AIA Atlanta COTE

The Chapter that nevertheless persisted!

**Committee Evolution:**

The COTE Chapter of Atlanta was started in the early 90s by Dagmar Epsten, FAIA, and has been spearheaded since the late 90s by Bill Abballe, AIA. It was not until the mid-90s that programs became regular, and efforts of more volunteers solicited. In 1999, the formation of sub-committees that was influenced by LEED rating system categories - Sites, Water, Energy and Atmosphere, IAQ/Materials, along with a couple of other categories, Technology and Education/Outreach - ensured that efforts and responsibilities of running the group were not concentrated in a few hands, but were shared by more people who headed these sub-committees. This move also provided opportunities for leadership; everyone who headed sub-committees had a chance to lead the group. Many did; some others have chosen not to volunteer for chair, while still being dedicated sub-committee chairs over the years.

The role of sub-committee chair is not confined to architects only – presently a landscape architect and structural engineer head two sub-committees, and for years a vendor for a rainwater harvesting company had a similar role. AIA Atlanta does require the chair and co-chair to be AIA members. This broad base of membership from the architect, engineer, contractor and developer communities is an outcome of the broader mission of sustainability that the COTE chapter fosters that is not confined to architects alone. This approach probably has precluded advocacy by COTE on issues that affect only, or mostly, architects (which may have been taken up by AIA Atlanta, just not by COTE). The chapter did take up advocacy for a few years in the mid-2000s mostly championed by a few members, and that effort flagged after they stopped their involvement with COTE. The broad-based mission however has enabled collaborating with and seeking out speakers from a wide spectrum of sustainability groups.

A notable undertaking that similarly had champions was a juried COTE Top Ten competition in the mid-2000s where there was an entry fee, and winners were given a project display space at the annual Southface’s Greenprints conference. It was popular and ran for a few years, but dropped off for want of sustained effort.

The Chapter partnered formally with USGBC for several years in the late 2000s. More recently in 2019, it forged a partnership between USGBC and AIA Atlanta to promote Greenbuild conference that was held in Atlanta.

**Committee Programming:**

Past these sidebar activities, the primary focus of the COTE group has always been education. The group meets on the second Friday of the month for a brown-bag lunch at the same architectural office that has volunteered their space for years, and hears from speakers on topics that belong to the five categories, cycling through each category twice in the year. The sub-committee chair is tasked with finding speakers for their respective categories. Topics that may be tangential at best to any category are also encouraged if they are compelling. The seminars earn attendees one CEU through AIA Atlanta. Seminars are always free of charge, and the chapter has never raised funds of its own. There is a modest amount of $500 allocated by AIA Atlanta which is mostly used up for the community outreach program, in which members spend a Saturday morning in August or September to collaborate with a nonprofit and install energy-efficient light bulbs and perform similar tasks in seniors’ homes or participate in a house-build. Remaining funds are spent at the planning social in December.

The attendance at COTE seminars average around 15 people. Publicity for seminars is through two emails – the first informative, and the second a reminder – and AIA Atlanta’s news blasts to its members. The email list is a dedicated one for COTE and is not widely shared. Attendees who attend a seminar are added to the list, and they can opt out on request.

**Lessons Learned:**

The main challenge for AIA Atlanta’s COTE chapter has been sustenance of effort for new initiatives that go through ebbs and flows of enthusiasm, effort, and time. The big opportunity is the potential of reaching a larger audience due to programs that have been forced to go online due to the pandemic. Over the next year when programs return to in-person, we have to explore simulcasting them online. The success of AIA Atlanta’s COTE has been the ability to choose a focus – being an education group - that worked for its volunteers and sustain it without a break for over two decades now, with no indication of any intervals in the future.