

From William J Martin AIA SFX state representative for AIA New Jersey

SFX National All Call Meeting Notes

July 9, 2026

Overview

These notes summarize the SFX National All Call held on July 9, 2026. The call included national updates, volunteer opportunities, upcoming programming, member communications, and a discussion of different small firm practice models.

National Updates and Announcements

- **National board engagement:** SFX members interested in leadership or service opportunities should consider engaging with the national board.
- **Peer review volunteers:** Volunteers are needed for the peer review program. Incentives will be provided by AIA National.
- **Design Conference:** New programs call for A'27 Design conference in Philadelphia in May of 2027.
- **Member interview:** A link will be provided to a deeper-dive interview available for SFX members.
- **Member awards:** Any awards received by SFX group members should be communicated to the group.
- **State representatives:** State representatives to National SFX should share the Insider newsletter with members and leadership at their state level.
- **YouTube channel:** Updates and changes related to the YouTube channel connection will be discussed further.

Program Topic: Different Practice Models

The featured topic focused on different architectural practice models, with several presenters sharing how they structure their firms, collaborate with others, and pursue specialized work.

Mentimeter:

The AIA Firm Survey Report from 2024 shows that nearly half of firms operate within a single discipline, while almost as many identify as multi-disciplinary, with a small remainder falling into other categories. This balance suggests that specialization and generalization coexist across the profession, each serving distinct needs. The Mentimeter poll echoes that pattern but leans slightly toward generalists, with most respondents describing their

practice as broad rather than narrowly focused. Taken together, the data reveal a field that values versatility and collaboration, where firms often blend expertise across disciplines while maintaining areas of focused strength.

Josh Zinder AIA — Practice Within a Practice

Josh Zinder described the creation of a practice within a practice to demonstrate sufficient experience in designing synagogues, mosques, and churches. A joint venture was created to support this work, and a new firm name within the larger firm was selected to help facilitate the operation.

Josh presents a cohesive narrative about the evolution and structure of Joshua Zinder Architecture + Design and its partnership with Landau Zinder Architecture. It begins with a portrait of the team, emphasizing collaboration and identity through candid images of group work and shared creativity. The presentation then moves into the firm's breadth of practice, showing how its work spans architecture, interiors, products, and master planning. Each discipline is illustrated with examples that reveal a consistent focus on design excellence and versatility. The story transitions to the idea of specialization, contrasting the industry's preference for specialists with the firm's multi-disciplinary approach. This sets the stage for the introduction of Landau Zinder Architecture, a practice rooted in decades of experience designing synagogues and other spiritual spaces. The slides trace Michael Landau's forty-year legacy and the formation of a partnership that merges his expertise with Joshua Zinder's broader design vision.

The presentation then shifts to the practical realities of establishing and structuring a firm, outlining the administrative and legal steps required to form a business entity. It explains how Landau Zinder Architecture operates as a firm within a firm under a formal partnership agreement, defining roles, responsibilities, and continuity. The final diagram clarifies the multi-modal business structure, showing how JZA+D functions as a multi-typological practice while Landau Zinder serves as a specialist, allowing both independence and collaboration. Together, the presentation forms a narrative of growth, integration, and adaptability—illustrating how a design practice can balance creative diversity with focused expertise while maintaining a clear organizational framework.

Lee Calisti AIA— Sole Practitioner Generalist

Lee Calisti discussed the solo practice model and described one of its main advantages as agility. Because all work is completed by one person, investing in technology is essential and makes it possible for a sole practitioner to manage the many tasks involved in architectural practice.

The story here is of Lee Calisti's architectural practice and philosophy, tracing how a solo firm can expand its reach and impact while maintaining independence and balance. It opens with the idea of moving "Beyond the Solo Practitioner," showing how intentional business strategy, scale-fluid operations, and core values allow a firm of one to operate with the capability of a larger organization. This illustrates a deeply rooted regional practice centered in western Pennsylvania, where local knowledge and community integration serve as tools for business development and design relevance.

Calisti's foundation as a generalist is shown through his teaching at Carnegie Mellon University and mentorship in small-firm, hands-on building environments. This background shaped a Renaissance-style approach to architecture, emphasizing the ability to assemble an entire building from concept to completion. His early residential projects, some award-winning, demonstrate how financial stability and creative freedom can coexist when overhead remains low and agility high.

He then discusses and explores the "Ecosystem of One," a model of radical self-reliance where organization, technology, and personal execution replace large teams. Through sketches, plans, and project management visuals, Calisti shows how disciplined workflow and digital tools sustain productivity and quality. Adaptive reuse emerges as the heart of his practice, with examples like Ducati and Mars Pizza storefronts illustrating how design bridges the gap between concept and construction through direct site involvement.

Highlights of the business of expertise, featuring high-efficiency commissions for law firms and tech companies that position the practice at the top of solo-firm benchmarks. The narrative expands to include municipal and mixed-use projects, reflecting a balance between professional growth and personal life. Calisti frames this evolution as designing a practice to fit a life—guardrails that preserve time for family and outside passions while broadening typologies.

The closing message, “The Reality of the Quiet Majority,” situates his work within the larger context of American architecture, where most firms are small and many are solo practitioners. It underscores how agility, low overhead, and strong consultant networks enable even a single architect to deliver civic-scale projects. The overall narrative is one of independence, discipline, and community connection—a portrait of how a focused, self-reliant practice can thrive and lead within the architectural landscape.

Marcos Santa Ana AIA— Architect-Led Design-Build

Marcos Santa Ana presented an architect-led design-build model. His practice engages approximately 10 people and delivers high-level architectural design. The firm uses in-studio mockups to test design details, cabinetry, and interior features that are developed as part of the design-build process.

This unfolds as a clear and disciplined narrative about architect-led design-build, presented by Marcos Santa Ana of Alloi Architecture + Construction. It begins with the event title and context, establishing the focus on how architects can lead both design and construction processes. The opening quote from Henry Ford, “Vision without execution is just hallucination,” sets the tone for a discussion about bridging creativity and action.

Santa Ana introduces himself as an architect, builder, and mountaineer, defining his identity through both professional and personal pursuits. His experience spans architecture, construction, development, and sustainability, positioning him as a practitioner who integrates design thinking with hands-on building. A map illustrates the geographic influences that shaped his perspective, connecting experiences across the United States and Europe. He then introduces the Alloi team, depicted as a cohesive group with defined roles ranging from studio management and project development to finish carpentry and business strategy. Visuals reinforce the idea that design-build thrives on collaboration and shared expertise.

The conceptual framework of Architect-Led Design-Build (ALDB) is distilled into three words—concept, detail, construct—emphasizing the continuum between design intent and physical realization. Diagrams show how architects and builders overlap during both design and construction phases: builders contribute efficiency, material knowledge, and precision during design, while architects bring balance, aesthetics, and intent during construction. The result is a unified process where each discipline strengthens the other.

A diagram illustrates the benefits of this integration—cost savings, time efficiency, quality retention, and client peace of mind—achieved through streamlined communication and full control over both design and execution. Later he transitions from theory to practice, showing images of construction details, material assemblies, and sketches that capture the tactile and conceptual sides of the work. Each project example demonstrates how architectural vision is carried through to craftsmanship, from framing and joinery to refined exterior detailing. The presentation closes with a modern architectural image and contact information for Alloi, encapsulating the firm’s philosophy: architecture as a seamless union of design and building, led by those who conceive and construct with equal precision. The overall narrative conveys a disciplined yet creative approach to practice—one that transforms vision into built reality through direct engagement with materials, people, and place.

Dana Ellis, AIA — Small Firm Ownership and networking Project Teams

Dana Ellis, AIA described a practice model that includes contractors employed part time, giving them opportunities to build skills as they work toward their own architectural licenses. She emphasized the importance of the small firm model and expressed that firm ownership should be a goal for architects.

For each project, Dana creates a new contract signed by all participants involved in the design and execution, allowing the team to manage each project individually. Her team includes collaborators such as “The Grouchy Architect,” and she often holds meetings in coworking spaces that function as part of an artist network.

Dana works with many clients who are artists and has intentionally slowed the pace of her practice to allow more creative thinking to shape the design process. Her firm works on feasibility studies, artist retreats, and projects involving artist-contractors.

This tells the story of The Outpost Studio’s approach to redefining what a small architectural firm can be. It begins with the idea of the “Firm as Network,” positioning the studio not as a single entity but as a collaborative ecosystem

of professionals and partners. Dana Ellis introduces the concept through the lens of the Small Firm Exchange, emphasizing how distributed expertise and flexible partnerships create resilience and opportunity. The founders of The Outpost Studio are shown alongside their collaborators, Aspen Design Solutions and Mendocino Permaculture, each contributing specialized skills and time to shared projects. This networked model replaces traditional hierarchies with fluid collaboration, where management and production are shared across independent contributors. The following slide formalizes this structure through a contract template, illustrating how each project operates under a new agreement that defines roles, expectations, and compensation. It reflects a professional yet adaptable framework that supports autonomy while maintaining accountability. The narrative expands to the broader context of small firm advocacy through the AIA Small Firm Exchange and the AIA Business Academy. These programs highlight how small practices can leverage national networks for mentorship, education, and business development. The Outpost Studio's participation situates it within a community of architects who champion flexibility, transparency, and shared growth. Next she visualizes the extended network supporting the firm's stability—bookkeeping through Chromatic Ventures, quality control via The Grouchy Architect, legal review by Momentus Legal, and coworking through The Digs. This constellation of partners demonstrates how outsourcing and collaboration can strengthen small firms without sacrificing independence. A radar chart then illustrates the rhythm of the studio's week, balancing management, creativity, and collaboration. Mondays and Thursdays are for team meetings, Wednesdays for individual projects, and Fridays for reflection and planning. This structured flow fosters clarity and freedom from the reactionary pace that often defines creative industries. The final sequence showcases The Outpost Studio's architectural work, including renovation and rebuilding projects such as the Willows building and lodge developments. The imagery of kitchens, lodges, and construction sites conveys a hands-on, grounded practice that merges design vision with real-world execution. The closing quote by Gustave Flaubert—"Be steady and well-ordered in your life so that you can be fierce and original in your work"—captures the essence of the presentation: stability as the foundation for creativity. Altogether, the Outpost Studio as a model for modern small-firm practice—networked, disciplined, and deeply human in its approach to collaboration and craft.

Marisol Gallagher AIA— Sustainability, High-Performance Design practice

Marisol Gallagher discussed a firm model focused on sustainability, high-performance residential design, historic preservation, Passive House techniques, and sustainable consulting for other architects. Her work includes additions to existing buildings that must address both sustainability and historic preservation requirements. As a second-year firm owner, Marisol noted that high-performance design starts at the top. She is working with ACH50 airtightness requirements and enjoys collaborating with end users to create buildings that are healthy, feel good, and are inspirational to occupy.

Marisol Studios, a practice defined by the principles of quiet comfort and conscious craft. The opening establishes the brand visually through a minimalist logo shaped like twin rooflines, set against a serene image of a contemporary home nestled in nature. The atmosphere conveys calm precision and a commitment to thoughtful design.

Marisol Sanchez Gallagher, the founder, is presented next as an architect whose professional journey began as a childhood goal. Her credentials—AIA, LEED AP BD+C, CPHD, and CPHT—reflect a deep engagement with sustainability and performance. She describes herself as an architect, consultant, sole practitioner, and serial volunteer, guided by values of openness, excellence, and community.

The following slide traces her evolution from Director of Sustainability and Partner to Sole Practitioner Architect, supported by her participation in the AIA Business Academy. The imagery of collaboration, construction, and professional development captures the balance between leadership and learning that defines her approach.

A quote—"No one asks about the ROI for Carrara marble"—introduces the theme of client education, suggesting that true value in architecture transcends financial metrics and lies in beauty, longevity, and experience. This idea leads into a comparison between measurable performance and emotional impact. Technical metrics such as air tightness, thermal performance, and energy modeling are juxtaposed with what clients actually remember: clean air,

quiet spaces, comfort, resilience, and a sense of permanence. The message is clear—architecture succeeds when it improves how people feel in their homes.

The final concept, “The Ripple Effect,” illustrates how small actions create lasting change. Architects learn, then lead; clients gain understanding; better buildings emerge; and the profession itself improves. Her sequence portrays architecture not just as a technical discipline but as a catalyst for cultural and environmental progress.

This forms a cohesive narrative of purpose and practice. Marisol Studios stands as a model of mindful architecture—where education, empathy, and craft converge to produce spaces that nurture both people and planet.

Jeremiah Russell AIA— Mobile Generalist Practice

Jeremiah Russell described a mobile practice model, though he noted that he does not consider himself a generalist. His focus is on the ability to travel, work in many locations, and take on projects across the country.

His work includes historic preservation and housing projects in locations such as Little Rock, Arkansas, and Washington, D.C. He holds 14 architect licenses in various U.S. states and promotes his practice as agile and mobile.

Jeremiah acknowledged challenges, including the difficulty of maintaining client relationships while traveling, but described mobility as an advantage in securing projects that might otherwise not be led by an architect with relevant experience. His work includes residential projects, historic preservation, historic restoration, and exterior restoration of buildings with fully modernized interiors.

Because of his mobility, Jeremiah feels he has lower overhead, more flexibility, and greater control over his schedule. He also schedules time with his wife and family between practice-related travel.

Jeremiah emphasized that 21st-century technology has changed conventional architectural practice by giving architects the tools to be more flexible, mobile, and resilient without relying on traditional office-based methods. His firm focuses on custom single-family homes, multifamily affordable housing, commercial office and retail work, historic preservation, and hospitality projects. Several projects involve full gut remodels, including historic row houses from the 1880s that were taken down to the studs.

Jeremiah described the advantages of a mobile practice, including lower overhead, no dependence on a physical office, and the flexibility to work from anywhere. He noted that this model also requires careful consideration of practice focus, personal lifestyle, social and professional relationships, risk tolerance, and the ability to work effectively in varied settings. Potential challenges include client concerns about reliability, difficulty building meaningful stakeholder relationships, and fears that travel may increase fees. He said these concerns can be addressed through strong communication, thoughtful scheduling, and demonstrated competence.

A mobile practice can also provide access to diverse markets across multiple regions, helping a firm withstand local market fluctuations. With projects in several locations, architects can create more flexible revenue streams and maintain greater control over their schedules. Jeremiah summarized the approach simply: use cloud storage, invest in a powerful laptop, focus on solving problems rather than specific products, leverage social media effectively, and take the initiative to begin.

Jeff Seabold, FAIA — Enhanced Project Model

Jeff Seabold, FAIA described an expanded practice model in which architects lead beyond traditional design services. His approach begins with context, and he sees himself as a “pollinator” who connects people, disciplines, and stakeholders.

Through his school board service, Jeff helped develop a walk-to-school program that improved safety for students walking or biking to school, strengthened the local environment, and supported public health. He emphasized that architects can pair creative problem-solving with developers and community partners to address broader civic challenges.

Jeff practices in Jackson, Mississippi, which he described as one of the fastest-shrinking cities in America. He believes that this context creates opportunities that a booming city might not offer. He described himself as an architect, general contractor, father, former chef, craftsman, problem solver, writer, green-building advocate, and “pollinator.” His path—from studying history to working as a traveling chef, becoming an architect, learning from

builders, teaching builders, and partnering with developers—has shaped a practice that blurs the traditional boundaries of the architect's role.

Jeff noted that buildings can last 40 to 100 years, yet architects are often involved only during design and construction. An expanded practice model allows architects to participate in more stages of a building's life cycle and create new business opportunities by doing more—not simply by charging more. To succeed, architects must learn to speak the language of each role they take on.

His work has included churches, minor-league baseball parks, multifamily repositioning, and redevelopment projects. Jeff emphasized that architects already have the skills to lead in more places. By stepping into the spaces between traditional roles, they can create new opportunities and contribute to a more responsible built environment.

Key Themes

- Small firms can be highly flexible and responsive when they use technology strategically.
- Architects are finding creative ways to structure practices around collaboration, specialization, mobility, sustainability, and community impact.
- Practice models can support both professional growth and personal priorities, including family time, creative thinking, and firm ownership.
- Architects can apply design thinking beyond traditional building projects to solve broader civic and community challenges.

Action Items

- Share peer review volunteer opportunities with SFX members.
- Communicate available incentives from AIA National for peer review volunteers.
- Distribute the Insider newsletter to state-level members and leadership.
- Share member awards with the SFX group for recognition.
- Provide members with the link to the deeper-dive interview.
- Continue discussion of YouTube channel connection updates and related changes.