



Practice Management

Settings

Community Home

Discussion 2.6K

Library 107

Blogs 109

Our Events 0

Members 12.5K

[◀ Back to Blog List](#)

Why you should consider applying to the AIA College of Fellows

By Christopher S. Wasney FAIA posted 5 days ago

Follow

0
Recommend

[Mark as Inappropriate](#)

By Chris Wasney, FAIA

My journey to fellowship began, probably like a lot of other people’s, with several trips to the starting line only to beat a hasty retreat. My chapter does a good job of educating and encouraging participation in this program, and I attended several of their annual “Demystifying Fellowship” programs. I’ve led a successful firm for over 25 years, and I’m very proud of our work, but the daunting part of the qualifications for Fellowship, as the chapter’s fellows explained it to us, was “demonstrating national impact or leadership.” We have a wall full of design awards, most local, some state, none national. Some projects got national press attention, but almost always without mentioning our firm. Dang...so what to do?

This question was the single biggest hurdle that delayed my application for probably about five years. So why, as I turned 60 in my application cycle, did I finally take the plunge and decide to navigate the anxiety of whether I’m worthy? I’m not actually sure. But I’ll take a stab at it.

Architects, as a group, seem remarkably interested in affirmation from our peers. Witness the relentless design award cycles and the quest for publication. Do accountants and dentists do this? I don't know, but I somehow doubt it. No doubt other professions indulge in this, but I think our family is especially prone to it. Is this a bad trait? I hope not, because as a firm, we have pursued design awards like dogs chasing proverbial cars. My charitable view of our profession is that we endure amazing challenges to produce our best work, and we value the approval of our fellow travelers on this journey above all—with the very notable exception of the satisfaction of our clients. We crave the admiration of our peers, perhaps to salve the battle scars of the process.

Why was it important to me personally? I'm certainly not immune to the desire for peer recognition, and many of my friends had endured the process, successfully, and encouraged me to pursue it, and there was certainly the appeal of sitting at the 'cool kids table' with them. But I do feel like our work had a positive impact on the world, however modest, and the aspect of fellowship that speaks to service to the profession resonated with me. So, being part of the College of Fellows was important to me, and I'm deeply grateful that I've been admitted.

Writer / Coach / Therapist

One of the best decisions I made was to engage an experienced writer who specializes in helping architects with their fellowship applications. My undergraduate degree is in English, and I'm a confident, competent writer, but the relentless self-promotion that the process requires—fellowship application is after all no place for modesty—does not readily fly off my keyboard. It becomes quite tiresome to write "I did this..." and "I did that..." over and over, because of course, for most of us, *we do* things with our colleagues, consultants, clients, and collaborators.

My writer/coach/therapist, Canan Yetmen, had worked with several of my friends in the Bay Area, even though she lives in Austin TX. I spoke to her and had a wonderful conversation, but alas by early spring, her dance card was already filled that cycle, accounting for the last of my false starts. I reserved her for the following year, and the die was cast. When we finally started, in January 2019, she explained that she never meets most of her clients, who are spread out across the county. I thought that was crazy, and promptly booked a flight to Austin. We spent a long day together, fleshing out a strategy and a process. She was part project manager, part therapist, and the relative proportion of these roles would fluctuate with my own confidence as we worked through it.

For a procrastinator like me, starting early in the new year was essential. Between project and firm responsibilities, weeks would go by without any progress on my end, and we ended up using all but a few days of the nine months we worked on this.

Object?

For some applicants, the choice of Object is probably straightforward. If one has a handful of national AIA design awards, look no further than Object One. President of the State AIA and on a bunch of national committees? Easy choice. I've long held the opinion, perhaps only my own, that Fellowship tends to reward

depth more than breadth, and well, I'm kind of a generalist, pretty good at a wide array of things, and not an expert or superstar in any of them.

Her best advice to someone in my situation—which I pass along here—was to not be too quick to settle on an “Object” and then try to cram your career into it. Rather, “pin it all up” so to speak, and see what emerges. We—meaning my writer, my sponsor, and I—were quite patient at this, and in fact, we changed objects pretty late in the game. The other point Canan stressed is that this is not a Greatest Hits collection or a career retrospective. Be prepared to jettison even one's favorite projects if they do not reinforce the theme of the application.

What was the “ah-ha” moment where the object became clear? Well, conversation over martinis at a neighborhood dive bar in San Francisco with an architect friend (and fierce competitor) who urged me to highlight a particular project that had received a lot of attention—the d.school at Stanford University—and then to ride that horse hard to the finish line and then craft the stories around the other projects in the application around that theme, which is perhaps best summarized in the all-important 30-word-summary:

Christopher Wasney's sensitive responses to academic architecture establish clarity and integrity while accommodating modern needs and innovative pedagogies. Operating within world-renowned campuses, Chris expands design and adaptive reuse strategies, with award-winning and influential results.

This epiphany settled the debate, for reasons that aren't exactly clear to me, both Canan and my sponsor felt this took my application from Object 1 and landed me squarely in the rather ambiguous but nonetheless comfortable realm of Object 2 Practice Management. I have always considered Object 2 the most suitable spot for generalists, and my successful application seems to bear this out.

Letter writers

Surely, we all know how this profession can humble us on a daily basis. A former boss and mentor of mine used to ruefully note “that's why they call it the *practice* of architecture” when something didn't quite go his way. Honestly, when I'm feeling waylaid by some problem or self-inflicted wound on a project, I sometimes pull out my application and read the courtesy copy of the letters from my recommenders. I usually don't recognize the guy they're describing, but it never fails to lift my spirits.

I heard from several experienced people to not stockpile my recommendations with client testimonials because the jurors can seem to discount them. I was fortunate that in our practice we collaborate as the local architect with several nationally and internationally known architectural firms from the East Coast, and I have become close friends with several of their principals. When it comes to showing national “reach” for a Bay Area architect, it was awfully reassuring to have letters of rec on the letterheads of Ennead, William Rawn Associates, and Centerbrook Architects. I was at first reticent about asking for this favor but was relieved to learn that to a one, my writers were happy to participate. I expect that will be true for most applicants.

I mixed up my letter writers between clients, collaborators, friends who knew my work well, and one brilliant professor who was the end-user of a project. All but the professor was a Fellow, by the way. Though wrangling one's letter writers is one of the more unnerving experiences, especially as the deadline

approached, it was smart to wait until near the end so that the themes in the application were well defined, and I could ask certain recommenders to reinforce specific aspects of the narrative.

Sponsor

The notion of a sponsor was one of the vaguest aspects of the process. I had heard that your sponsor would be the person who nagged your letter writers to get their stuff done, in addition to being your primary advocate. That didn't seem right to me, so I didn't ask my sponsor to do any of the scut work involved in this process. In the 'generalist' spirit that pervades my application, I chose someone who knew my work in several different contexts: as a fellow architect in our region; as an educator; and as my 'boss' in my teaching capacity at Stanford University's Architectural Design Program for the past decade. John Barton FAIA proved a wonderful choice, lending gentle and sometimes firm advice, coaching me, and critiquing and improving my application. I'd suggest that anyone applying to relieve their sponsors of the picayune duties and nagging and choose someone who can best speak to the big picture.

Production

This is not a small endeavor. It was a lot of work. I ended up treating it like a project in the office—a design project with a trajectory, with deadlines, deliverables, milestones. That helped a lot because it made the mysterious process familiar. I had the distinct advantage of having the resources of my firm at my disposal, including a fantastic graphic designer, Katie Gutierrez, and access to professional photography. Add in the cost of my coach and a copy editor at the very end (wasn't going to blow it on a technicality), it was a substantial investment. On the other hand, I have friends who just did their own and sent it in and were successful, but I just wasn't that brave or confident. But clearly, both paths are available to applicants. I wanted to leave no possible doubt other than the substance of the application.

Coda

Was it worth the time, the stress, the money? Yes, I think so. I'm very proud to have been chosen, to have made the grade on my first try, for all the reasons selfish and selfless described above. It was professional therapy, and like regular therapy, it has its discomfoting moments, as in: is this all I've done in my career? And then, on the other end of the emotional spectrum, a satisfying and somewhat coherent look at my life's work.

So... whew! What a relief when I read that email, on Valentine's Day of 2020—one of the last happy moments for me in that terrible, difficult year. I'm glad I'm through it and happy I screwed up the courage to do so. And now back to work with my colleagues, and back to thinking about what "we" can accomplish in the future instead of what "I" already have.

[\(Return to the cover of the March 2022 PM Digest\)](#)

0 comments

49 views

Comments

Add

Currently no comments.

AIA.org

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Code of Ethics](#)

[Contact Us](#)

AIA Network

[AIA Conference on
Architecture](#)

[AIA Contract Docs](#)

[AIAU](#)

[AIA Foundation](#)

[AIA Store](#)

[AIA Trust](#)

[Architectural Adventures](#)

[TopicA](#)

AIA KnowledgeNet. All rights reserved.