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BEFORE THE DELUGE

Breakfast should always be as empowering as the one held on May 6 at the Institute for Urban Design. Executive director Anne Guiney (and former *AN* editor) invited planners from the Army Corps of Engineers to kaffeeklatsch with a roomful of architects, curators, and engineers who contributed to (or are closely following) MoMA's *Rising Currents* exhibition. The Corps planners tried to demystify how their agency gets work done, describing the stars that must be aligned and the hurdles breached before any project can be implemented. These include a daunting inventory of authorizations, appropriations, and—toughest to corral—non-federal funding partnerships. And that is why, it suddenly seemed clear, what to do when water starts lapping the toes of the Statue of Liberty in our children's lifetimes hasn't landed on their plates yet. Even more troubling was the need to select projects exclusively on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis. One planner acknowledged that the economics of ecological disaster are the fuzziest of maths, and therefore politicians (the starting point for authorizations) don't like to go there.

That's when Guy Nordenson stepped in. He explained that while the solutions sketched out for how to buffer, block, and rechannel the coming floods in *Rising Currents* may seem like so much blue-sky dreaming to the Corps and the powers that be today, when disaster strikes, and everyone is casting about for solutions, suddenly those plans so close to hand (and already quite detailed) will look like the most cost-efficient way to go.

The *Rising Currents* proposals were the result of research undertaken by Nordenson's office several years ago, and they brought a designer's perspective to an important public policy issue. But the project should also serve as a model of the type of preemptive design thinking that could be picked up by any firm casting about for work in the future. It's a perfect time—with commissions and projects at their slowest in several decades—for design practices to undertake long-range research that might not lead to immediate work but could develop "plans so close to hand" that they might easily lead to work in the future.

This is the time for architects—so many of whom wished for some slack in recent decades to be more reflective—to take up research-based initiatives. What better time to research energy-efficient products and building systems, potential city code or zoning changes that may be put into effect in the next few years? Research projects might actually drive the necessary change and prepare the ground for new thinking that will impact the production of architecture and the urban environment. It is difficult to prove that research done now will definitely lead to work in the future, and we don't want to rely on anecdotes about how architects can drive development or change. But with the current slowdown, what do professionals have to lose by devoting their knowledge to long-range planning for their future and the city? **JULIE V. IOVINE AND WILLIAM MENKING**

TURNING THE CORNER

continued from front page

"I wouldn't put it in the 'great' category just yet, though things are good," said AIA chief economist Kermit Baker. "I'd want to see sustained growth for that, but we're definitely moving in the right direction."

Billings reached 46.1 in March, up from 44.8 in February (and the highest reading since August 2008, when billings were 46.7). Yet even those August numbers had been preceded by months of lower readings, suggesting its level of activity was somewhat anomalous. The case could be made that last month's billings are arguably the best performance since January 2008, the last time the index was above 50, indicating that billings are rising. It fell in February to 43.9, remaining below 50 ever since.

Another sign this could be the real thing is that not only billings and inquiries—up 6.5 points to 58.5 last month—are improving, but so, too, has every region and sector, a concerted movement that has not happened since the industry's woes began two years ago. It appears the AIA's predictions that the industry would emerge from its recession by the middle of the year may be spot-on.

Most impressively, the Midwestern region has broken the 50 mark, reaching 50.5 in March, up from 49.4 in February, and the region's tenth straight month of gains since hitting 37.2 last May. The Midwest has been unexpectedly strong thanks to improving manufacturing and housing. Walter Street III, president of AIA Chicago, believes the region's economic diversity has helped it weather the storm. "The Midwest tends to be a more conservative business environment," he said. "That said, our diversity has allowed us to be more flexible."

The South rebounded 3.7 points to 44.4, still leaving it in last place, but a promising sign. The East reversed a one-month dip reaching 47.0 in March, up from 44.1. Meanwhile, the West continues its rebound from being the worst of all regions last summer, when it fell to an abysmal 36.4. Last month it hit 46.0, up from 43.6 in February.

Within the sectors, institutional work saw the largest gains in March, rising 2.6 points to 46.8, an especially positive sign since institutions tend to be strong patrons during downturns. This has not been the case during the recent recession because many universities, foundations, and governments were especially hard hit and unable to take advantage of cheap construction costs as they typically do. With their latent return to health, this could be a considerable growth sector.

Mixed-use work, which has posted moderate gains since August, continued to rise, increasing 1.7 points to 45.0 in March. Industrial/commercial work, which has seen greater volatility—it has not posted two straight months of gains since this time last year—rose in March to 44.7. Residential work was flat at 47.3, though twice in the past six months it has risen above 50.

It may be disconcerting that none of these areas within the industry has posted sustained growth, but that may be another sign of overall improvement. "I temper my excitement because I'm constantly talking to architecture firms, many of whom are seeing little or no work," Baker said. "But there are others who say it's trickling back in, and some who are on track for great years. That's actually about what you'd expect and about where we'd want to be to set us up for a complete turnaround." **MATT CHABAN**

LETTERS

ENOUGH ARCHISPEAK, ALREADY!

I appreciated William S. Saunders' reflection on the less than stellar record of architectural writing ("Hasty Habits of Mind," *AN* 07_04.21.2010). The one test left out of this excellent piece is when, in a university context, we are called on to relate our subculture to others in the academy. I don't mean to lionize academic discourse in the social sciences (often opaque, insular, and simply irrelevant). But still! Academics need to at least try to engage other serious people.

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SHOW ME THE RECOVERY

I take umbrage at the comment "the industry has turned a corner," as you state in your recent billings report (archpaper.com, 04.26.2010). If that were really the case, why does the unemployment rate among architects remain at an all-time high? Why are there so many competent architects, especially well-credentialed senior-level professionals, unemployed since the beginning of 2009? Moreover, there are still firms that are forced to cut staff even now. You may be getting your information from firms who don't want it to be known that they have no work, and also don't want to respond to your inquiries for the same reason. I think

psychologically it is difficult for the many unemployed architects to comprehend that the market is doing better while they can't find a position for a whole year.

As the president of an executive search firm, I get to see the effect this recession has on the unemployed. This recession is like no other that I have lived through in the past 30 years of my practice. I would like to see some statistics that could give us hope that the industry will pick up, and for what reasons this may happen.

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