

LaPlaca Cohen

The American Institute of Architects Repositioning Research Summary

Repositioning the Institute The Challenge:

For over 150 years, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) has been the voice of this country’s architectural profession. Today it boasts 80,000 members and nearly 300 state and local chapters. But, all is not well. The general public’s understanding of the profession is as skewed as it has ever been, defined by limited contact with working architects, and media attention surrounding a handful of “starchitects.” Meanwhile, younger architects are entering a profession battered by a sputtering economy in which the value of AIA membership seems, to some, questionable.

Related Strategic Milestones

The 2012–2013 repositioning initiative underway builds upon the excellent research, insights, and strategic work that resulted from a series of previous assessments. Critical projects that have informed LaPlaca Cohen and Pentagram’s thinking:

1999
Aligning the Institute for the Millennium

2004
AIA Brand Development Initiative

2006
Communications Summit

2007–2011
AIA Strategic Plan (Weave)

2011
Communications Summit

2012
Repositioning the Institute

What is the role and voice of the AIA in the social, economic, and creative context of early 21st century America? To address such an ambitious and broad-ranging question, the AIA has asked the consulting team of Pentagram and LaPlaca Cohen to spearhead a year-long repositioning initiative, leading to focused and clearly articulated messaging approach, as well as a reconsideration of the visual representation of the AIA’s identity.

The process underway is one of the most expansive and comprehensive ever undertaken by a professional association. Its first phase, the results of which we are sharing in this report, include insights from numerous one-on-one conversations and small group interviews with members, senior staff leadership, elected representatives, and board members; as well as online surveys through which members, the general public, and clients have shared their thoughts.

We also include insights from an engaged and diverse range of thought-leaders from across the country. Their range of expertise in design, economic development, business, lifestyle trends and other related issues provided us with an indispensable point of reference and contrast to the perspectives gleaned from within the architectural community.

In all of the outreach, interviews, and surveys, this effort generated over 30,000 touch-points of input. Moving forward, our team will build on the insights we have gathered to construct the framework for the strategic and graphic approach to defining and positioning the AIA of the future. LaPlaca Cohen and Pentagram bring to this project extensive experience in strategic identity projects for architectural, cultural and design-related clients, including some of the nation’s most renowned architecture schools. This assignment for the AIA synthesizes our collective knowledge and provides a national, institutional platform that not only addresses long-standing challenges within the organization, but also helps the AIA to claim its rightful position

as leader, bellwether and beacon for a profession that has undergone radical transformation in recent years. As all of our discussions have demonstrated, the AIA is at a critical juncture, perhaps the most significant in its history as the voice of architecture in America.

A repositioning initiative cannot solve all of the AIA's problems alone. But, it can set the stage for a renaissance of the profession with smart, focused messaging and bold, breakthrough communications. This research summary is the first step in that process.

Repositioning the Institute: Preliminary Findings

After reviewing and digesting the findings from our research process, we created a working hypothesis, which will guide our thinking as we develop the AIA's positioning platform. The forthcoming ideas will be further tested with AIA stakeholders and refined in the coming months:

- ❖ Lead with emotion by tapping into the passion and idealism that drive the profession.
- ❖ Shift the conversation from process to impact and benefits by communicating value in terms that resonate with architects, clients, and the general public.
- ❖ Lead with conviction and clear positions and members will follow. Take a firm stance on what is important to the organization and the profession.
- ❖ Focus on core offerings by prioritizing your programs, resources, and initiatives.
- ❖ Demonstrate your value by speaking to the new needs of today's architects.
- ❖ Make it easier for constituents to listen by streamlining communications and simplifying nomenclature.
- ❖ Guide the conversation by creating more occasions to engage the public.
- ❖ Remember that community is at the core of the AIA offer. Beyond supporting practice, the AIA provides the chance to connect.
- ❖ The AIA's sweet spot is the intersection of collaborative, passionate/visionary, and problem-solving.
- ❖ The AIA's winning formula is about fusing passion with practice.
- ❖ Building relevance is ultimately a matter of demonstrating impact.

The core drivers of the AIA brand are:

**collaborative
passionate/visionary
problem-solving**

These drivers are (or should be) the throughlines in all of the AIA's diverse activities. The intersection of these three attributes is essentially the AIA's sweet spot or defining lens. All future communications should be expressed through this unifying perspective once it has been further researched, refined, and vetted.

In short, the AIA should be:

- ❖ Progressive, not reactionary
- ❖ A vital resource, not a superficial designation
- ❖ Universally beneficial, not limited and elitist
- ❖ Adding value, not additional financial burden
- ❖ At the cutting edge, not a follower
- ❖ Public facing, not behind closed doors
- ❖ An architecture resource for all, not just for industry insiders
- ❖ Results and benefits-focused, not process-driven or self-referential

Communications Considerations

Fusing passion with practice is AIA's winning formula. Providing professional support for the practice of architecture is a valued hallmark of the AIA identity, but it has not been enough to make the organization truly remarkable or distinctive. Adding passion—the ideological and emotional motivators that make the profession so appealing—will help transform members from complacent supporters into ardent advocates.

Furthermore, demonstrating the impact that AIA members have on society builds the AIA's relevance. The AIA needs to speak in terms that focus less on the architectural process and more on how good design benefits the public's everyday lives. The AIA must communicate the value that only architects can provide through creative solutions for projects of every scale.

Repositioning:

Who LaPlaca Cohen/Pentagram Talked To and What Those Groups and Individuals Said

1. Grassroots 2012 attendees

At the AIA Grassroots: 2012 Leadership and Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., Arthur Cohen, CEO of LaPlaca Cohen, and Michael Bierut, Partner at Pentagram, presented an overview of the yearlong repositioning initiative to the AIA Board, essentially kicking off the project. While attending the conference, Noreen Ahmad, Manager of Strategy and Branding at LaPlaca Cohen; Allison Jones, Associate Strategist at LaPlaca Cohen; and Jane Kolleeny, consultant for the AIA repositioning project, attended sessions and interviewed over 40 conference attendees. Respondents included a broad range of architects, AIA staff members, and other members of the architecture community to gauge internal and external perceptions of the architecture industry and assess the AIA's role in that field.

Key Takeaways

- ❖ The vast majority of interviewees felt that the public perception of architects and architecture is not accurate. Architects are typically viewed as: people who design homes and buildings whose services are prohibitively expensive and executed in a way that does not value client input highly enough. Yet, within the design and building industry, architects are perceived to be visionaries who work closely with clients to realize creative solutions for an array of challenges.
- ❖ AIA members hope that the AIA can raise awareness of the value of architecture and the multitude of ways in which it can serve the public, making architects seem more approachable and more likely to be top of mind for potential clients, regardless of project scale and budget.
- ❖ Interviewees view the AIA as a professional organization that is the “voice of the architecture profession” and that sets ideal standards for the industry. Its legacy and its members' vast wealth of expertise and experience have positioned the AIA as the industry authority. Yet, it is also felt that the AIA has a very complex organizational structure that even its members find difficult to navigate.
- ❖ The AIA website is widely viewed as extremely difficult to use. Site visitors have trouble understanding how information is organized or where it is located within the site.
- ❖ Architecture schools do not prepare students for the realities of the profession. Students lack the business skills necessary to contribute to a successful practice or to start their own. However, not everyone agrees that it is up to the schools to provide practical preparation; many feel that schools should be left to focus on design and theory, the areas that foster passion for the profession; professional skills can instead be developed on the job and through AIA support.
- ❖ Weak business skills were cited as a problem among more established generations of architects as well.

- ❖ It is also felt that it is imperative for the AIA to engage younger audiences, since the industry is graying and the “lost generation” has left a gap in the workforce that needs to be filled. However, there are few jobs available in this economy, limiting opportunities.
- ❖ Emerging architects have an especially strong interest in the “social” aspects of architecture, viewing well-designed environments as a means to improve health and well-being for both local and international communities.
- ❖ The AIA lacks diversity in terms of age, gender, and race.
- ❖ The recession has made it difficult for many AIA members to afford dues; consequently, a number of members have recently left the organization, and some have been hit hard enough that they are pursuing alternative careers.

2. Internal Stakeholders

LaPlaca Cohen spoke to a group of “internal stakeholders” to gather their thoughts and insights. 22 individuals in total represented a diverse selection of AIA employees, elected leaders, members, and board members. As individuals with a vested interest in the future of the AIA, they offer perspectives that are especially crucial to the repositioning initiative. Arthur Cohen, CEO of LaPlaca Cohen, and Allison Jones, Associate Strategist at LaPlaca Cohen, traveled to AIA headquarters on March 28, 2012, to conduct eight of the interviews, two of which were group interviews. The remaining interviews took place via telephone.

Key Takeaways

- ❖ The AIA is dedicated to supporting architects by helping them develop their skills and expertise and by providing tools that enable them to maintain a successful practice. While supporting the practice of architecture is a worthy and necessary focus, little attention has been paid to the motivators that initially drew architects to the profession—i.e., their passion for architecture.
- ❖ Within the AIA, the allocation of responsibilities and the prioritization of objectives have not yet been clearly defined; efforts are duplicated and opportunities to pool resources are missed.
- ❖ The AIA is committed to respecting the myriad voices within its constituency and letting those voices guide the organization’s path. However, catering to a diverse spectrum of interests without first identifying core, prioritized objectives undermines the organization’s ability to make meaningful progress.
- ❖ CES and Contract Documents are frequently cited by members as the most critical draws for AIA membership. Though these services should remain primary offerings, they are not in themselves enough to define a compelling value proposition, particularly in a climate in which fewer architects are pursuing licensure.
- ❖ The AIA serves as a space for professionals to collaborate and exchange ideas. Though many architects are interested in engaging with their peers, they are also protective of their practice—especially in the current recession—and sharing information may come across as risky.
- ❖ Architecture is evolving and expanding into new frontiers, a development that is both an exciting opportunity and a challenge to the standards of practice.
- ❖ Architecture schools do not provide students with the business training necessary to run a practice. It is important that the AIA continue to provide business guidance and perhaps expand efforts in this area.
- ❖ Discussion of the need to raise awareness of the value of architecture often led interviewees to mention that many architects are not accustomed to being proactively engaged with their communities and communicating the importance of what they do to their potential clients and the general public. Thus, efforts to build awareness will depend not only on educating the public, but also on building commitment among architects to spread the message. Accordingly, the AIA will need to give them tools to become more comfortable “telling their story.”
- ❖ AIA membership means access to a remarkable amount of programs, services, and knowledge-building resources. As a result, keeping members informed about all of the AIA’s activities without inundating them with too much information has proved to be a challenge. Indeed, it seems that

the AIA has not yet developed an efficient system; members feel bombarded with too many communications and that efforts to find the information they need on AIA.org are futile.

- ❖ AIA membership is a significant expense that many architects have trouble affording, particularly during a recession. Licensure, too, is a substantial investment that an increasing number of professionals are avoiding. Justifying these expenses when income is tight is a matter of knowing that they are essential to survival and that they will help architects adapt and expand their practice.

3. Groups Around the Country

LaPlaca Cohen and the AIA engaged Jane Kolleeny, a consultant and journalist familiar with the profession and the AIA, to speak with various members, component executives, and AIA leaders around the country. The added perspective of these 64 individuals represents a diverse cross-section of AIA's staff and membership. As individuals with varied levels of connection and commitment to the AIA, they offer perspectives that are especially crucial to the repositioning initiative. Jane conducted a number of these interviews in-person and gathered other opinions via telephone interviews. The conversations generally followed the same line of inquiry that the Grassroots and internal interviews did with some degree of customization based on the interviewee.

Key Takeaways

- ❖ "Architect" is a term that has evolved and expanded enormously in the past few decades.
- ❖ The public's perception of architects can be very myopic, generally stemming from a lack of exposure to the field. Many are unaware of the expansive responsibilities of architects.
- ❖ Interviewees spoke about the need for architects to be less insular, and to understand that they will be "invisible" unless the public understands the importance, benefits, and breadth of the field. Although dialogue and leadership within the field are important, the more prominent the architectural voices are in other territories, like education, government, and entertainment, the more the public will grasp "the value of architects in society."
- ❖ There is a dire need to address the endangered nature of the architecture field, according to some interviewees.
- ❖ Architects lament the loss of the "master builder" role that was historically assigned to them.
- ❖ There is a prevailing sense among interviewees that although the AIA's brand identity, including its logo, is authoritative and venerable, it does not communicate the energy, flexibility, or enthusiasm that would drive the institution into the future and inspire all generations.
- ❖ The AIA must represent the field as a whole and as a public-facing "voice of the profession." The visibility of the AIA would reflect directly on the visibility of each and every architect, and could make an enormous impact on the strength and unity of the profession.
- ❖ As change permeates the profession, many architects (especially the younger generation) are pursuing nontraditional pathways. Some interviewees felt that in order to stay relevant, the AIA must embrace variety of career paths that are open to those trained in architecture.
- ❖ Architects "can enhance the environment and the social fabric of the world." Many feel that the AIA does not reflect these issues and priorities, nor does it reach out enough to emerging architects..
- ❖ For many, the AIA is about community building, codifying best practices, generating contacts and new business, and staying "ahead of the pack" on trends, news, and design thinking.
- ❖ Although the AIA needs to work on its accessibility and clarity of benefits, and work harder to retain its members, the onus is also on the member to take advantage of the AIA community:
- ❖ Interviewees explained the difference in value between the national and regional chapters of the AIA, and how the former can provide access to a greater bank of contacts and resources, whereas the latter helps build local communities of architects. However, some see a disconnect, and feel that there should be more communication between the two in order to make use of their differing benefits.

- ❖ Interviewees suggested a variety of tools and resources that the AIA could offer to help them build their practices and continue their education to stay relevant.
- ❖ As BIM becomes the “way of the future,” there is a unique opportunity for architects to become the leaders and champions of this new technology. The AIA could help provide the resources for architects and practices to become knowledge leaders on tools like BIM and integrated project delivery (IPD), trends that could give much more power to the architect in the building realm. The AIA should embrace academics within its membership to bring the two distinct areas of practice and academia together. If the academics who teach the emerging professionals are encouraged and valued within the AIA, it will powerfully impact their students.

4. The American Public

LaPlaca Cohen and the American Institute of Architects engaged Slover Linett Strategies to design and administer an online national poll as part of a four-part online research plan in support of the AIA’s repositioning initiative. The poll included a **national pulse survey**, which gathered key perceptions of architects and architecture among the general public. The research was conducted online with a demographically representative sample of U.S. adults 18 years of age and older during May 3–6, May 7–9, and May 14–16, 2012, to three separate but demographically representative populations. Data, based on eight total questions, were weighted to gender, age, geographic region, education, and race using the most current population statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau. This top line reflects data from 3,052 respondents, including 1,328 college graduates.

Key Takeaways

- ❖ Members of the public do not feel particularly knowledgeable about the services architects provide.
- ❖ Few homeowners have worked with an architect on a home-related building or design project or see themselves as likely to do so in the future.
- ❖ College graduates are more familiar with the services provided by architects, and are more likely to hire an architect, than those with lower levels of education.
- ❖ Respondents with higher incomes are more likely to seek an architect’s services, though income does not entirely explain the greater prevalence of working with architects among college graduates.
- ❖ Members of the public who have worked with an architect are generally satisfied with their experience(s) and are inclined to work with or recommend architects in the future.
- ❖ Architects are seen as relatively easy to work with by members of the public.
- ❖ The public generally thinks architects provide essential skills and services, but are torn about whether these skills are worth the perceived cost and difficulty of hiring an architect.
- ❖ College graduates are particularly likely to see architects as adding value with skills and expertise that cannot be matched by a contractor.
- ❖ Members of the public tend to associate architects with large buildings, though not necessarily unique and iconic ones.
- ❖ Perceptions of architects among the general public are generally more positive than AIA members expected them to be.

5. AIA Members

LaPlaca Cohen and the American Institute of Architects engaged Slover Linett Strategies to design and administer the first of two online member surveys (the first was conducted April 19-27, 2012), which included members at all levels. All AIA members except for national

staff were invited to take the survey. The survey instrument contained nine questions and included both closed- and open-ended responses. Demographic information in this top line comes from AIA records; member data was appended to survey data when available.

- This top line reflects data from 10,091 surveys; an additional 563 surveys were collected but were excluded from analysis because the data was not usable because, in most cases, of partial responses.
- Additional analysis was conducted on a few key respondent subgroups:
 - “Large” firms, with 100 or more employees
 - “Medium” firms, with 10–99 employees
 - “Small” firms, with 1–9 employees
 - “Established” professionals, with 5+ years’ experience in the field
 - “Emerging” professionals, who are under 45 years old and have fewer than five years’ experience in architecture

Key Takeaways

- ❖ The AIA serves both newcomers to the architecture field and seasoned practitioners.
- ❖ AIA members are only moderately satisfied with their careers.
- ❖ Emerging professionals are less satisfied with their careers than more seasoned practitioners.
- ❖ Though AIA members feel they are well regarded in their communities, they don’t think that the public appreciates the value of what they do.
- ❖ There is strong consensus around the top needs of the architectural field: educating the public about the role and value of architects and design, and making the business case for that value.
- ❖ Members’ top individual needs are around opportunities to advance their career and assistance with the business side of architecture.
- ❖ Those who work in smaller firms have greater needs around the business aspects of their work.
- ❖ While all AIA members identify educating the public about the role and value of architects and design as a top need for the field and a crucial area for the AIA to address, small-firm professionals are particularly likely to do so.
- ❖ Professionals working in larger firms feel a more crucial need than those working in small firms to network outside the field.

6. External Stakeholders

In addition to gathering the opinions and perceptions of internal stakeholders, we also conducted a series of interviews with “external stakeholders,” a selection of individuals outside of the AIA community. While some of these individuals are architects or work in affiliated professions within the built environment industry, others are thought leaders in unrelated fields. Given their distance from the AIA, their perspectives provide insight into the discrepancy between architects’ perceptions of themselves and how they are viewed by those outside of the profession, and how the AIA can more effectively engage a broader range of audiences.

The external stakeholders, eight in total, were chosen through a collaborative selection process between LaPlaca Cohen and the AIA. The group represents a diverse and evenly balanced range of perspectives in terms of profession, geographic location, age, and gender:

Key Takeaways

- ❖ When asked what the role of architects is in today's society, interviewees often noted that society's understanding of architects is not consistent with what they actually are and what they *should be*.
- ❖ Speaking to this disjuncture, they provided their thoughts on strengths that architects should build upon as well as weaknesses and misperceptions of the field that must be addressed.
- ❖ Throughout the interviews, one of the concerns that was most consistently voiced was that architects are in danger of losing their relevance because they are viewed as risk-averse and unwilling to take on liability for more facets of the building process. As a result, interviewees felt that architects have cornered themselves into a narrower, less impactful role.
- ❖ Though the interviewee pool was comprised of individuals with varying degrees of exposure to the AIA, as members or otherwise, all of the interviewees expressed their thoughts on who the AIA is and what purpose it serves for the architecture profession. Overall, interviewee impressions indicated a consensus that there is need for improvement.
- ❖ In some cases, interviewees identified particular ways in which they felt the AIA could better serve its members. While no recurring suggestions emerged, their quotes represent a few areas in which the AIA could take measures to become a stronger resource for architects.
- ❖ Communicating the value of architecture is a significant challenge. They shared their thoughts on why that is and how they view the value of architects and architecture.
- ❖ Some interviewees noted that the lack of awareness of the value of architecture stems in part from what they perceive as architects' limited effort and desire to communicate effectively with those outside of the profession.
- ❖ There is significant opportunity to build the case for design as being good for business by reaching out to the business community. By quantifying the benefits of design in terms that draw on outcomes and evidence, the business community will better understand why working with an architect is a worthwhile investment. However, strong research that indicates the positive, compelling outcomes of design decisions is not yet easily accessible to all.

External stakeholders
included:

Partner, SHoP Architects, New York, NY
COO, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO
Cofounder of Architizer, Lecturer at University of Pennsylvania School of Design, and Principal at HWKN, New York, NY
Director for Global Foresight & Innovation, Arup, San Francisco, CA
Executive Director, Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, Philadelphia, PA
MIT Media Lab, New York, NY
Former Publisher of *Architectural Record*, Independent Consultant, and AIA Liaison to the Clinton Global Initiative, San Francisco, CA
Managing Partner, Anbau Enterprises, New York, NY

7. Peer Institutions

LaPlaca Cohen undertook a benchmarking study of three peer membership-based organizations that face similar marketing and communications challenges as national bodies overseeing and interacting with local chapters or affiliates. The analysis primarily relied on information gathered from interviews and was supported by print materials, press coverage, and websites. These organizations were selected not only because they may have a similar scope (architecture) or structure (dues-paying membership), but also because of their desire to make a clear impact in a specific area for which they seek recognition. Each is a mission-driven not-for-profit that establishes credibility through affinity-building measures with both a self-selecting group of “insiders” and the public at large. Interviewees were identified and solicited based on a variety of factors, including management structure and areas of strength within the organization

Key Takeaways

- ❖ Centralizing the responsibilities of communications teams allows for consistent and on-brand messaging at both the national and the chapter/regional level. This has meant designating a

“point person” who oversees all communications prior to their release and ensures that messaging utilized at the local level comes from the national office and is not developed “organically,” but rather with purpose and consistent voice as part of a larger marketing strategy.

- ❖ Achieving long-term, mission-driven goals entails streamlining organizational resources through the development of internal priorities and constituent hierarchies. In other words, missions serve these organizations as both rallying points and a focused means of strengthening their brand.
- ❖ Public programs, from conferences to exhibitions to community events, are important tools for organizations to engage non-member supporters and build affinity. Building exposure beyond the core audience is a way to not only strengthen support for and awareness of the organization, but also pave the way for more sponsorship and a larger breadth of media attention.
- ❖ Demonstrating relevancy is associated with engaging members’ affinity for the organization.
- ❖ With more affirmation and renown across a larger section of the population who would not necessarily want or need to join, as members achieve cultural cache and recognition. This in turn makes an affinity with the organization even more coveted for current or potential members.
- ❖ Audience hierarchies play an important role in determining the voice and tone with which each organization should primarily communicate. While consistency in messaging is key, to speak to a broader public, language is more powerful when it is relatable and personalized. Industry vernacular is better used when targeting audiences closer to the specific field.
- ❖ Marketing and communications activities are most successful when efforts are focused on one campaign, initiative, or project at a time. When overloaded with efforts that are not streamlined within the organization, messages can get diluted, the result may be less successful and thoughtful, and the audience may be overwhelmed by activity and information.
- ❖ Whether one’s members are entirely independent from or intertwined with the parent organization, strong brand messaging and powerful exhibitions, initiatives, and programs organized by the parent organization tend to have a positive impact at the local level.
- ❖ Being a not-for-profit and an advocacy organization does not have one programmatic expression.
- ❖ Digital activities must be a communications priority, driven by quality content developed specifically with member needs and high user value in mind. It is essential for members and non-members to be able to easily navigate the site and immediately understand the mission and content.



Repositioning:

Thinking Ahead and Next Steps

As the project progresses, here are some key questions for the AIA’s leadership and members to consider with regard to the repositioning effort. These questions are applicable at all levels of the organizations and the answers to these questions will ultimately inform the shape of the solutions that Pentagram and LaPlaca Cohen propose.

- ❖ How committed is the AIA to change?
- ❖ What can you do to help the AIA align itself with these conclusions?
- ❖ What hard choices about programs, structure, etc., should we begin to investigate?