

Small Firm Roundtable Questionnaire –  
Responses from Carl Elefante, FAIA

1. Seventy-nine percent of member-owned firms are small firms (under 10 employees). Large firms tend to have integral leadership training. What new steps will you take to increase access to leadership development training for members working in small firms?

Leadership training is important in two contexts: within the firm and in the community.

For years, I owned a small firm (seven staff). The experience helped me appreciate the value of every productive hour. Time for training must be purposeful and relevant. It also taught me that each chair needs to be occupied by a professional with broad skills and willingness to take on whatever challenges come. Leadership ability is a necessity, not a nicety. It's worth the investment.

The AIA Leadership Institute is a program that addresses both leadership contexts, helping architects develop as firm and industry leaders. The format is tailored to accommodate small firms by providing venues in multiple cities. It combines national speakers with local networking.

As AIA President I will with you work to expand the Leadership Institute by increasing venues and providing more scholarships to encourage broader participation.

Many local chapters do a terrific job developing leadership within their communities. For example, AIA Baltimore conducts the CivicLAB program to develop leadership skills and more deeply engage emerging architects in the community.

In 2013, local chapter programs were supported by the AIA Innovation Fund. In 2011 and 2012, Innovation Grants were awarded to the Small Projects Practitioners (SPP) Knowledge Community, Custom Residential Architects Network (CRAN) and the Small Firm Round Table (SFRT). Incentive programs like these bear fruit far beyond the dollars they cost. As AIA President I will work with you to fund innovation grant programs.

2. What would you say to a small firm practitioner who does not see the value of membership, would you do anything differently to increase or promote the value AIA provides?

A simple truth about AIA is that you get out what you put in. This doesn't mean that AIA can't be improved. It means that AIA has a great deal to offer those who get engaged.

AIA has an enormous job to do. The construction industry touches every city and town and intersects with every sector of the economy and society. There are thousands of AIA members who sketch their visions in pencil and thousands more who never touch pencil to paper. There are firms with work around the globe and others with work just around the corner.

Some of what AIA does supports practice almost universally. Where would the profession be without AIA contracts and specifications? If not the AIA, who would promote legislation like Good Samaritan laws that protect architects when they are most needed by their communities?

A great deal of what AIA does supports specific practices areas, including those relevant to small firms. There are twenty-one Knowledge Communities (KC's) open to all members. The Small Project Practitioners KC has nearly ten thousand members. There are hundreds of practice tools to support every type of practice.

Too frequently, AIA resources are difficult to access. In the era of Google and Amazon, there is no excuse for this. As AIA President, I will work with you to use 21<sup>st</sup> century solutions to make AIA's assets available to members. AIA Kinetic, developed by the Small Firm Round Table, is a model of what AIA can do.

### 3. What do you believe are the prime issues facing small firms?

From my personal experiences as a small firm owner and also from research conducted by the AIA and other industry sources, there are some difficult issues confronting nearly all small architectural firms. Most revolve around the challenges of limited resources. Also, architecture requires command of a broad range of skill sets. Small firm practitioners must wear many hats and switch hats at a moment's notice. Here are three issues that concerned me most as a small firm owner:

Marketing – Business development for small firms usually means getting pulled between doing current projects and chasing new ones. It's hard to avoid cycling from too-busy-to-do-marketing to not-enough-work-to-go-around. I always wished that AIA had more off-the-shelf marketing resources to use with clients; ones explaining what we do and how we do it. I believe AIA Kinetic could provide these resources if made a priority.

Staff Development – The issues addressed in your first question are challenging for small firms. I found the “family” feeling of my small firm extremely rewarding; yet, like a family, it's important for even the youngest child to reach adulthood. Investing in staff development can seem like “robbing Peter to pay Paul”. It's a difficult balance.

Keeping Up – Sometimes, I avoided architecture magazines. They only illustrated more ways we were falling behind. The challenge is to stay focused on what is relevant for your practice. With a sense of what's important for your community of clients, it makes keeping up with an ever-more-rapidly-evolving field manageable.

4. How do you think the AIA public awareness campaign should acknowledge the work of small firms across a broad range of project types?

The newly released ilookup commercial avoids large-scale starchitecture and features more familiar buildings of many types. I am very pleased to see this development and would like the trend to continue.

There's lots of talk about the importance of "telling a good story". Getting attention in today's overhyped media-soaked world is challenging; but, it doesn't compel AIA to raise its voice to a scream.

Our most powerful story is that architects shapes lives. Where and how people live shapes them and their ability to contribute to the economy and society. Showing the human impacts of architecture is the most relevant story for the clients and communities we serve.

Making an impact on people's lives can be beautifully illustrated through the work of small firms. It's the infill development that transforms a vacant lot into productive housing. It's the addition that allows the downtown commercial building to remain occupied and viable. It's the renovation that transforms the neighborhood school and improves educational outcomes. It's the new library that creates a vibrant community hub.

The AIA public awareness campaign needs to extend beyond the occasional release of a thirty second commercial for network TV. We need tools in the hands of architects that empower them to act as ambassadors of the profession. Helping the public and clients feel good about what we do as architects must be the first purpose of our awareness campaign.