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Joining the Inner Circle

How the AV industry is gaining the trust of architects and overcoming misconceptions about our technologies.

By John McKeon

Interior designer Roseanne Bell, AV designer/integrator Chris Scharrer, and architect Molly Jones confer on the role of technology systems in the early stages of a recent project.

Last year at InfoComm, interior designer Roseanne Bell presented a seminar entitled “Designing AV Spaces: What Architects and Designers Need to Know.” It was a telling moment when she realized there wasn’t a single architect or interior designer in attendance.

To be fair, the InfoComm show isn’t highly attended by architects or designers. Still, the event’s organizer, the International Communications Industries Association (ICIA), as well as other industry groups like the National Systems Contractors Association (NSCA), are focusing increased attention and resources on outreach programs aimed at architects and designers. The goal of these programs is to promote the role of AV professionals and get them involved earlier in the building-design process. If

Bell's InfoComm seminar is any indication, not many design professionals are paying attention.

"The main thing designers need to know — and if they'd learn this it would solve an awful lot of problems — is to get the AV consultant or systems integrator onboard at the very beginning of a project," says Bell, who is division vice president and director of interior design with The Benham Companies in Tulsa, OK. "Some are doing it, but it's so slow, and most of them just don't get it. It's unusual to find a group that puts the AV people on the team from the start."

Robin Ellerthorpe, a principle with the architectural firm OWP/P in Chicago, says part of the reason for architects' inattention to AV issues is the sheer volume of knowledge they would need to acquire to stay current on the technology. Most of the time, he says, it just isn't worth it. "We might get an AV-related project one out of six times," he estimates. "When we do a base building, it might not include any AV."

As a result, most firms seek specialized AV training only when a project requires it, Ellerthorpe says. His firm has developed a special expertise in security issues, but he says very few firms offer specific AV system design support.

The AV industry doesn't seem to be reaching architectural schools either, as few newcomers are entering the profession with any familiarity with AV issues. According to one source at the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, some schools outside of the U.S. have sound/AV-architecture programs. However, Ellerthorpe, who is a trustee at the University of Tennessee's school of architecture, says he doesn't see it in the curriculum. It's ironic, he says, because so many design students have become adept at displaying their own work with projectors and moving displays, but don't have a real understanding of how it all gets there.

The hands-off approach

Ignorance of AV on the part of architects is only the first part of the problem, according to Chuck Wilson, executive director of the NSCA. Wilson has devoted the last few years, alongside many other industry players, to developing a new version of the Construction Specifications Institute's (CSI) MasterFormat, in which the old, generic section governing electrical systems has been expanded to address a full range of AV and low-voltage electronics. "It took me two-and-a-half years to explain to the CSI what the heck we do," Wilson says. (CSI members include design professionals, specifiers, engineers, contractors, and builders.)

Even after AV processes and products became well understood, Wilson says, architects were still wary. "We totally underestimated the perspective they were coming from and the amount of risk and litigation they incurred from misunderstanding of technology," he says.

To architects, sophisticated displays and other multimedia systems are highly visible project components that also seem highly likely to fail, grow over-complicated, and disappoint clients. “When we were talking about how cool our systems are, what they were hearing was how many things could go wrong,” Wilson says. “They feared having a risk exposure that wasn’t worth it in view of the amount of money involved. Quite often they would do whatever they could to design around any sort of technology.”

When it comes to specifying projectors, speakers, screens, and other AV equipment in a control room or conference facility, Wilson says architects often defer and require the equipment to be furnished by the owner (FBO). This distrust of AV equipment is often grounded on negative project experience, Wilson says. “We made a promise to them that we would get our act together in delivering technology,” he says.

One architect says the FBO approach is a cop-out. “The architect needs to be more responsive,” says Jeff Kehm, architect and owner of Faber Design in suburban Boston. “There’s an awful lot of responsibility on everyone at the table, and as the architect you can’t just shrug your shoulders.”

This indifference often leads to major problems later, when important AV systems are installed. A high-brightness projector, for example, may generate more heat than the building’s HVAC system can exhaust. “When you identify something, you don’t just sit there and hope it goes away, because it’s going to come back and bite you,” Kehm says.

A perceived problem with reliability isn’t the only reason architects are wary to address AV, Ellerthorpe adds. “A typical base building with standard outfitting might cost $85 to $100 per square foot to build, but when you throw in the AV it can go to $300-plus per square foot,” he says. So in the mind of the architect, AV is not only high risk, but also high cost. The safe alternative is to let the clients buy their AV systems later like they would furniture or computers.

Sharing the blame

As out of touch as architects seem to be with AV, AV pros aren’t much better. “There has traditionally been a lack of understanding in the AV industry of the construction process, of such factors as scheduling, phasing, and contracting,” says Dan Feerick, sales manager at MCSi East in Boston. In the past, this has led to the AV integrator being regarded as just another subcontractor bound by a competitive bid and simply required to execute the specifications of a contract.

However, AV specialists have been learning the “nuts and bolts” of the construction industry, Wilson says. For example, AV pros accustomed to working from company purchase orders are now more familiar with the exhaustively detailed contract documents that usually drive major construction projects. These contracts often incorporate industry-standard “general provisions” that may embrace issues as diverse as bonding,

responsibility for jobsite meetings, safety procedures, and accepted wage structures for different trades.

The increasingly common “design-build” project delivery system encourages a more collaborative approach, Feerick says. “We were very much on the periphery in the past, and we’re much more a part of the project team now,” he says. “Architects are expecting a lot more input from their low-voltage contractor; much more so than other subs because your systems are so front-and-center.”

As the industry picture has evolved, savvy firms like MCSi have reached out to architects with basic and advanced educational programs. MCSi launched a series of “lunch and learn” sessions in the mid-1980s, Feerick says, at which a soft-sell strategy guided delivery of extensive technical and application information about new AV systems.

HB Communications also reaches out to architects with regular educational programs in which American Institute of Architects (AIA)-certified continuing education credits are awarded. Scott Hilton, sales director in the firm’s Boston office, says the result is that HB is now closer to many of the architects it works with, and in many cases AV requirements are included in the earliest project specs.

Identifying the source

As the AV industry continues to reach out to the design industry and architects slowly begin to bring AV pros in earlier during the design-build process, there will also be changes in the way AV pros are hired. Independent consultants, for instance, are playing an ever-increasing role as an influence between the architect and integrator. This is particularly true in larger markets.

“In New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago in particular, there are a lot of consultant-based jobs,” says Robert Menell, president of Excel Media in New York City. “Consultants are one of our prime sources of opportunity.”

Of course, many integrators are working directly with architects. Martin Calverley, vice president of engineering at MCSi, estimates that architects influence 25 to 35 percent of MCSi’s projects. And Wilson estimates that half of a typical NSCA member’s business comes through “the construction channel,” via architects, general contractors, and other participants.

What does that mean for a firm’s marketing strategy? Sometimes it presents a quandary, says Angelo Dituri, president of General Audio Visual (GAVI) in New York City. What do you do with architects who expect AV design services to be included with product costs, as they often are with lighting systems? “The way that business is structured, they basically give the design away for free,” Dituri says. “We can’t do that. We have to get a fee.”

Of course, reasonable amounts of pro bono work can open doors. “We may

do some work for nothing just to be listed on the architect's drawings and become part of the specification," Dituri says. "You have to be willing to give a little pro bono in order to look at the big picture."

There are other issues that arise from being involved early in the design process, as well. Some of these stem from longer lead times on projects. "There's a risk because you can put a lot of work into something and still have it yanked away from you later," Calverley says.

Similarly, an integrator can invest a lot of preliminary effort in a project that's eventually awarded to someone else. Still, the effort is worth it, Calverley says. "It's really all about the relationship," he says.

The payoff can come when an architect recommends a specific integrator to a client, Feerick adds. "The architect is generally the primary point of contact for the end-user," he says. "They know who their architect is going to be long before they've selected their general contractor or any of their subs. The architect's recommendation carries a lot of weight."

Of course, logic dictates that architects will be inclined to recommend integrators who have performed well and contributed to the success of previous projects. As a result, many integration firms have targeted specific marketing efforts to architects. HB Communications advertises in regional architectural journals, Hilton says, in addition to conducting its education programs. MCSi is a regular at tradeshows geared toward the design community. And NSCA has a traveling Technology Pavilion it stages at architects' trade and professional events. Of course, architects vary widely in their receptivity to these efforts.

While ICIA and NSCA will continue to offer AV training for architects — courses that are often certified by the AIA — designer Bell doesn't see much interest from architects, perhaps because AIA isn't currently pursuing AV as a continuing education subject for architects. But they should be interested, she says, because AV expertise is something that will make architects more valuable to their clients. "A lot of times buildings don't involve AV just because the architect doesn't suggest it," she says. "They need to look at AV as another design tool, not just a component like air conditioning."

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