John Fleming and Barbara Swift recently sat down with former Seattle Mayor Paul Schell to discuss the collective responsibility of city building. The following is the first of a two-part interview. The rest of their conversation will be printed in ARCADE 24.2, Dec. 05.

HISTORY AND ALLIANCES

BS: On this issue of leadership in the next generation. I hear people say, "We need another Jim Ellis."

PS: —No you don't. I like Jim but that was from a different time. There were ten people in the Rainier Club who could decide what ought to happen. Now, fortunately and unfortunately, nobody runs City Hall and there is no establishment. There is no media leadership on issues. It has been redefined as gossip. The nature of governance has changed. You don't hire a press office to run an open office. To stay in office you hire somebody to manage the media – a PR person. There is no context or perspective. My own feeling is, "Do it anyway."

JF: How can the design community participate in the process as decision makers?

PS: There is a lesson from history – in the late '60s and early '70s the focus was, "How do we build a great city?" There were social, transportation and political issues involved in finding a community consensus about what this place could be and should be. Then the conventional wisdom was to build more freeways. We had a road being planned around the city, around downtown. Pioneer Square was to be parking lots. The Market was considered a rat-infested slum to be torn down for high-rises. In the middle was Forward Thrust, an establishment solution – broad-based, multi-issue campaign that got people thinking. Unfortunately, the transportation system failed.

At the time there was a loose alliance of people who cared about the freeways – the League of Women Voters, the arts and the design constituencies. It was a combination that pushed through lots of initiatives. Everybody helped everybody else. The artists helped fight the freeways, and the freeway people helped support the arts. It built a community consensus around, "What kind of city do we want to be?"

There was a healthy media involvement. First Argus, then Seattle Magazine, and then the Weekly. Civic discourse was a great part of Seattle life. It isn't broken now. We are struggling to find a new way to have that civic discussion.

Looking to the past for the strategies may not be the right thing, but you can model the approach. One which is broad and community-based keeps the language and ideas open across disciplines, sympathizes with other issues and is not single focused. This holds true today. We've broken ourselves into communities of special interest, and it's a my-way-or-the-highway attitude rather than finding a reasonable middle ground, building a constituency and going for it.

JF: Is the question: How do you rebuild that energy?

PS: In the late '60s and early '70s we had the good fortune of having some visible adversaries. The Downtown Seattle Association (then called Central Association), Mayor Wes Uhlman and the newspapers were promoting freeways. The kids writing the stories in the papers weren't. That made it easy to say, "We need a change because this direction isn't the right one."

There are some natural alliances for building a great city such as the environmental community. Good environmental policy should encourage density. Environmentalists should be our strongest allies. The number one issue for making growth work is increasing density in the city.

There are other logical alliances. We are a city that is 80 percent Democrat, but we are also conservative, liberal and populist. Labor is a powerful force in our city, as are the environmental and neighborhood communities. There already is an alliance between Labor and the environment that came out of the WTO. There's no one dominant force.

You have to work the press. It's letters to the editor and letters to the council. In City Hall, when you get ten letters individually written on an issue, you think, "The world's coming to an end." With emails it is easy to do. They all read emails.

In order to have the allies you need, you must open lines of communication across disciplines. Invent new ways to talk to each other. Imagine if you were insulted, confused or made to feel stupid. How do you think the average person feels? I think you need to find a way to communicate to the broader community. Write letters in Dick and Jane language. Architects – don't take this the wrong way, I love architects – but they have their own language. In order to be a good communicator you have to put yourself in the skin of the person you're talking to. Interdisciplinary dialogue is critical.

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Celebrate the common rather than the uncommon – that's the bigger challenge. Not to put down the art, you need that to inspire good design, but you need to understand the major job of the profession is helping us build communities, create shelter we can afford and preserve the environment that we share. Those are all broader goals of the profession but too often the honor awards are given for indulgent projects. Give an award for affordable, livable and inspiring projects.

When I was mayor, one of my first efforts was to describe what I hoped for Seattle: A city of choices. The more choices you have for your life experience the richer and better your quality of life. The more choices you have in housing style, education, restaurants, and theaters. That's what makes a great city.

Neighborhood planning in Seattle had been launched when I came into office. There was a reaction to the term "Urban Village", a planner's term. Good concept, bad communication. "Urban Village" – scared the hell out of people. If it had been said, "Look, we all need to understand that if our region is going to maintain the things we love about it, then we need to take some density." When we got into it we found that at least half of the neighborhoods were willing to take added density and they recognized that it made sense to do it in the neighborhood business districts. Help them come to the conclusion that this is in everybody's common interest, and make it in the context of the community – don't preach to them about what's good for them.

PUBLIC SERVICE, POLITICS AND LEADERSHIP

PS: The world of politics has changed from public service to a nasty little game of power. It is all about making celebrities of our leaders. The way you survive in this process is, don't do anything. Certainly don't take any risks. Manage the events of the day as they hit the television stations.

The way you survive in politics is not to be a leader. You run around and find out where the crowd is going. You don't start new initiatives.

Right now it is a burden, politically, to hire good architects and good builders. It is not politically smart. You come across as aloof, elitist, expensive and arrogant. I got all of those epithets thrown my way. The peoples' places ought to be as good as the millionaires' places. I think it is a good long-term investment to do it right the first time and not have to do it again.

The politicians can get behind you if you're bringing the mob to them. Don't expect them to go lead the mob. Don't expect it to come from the papers. The politicians are survivors and the press, critics. You're not going to get leadership from the politicians or reinforcement or support from the press. That's life.

EDUCATION

PS: It's critical for students to think about how they fit in. The task of building strong communities ought to be led by people who understand the linkages between healthy communities, healthy environment and how the two can work together.

BS: I don't think architectural education supports the systems approach or constructive multidisciplinary work. Without this architects will find themselves without power.

PS: In many ways it's not constructive to have architecture students sitting in an academic setting. They are learning a trade. There are some obvious benefits to the traditional arts and sciences approach, but they aren't getting the skills they need to be successful as part of community

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leadership. They aren't even teaching the people in the profession to be good business people or how to relate to clients. In the real world nobody does anything by themselves. To be really good you need to understand the goal of the client and the money.

PS: Bradner Gardens is a wonderful example of architecture and design helping build a community, and provide immense satisfaction, loyalty and understanding. If you had a hundred of those you'd change the city. You really want your neighborhoods to have a whole different feel. Neighborhood design as opposed to downtown design has to be different. This should be part of the basic strategy of creating a city of choices. I think Seattle, by and large, is on track.

JF: Who are the most likely leaders? Is it developers?

PS: The architects ought to become developers. Some of them should go to business school. It is the investor developer who assembles the players, rents the money, rents the architects, rents the lawyers and pays for all of that. Architects could play that role, maybe better than anybody. It gets back to how the profession sees itself. Are we the on-high gods who will tell you what is good design? Or are we getting our hands dirty being part of the team, making some compromises in order to help the whole product come out the best it can?

ACTION

PS: Become blunt and put things into a frame the average person can understand. This is a critical first step. Get a common language to influence the community. Build alliances, find communication strategies that bring the issues down where the average person can understand how it will impact them. Do it in a way that doesn't dazzle them, but moves them.

John Fleming is a partner with rbf Architecture in Seattle. Barbara Swift is the principal of Swift & Company and a big fan of civic leadership, alliances and action.