

# architect vs. designer

what's in a name, and a credential? the debate has taken on new fervor in this cutthroat economy.

by cheryl weber, leed ap

**T**ough economic times trigger a variety of responses from business owners: fear, a new clarity, competitiveness, and, for architects who design houses, turf battles. Anyone who's been following the online forums this past year has seen the cauldron of comments boiling up around a long-simmering debate: Is it time to regulate residential design? After Waterloo, Iowa-based architect Edward J. Shannon, AIA, LEED GA, posed this question about eight months ago on *residential architect's* LinkedIn group, more than 1,000 posts—some calmly logical, some livid—lit up the message boards and cross-pollinated on the forums of the Congress of Residential Architecture (CORA) and the Custom Residential Architects Network (CRAN). Clearly, it touched a nerve.

To put this issue in perspective, residential architects seem especially vulnerable to the insults visited upon the profession these days: industries from IT to lawn services co-opting the term architect, a time-consuming licensing process exacerbated by the weak economy, and a lax regulatory environment for



James Steinberg

house design that invites sub-par players. Add the drawn-out housing bust, and it's enough to make anyone cranky.

"There's a low amount of work right now, which makes more evident what piece of the pie is being done by non-architects," says Luis Jauregui, AIA, president of Jauregui, a design/build firm based in

Austin, and former national chairman of CRAN. "Feelings are rawer in a slow economy. Nobody complains when they have more work than they can handle."

This contentious conversation may never be resolved, but at its heart is a question of value: If virtually anyone is allowed to design a house, what is registration worth to architects

specializing in houses? And what is the value of a residential architect versus a licensed designer?

Basically, the regulatory ideas that have been tossed around for decades are all laudable, but notoriously difficult to apply nationwide. The lack of measurable and consistent credentialing is what

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prompted Shannon's LinkedIn question. A year ago, he moved from Chicago, where residential designers are required to have a license, to Waterloo, where they are not. He teaches residential design in the local community college's architectural technology program, which emphasizes drafting skills. "As a college instructor, it's hard to look my students in the eye and say, 'If I give you this training, you're qualified to hang your shingle,' yet they are, according to state law," Shannon says. "It was culture shock."

With public health and safety and a solid design sense at stake, Shannon sees merit in a state-mandated competency test for home designers, which would sort out the poorly trained from the professionals.

Thomas H. Donalek, AIA, of Chicago drew a harder line on the AIA Young Architects Forum: "I think that the required combination of education/degree and work experience and a test is an example of architects holding our profession to a higher standard than bare minimum. It is the combination of these factors that together do a reasonable job of assuring the protection of the life, welfare, and safety of the general public."

Members of the American Institute of Building Design (AIBD) also chimed in. "I believe that any American has the right to design their own home as long as it meets codes. If you want to regulate 'ugly,'

## going public

The recent online discussion about licensing designers was a call to action, says national CRAN chairman Mark Demerly, AIA, LEED AP, president of Demerly Architects in Indianapolis. How are we going to elevate architects and show that they're different from a house designer, draftsman, or builder? "It's a challenge to the profession in general," he says. "We haven't done much to advocate who we are and what we do."

But new opportunities are opening now that CRAN is an AIA Knowledge Community. Formerly a subcommittee of the housing-focused Residential Knowledge Committee, CRAN's status change became official at the AIA National Convention in May. "CRAN's ability to form as a Knowledge Community means they have a place at the table and the ability to share their views," says AIA president Clark D. Manus, FAIA. "We need to address those concerns."

One of Demerly's goals is to get local CRAN chapters to organize speakers' bureaus to reach communities and allied professions. He's also working with the AIA on article ideas for dissemination to national media such as *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, as well as local news outlets. "We're visual people, and sometimes we take for granted that everyone understands what we do and will come to us when they want us," he says. "We have to shift the paradigm and show the value we provide." —c.w.

then you need to live in a community with design guidelines," wrote AIBD member Susan P. Berry, CEO of Classical Home Design in Maitland, Fla.

One reason this subject is so heated is because the single-family home is at the heart of the American dream, and our libertarian tendencies run deep. To quote Thomas Jefferson, a famous non-architect, "I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than to those attending too small a degree of it." That sounds a little dangerous in a construction context.

But Jefferson was, of course, a role model who spent his life building up and tearing down portions of his house, notes Marvin Malecha, FAIA, dean of North Carolina State University College of Design, Raleigh, N.C., and an Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture distinguished professor.

"He did that with great trepidation and was very reluctant to share what he was doing with the architects in the Capitol, so there's always been this tension about what a professional can bring to a job, and what

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## practice

upon graduation because you can't practice or get a job without it," Mulfinger says. "In our profession, everyone gets used along the way to registration; they don't need to have this

has taught us anything, it's that there is another practice competency schools ought to teach: entrepreneurship. Architects make up less than 1/10 of 1 percent of the U.S. population, so

in this painful economy there is growing hunger for good design, and architects are not alone in providing design expertise. The marketplace will adapt to high-quality design service delivery providers who meet the needs, do it at a value price, and use the latest technologies to get top quality and speed."

Entrepreneurship may mean working creatively with industry colleagues rather than trying to compete with them. For example, many builders and remodelers feel an off-the-shelf plan can get the job done, but there are times when they need someone with an artistic eye to solve a complex problem, and that's an architect.

On the CRAN forum, Decatur, Ga.-based architect Eric Rawlings, AIA, LEED AP, urged residential architects to consider designing one-of-a-kind speculative houses with local remodelers and builders. "We must recognize where the market opportunities are and the areas that need the most help," he says. "Spec houses fit both categories, and architects can't make a real impact on the residential market until we get involved in that market."

In downtown Atlanta, speculative renovations have kept Rawlings busy right through the recession. Residential designers are good at doing basic boxes, he says, but when it comes to transforming the structure behind an old house's

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*"as a college instructor, it's hard to look my students in the eye and say, 'if i give you this training, you're qualified to hang your shingle,' yet they are, according to state law."*

—edward j. shannon, aia, leed ga

credential to be productive. We diminish our value by not finding a structural way for the registration process to be more logical and normative."

Architecture schools should step up and help speed the IDP, Malecha agrees. For example, at a time when firms have fewer projects under construction, why not develop an online construction administration course for interns? Out of the 5,600 supervisory hours required, 1,880 can be chosen from any category, Malecha explains, so if they can't get onto a construction site, they can take an online course. "I think schools have to jump into this fray somehow, even though with budget cuts it's tough to focus on doing innovative things," he says.

### credential creep

If the Great Recession

they need leadership and negotiating skills to relate to a variety of audiences. In short, they need a stronger position from which to compete with other entrepreneurial business models.

The context for success is changing, and the profession needs a larger definition of itself, says James P. Cramer, Hon. AIA, chairman of the Greenway Group in Norcross, Ga. He also is president of the Design Futures Council and a past CEO of the AIA. The Greenway Group forecasts that private credentialing will increase across all professions and gain market share. That raises the stakes up and down the design food chain.

"What has overriding importance now is that architects must see themselves as design entrepreneurs in a very competitive zone," Cramer says. "Even



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## practice

plaster walls, their ideas are limited. And once he grooms his associates to offer unique solutions, they often enlist his help on new construction. The partnership pays off. Two spec projects sold for more than \$700,000 in 2009, he says, while nothing else sold in the neighborhood that year.

large home after another, he can work in shorthand to produce one-off details with trusted subs. By contrast, Malecha is more attuned to time, people, and place. "I like to call it understanding the scenarios of life in a building," he says. "Oh, by the way, the stair landing is reconfigured so the chan-

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—dale mulfinger, faia

Remodelers and builders want to pick finishes—that's how they differentiate themselves, Rawlings adds. By providing only the architectural moves, he's affordable to builders, and he's able to crank out far more houses and reach clients who never get to experience artistic solutions, while eliminating cookie-cutter homes in his neighborhood.

There's a give-and-take on homes that you can't have on commercial or third-party structures, Malecha says, so it's not either-or, but both-and. An example is the 9,000-square-foot chancellor's residence at NC State that he's working on with builder Jon Rufty, president of Rufty Homes in Raleigh. Because Rufty builds one

cellor can see everyone and everyone can see him when he's welcoming visitors at a reception."

The AIA's position that public welfare concerns justify licensure even for single-family homes resounds for many architects, too. It's ironic, points out Donalek, the Chicago architect, that many rural areas don't require an architect's stamp on house plans. "I wonder how many of those buildings destroyed by tornadoes last spring were substandard, seeing what happens in small towns in the good old boys' network," he says. "The more I learn and do, the more I see how complicated architecture is."

The past half-century's population growth has  
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## practice

raised the stakes on zoning and energy consumption. We live closer to each other now, and our residential energy codes are getting stricter. “Who is accountable when the documentation needed to get a building permit for a house in many states is one step above a child’s drawing?” Malecha asks. “That’s not in anyone’s interest if we want communities of quality. And if a house is built cheaply, how will it maintain its value for resale?”

There’s an in-between place where an architect has a voice, acting in the public good. That’s what we should be focusing on, he says. “This isn’t, in my mind, an issue of generat-

*“architects are responsible for health, safety, and welfare, irrespective of the scale of the project—that’s the primary thing.”*

—clark d. manus, faia

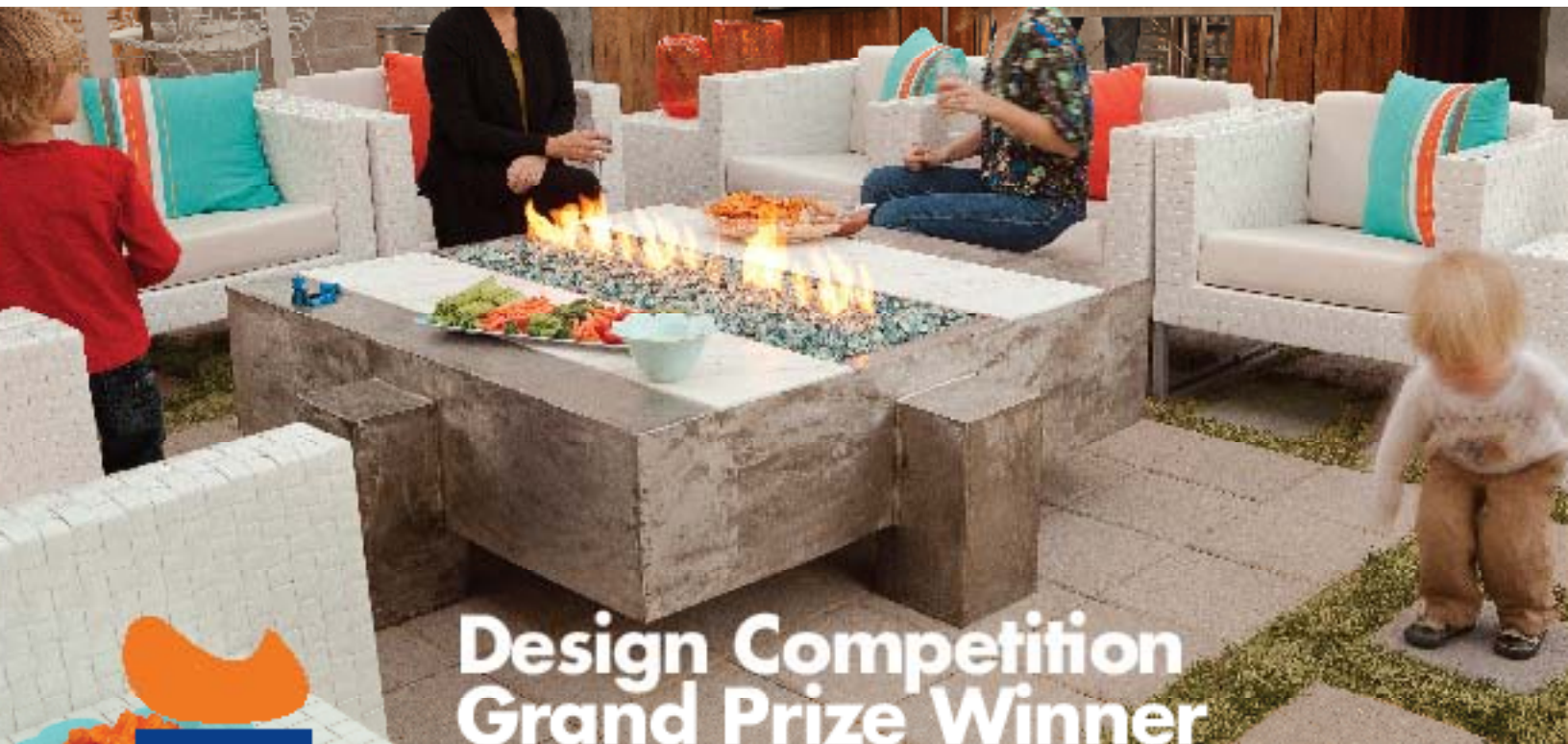
ing a business income, although one could argue that’s what happens, but about the interest of the community being held. What someone builds on the open piece of property across the street will have an impact on me, and who’s watching that for me? The building depart-

ment, not so much.”

In a crowded professional marketplace, credentials do count. Cramer cites research by Morris Kleiner, an economics professor at the University of Minnesota, showing that licensure or certification from a government body boosts licensees’ income by about

15 percent. But, Cramer says, it’s up to individuals to invent their own future. “The licensing organizations do not owe the profession a steady stream of work,” he says.

However, he adds, the AIA should have a strong public affairs and government relations arm that runs offense and defense for this diverse profession. And the registration process should be reviewed. “We never want to get so caught up in our habit patterns that we believe they can’t be improved,” Cramer says. “Everything we have can be substantially improved, including the relationship between the profession and the public it serves.” ra



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