Chapter 1

Introduction

After years of anticipation the new museum opens. Architects and critics scrutinise all aspects of its design with great excitement. Visitors throng to the building to experience its innovative features first hand. Pictures and commentary appear in major magazines and newspapers and on the web. The architects are praised for their skill and the museum board is congratulated on its progressive choice of designers, but nowhere is the complicated and sometimes contentious process of the museum’s creation described. As so often happens, the building’s form receives all the attention; what happened behind the scenes, over a period of many years, remains invisible.

In this book we explore that largely hidden process, focusing on the exchanges between client and architect and how these help to shape design. Often, but perhaps not often enough, the exchanges between client and architect take the form of a dialogue: that is, they think together. From the contrasting contributions of client and architect something new emerges, from tensions generated by difference, possibly by conflict, a transformation occurs. How this happens, who is involved and how design results is the subject of Design through Dialogue: A Guide for Clients and Architects.

In recent years, as the size and complexity of architectural projects have grown and more building professionals participate, variation in who fulfils the roles of architect and client has increased, with contact between architect and client becoming more attenuated. Fortunately, there are still architects who are responsible for design and who meet face to face with clients. For us, ‘architect’ refers to this person or persons; ‘client’ includes...
those who commission a project as well as those who are consulted during design whose lives it will affect.

Our intention is to help clients and architects enter a dialogue with confidence and pursue it with success. Instead of presenting instructions, rules or specific techniques, as a manual might, we draw examples from actual architectural projects, both large and small, from different countries. We interpret, support and extend material from these cases with concepts drawn from various fields: group dynamics, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, communication theory, developmental psychology as well as architecture. Our book is a guide that suggests how clients and architects might find their way through what is always new territory: designing an architectural project together. While we focus on the relationship between client and architect and the activities they undertake, the book should be useful to all those who participate in the design and construction of environments.

Some, possibly many, architects pursue design primarily as the creation of form without giving sufficient attention to patterns of use and how the new environment can enhance the lives of occupants. This purely aesthetic orientation, which is also promoted in the education of many architecture students, leads to the mistaken view among potential clients, particularly for commercial projects, that architects are only image-makers, cannot be trusted to work within time and budget constraints and therefore must relinquish many of their traditional responsibilities to others, including project and construction managers. That view and the resulting decrease in the centrality of the architect to the design and construction process severely reduce opportunities for architects and clients to discover how design can enhance the quality of everyday life.

Fortunately, there are architects who still consider both form and use as well as the connections between them, exploring how design can meet people’s needs and desires in innovative ways. These architects engage in dialogue with the client, pursuing design as both a social and an aesthetic process. By presenting the ways that such architects work and the projects that result, we hope to give architects, students of architecture and future clients a greater understanding of how design is achieved through dialogue and of the many benefits that ensue.

A Dialogue between Client and Architect

The term dialogue is often used as a synonym for conversation but dialogue is more than just conversation. Dialogue is a collaborative activity; participants talk with rather than to each other; certainly they may disagree but they do not aim to ‘win’ or persuade. Instead, through talking they explore and discover, staying with the tensions and conflicts that arise, to allow the unexpected to surface. Such a process depends on an attitude of not knowing and a tolerance for uncertainty. Just as importantly, dialogue relies on a relationship that Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber called ‘I-thou’, in which each person fully acknowledges and respects the other’s humanity including that person’s knowledge and ideas. Buber, who developed a philosophy of dialogue, recognised that instead of an ‘I’ that only knows objects and ends, dialogue requires an ‘I of relation’ that he later termed the ‘I of love’.

Architect Louis Kahn found that he had many beliefs in common with his client Dr Jonas Salk, inventor of the polio vaccine, including a belief in the distinction between what Salk called the ‘measurable and the ‘unmeasurable’. Architect and client came from very similar backgrounds and shared a vision of creating community and linking human intellect and spirit. The result of their collaboration, the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, is a remarkable building. Many of its outstanding features can be traced directly to the dialogue between client and architect which began when they first met in 1959.

Each respected and listened to the other. While Salk was sympathetic to Kahn’s design approach, from the very beginning he was able to reject some of the architect’s key ideas and present his own. Based on his understanding of the needs of research scientists, Salk rejected Kahn’s first proposal for laboratories in towers similar to those at the Richards Building Kahn had designed for the University of Pennsylvania. Instead, Salk required open-plan laboratories.1 For his part, Louis Kahn was sensitive to needs that the scientists had not recognised themselves: he proposed a small study for each principal scientist as a refuge from the noisy, spartan labs and persuaded the scientists of their value.

The construction contract had already been signed when Salk realised he could not accept Kahn’s second scheme of four laboratories organised around two courtyards; he requested instead just two lab buildings facing each other across a single open space. The design that followed led to the creation of a dramatic space: between two three-storey laboratories a single, hard-surfaced plaza stretches without interruption to the Pacific Ocean. The fact that the central plaza is hard surfaced without any planting is the result of advice offered by Mexican architect Luis Barragan. The teak study cubicles...
… dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in relationship. Thinking together implies that you no longer take your own position as final. You relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result simply from being in a relationship with others — possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred.


Moore Ruble Yudell, St. Matthew's Parish Church, Pacific Palisades, California, 1983, Third design workshop. Using large-scale models, Charles Moore discusses alternative schemes with parishioners.

... are stacked in towers at each end of the laboratory buildings, Kahn recreated with them some aspects of ‘the monastic setting that had interested Salk and him from the start’. Since the lab buildings were sunk below ground, the lowest floor of laboratories is at basement level. To bring daylight to them, Kahn designed long, sunken courtyards on each side of the plaza. Today architects of large projects rarely work exclusively with just one person as Kahn did with Salk. It is far more common for architects to work with a client group or several groups as Charles Moore of Moore Ruble Yudell (MRY) did while designing St. Matthew’s Parish Church in Pacific Palisades, California. After the small A-frame chapel of St. Matthew’s burned to the ground, the congregation decided to rebuild. Partly as a consequence of acrimony over the recent selection of a new pastor, the congregation decided that, in order to be built, any final design for the new church would require a two-thirds vote of approval from all 350 members. Charles Moore was one of the few architects willing to accept that requirement, writing in the proposal submitted to the selection committee in 1979 that ‘… the most important act of the architect is listening, and the successful building grows out of an intimate and continued relation with the clients’. In his proposal Moore outlined a series of workshops to give all parishioners an opportunity to participate directly in the design process.

After MRY was chosen, the architects held three design workshops on Sunday afternoons, a month apart. Structured with care and usually including a shared meal, each workshop set out specific tasks that required a combination of talking and showing by the architects and the participants. For instance, during the first workshop parishioners walked the 37-acre site, pausing at certain points to record their thoughts, impressions and desires for the new church. Later they developed briefing and design preferences, using materials for making models which the architects provided. During the second workshop participants proposed plans for the church, making their own drawings, sketches and rough models. Moore also showed them slides of many churches, modern and historic, asking them for their likes and dislikes. It was at the third workshop that MRY presented three alternative designs arising from the previous workshops. Six of the seven groups within the workshop agreed on the same alternative.

The participatory process of designing St. Matthew’s illustrates several characteristics of an effective dialogue between client and architect. The architects were observably open to the possibilities and desires expressed by parishioners, even when they were contradictory, enthusiastically drawing design implications from differences rather than proposing alternatives or trying to reach consensus between opposing views. Charles Moore recalls: ‘An important discovery we made early on was that when we really pushed something we lost it. It worked best to let the parishioners generate the ideas and then to coax them into architectural expression.’ It is notable that Moore used the word ‘let’. Letting allows something to happen; it does not impose or direct the action in a certain direction to achieve a predetermined outcome. Allowing things to emerge is a key feature of dialogue that requires time and patience as well as the stance of being open. This stance has been called ‘suspending’ one’s opinion and, as importantly, ‘the certainty that lies behind it’.

Early in the participatory design process for St. Matthew’s the architects discovered that the parishioners held very strong and conflicting preferences: some wanted a ‘simple parish church’ while ‘other people wanted a noble, almost cathedral-like space’. Another apparent contradiction was a shared desire for intimate seating in the half round but also for a traditional sanctuary. Many parishioners wished for connections to the outdoors through the plentiful use of glass but other participants, concerned about good acoustics for the new organ, argued for hard, heavy surfaces and not glass. And another group of older members, expressing nostalgia for the former wooden church, preferred a wood interior.

The architects were able to hold these apparent opposites in mind, in balance, to generate design proposals that accommodated them all. In the
... people creating something, working together to make something, have a much easier time working with each other, and find the experience far more exciting and positive than people on committees, who are cast automatically into a kind of critical role of wondering whether what’s already in front of them is alright or not.

Charles Moore, *Hanging together to make something*, 1968, p 103

The pews and exposed timber windows give views to the garden. The chapel create an impression of lots of glass.12

... two-thirds. These, along with the internal timber roof and wooden furniture, give the overall impression of a wood interior. At the same time vertical windows next to the altar, a glass narthex and a bay window in the chapel create an impression of a wood interior.

When vertical windows next to the altar, a glass narthex and a bay window in the chapel create an impression of lots of glass.12

During the development of the schematic design for St. Matthew’s the pastor of the church and the future occupants of the new church who participated in the workshops served as the client for the project. Subsequently, to develop and refine the design the architects worked with several committees of congregation members. Approval of the final design came from almost the entire congregation: a full 83 per cent approved, far higher than the requisite two-thirds.

At St. Matthew’s architect and client were able to contribute in the best way they could from their respective areas of knowledge and experience. As in any successful dialogue each respected the knowledge and ideas of the other and the outcome grew from their joint efforts, a process that was immensely satisfying to all. Charles Moore has written, ‘Being a part of making that architectural outcome grew from their joint efforts, a process that was immensely satisfying to all. Charles Moore has written, ‘Being a part of making that architectural design is at least one step removed from the client, reducing and sometimes removing the possibility for dialogue between client and designer to take place. In this book we are interested primarily in this direct dialogue, between those on the client side who are most knowledgeable about what is needed and desired and those on the architect side who are responsible for the design.

A Relational Approach

As Charles Moore observed in his written proposal to the selection committee at St. Matthew’s, a successful building grows from the relationship between client and architect. In fact, it grows from an entire network of relationships among myriad participants. Just a short list could include: the architect (or more likely several architects and other design professionals), the client (often an entire client team), future occupants, members of the local community, engineers and consultants in specialised areas, contractors and subcontractors, city officials and other municipal authorities, representatives of financial institutions, fabricators and other producers of materials and products. Despite the significant impact that the quality of these relationships has on the case of the entire design process and the quality of the final project, historically little guidance has been given to clients or architects on how best to engage in these relationships and how to manage different perspectives and inevitable disagreements. That is beginning to change.

The web sites for both the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in the UK and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in the US use the word ‘dialogue’ in their general recommendations to clients who are choosing architects. The RIBA calls its recommendations ‘Working with an architect on your home’ and states, ‘Good architecture needs collaboration and dialogue. You need to respect each other’s views.’ The AIA also suggests cooperation in its title ‘You and your architect: A guide for a successful partnership’ and states, ‘There is no substitute for the intensive dialogue and inquiry that characterize the design process’.15

Two recent publications in the UK give more comprehensive and detailed guidance to clients of both small and large projects. Each offers well-organised and well-illustrated recommendations to clients for finding an architect, creating a brief and participating in design decisions. Creating Excellent Buildings: A Guide for Clients by the CABE is very clear in its instruction to the client regarding responsibility: ‘You should retain responsibility for seeing that the brief describes unambiguously and clearly what you want the project to accomplish. You should review it, be sure it says what you want it to say...’. The School Works Tool Kit by Jane Seymour recognises the importance of the active role clients can take in working with architects on...
that generated the involved students, teachers and renovation of a 1960s building of corridors and stairs. This radical aerial walkways and bridges instead auditorium, dining facilities and accommodates a geodesic 2004.

School, Dulwich, London, Architects, Kingsdale de Rijke Marsh Morgan and contractor, replacing the more traditional adversarial one. coordination could benefit from a collaborative relationship between architect practice requires a high level of coordination between different parties. Such to communicate more rapidly, there is growing recognition that good business and includes ever more participants and as new technologies enable people the process of designing and constructing buildings becomes more complex how to build effective working relationships is receiving more attention. As 16

extracting 'tips' for planners and designers to make that process more public participatory process that occurred in a wide variety of projects, client communities. In Designing Public Consensus Barbara Faga examines the public participatory process that occurred in a wide variety of projects, extracting 'tips' for planners and designers to make that process more manageable and more useful. In Curing the Fountainheadache: How Architects & their Clients Communicate architect Andrew Pressman and other contributors tell stories of architect-client interactions, both frustrating and exhilarating, with pointers for clients and architects. 18

In the fields of construction and business management the question of how to build effective working relationships is receiving more attention. As the process of designing and constructing buildings becomes more complex and includes ever more participants and as new technologies enable people to communicate more rapidly, there is growing recognition that good business practice requires a high level of coordination between different parties. Such coordination could benefit from a collaborative relationship between architect and contractor, replacing the more traditional adversarial one.

In 1994 the UK government and the construction industry, recognising the positive impact collaborative relationships can have on both process and product, jointly commissioned Michael Latham’s report, Constructing the Team, which led to the establishment of the Construction Industry Board to oversee reforms. In 2001, in a follow-up report, Latham noted that partnering had made great strides, particularly in the housing association movement and other parts of the public sector but that many commercial clients still did not understand that fiercely competitive tenders and the practice of accepting the lowest bid do not produce value for money. 19

Adversarial approaches produce high levels of litigation and conflict, low investment and negligible margins, well-documented drawbacks that have stimulated an increasing number of collaborative relationships in design and construction in Britain. Such relationships are reinforced by new forms of partnering contracts that engage everyone on the construction team in the joint discovery of solutions to problems. Responsibility for risk is shared between contractor and client, further reinforced when open book accounting clauses are incorporated. These forms of contract ensure a successful outcome through an ongoing cooperative relationship. 20

In the US, guidance offered to architects from a business and management perspective stresses teamwork and engagement of the client. In their concise manual The Next Architect: A New Twist on the Future of Design, James Cramer and Scott Simpson single out three recent changes that affect design practice: (1) recognition that design is team-based and not the work of a solitary genius; (2) increase in the speed of tasks; and (3) development of technologies that allow designers to show their thinking and proposals in three and four dimensions extremely quickly. This third change makes ‘the design process far more transparent and accessible to clients and the public alike, further encouraging [and in fact requiring] broad participation’. 21 The authors point to the significant role the client now plays and the importance of the architect’s ‘clientship skills’ and list simple rules to follow. They also recommend radical changes to the entire design and construction process, with contractors becoming partners early on by joining the design development phase and participating in the preparation of construction documents.

In his discussion of the need to redesign architectural practice, Thomas R Fisher in In the Scheme of Things notes the extremely adversarial character of the relationships between participants in the design and construction process and suggests that the jargon used by different professionals hinders understanding and cooperation. He suggests that building cooperative relationships could well begin with language, with ‘the words we choose and the way we use them’. 22 Another path to cooperation and collaboration is offered in the emerging, computer-based techniques of building information modelling (BIM). With BIM all participants in the project, from early on, can contribute and share information with the use of a single virtual model. 23 How best to improve the relationship between professional and client is receiving more attention in business and the professions. In The Trusted Advisor, David Maister, Charles Green and Robert Galford extend guidance to all professional consultants who work with clients in an advisory capacity. Many of their suggestions on how to build a client’s trust and confidence apply to architects as well: how to focus on the client, how to be a good listener, the confidence apply to architects as well: how to focus on the client, how to be a good listener, the importance of acknowledging and responding to emotions. 24 In the field of psychotherapy, therapists have been rethinking their relationship with clients, giving special attention to the inherent power differential and taking it into account in their work with clients. Based on the writings of the Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana and intersubjective psychoanalysts
When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the practice context. This is part of what Donald Schön called ‘reflection-in-action’ in contrast to an earlier mode of professional practice – application of ‘technical rationality’. As reflective practitioners realise, ‘Complexity, instability and uncertainty are not removed or resolved by applying specialised knowledge to well defined tasks’. Instead, they approach each project with an open, inquiring attitude, discovering what is new to that project and responding, by thinking and doing, to the specifics of that case.

Our Dialogue

To gain greater insight into the way dialogue shapes design and to present details of a variety of projects, we interviewed architects and clients in the UK, the US, Sweden, Israel, Hong Kong and New Zealand. Some of the projects are large and well known (museums, a supreme court building, a central library, a hospital). Others are smaller and not so well known (schools, houses, shops, a local library). Some buildings: the National Museum of the American Indian, the Central Library in Seattle, Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, the Supreme Court in Jerusalem we selected because we already knew that the process of designing them would be illuminating for this book. Other times, often through serendipity, we met or learned of architects who relish their relationships with clients and who view their conversations with them not as a necessary burden but as a springboard for design. Even with such an attitude the process is not easy. We sought to discover how these architects work with clients and what the consequences are for design.

As in the dialogue between client and architect, we have each contributed to this work from our respective areas of expertise, experience and concern. Karen Frank is an environmental psychologist who teaches architecture students in seminars, design studios and courses on the social aspects of architecture at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Karen has previously written about architectural design, urban public space, alternative housing and types in architecture. Teresa von Sommaruga Howard, who lives in London, is an architect who consulted with tenants in public sector housing well before that became a common practice. Teresa is also an interim manager and organisational consultant and a group-analytic psychotherapist with a specialty in conducting large dialogue groups.

Very much like the evolving design for a building, the form and content of this book kept changing as we kept ourselves open to new possibilities, holding the tensions and conflicts that arose, allowing them to generate new ideas. One of the biggest challenges we faced was how to structure the book. We wanted to integrate different kinds of material from a variety of cases and sources to illuminate particular approaches and concepts. Consequently, separating the book into discrete and complete case studies was not an option. Since we do not see the design process as a linear sequence of tasks but as a reiterative process of overlapping activities, it made no sense to organise chapters around steps in a linear sequence of what happens first, second etc. After a great many outlines, much discussion and revision that continued as we wrote, we settled on a plan. Chapter 2 ‘In Dialogue’, describes five different ‘dialogues’ that contribute to design: between client and architect, between briefing and designing as activities, between the brief and the design as outcomes, between ideas of use and ideas of form and between the inner and outer worlds of clients and architects. Subsequent chapters focus on four kinds of overlapping, often simultaneous activities that occur during the dialogue between client and architect: relating, talking, exploring and transforming. Examining each of these four activities offers a different lens for looking at design and dialogue, revealing a different set of issues and concerns.

From the beginning to the end of a project, no matter how large or small, and possibly after its completion, client and architect are relating to each other.

They do so largely through talking and through activities closely connected to talking – showing and writing. During periods of briefing and designing, both client and architect are continuously finding things out; together and apart they are exploring. Often the client begins this activity before commissioning an architect, to determine needs, to select a designer, to consider whether a new building or a renovation is even necessary. It is in the architect’s hands to take what has been learned with the client, to hold possible differences and possibilities and the tensions they generate and propose a design or several designs. This involves transforming. As with exploring, instances of transforming may happen anywhere along the way; a transformation is not necessarily a final or singular climax. Here again the client plays an important role for the client may well have asked, quite explicitly, for a different kind of building, for a transformation of the ordinary.

Since the activities of relating, exploring, talking and transforming do not happen sequentially, the chapters can be read in whatever order the reader prefers. Readers who seek all information about a given project are encouraged to consult the index since different aspects of the same architectural project often serve as examples in several chapters.
Another challenge we faced was finding the right words for translating a body of knowledge from other disciplines that have their own languages and concepts. As in all translations the new language we developed does not quite match the original. The intention is to open a door to new ways of understanding and reflecting that we hope many architects and clients will find illuminating. Endnotes and the bibliography offer sources for readers who wish to learn more.

Thank You

To create this book we engaged in the same activities that frame its chapters: relating, talking, exploring and transforming. In pursuing these activities we relied on the gracious participation of architects and clients around the world. From our interviews with them we gathered invaluable material—the details of projects and processes and their insights into design and dialogue. To the architects and the clients who contributed to this work, whose names are listed at the close of the book: Thank you for your time, your attention and your stories.

Our work benefited significantly from the contributions of others as well. Tony Holmes unfailingly supplied his photography and Photoshop skills, research assistance and his good humour. Nesbitt Blaisdell posed for the cover photograph with patience and grace. Lynn Paxson extended enthusiastic research assistance and his good humour. Nesbitt Blaisdell posed for the cover. Tony Holmes unfailingly supplied his photography and Photoshop skills, research assistance and his good humour. Nesbitt Blaisdell posed for the cover. Lynn Paxson extended enthusiastic research assistance and his good humour. Nesbitt Blaisdell posed for the cover.

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NOTES

4 Ibid, p. 139.
5 Ibid, passim.
7 Ibid, for information about the content of each workshop.
11 Ibid.
15 ‘You and your architect’ www.aaia.org/value/index.htm
20 The New Engineering Contract (NEC) Suite is a family of contracts developed to stimulate good management of the relationship between the two parties and hence the work included in the contract. Written in clear and simple language so that it is easily understood, the suite can be used for a wide variety of situations and types of work in any location. There are five Options; Option G is specifically for open book accounting.
23 See Garber, ed, Closing the Gap.
