

Reflections on the 2026 AIA LA Technology Conference: AI: Architectural Intelligence

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Figure 1: Image courtesy of Denis Vitoreli. Image created with the use of AI software.

Introduction

The 2026 AIA Los Angeles Technology Conference — ‘AI: Architectural Intelligence’ focused on what Carlo Ratti would refer to as the artificial, as implied by his naming of the 2025 Venice Biennale ‘Intelligens: Natural, Artificial, Collective’. The conference framed AI as a new form of intelligence embedded within the practice of Architecture. Contemporary discussion outlines AI as systems that can learn, anticipate, and evolve alongside design processes in lieu of being limited to renderings, scripting, and text generation prompts. The conference was held at the AIA LA Center for Communities,

and vendors were exhibiting in the courtyard while attendees gathered to hear from prominent leaders in the architectural tech world today.

AI as a Workflow Layer

Historically, AI has been applied to discrete tasks such as rendering, scripting, or text-based assistance. These tools operate independently and are typically used at specific moments in the design process. Jeffrey Espinoza of D5 Render talked about the Three Tiers of Co-Intelligence in Visualization, but this has parallels to all workflows in design. The first Tier, Task-Level Co-Intelligence, is the commonly understood AI assistant that operates as an isolated micro-task to improve efficiency within existing workflows. Tier 2, Module-Level Co-Intelligence has AI operating as an end-to-end visualization agent to transform efficiency and elevate creative direction. Whereas Tier 3, Workflow-Level Co-Intelligence, has AI managing complete visualization modules to streamline production and reduce workflow frictions. These agents are doing the work in the in-between space between the designer and the deliverable software. Traditionally, this is the space where a user exhibits their technical knowledge, and with the introduction of AI Agents, that technical skill space will be automated and elevated with AI agents automating the task. Jeffrey also demonstrated how, starting with a 3D model in Revit, designers can move into rendering platforms like D5 and use AI agents via text prompts to explore atmospheric matching, material mapping, and lighting conditions. This removes the long process of setting up lighting and programming detailed render tricks to produce specific atmospheres, such as a foggy morning or the exact feel of the 'magic hour' rendering. The new process shifts how the architect interacts with the software creating efficiency and gets the design to a client-ready deliverable exponentially quicker than using traditional rendering workflows.

Model Context Protocol (MCP), a New Way to Interact with Software

Julide Bozoglu of Goettsch Partners stated that "Architectural intelligence is the ability of a digital practice to understand building information in context and use it to support better design decisions." She then proceeded to show how AI has been integrated into BIM workflows and utilizes Model Context Protocols to perform BIM tasks. Model Context Protocol (MCP) is an interoperability framework that allows AI systems to connect directly with software platforms, data environments, and digital workflows. In other words, instead of manually navigating software interfaces, the architect provides instructions, and the software performs the work. She then proceeded to outline three Phases of MCP. Phase 1, Optimization, where AI improves tasks inside existing BIM tools with Human-led Assistance. A specific example would be having an AI clean up a plan and adjust the location of the grid bubbles, section, and elevation callouts, and space out all the text and dimensions. Phase 2, Delegation, where AI systems initiate

and manage defined workflows with goal-directed systems. This translates to an AI agent helping with the design review of a building design to determine if it is code compliant. Phase 3 introduces context aware, natural language driven systems that operate across the digital practice, supporting decision making and workflow execution. In this new context the architect directs, the software executes. This example would be an AI Agent whose responsibility is to upskill employees as software and technology changes to keep them informed and evolve the practice in parallel to the advancements in the industry.

Removing Data Silos and the Future of Architectural Firms with AI Agents

This structure of AI and the tiers plus phases of engagement was summarized by Leo Salce and Enrique Galicia of Avant Leap. They shared that most firms misunderstand how to incorporate AI into their practice and the capabilities of AI in general. Avant Leap found that 73% of AI concepts evaluated within AEC firms fall into low-value effort-to-impact categories, reinforcing that the primary risk is not failing to adopt new technologies, but investing in the wrong ones. Avant Leap points to four core problems architects are being asked to solve which are design intelligence, production automation, knowledge systems, and compliance and risk. Yet the industry remains constrained by deeper institutional challenges: fragmented knowledge, difficulty scaling change across organizations, and a lack of connected infrastructure.

The immediate solution is Agentic Architecture (note this term is in direct conflict with Kimon Onuma's premise of Architecture of Intelligence). This looks like a structured AI system that is beyond the chatbots and is a multi Large Language Model (LLM) that is orchestrated through the firm and has the human within the loop of the decision making. The goal is to use the Model Context Protocol (MCP) to traverse the AEC systems, such as Revit BIM, Navisworks Clash, Autodesk Construction Cloud Documents, and Energy Analysis, to unify the information that is produced and then evaluated by an AI Agent. This removes the current siloed system through a single interface and has identified MCP's as the most important infrastructure shift since the introduction of BIM itself. For example, a unified system could allow a project team to query a model, a clash report, and a specification set simultaneously and surface conflicts or inconsistencies that would otherwise require manual coordination across platforms. Structuring data within the firm removes the jeopardy of institutional knowledge that is lost each time a project is closed, or a person leaves the firm. Architectural firms of today should begin to combine their standards with project historical data to support a process of bolstering design intent with coded, firm-specific design intelligence.

The Architecture of Intelligence

Kimon Onuma, FAIA, was the morning's keynote speaker, and his message of taking back the identity of the word architecture felt timely. A slide was presented that outlined the incorporation of technology into the architectural field and then highlighted that around the late 1970s to early 1980s, the use of the term architecture was commandeered by other professions. Terms such as software architect or the architecture of the computer program dilute the meaning and vesting of the term within the practice of building and design. His call to action was based on how intelligence is a resource, and we, as architects, should value it and not waste it within the services we render. Parallel to this, Onuma presented that the amount of data that was being created during the design process was not translating to the continued use beyond the delivery of the project. The data is there during the BIM documentation, but post-building occupancy, the data dies within stacks of paper or flattened PDFs that undermine the process. Onuma also presented information from a similar conference and explained that the volume of data generated through design processes is increasing exponentially, raising a critical question: how will the profession structure, manage, and extract value from this information? Onuma pointed out that buildings are our products and ultimately the foundational beginnings of the data that architects produce. The architect is between worlds, the physical reality and the digital space, and it will be the architect who shares data in a structured format that will lead the future of the profession.

Conclusion

The exponential change in the digital practice of an architect today is both challenging and opportunistic for those who see a new future for the building industry. Architects need to cross-pollinate their practice and recognize that the digital world is as valuable as the physical world, and the practicing architect is the bridge between them. MCP has the potential to be a major catalyst for change. Firms that can align their project data with consistent standards will be better equipped to retain institutional knowledge and organize information in ways that support long-term value. The days of simple chatbots as a companion to the architect are gone, and careful incorporation of AI Agent is the necessity of the practice. Now is the time that we as architects start to value our self-worth and lead the physical development of this planet with confidence. When grounded in design intent, responsibility, and human judgment, Architectural Intelligence is more powerful than Artificial Intelligence, as it is based on the true values of the architect's profession and blended with the needs of the digital practice of tomorrow.

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