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## NEWS HEADLINES

## MEMBER TO MEMBER

## Malecha Urges a New Way of Seeing Sustainability

Architects poised to take the lead at a time when the fundamental structures and systems of our culture are in redesign

by Zach Mortice  
Associate Editor

**Summary:** Speaking at the 2009 Ecobuild conference in Washington, D.C., on December 10, AIA President Marvin Malecha, FAIA, called for new perspectives on sustainable building. Malecha envisions sustainable design as a broad-based attempt to make wholesale adoption of environmental context the primary energy performance and aesthetic driver of design. By failing to make this transition, architects might make themselves irrelevant. By seizing upon it, he sees them leveraging their critical, creative, and design-oriented expertise into collaborative leadership roles that are desperately desired.



From behind his signature black Corbu glasses, 2009 AIA president Marvin Malecha, FAIA, implored his audience last week in a keynote speech at the Ecobuild conference in Washington, D.C., to find a “new way of seeing” to address the world’s sustainability crisis.

One reformed worldview anecdote that Malecha offered was based on a simple children’s toy: a kaleidoscope. Years ago, he said, a member of the North Carolina State University Board of Trustees, where Malecha is dean of the College of Design, gave him a small, plastic kaleidoscope and told him: “It doesn’t take a lot of money to see the world differently.”

“The lesson of the kaleidoscope is that we must be prepared to see the world differently,” Malecha said. “We cannot see this challenge with the same old eyes.”

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Malecha also spoke about how artistic traditions inform cultural worldviews, including their approach to sustainability. In traditional Chinese landscape painting, he said, artists paint from the perspective of immersion and engagement with the land. In similar Western traditions, the perspective is observational and objective. “We have extended this Western perspective from painting to our manner of designing buildings for diverse contexts,” Malecha said. “We must learn from the Chinese landscape artists and determine to have our architecture enter a gentle, symbiotic relationship to the land and the environment.”

### Culture change

Malecha urged the Ecobuild attendees to move beyond perfunctory ways of viewing and addressing today’s crisis of energy and sustainability. Coming to agreement on common goals and prescriptive sustainability guidelines is an important first step, but little more. Further, tailoring these new prescriptions into already accepted design and building practices (like placing photovoltaic panels on a bloated McMansion that was designed in ignorance of its site context and energy performance) isn’t enough either. Malecha said this asks little more than: “How can we make what we already like work without changing anything? This is not new thinking—[making] sustainability fit into predetermined aesthetic guidelines.”

This new worldview requires a “fundamental, transformational change” and an “adoption of a new culture of design and building,” he said. Such a “new culture” would use environmental context to wholly inform its buildings’ aesthetics and energy performance. Each region of the world would be forced to rediscover how their ancestors built structures that worked symbiotically and regeneratively with the land; albeit with contemporary function and performance standards. Malecha said he believes such an approach can create richer, more diverse building and design traditions that will fundamentally reinforce the cultural singularity and uniqueness of all places. “The mixing of strategies is the pattern of nature,” he said. “I believe in my heart and am sure in my thinking that a fundamentally diverse aesthetic language is waiting for us to evolve it from regional and ecosystemic drivers. We can transform our buildings by the demands of environmental requirements. We can live differently with less, yet with choices just as rich as those dependent on excess.”

### Context rules

Malecha’s comments on looking to environmental context to determine design have been reinforced by the selection of Australian architect Glenn Murcutt, Hon. FAIA, for the 2009 AIA Gold Medal. Murcutt’s portfolio of small houses and community centers in Australia provides a model for environmentally deferent building—rigorously customized to their site, orientation, and program, yet designed with uncompromising attention to aesthetic grace.

In the past, Malecha said, each new advance in technology opened up new expanses of land and resources for use in America and beyond. A primary driver of industry and technology was (and still is) to develop new ways to locate and use resources. “This part of our story, no matter how romantic, must be reconsidered,” Malecha said. “There are just too many of us to spread over the land as we have.” Today, the science of human progress must be measured by how we learn to collaborate, not consume, he said. “We’ve pushed the incredibly resilient environmental system of our planet to a place where it has begun the process of rejecting its most harmful element: us.”

### Irrelevance or leadership

At its heart, the sustainability dilemma the world faces is only superficially about the conservation of energy, Malecha said. “It’s a public health question, and a welfare issue. We must connect people and traditions of all economic and social means. We have gotten into this

situation by assuming that our wealth as a nation would somehow lead us to yet unknown solutions without hard choices or sacrifices.”

Malecha asked architects to invite others in to help solve this problem and overcome the profession’s susceptibility to destabilization from new expectations, technologies, and service delivery methods. Failing to do so, he said, will risk being “considered irrelevant.”

The result would be a historic waste of expertise. Everywhere he turns, Malecha said he sees a world crying out for design-led guidance.

“Presently, the design mentality is feverishly pursued by every segment of business and social inquiry to facilitate the evolution of the understanding of creative thought as an action strategy to maintain a competitive edge in the world,” he said. “We’ve been made painfully aware of the fragility of the system we have come to depend on. Food chain security, national energy needs, even the underlying economic system of our country are at a moment of redesign. The implementation of this process must be guided by a critical thought process that is inherent in design thought. To study design is to consider what does not yet exist. It is an endeavor that anticipates what is to come.”