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AIA Condones Torture and Killing

Proposal to Enforce Human Rights within AIA Ethics Code Rejected

January 6, 2015 - After more than two years of petitioning by independent nonprofit organization Architects/ Designers/ Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR), a recent letter from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) indicated that the professional association will take no action to address participation of architects in designs intended to degrade, torture, or kill people. “The AIA Code of Ethics should not exist to create limitations on the practice by AIA members of specific building types. The AIA Code of Ethics is more about desirable practices and attitudes than condemnation,” wrote 2014 AIA President Helene Combs Dreiling, FAIA. The current AIA Code of Ethics and Professional Practices includes Ethical Standard 1.04 “Members should uphold human rights in all their professional endeavors.”

“AIA’s refusal to draw a line is unacceptable” responded ADPSR President Raphael Sperry, a San Francisco-based architect. “Doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses all have codes of ethics that limit professional complicity in human rights abuses that include torture and killing.” Writing in a recent [op-ed for CNN.com](#), Sperry cited the code of the American Medical Association and the [World Medical Association Tokyo Declaration](#) on Torture, which reads, ‘The physician shall not provide any premises, instruments, substances, or knowledge to facilitate the practice of torture.’ “That leaves providing the premises for torture up to us architects, and as far as the AIA is concerned, we are open for business,” he opined, adding today, “professional licensing exists to protect the public; if professionals won’t prohibit active engagement in harming the public, especially in the most extreme and graphic ways, how can you claim professional status at all?”

ADPSR board member and Boston-based architect Shawn Hesse shared his discontent as well: “I’d like to think I belong to a profession that takes our role of creating spaces to enable human activities seriously. Imagine what the world would be like if architects, engineers, and contractors refused to help dictatorships build facilities meant for torture or execution. It is disappointing to me that the AIA is apparently more concerned about potential impact to architecture firm fees than they are about human rights.”

ADPSR Vice President Lynne Elizabeth agreed that AIA is failing the architectural profession and the broader public: “I’m not sure AIA realizes that a code of ethics protects not only the public, but also protects its own members by establishing explicit restrictions on known unethical practices. It can provide the institutional backbone to be able to say no to unconscionable client requests, especially

when the stakes are very high. When it comes to light that architects are knowingly being employed to design spaces for the execution and torture of human beings, the role of a professional organization should be to prevent further abuses. This is a duty that must have a higher priority than business concerns. And it's on the table now."

Sperry offered a comparison to past human rights abuses: "What about the gas chambers used by the Nazi regime? Israel's Holocaust research center Yad Vashem has [some of the design drawings for them on file](#). These were technically somewhat complex buildings – they had to handle toxic gas inside them without killing the executioners above the 'shower' rooms, which was an unprecedented design criterion for the time – that were designed by architects, much as the rest of the Nazi genocide program was managed by technical experts. Now, that was done before the establishment of the current international human rights system, but I think we all wish that average Germans had had more direction about how to resist the horrors that their own government was enrolling them in. And that's where civil society organizations like AIA are supposed to do their work. AIA calls itself a 'leadership' organization, it claims that members make decisions in the public interest, and that it stands for architecture improving our communities and our world. Well, human rights is a core part of the better world that we all hope to live in, and AIA just rejected that. This decision is a complete sell out."

ADPSR has posted the complete letter from AIA along with other documents on its website, www.adpsr.org.

Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility is a national nonprofit founded in 1983 to promote peace, environmental protection, ecological building, social justice, and the development of healthy communities. For more information see www.adpsr.org

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