools, pollution control, etc. So we have the American Medical Association to thank for the fact that we are one of the least healthy nations in the developed world.

### **End internecine warfare**

Architects holding back other design professions is embarrassing.

*Another big difference between a business and a profession  
Businesses need to compete, professions need to collaborate.*

End internecine warfare—embrace interior designers, landscape architects, urban planners, industrial and graphic designers

Architecture, as the senior design profession can take the lead.

If architects are to design more than the present 2% of custom buildings, they will need to collaborate.

The work of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Design Century, is potentially so vast that architects are going to need all the help they can get.

All these current practices are unbecoming, barriers to leadership—licensing, accreditation, honors and awards, mandatory education, lobbying with money, internecine warfare with other design disciplines, commoditization, protectionism—all lower public esteem for architects, and consequently the leadership and clout of the profession. None of them existed when architecture was most respected.

### **#3 Give up being professionals.....become metaprofessionals**

Define Meta: A higher science of the same nature but dealing with more fundamental problems. (OED)

*Becoming metaprofessionals is the only way to address the great architectural challenges of this century.*

At this time, no profession is organized to meet its true goals

Take psychology. Since one quarter of the world's people have serious psychological difficulties, even if we doubled the size of the mental health professions and worked around the clock our effect would be infinitesimal. We must find ways to use lay resources, paraprofessionals, mass media, Internet, automated systems, etc.

Similarly, every profession must become a metaprofession—find ways for others to use what we know.

There are not enough designers to do the jobs I'm talking about, to meet the great social and planetary challenges.

It means you must become designers of design, orchestrating the work of others, raising your sights to include new challenges.

If all this seems overwhelming, remember, those who are doing what they were trained to do are obsolete.

The new management learning: Must destroy what works to try something risky, but might work better. Marshall McLuhan "If it's working, it's obsolete."

As a social scientist, I would like to offer more measured, more complex, more nuanced advice, but I'm afraid it boils down to a rather simple choice you must make—you can develop the leadership that will enable you to build a better world, achieve real progress toward sustainability and meet the other goals you have cherished since you were students, OR you can continue the protectionism and commoditization and demeaning practices that now characterize the profession. I don't see how you can have both leadership and the status quo.

Designers can still do business with business—but without expectations, and with the power of your professional standing—as peers.

While the big jobs are fixing the world, you can still do grand homes and buildings.....what I call gourmet architecture. Just because one is working on the problem of world hunger doesn't mean we shouldn't cook gourmet meals.

Designers already have what most leaders need. Designers are already good at seeing things in context, already understand the sweep of history, already are conversant in the arts, sciences and humanities (as are the best leaders), already are good at working in ensembles, already are environmentally aware, already understand the limits of technology, its backfiring nature, already are capable of a high level of creative thinking, already can appreciate the esthetic dimensions of leadership, its gracefulness and beauty.

The first step, then, is for designers to begin to imagine themselves as leaders – of design firms, of communities, of cultural organizations, of corporations, of government, of society.

Designers do not need to position themselves as second to anyone.

Tall order? Remember, big changes are easier to make than small ones.

You have a secret weapon: Why, in novels and movies, does the architect always get the girl? The psychologist doesn't. It's not because the architect knows how to fix electric plugs. It's because architects have a special mystique.

Throughout history architects are associated with greatness, with creativity and beauty and strength and the courage and drama of designing and building a great cathedral or thrilling skyscraper or a lush park or an exciting and beautiful city or a simple, elegant home.

None of the rest of the professions has quite that powerful a mystique. That's why the girl always goes for the architect.

Society will go for the architect too. Give society a chance.