Q4 INFLUENCE: IMPACT

Brace for Impact

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Firms with intentional strategies around data, value generation and inclusion will enjoy positive impact and increased influence. Others beware.

"Brace for impact!"

Airline pilots are trained to say this command to protect their passengers and crew when a crash is imminent.
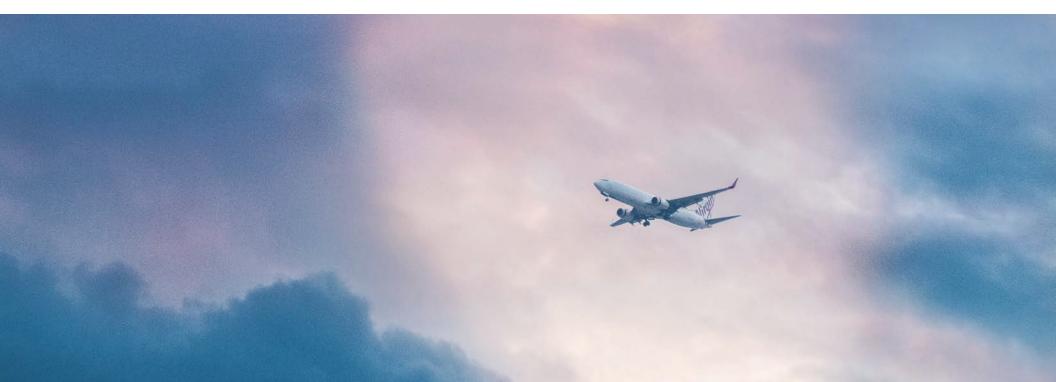
"Architects, brace for impact."

Why? Because danger lurks. If we are successful in redirecting our behavior positively, we, and our partners and clients, will feel the impact in beneficial ways. Without such change, the profession — as we have known it for centuries — may cease to exist.

For the past four quarters of 2022, DesignIntelligence has taken readers like you on a flight through stewardship, responsibility and world-building, all with the goal to result in more impact: greater influence, better outcomes and more significant, measurable results. As we have shaped it, such impact must occur in a variety of new forms: in sustainable design, in the diversity of those who practice and in leveraging technology, and data. Measurable impact in multiple forms.

Other impactful roads are crying out to be traveled. Higher value in compensation and profitability to support R & D, investment in firm infrastructure and people development, long-term strategies and giving back to the community as corporate citizens can only be funded by firms profitable enough to support them. As the perennial laggards in technology adoption, R & D investment and productivity growth, the design and construction industries are last in industry advancement compared to all others.

Flight Plans

For practitioners wondering where to go, the paths are clear. Several strategic differentiating measures have been developed by leading firms that offer clear routes. The day has already arrived when firms are designing their practices and projects to capture and use data-based criteria that include:

- Performance criteria and evidence-based design.

- Research-based design.

- Social specifications.

- Performance metrics.

- Environmental infographics such as wheels, roses, flowers, kite graphs and dashboards that target and achieve goals in multiple concurrent systems such as water, site, community, etc. Leading firms such as Dialog, BNIM, Perkins+Will, KieranTimberlake, Dialog, SERA, et al., have long used such data visualization techniques to help their clients and teams see and design with greater impact.

- New contracts, project delivery methods and incentives, and specialized, data-based services.

- Inclusion of people of color and increased diversity and equity. This is already offering expanded input frames, thankfully, after centuries. To wit, the AIA's new national leader, EVP/CEO Lakisha Woods, an African American woman, replaces Robert Ivy, a 60-something-year-old white male who led the organization for decades. As further evidence, witness the AIA and countless other leading national firms establishing new principal-level positions and firmwide campaigns to promote justice, equity, diversity and inclusion (JEDI). The 2022 Pritzker Prize winner, Diébédo Francis Kéré, is an African architect practicing in Africa. Why does this matter? Continued hard work toward greater inclusion will offer broader perspectives and increase architectural impact for a wider constituency.

Regardless of which of these paths a firm might choose to map their future, the core assumption is that we must choose an approach to differentiate our firms, then measure and quantify it to yield results.

Data-Based, Value-Generating, Inclusive Firms Will Survive

Since their seminal books of the 1980s, Dana Cuff and Robert Gutman predicted the bifurcation of the architecture profession into large, "mega" national/global firms and "micro" boutique, small firms providing high service or high concept design.[1] To a large extent, these prognostications have proven correct. Mid-sized firms are struggling in general, with only a few successful regional exceptions breaking the pattern. So what? This trend is evidence of the forces shaping practice. To right-size to achieve their effective critical masses, firms are trimming the fat and using strategic, freelance alliances to become lean or are growing by acquisition, aggregation and vertical integration to create self-contained, full-service operations to sustain themselves. Both models are generating larger capacities to have impact.

Data and Machines

In his new book, "Machine Learning: Architecture in the Age of Digital Transformation," Phil Bernstein offers some potential solutions for those seeking data and automation strategies.[2] While he agrees with the prediction of the Susskinds' book, "The Future of the Professions," that architects are not likely to be replaced by machines within the next 30 years,[3] he nonetheless advises that task-based automation is one possibility.

Firms just beginning to chart their courses to the future need only to heed the advice of seers such as the Susskinds and Bernstein. They should look to the top firms and absorb their best practices. In emulating the best, they should not merely steal or ape what good firms do, they should digest their data strategies and adapt them to match their own firm cultures. If they do, they can transcend current practices and possibly leapfrog others to elevate the standard of practice for all.

Value and Inclusion

Design professionals who continue to rely on their goodwill, years of experience and uncanny horizontal abilities to "design anything" will, per experts like the Susskinds and Cuff, find it increasingly difficult to compete and survive. Rather, the surviving firms of the future will be those who are skilled at demonstrating and delivering real value in the eyes of clients and partners, using modern tools and diverse teams.

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[1] Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988).
[2] Phil Bernstein, *Machine Learning: Architecture in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2022).
[3] Daniel Susskind and Richard Susskind, *The Future of the Professions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

An Integrated Approach

To connect the three ideas central to this essay, let's look at the data. First, leading firms are using data to inform and transform their practices — the very ways in which they work. Second, they are delivering solutions in ways that add value to projects, in terms valued by clients and partners. Finally, they are achieving these two objectives while deploying a significantly more diverse roster of colleagues. Design professionals representing new disciplines, skills, paradigms, demographics, races and beliefs are not only helping firms find staff amid the post-COVID Great Resignation, but are simultaneously arming industry evolution with smarter, more well adapted, different thinking teams.

I admit, it's harder to practice these days. When the Wright brothers first flew, there were no rules. They deployed intuition, perseverance, guts and luck to succeed. This is how many of us used to practice, but no more. These days, we need more machines, people, data and analysis. We are responsible for so much more beyond our buildings. We also need connectors, systems and enablers to integrate it all. We're not in Kitty Hawk anymore.

What's the Plan?

To survive, we need a clearly conceived action plan for how we'll do these things. First, for how we'll use data. In a June 2022 DesignIntelligence podcast, DI's CEO Dave Gilmore interviewed Arup's chief data officer, Volker Buscher, in a candid discussion that reinforces this point. Posited as a potentially seminal moment of equal significance as the birth of Revit, the formation of the Hanover Principles and the emergence of Integrated Project Delivery — all of which found their origins at Design Futures

Council events — the importance of having a data strategy looms large.

To create value, firms are advised to conduct honest self- and client-based assessments and heed the data to create more value. Diversity and inclusion are most notably reaching critical mass through the widespread implementation of domain leaders within each firm, following cultural change and new practices and actions. For all these considerations, a sustainable, adaptable strategic plan is advised to guide these new motivations and movements to result in transformative outcomes for firms.
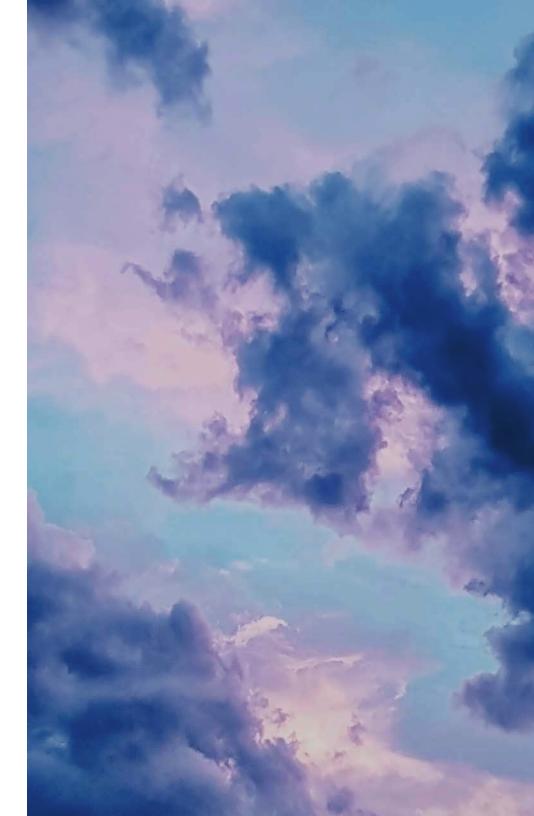
Let's Keep Score

(Is it true that "what gets measured gets done"? Let's try it and find out …)

In an architectural profession long-hindered by an overreliance on intuition, the time has come to join the rest of civilization and become data-savvy. Architects have shunned efforts at data, calculation and prediction in the past due to "innumeracy." While we may have learned to become literate, it's time we become numerate, as well.

The point of the focus on data reliance is that we have little to lose because we are already losing. We are losing value, respect and the battle to have greater positive impact because of our reluctant stance on data and technology use. Projecting that trend has caused many to issue dire predictions about our futures as professionals. In truth, there is much to lose, even beyond our own stature. Simply put, data and automation are part of the new foundation upon which we must stand as professionals in leadership roles. So armed, we can then deploy our experience, humanity and judgment — things we value most.

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Impact is about results. Metrics. Proof.

Accountability.

Over my six-decade career in architecture, I've listened to too many tales of woe from trusted colleagues. Usually overheard at cocktail parties or lectures, these sob stories could easily have been delivered by legendary comedian Rodney Dangerfield. "I don't get no respect," they moan cynically. "People don't appreciate design enough." "We are underpaid and undervalued." The question is: Why are these perceptions so prevalent? Perhaps the answer is that the ways we have chosen to create our cultures, businesses and practices over the past century and a half have failed to have enough impact.

Impact? What does that mean? For this discussion, under our annual editorial theme of INFLUENCE, impact is about results. Metrics. Proof. Accountability. In plain English, impact can be thought of as the result of a concussive force, the action of one object coming forcibly into contact with another, or to have a strong effect on someone or something. Essential terms in these definitions include action, contact (between two "objects") and a strong demonstrable effect.

But Coach!

"Coach, I've been dribbling in circles and back and forth, up and down the court all game. I'm exhausted!" is how so many complaining architects sound to me. "I've been lifting weights and running sprints all day." The coach might counsel, "Working hard is not enough." The real question is: Have you had any impact? What good athletes share is preparation — a precursor to impact. Impact is what happens when you apply the action you've prepared for. How do you know if you've had any? You ask. You observe. You listen. Most importantly, you measure. Subjectively or objectively, anecdotally or scientifically, to demonstrate impact you must quantify it. And if you don't keep score, you can't demonstrate results.

Built environment professionals who believe they've had impact merely by having had 40-year-long careers are mistaken. In this case, demonstrable quantity — of time, number of buildings, perhaps walls full of design awards or even having been in the upper percentiles of firm profitability — is not enough.

None of these metrics matter if the candidate can't demonstrate change or effect on those outside themselves and their project teams or firms. Who might that include? At the first tier, clients. Next comes partners and colleagues. Beyond this, with immediate project connection, come the users and constituents who benefit from the projects we design and build. Finally, it includes those in the communities that surround our buildings — the local and global citizens impacted by what we do. This spectrum of people and planet upon which we can have a positive effect is the playing field where we keep score of the impacts of our work.

The old saw, "What gets measured gets done," has been attributed to Peter Drucker, W. Edwards Deming and others. A brief Wikipedia search of the reference revealed:

> V. F. Ridgway published a paper in 1956 criticizing the measurement mantra. Simon Caulkin, a columnist, neatly summarized Ridgway's argument as:

> "What gets measured gets managed — even when it's pointless to measure and manage it, and even if it harms the purpose of the organisation to do so." Indeed, the paper's title is "Dysfunctional Consequences of Performance Measurements."

Ridgway clearly was onto something in 1956. Not everything that matters can be measured. Not everything that we can measure matters.

But in architecture, we have little to lose by trying to measure a few things and see what they tell us. Particularly if we are in search of greater impact and influence.

In the early days of practice, we could get away with saying, "I'm just an architect. I just do buildings. It's not my job to worry about the outcomes or keep score." No more. Back then, we held all the knowledge we needed in our heads and relied on time and apprenticeship to transfer these skills to the next generations of practitioners. The Susskinds' book, "The Future of the Professions," is an illustrative example of how heretofore closely held tasks are now being deconstructed, routinized and distributed. If you want more impact, develop a strategy in response to that data. It's what the future is saying to us. How will we respond to have more effect and influence?

Architect + Action = Result

In her recently published book, "Architect + Action = Result," Rebecca W. E. Edmunds, AIA, outlines a subject/verb/object grammatical equation to direct architects seeking to create more meaningful professional narratives toward clear, strong action.[4] This equation is, or should be, at the heart of all practitioners' strategies. Beyond hanging their shingles and doing work, they should be armed with an action-oriented plan and purpose and be able to demonstrate its results and impact.

For all seeking an escape from the Rodney Dangerfield-ian self-limiting aspects of their practices, action and result should be their watchwords. Action and result should become the canvasses upon which they paint. Whether through broad strokes or micro-focus, their expressions only have meaning through impact.

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> Successful organizations have impact – or they cease to exist.

By the Numbers

I'm hardly a numbers person. Given a choice, I would rather reside in the universe of words and images, people and experiences, not numbers. But I've learned the hard way that in business, people keep score. They do it with stock prices, profit and loss statements, budgets and schedules, requirements and expectations. I've learned to cope with this world by embracing spreadsheets and allying myself with teammates more numerically inclined than I am. To survive, I've taught myself to be more keenly aware of metrics and finances. But I still believe the world doesn't revolve around those things. They are only the data, not the thing that compels us. The thing, I believe, for most of us designers is the doing. Plying skills honed over long careers is what most of us love. But where too many miss the boat is by remaining self-focused. Where is our impact? Have we had any? How can we know if haven't taken stock?

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[4] *Edmunds, Rebecca, W. E. Architect+Action=Result, r4 llc, 2021*

How many of us even take the time to ask our clients to measure how we did? Proven techniques such as Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE) interviews, net promoter scores and POE performance metrics for our buildings are now becoming de rigueur for leading firms. But what about the rest? In all other segments of business and society, providers of goods and services have learned the necessity of measuring their success. Not just through their own profitability but in other kinds of scorekeeping. Significantly, externally focused ones. Health care professionals couldn't do their work without monitoring and collecting all kinds of data including heart rate, oxygen level, blood analysis, medications and countless other data points. Retailers soon cease to exist without customer satisfaction surveys and strategic adaptations based on their content. They have long used point-of-sale collection devices that track inventory and revenues, inform tactical decisions and long-term vision.

A cursory look at these practices alongside the average architecture firm would easily show most of us are lagging or absent from any such data collection to inform our practices. Sure, a few leading firms are leading the way, but the rest — I'd speculate over 90% of the firms, many of which are comprised of only a handful of design professionals — do not likely have impact metrics on their strategic horizons.

Valid Questions

To practice what I preach, and consider the impact these opinions might be having on you skeptics (or even those mildly interested), let's pose a few questions:

1. What should you measure?

2. Why should you care?

3. How can you afford it?

4. How should you begin, and what can you do with this information once they collect it?

All valid concerns. Let's tackle them one at a time.

1. What to Measure?

Client satisfaction leaps to the top of the list here. Building performance comes next. Based on the current professional zeitgeist, achieving environmental goals and increasing diversity might seem appropriate. No firm can afford to collect and manage all the data. The key is being able to answer why you need each piece and how you'll use it. You could call it the Impact Test. What does collecting this information do for us and others, and how does it help?

2. Why Care?

Architects should care about measuring a given performance indicator for two reasons: first, if it has value in changing behavior; second, if it helps them regain knowledge and action to return to being on a par with realtors, retailers and countless other common players in business civilization. They know the average costs of houses in your neighborhood. They know your buying habits and preferences. Do architects really want to continue to be less informed than these peer providers of goods and services who are already armed with data to inform their work? I don't think so.

3. The Business Case

In an architectural profession long challenged to be profitable, the perennial question around metrics has always been: How do we afford it? To that I say, how can you afford not to? In a world

where everyone else is keeping score, your very survival depends on your ability to generate a profitable cost/benefit equation. Not just for your firm and not just for your finances. We must learn to include costs of all kinds — social, environmental, human, direct and indirect — as well as focus on the long-term horizon vs. short-term, first-cost mentalities. Those who lack the ability to generate such equations and value propositions should get help fast.

4. Getting Started

To identify where your true impact lies and how to increase it, firms are advised to create a rigorous plan. Hire a consultant and set a timeline, objectives and budgets. Approach this quest as you would any research or project management activity. Ask your customers and partners. Their perceptions are more important than your own. Without them, you have no practice. Start simply and modestly. Celebrate some small wins. Then, build on success to generate more impact and value. Those with the motivation and inclination to achieve true change will know what to do.

Call to Action

To leverage your efforts to have greater force, take the time to look around. Next, take action. Take a shot. Finally, measure the results and repeat the cycle. That's how successful organizations on planet Earth operate. They're just as passionate about their work as we are about design, but they take the time to look outside their own sandboxes every so often. They have impact — or they cease to exist.

At the end of his infamous day off, Ferris Bueller said it best.

"Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

Then, based on what you learn, take some small steps to develop more impact from what you do. You might just find it's quite rewarding — financially, professionally and personally. At the least, you'll be doing some good through better-performing buildings, happier clients and constituents, and a broader outlook.

The Future Is Talking

As we look through the clouds to the horizon, we see a future with a message. Our questions are clear:

What is the future telling us?

How will we respond?

Firms that have already deployed these kinds of strategic measures should be able to lower their tray tables, open their laptop computers and continue working, confident in their trajectories. Perhaps they'll capitalize on the opportunity to recharge during their journeys to continue their missions when they land. They

can rest assured in the knowledge that they have created greater positive impact and influence for their colleagues, clients and communities. They will have made themselves more valuable — the kind of responsible design professionals we have always aspired to be.

Those who have not responded and are without value- and data-based strategies should grab their knees and brace for impact.

Either way, hold on. It's going to be an interesting landing.

Michael LeFevre, FAIA emeritus, is managing editor at DesignIntelligence and principal at DI Strategic Advisory. He is the author of "Managing Design" (Wiley 2019), an Amazon #1 bestselling new release, and the contributing editor of "Architect + Action = Result," by Rebecca W. E. Edmunds, 2022.