



# Regaining Respect

DesignIntelligence®  
Quarterly



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## Regaining Respect

*In this candid conversation, Barbara Heller reflects on the profession and speaks the truth about risk, reward, and default behaviors*

**DesignIntelligence - Michael LeFevre (DI):** We met at Stanford's Center for Integrated Facilities Engineering (CIFE) back in 2005. The focus there was on BIM and AEC process improvement. At Heller & Metzger PC Specifications Consultants, and Design +Construction Strategies, you've been a practitioner and strategist in the design space for decades, and I've known you to not be shy in sharing your thoughts on what's wrong with our industry. After a harrowing, confusing year, our theme for this year is clarity. We want to begin that quest in Q1 with introspection. I hope through our dialogue we can throw off the gloves and get to the bottom of some of these issues. And I hope we'll still be friends when we're

**done! What do we need to do to see more clearly and right the many industry wrongs we kvetch about?**

**Barbara Heller (BH):** My suggestions for clarity are pretty straightforward. First, architects need to own the cost estimating process. Contractors have weaponized cost estimating and use it as a bludgeon against architects. Next, architects who are experimenting with new project delivery strategies need to establish ground rules for how much time they need to make decisions and how design liability is delegated if the Contractor decides to seize control of some portion of design. If those two things happened, a lot of problems we see would go away.

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Also, it would be great if architects had more of a media presence. We've become kind of invisible. Often, when a new building is the subject of a news article, the developer, owner and contractor are mentioned well ahead of the architect. That's wrong.

**DI:** Those are bold challenges. I agree with you in principle. But they're challenges we haven't found a way to fix over centuries. They go to the nature of how architects think, practice, and are motivated and rewarded.

BH: Anything can change if people decide they want the change. There's nothing to prevent an architecture firm

from becoming a full-service technical firm. However, most architects seem to prefer to concentrate exclusively on design. That must give them a lot of psychological satisfaction because they're leaving a lot of money on the table.

**DI:** At the risk of striking a nerve, your comments about contractors "weaponizing" and "bludgeoning" cost sound, to say the least, shellshocked or defensive. Having seen that from the other side - and to play devil's advocate - I would ask: what would the alternative get the team? That is, if the contractor didn't manage the budget? In my 20 years as an architect I felt exactly as you do, that the contractor was ill-intended and enjoyed beating up the architect.



**But having seen it from the other side, in working for a CM for 20 years with more than 70 design firms, the opposite is true. I finally was able to see my own bias. In fact, CMs would love to have architects manage their own budget. They would love projects to be in budget without having to be the bad guys, but it's seen as their job. Somebody's got to keep the project in budget, and CM's know how. Your question is, can architects learn to do it themselves? I think the answer is no. They need the input of the CM and the trade contractors. They don't have the skills to manage risk, budgets, and contingencies. They don't know crew sizes, cranes, hoisting, market conditions, bonds, insurance, temporary protection, etc. They're not trained to manage contingencies. In fact, they're educated and motivated otherwise - to induce risk - through design change. And patrons of good architecture want them to! So, the next question then is how can we as teams do what needs to be done more collaboratively, more pleasantly, more politely: get projects in budget?**

**BH:** Shellshocked is a good word. Before discussing the specifics of cost estimating – which is a separate exercise from managing the construction budget – the Heller & Metzger side of our house was increasingly involved in difficult projects. Watching project after project experience unnecessary problems that compromised architectural services became discouraging.

As for cost estimating, it makes no sense that architects design things in a price vacuum. It diminishes the value of their work. Can't think of another commercial endeavor

that is presented without a price tag. Maybe the design of a new airplane. We've been constructing buildings, as a species, for over 5000 years. The cost shouldn't be a mystery.

Owners wear many hats on construction projects. They are the client, the customer, and the CEO of the project. The client may be interested in the architect's professional advice, but the customer and the CEO are cost driven. Architects should be credible when these conversations are held. Otherwise, they are on the receiving end of someone else's subjective interpretation of what is expensive. Doing a cost estimate is very different than bidding a project and managing the finances. Pretty soon, it will be an automated app via AI. A cost estimate doesn't require participation from suppliers or subs or anyone else outside the design ecosystem.

**DI:** Your second point goes to the other classic fly in the ointment, managing schedules. I tried to get to the bottom of both these challenges in my book, *Managing Design*. You suggest architects must develop the ability to outline decision timelines. Despite the messy, cyclical nature of design, I think this challenge has a better chance of being solved. Even though there is little science devoted to this in school, as professionals we should be able to predict decisions and prioritize them. They're what we do as designers, but we've been schooled - and rewarded - for playing. Design doesn't necessarily work in neat linear, sequential steps. But it can be more so, and to everyone's advantage if we try. In my role as a dedicated design manager I had success helping firms do just that.



**We prioritized decisions and helped firms focus. They resisted at first but appreciated it in the end because it helped keep their projects between the lines. As specification consultant and as a strategy advisor you've seen this too. Does developing design schedules work? If so, specifically what works?**

**BH:** Creating a successful business process is much like doing a successful building design. It must be imagined and identified as being a desirable outcome before it is actualized. If architects wanted to normalize the design process – for a specific client or specific building type – they could do so. But most architects, as creative and imaginative as they are, run aground when it comes to re-imagining how they practice. This isn't true of all firms but seems to be true for a majority. DCStrategies runs into this impediment on some of our consulting projects. There may be an obvious way for an organization to improve efficiency or other outcome, but it isn't adopted due to the staff's emotional resistance.

**DI:** Great points. Tasks that architects do regularly should be able to be scheduled and managed - including time for design exploration, back tracking, and option studies.

**You've worked at national AIA levels in leadership positions to effect change. In BIM, new documents, project delivery, and other initiatives. How did you do? Can you point to any momentum changes?**

**BH:** I was the first female on the AIA Documents Committee in 1991.



Women were not invited on that Committee by intention before then, and a few members decided to change the policy. Not everyone was on board. But things changed enormously, and after 15 years on that Committee, I served my last term as Chair. What I wanted to accomplish was to make the documents more about marketing architectural services and less about avoiding risk. Maybe I had some minor success, but not enough. Contractors have gained the upper hand in the industry by being the “can-do” guys and architects, especially as codified in the AIA Documents, are the “won’t-do” guys. The insurance industry has had a hand in that by creating unnecessary fear of liability in the architectural profession.

**DI:** How do you see the AIA’s attitude toward industry change? Are we suffering from the old guard and our

**inertia, lack of momentum and fear of change? Or are you seeing some hopeful signs of improvement? If so, where are they? It seems we’re still searching for real leverage. We’ve hoped that might come from owners. As you said earlier, contractors have seized some of the opportunity. But as a rule - with some notable exceptions - the architectural profession has been intransigent. Where’s the leverage?**

**BH:** The AIA is challenged by the enormous diversity of its membership. Something like 75% of its members work for firms that are 5 people or less. Their interests and needs are much different than Gensler or HOK’s. Developing a program that serves the broad interests of the profession is difficult.



One thing the AIA could do that would benefit all architects is to educate the media so architects get top billing for their work. Consider the facts. In order to become a registered architect, it is necessary to have a graduate degree, an apprenticeship and to pass a lengthy, difficult exam. The requirements for becoming a licensed Contractor vary by state, but none require a graduate degree or an exam. Some only require \$50 and a pickup truck. As for developers, there's only one requirement, and that's access to money, not necessarily your own. No education, experience, or testing are needed. So why are contractors and developers getting more credit and publicity for creating a new building than the architect? It makes no sense.

**DI: I absolutely agree. It doesn't make sense. Nor is it fair. But we know things aren't always fair. What I've observed, having also viewed things from the CM's perspective, is despite the respect architects would like to have, they have contributed to diminishing that same respect through their actions. Repeatedly being over budget, being late, and being concerned about their own agendas have earned widespread disrespect. CM's and owners scoff at this repeated misbehavior. Architects have got to understand that and change their actions to earn back the respect they want.**

**BH:** Those are two separate questions: Respect within the project team and respect in the outside world are driven by different factors. It would be easier to fix getting credit and respect in the outside world. It's common to find a news article about a new building where

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the people mentioned first are the developer, the contractor, the owner, and all kinds of other interests. The architects go unmentioned or are buried on page three.

The AIA should step up and make a point of educating the media to make sure architects get credit for their buildings. It's something they richly deserve. They're responsible for the building and they have significant blood, sweat and tears involved in the process. Arguably more than the owner, developer, or contractor, because it's their intellectual property. I don't deny the others deserve credit too, but the architect should at least get equal billing.

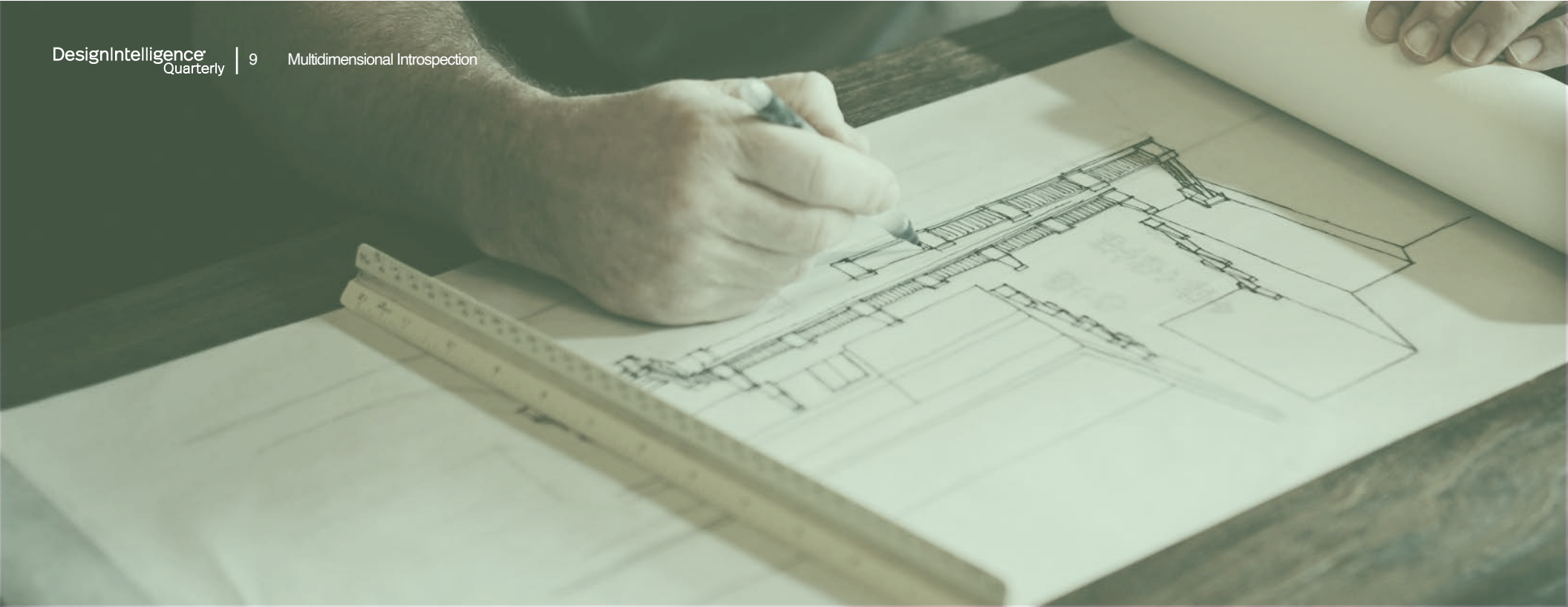
DCStrategies developed the diagram below to help educate a client new to the construction industry about its culture. It reflects the major players, their backgrounds and their rank in project influence and decision making. A pecking order, if you will. The disparity in level of training and amount of control is unique to our industry. Uncredentialed people don't make critical project decisions in medicine or law.

## PROJECT POWER AND INFLUENCE: CONSTRUCTION DECISION MAKING



Graphic: Courtesy of Barbara Heller





The person with arguably the most power is the code official because they have the power to stop the project. Or to slow down the approvals. And code officials have a completely ad hoc background. There are 40,000 independent code authorities in this country – that's organizations, not individuals – and they each have the authority to create their own rules. That's another unique aspect of the construction industry, lack of federal regulation and enormous power at the grass roots level. One of the reasons there's so much variation in practice styles in different regions.

**DI:** The architect's liability is underappreciated. The value of their intellectual property is too. But I want to

**get your reaction on my other point, having seen it on the project team and having been on both sides, I used to bristle at how handsomely contractors are rewarded for all the reasons you cite. They don't have the intellectual rigor. Many have gone to construction school, but not for as long. It boils down to what's valued in our society. That is, the ability to manage risk and, as much as I hate to say it - in an era where courtesy is lacking - their ability to be aggressive and force results. Have you seen that on your projects?**

**BH:** It's even more than that. I've lived long enough to witness this sad evolution.

When I started practicing here in DC, the industry was dominated by a few local firms. There weren't any national architecture firms in DC except for SOM. There were certain major contracting firms and big developers, but they were all pretty much local. If they had a regional practice that was exceptional.

At that time, the head of my firm was a prominent architect. The biggest construction firm was led by George Hyman and became Clark Construction. One of the largest developers was Oliver Carr. His company became CarrAmerica. In 1974, these individuals all lived in the same neighborhood, belonged to the same country clubs, drove the same cars, et cetera. Fast forward to today, 45 years later. CarrAmerica and Clark Construction are Fortune 500 companies. The son of the architect who owned the firm that employed me, and who inherited the company didn't do as well with it. It was a 40-person firm when he inherited it and it ended up as a five-person firm in rural Virginia doing primarily residential work.

Most local DC architecture firms, the ones that controlled the design market in 1975, disappeared by 1990. Why is it these other entities were so successful at riding the wave, becoming national, going public, and understanding how to be profitable doing construction when architects couldn't? Part of that answer is attitude. Architects tend not to think of themselves as businesspeople. It may be one reason that cost estimates aren't a routine part of the design process. Architects don't like to focus on money.

**DI: I agree. Until we get a generation of people who are**

**educated, motivated and value these business issues the rest of the world runs on, we'll continue to endure these conditions we're talking about. We were educated and rewarded to do the opposite, that commerce was a bad thing, business was bad. We were artists, lone-wolf geniuses. The work was the focus.**

**BH:** The saying was, "If you have to ask how much it cost, you can't afford it."

**DI: Yes. That must change or architects will continue to suffer and languish.**

**BH:** As artificial intelligence becomes more robust and more individuals and non-professionals market themselves as designers, life will be more difficult for architects. The profession would be wise to expand its market footprint. I sometimes watch Home and Garden TV. Every show features someone with design skills who is not an architect. That's a missed opportunity for the profession. The AIA should ask them to make a show about architects doing great houses. There are dozens of architects as cute and personable as the Property Brothers. With perhaps more talent.

Another general observation about architects, and perhaps one reason the industry isn't making a fuss about their media profile, is that most of them seriously dislike conflict. They will bend over backwards to avoid having an argument. That's a shame. There will always be conflict and difficult people are everywhere. Heller & Metzger employees are mostly working mothers. I started the firm because specifications consulting is an ideal "mommy track" niche

in architecture. And the thing I find myself saying most often to my staff over the years is: “Quit being a girl! The guy’s trying to screw you out of your fee. He is not your friend. You don’t want him to be your friend.” This attitude is not exclusive to women, many of our male clients seem to feel a need to be dignified and polite and don’t get down there and dig in when they need to.

**DI: Conflict is a part of business and life. I always say most of us got into this business because it dealt with inanimate objects and avoided conflict, but guess what? There are people, politics, and conflict in projects! Being able to deal with all that gets rewarded. We need to teach and get better at that.**

**BH:** You need a strategy for it.

**DI: I’ve always seen you as a shining light. You speak your mind and are willing to do something about it. In your practice as a specifications consultant and over the last 20 years as a strategy consultant you have put yourself on the line to give back and effect change. Have you trained your replacement? Who is coming along to stand on your shoulders?**

**BH:** Thank you for those nice compliments. I have a wonderful staff but none of them want the stress of managing a firm.





So, although we have a consistent approach to our work and share a philosophy of what differentiates our services, there's no leadership transition plan at the moment. That was a primary goal for 2020, but then COVID came along.

**DI: To try to put a lid on a crazy year and turn the corner to 2021, I'd like to hear about your own strategy. Back in January 2020 we were rife with cute analogies about "2020 vision" and seeing clearly. Thanks to COVID, politics, social unrest, climate change, the economy, and other wide-reaching crises, that didn't happen. Instead, we were conditioned to deny science and facts, and were overloaded with 'fake news', mis-and- disinformation. We're going to try again this year. In your quest for certainty and optimism, are you doing anything to bring focus and purpose to the year ahead?**

**BH:** We're not out of the woods with respect to the pandemic. Our workload is close to normal, but our receivables have tripled. Depending on what happens politically, economically and medically, we can't be sure we'll ever get paid for some of that work. That's an immediate concern. And then, there's the question of the future of cities. Will anyone build a speculative downtown office building in the next decade? The pandemic has made many companies decide to become virtual companies so how people chose housing and whether they show up in an office may change dramatically. Higher Education is in something of a crisis. Almost all our Higher Ed projects are on hold. The pandemic will change the nature of the construction industry and we don't yet know how it will evolve or how it will change our work. Since Jan 1 we've been flooded with



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RFPs, about triple the normal rate. So we are seeing activity and optimism in the industry for 2021.

**DI: Staying with our introspective bent, would you give that same advice to others—your clients?**

**BH:** I suspect our clients already know they need to get paid and that the future of the construction industry - especially large public projects - is uncertain. Giving advice about riding out the pandemic is foolhardy because there's no modern precedent or rational way to know what's around the corner. The world's experience with COVID is less than one year. We're optimistic that the medical cavalry is coming to our rescue, but that's not proven yet. The best-case scenario is that vaccines and therapies will be brought to market so that COVID will be a non-issue in a year. The worst-case scenario is that the virus will elude medical treatment and leave a significant number of people with impairments and others in lockdown which will cripple the economy for a long time.

Like everyone else, I want to believe that human ingenuity will prevail. But that is not a certainty.

**DI: That's telling. You're a strategy firm and you know these issues, but you're struggling with them yourself. Do you have any plans to broaden your network to include more diverse participants in the year ahead? Diverse in age, thought, discipline, and every way - to widen your perspective?**

**BH:** 2021 doesn't promise to be a growth year at this moment. That could change, but for now, we're happy to be alive and intact with the same staff we had in January 2020.

**DI: That's understandable. What haven't I asked you that you'd like to share? Something that's been bugging you, or a bit of advice in a time when wisdom seems so needed?**

**BH:** The pandemic has caused losses in some respect for everyone. Our country is leading the world in terms of COVID infections per capita. My mother was a Holocaust survivor so I would tell people that although terrible things can and do happen, if you survive, your life is a gift. Doing something to make the world a better place will help offset the suffering caused by this calamity.

**DI: Wonderful advice to end with. We need more of that. Thank you for sharing it, and for reflecting with us.**

**BH:** I'm delighted to do it.

*Barbara Heller is an architect and founder of the specifications consulting firm Heller & Metzger PC as well as the founder and CEO of the business consulting firm Design + Construction Strategies LLC. She is a Senior Fellow of the Design Futures Council and a member of the Advisory Board of Stanford University's Center for Integrated Facility Engineering (CIFE). She has worked on over 400 construction projects and her clients include several firms whose principals were awarded the AIA Gold Medal.*