

# Meet a AIA Potomac Valley Chapter Member: Milton Shinberg, AIA

*Milton Shinberg, AIA, principal of Shinberg Levinas Architectural Design LLC, a recipient of a 2002 Design Award from the Chapter, offers some insight into his practice, philosophy and outlook on architecture. Milton spent twenty years as adjunct professor of architecture at Catholic University. Not short on opinion, Milton expresses a belief in knowledge, learning and a commitment to a high standard of practice. The Chicago Botanical Gardens project sets such standards - Let's look forward to seeing more superlative architecture from Shinberg-Levinas.*

AIAPVC: It came as a bit of a surprise when your firm Shinberg/Levinas won a design award for year 2000 - not that it wasn't deserved, but that your firm is not quite a household word at the chapter. Who are you, and where have you been?

MS: We've not been heavy on self-publicizing. Secondly, we've not been active in professional organizations. So we've not been applying for awards. Strong repeat clients and good referrals have made that less of a focus.

I graduated from Carnegie-Mellon in 1971, apprenticed with Arthur Cotton Moore, and then started my own practice as soon as I got registered.

Some articles on our projects appeared in the Post and Dossier, I received a drawing award from the AIA Journal, but we have not consistently pushed. But the truth is, that we need to do more. Unless you constantly repeat exposure nobody remembers anybody.

AIAPVC: What kind of work - what do you do at Shinberg/Levinas?

MS: Public charter schools, parochial schools, and synagogues represent 85% of our work - institutional specialties. High-end residential work and special projects are the rest. Special projects include the Chicago Botanical Gardens (award winner) a very interesting and very unusual project. I was a consultant in Charlotte North Carolina as an urban school expert in an award winning planning project for Second Ward there, which has now been approved by the City. Some space planning as well.

AIAPVC: Has the practice been profitable?

MS: The answer is, it is profitable. Is it as profitable as it would be if we didn't spend an enormous amount of time on design? The answer is, not nearly as profitable. We make a living. We have criticized ourselves many times for not knowing on each job whether we're making money or not. We can predict fairly well what our costs are, what we need to do more rigorously is examine how many hours go into a job. To some extent it's a limited opportunity to take

corrective action because there's a quality standard we also maintain. And if it turns out we need to spend 110% of budget, if it's 120%, we'll spend it.

The answer overall is we are making a profit.

AIAPVC: Is it easier or harder to make a profit these days?

MS: We've found it easier. We have found that our institutional clients (and that's part of the reason we're going in that direction) understand the need for more fees and they see the relationship between what they get and what they pay. I don't think that's true of Harry homeowner. And I don't think that's true of the commercial developer who has always been concerned about the bottom line.

AIAPVC: I've heard the statement that in order to do good design you have to be willing to not engage two of three potential customers. Do you agree?

MS: Depends on the reputation of the client. Yes, it is a good question. Honest answer? No. I'll usually give it one round to see how things go. On several occasions, I found that someone who I thought had no interest in design quality turned out to be very committed to it. Others, who sounded like good clients, when it came down to it, were only interested in the bottom line financially.

AIAPVC: What is your preferred form of agreement?

MS: We use two... For small projects we have a letter agreement that has developed over time and was vetted by DPIC, includes many of their provisions. For larger projects we go into AIA standard form of agreement B 151 with a number of additional clauses - limitation of liability, fast tract issues, which we have as standard boiler plate for and on occasion have to debate and negotiate pretty hard with clients.

AIAPVC: How well received has the limitation of liability been?

MS: The better we get at explaining it, the better it is received. It is becoming more the norm.

AIAPVC: How do you screen potential clients to secure relationships that would be most beneficial?

MS: Again, it's intuition more than anything else. We try to have as many clients by referral as possible. So we have a chain of relationships. Clients who are not candid about their financial ability to carry out a project raise a red flag for us.

AIAPVC: What advice do you have for interns fresh out of college?

MS: First of all, to recognize that graduation is demotion. You fall from the top of one group to the bottom of another. Secondly, going into a firm means understanding the firm culture before understanding about doing the job. Also, to understand what it is like in other firms, and what their firm



cultures are.

AIAPVC: Other than for say failure of payment, how do you know when it's time to part company with a client?

MS: If a client is not receptive to ideas, if the dialogue is not good, and particularly when a client is busy seeking blame instead of teamwork, then the client's not being helped and we're wasting our time. The less that either have invested in the project at that point, the easier to sever the tie. The difference between experience and not being experienced is trusting your instincts, not whether you have them.

AIAPVC: Have you been affected by the Howard Roark syndrome?

MS: I'm amused by it. I debunk it with my students. At one point I showed them the Fountainhead as an experience in their education. I'm affected by it as clients have expectations about it. I enjoy reading Wright's letters to clients. It's amazing to me that people would accept the idea that the most important thing that happened in their life was working with Frank Lloyd Wright. I don't have or desire that ego. If anything, we are the nexus of personal expression and service. And if we can't provide service, and are only providing expression, I don't think we're architects. Oddly, architects are both the most intriguing professional to many people and, at the least respected profession when dealing with clients.

AIAPVC: Are you aware of issues at the state level, i.e., licensing interior designers, scope of practice, that could affect your practice?

MS: The one I want to comment on is the interior design situation. I don't agree with the AIA's attempts to limit registration or other capability to be recognized in law as an interior designer. It's a profession that is in some ways significantly different from architecture. There are limits on what knowledge base interior designers have. But to think that we would simply oppose a group because their work overlaps with ours shows weakness and not strength. I think that if we are good at what we do, we should be able to compete with others on the market place.

AIAPVC: Have you heard or seen the advertising that national AIA has produced?

MS: Yes. I'm pleased that it's not too slick. I think that it emphasizes thoughtfulness, professional quality, that it distinguishes what we do from what builders and people who are single minded just on construction issues do, that we are the whole package. And that you can come to an architect and feel that's the person you should rely on as you're the person who understands your needs. I think that's a good approach.

AIAPVC: You use consultants and bring work to them - civil, MEP,

Structural - Do your consultants bring work to you?

MS: Yes. It's less typical, but it happens, for example we have a relationship with Oehm Van Sweden. They're extraordinarily well known landscape architects and they involved us in the Chicago Botanical Gardens. Another thing that happens, that will probably shock most practitioners, is that we on occasion give our consultants retainers. I think it's important to establish the relationship. Typically they accept a pay when paid deal, but we acknowledge through a retainer that they have some risk and cash flow issues as well. On the other hand, we don't make a habit of it. So to answer your first question, we sometimes get that kind of an invitation for team membership.

AIAPVC: How would you encourage young people, your sons or daughters, or niece or cousins, or neighbors who expressed some interest in architecture - how would you foster architectural dreaming?

MS: We provide real exposure, so that they can begin to find their own conclusions. We have someone right now from my kids' school who has a two week (what we call) internship. We had another last year. So one of the things to do is to bring them into the office. I give talks on career days at schools. There is a summer program at Catholic University called "Experiencing Architecture." I taught in that.



If somebody came to me and asked "Do you recommend architecture as a profession?" My first question to them would be "What do you like to do?" Based on the answers, I get a fairly good sense of whether they are genuinely engaged with issues that have depth. I don't care whether they are engaged with issues of depth exclusively concerning architecture, per se. What matters is a thoughtful quality. I can encourage them to investigate it more.

In answering the general question, I don't think I would quickly encourage someone. In architecture, it's a real, and very difficult commitment.

AIAPVC: Any frustrations, misgivings about how you practice?

MS: One, among many: we don't have enough time to read - not just journals, pretty pictures, but things that are more in-depth, that are harder to read. I was very struck by a physician that I saw for years before he retired. He wasn't available except for emergencies between 12:30 and 2:00. He wasn't just having lunch. He was reading - journals, and anything he could get his hands on to advance what he was doing professionally. It impressed me that he made a scheduled appointment of his day that was sacrosanct.

We don't do that. When the mags show up in the mail, the plastic covers get ripped off, and everybody is there consuming dessert. That's what we want. We want to see what's visually exciting. I have to say that I think it's often very superficial

In this office, I'm pleased that we talk about projects, people

contribute ideas that they find relevant from others' work for consideration. But not as a form of mimicry. I see many offices doing what I consider mimicry; you see all the office building re-dos, all the same canopies out front, the same arcades, the same skin design. We're remaking our cities based not just on turning the pages of a magazine but on having mirrors to them. It's a shame.

AIAPVC:What's the core of your agenda?

MS: I don't want to read too much of that (the mags). I have always relied on what I feel in my gut. I don't want to be too influenced by what other people (architects) are doing. Our sense of beauty ultimately isn't superficial. I have some interest in investigating this and I'm not alone in concluding that it comes from the cognitive system that helped us evolve, not from notions of aesthetics, style or formalization as something independent of who we are, acting in the environment, seeking the things that are strongly related to survival instincts. There are few better reasons to make architecture beyond shelter than to provide turf and a sense of protection (look at Wright and Van Eyck), and identity and meaning that supercedes style.