1999 business leadership awards

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THOSE WHO KNOW BETTER, KNOW ELJER™
from the publisher...page 13

letters...page 16

home front...page 30
A well-wooded home / Concrete wallpaper / Home-buyer profile / 1999 Homes for Habitat Design Awards / Summer school for architects / Glass-backed bar / Shopping for objects online / Postcard from Jerusalem

perspective...page 42
A trip to Haiti renews one architect's faith in the power of architecture to improve people's lives.

practice...page 50
When it comes to showcasing your work, nothing compares to good architectural photography.

architects' houses...page 72
Get personal with three of your colleagues in Missouri, Florida, and California. Join us on a private tour of the houses they designed for themselves.

fine (red) lines...page 82
When clients and building codes pull you in opposite directions, get creative. Here are five architects who faced daunting code restrictions but still ended up satisfying both clients and building officials.

off the shelf...page 92
Bold new office furniture that really goes to work for you.

tech lines...page 96
Have you prepared your firm for Y2K? Planning ahead can minimize problems next January.

doctor spec...page 104
Basement waterproofing: the bottom line on banishing wetness below ground level.

hands on...page 110
In two New York City apartments, sliding doors instantly transform large, open spaces into smaller, more private rooms.

special places...page 128
James Cutler, FAIA, takes a hike in the Pacific Northwest.

cover story:
1999 business leadership awards...page 58
Meet the winners of residential architect's Business Leadership Awards. These five firms set new standards for the entire profession in practice management, design, community service, marketing, and financial success.

Cover photo: Danny Turner

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It had all the potential to be brilliant. But they just didn't quite get it.

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When editor Susan Bradford Barror asked me to write this column, I was excited about the opportunity. I knew that the May/June issue was going to feature the winners of residential architect's 1999 Business Leadership Awards, a competition that recognizes excellence in residential practice. We asked our 20,000 readers to participate, and the response—in this first year of the awards program—was strong.

In the realm of residential architecture, what is leadership? Design excellence and financial success, to be sure. But also a keen sense of integrity, a giving back to the larger community. Therefore, our judges examined how the participating companies performed in five areas: practice management, marketing, design innovation, community service, and financial success.

The entrants that most impressed the judges demonstrated excellence in all of these areas. These five winners are well-rounded, well-run practices. The top spot went to TMS Architects, in Portsmouth, N.H. The other four winners are Looney Ricks Kiss, Memphis, Tenn.; Mahoney Architects, Tiburon, Calif.; Schmitt Sampson Architects, Charleston, S.C.; and James, Harwick + Partners, Dallas. Our story on page 58 illuminates just what is so special about these firms, and why the judges chose them as business leaders.

**trial and error**
When you read about these companies, you can't help but notice that their business savvy is not always the result of information they acquired in architecture school. "Trial and error" is the buzz-phrase constantly invoked by the winning architects when they talk about what has helped them hone their business leadership abilities. If you follow the credo that great business leaders are not born but made, you will enjoy reading about the winning firms.

It was residential architect's goal, with this awards program, to create an opportunity for industry leaders to learn from each other. We hope you will find that we have succeeded in doing this with the premiere of our Business Leadership Awards program.

**behind the scenes**
On page 72 in this issue, we take a look at the homes of three architects. Hailing from Kansas City, Mo., Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and San Diego, these designers share a love of urban life, respect for the fabric of a neighborhood, and concern for the natural environment. Each home reflects those values while expressing its owner's exuberantly personal sense of style.

And in our final feature, we examine details from five projects that overcame potential problems with code restrictions. Sometimes there's a fine line between a code violation and a creative compromise, but the architects who designed these projects opted for legal solutions. You'll find this story on page 82.

**show time**
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fan mag?

I really enjoyed your first issue of 1999. Your review of the architects who contributed most to residential design during the 20th century was excellent ("20th Century Giants," January/February, page 46). I am in complete agreement with the group you highlighted. They are people whose work I have studied and admired for the past 30 years.

I was distressed, however, by your efforts to identify the “rising stars of the 21st century.” I felt embarrassed for the seven talented architects thus cursed. Our profession doesn’t need celebrities. Good design speaks for itself and doesn’t require a press agent. A talented architect needs no verbal glorification. (Did some architects really nominate themselves?) His or her body of work will be testament enough as the architect matures. Sadly, early public adoration usually corrupts the creative spirit and often results in a dwindling procession of increasingly mediocre projects. I hope those crowned by your publication will continue to have good sites, good clients, and the ability to grow beyond this premature coronation.

You produce a fine professional journal. Don’t let it become another fan mag.

Keith A. Dover, Architect
Heber City, Utah

the wright stuff

At first glance, I could hardly believe the January/February cover of residential architect. Bravo, and thanks for the wonderful issue.

Keith A. Dover, Architect
Heber City, Utah
Frank Lloyd Wright left a generous and uniquely American legacy in the form of his philosophy and principles of design to a profession that, to this day, has ignored them in favor of the imported Bauhaus School.

Mr. Wright’s houses, especially the Usonian types, demonstrate warmth, scale, and structural inventiveness, all for the sake of economy and energy efficiency. In contrast, the majority of today’s residential design is still stuck with the Bauhaus or International School concept.

Recent trends of would-be signature designers have made it even harder for most people to understand a more natural and rational approach to home building.

My advice to the so-called “rising stars” is to study the works and principles of real genius rather than those of the trendsetters whose buildings are as shallow as their façades.

I noticed that one of the most creative architects, Bruce Goff, did not make your list. Perhaps a later issue on Goff and a few of his students would be another blockbuster.

Better yet, let’s save our forests by challenging the would-be stars of the 21st century to design houses without using lumber. Why not hold a contest to design a cost-efficient ferroconcrete house that would be fireproof, termite-proof, energy efficient, earthquake and hurricane resistant, and, most of all, affordable to the average wage earner?

Justo Monillas
Pleasant Hill, Calif.

good company
I am very flattered to have been ranked among the 20th century giants. The company I found myself in was superb and humbling.

Robert A.M. Stern
Robert A.M. Stern Architects
New York City

keeping the faith
I am writing in response to your editorial in the January/February issue (“Beyond Frank Lloyd continued on page 20
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Wright,” page 13). I am a graduate student studying architecture at the University of North Carolina—Charlotte. I have some concerns about the comments you published regarding readers’ responses to your 20th-century poll.

First, regarding the comment of one of the poll respondents that today’s architecture is “an eclectic mix of junk”: That is far from the truth. There have been great advances in the field of residential architecture in terms of technology for more efficient homes and a greener approach to the design and construction of them. We study these technologies extensively in our course work and apply them every day in our design work.

Second, while it is true that we as designers have to design the types of buildings our clients will pay for, there is no reason we can’t offer alternatives to the norm. We need to take the time to develop new technologies and design strategies for a more economical and environmentally sound design base. Just maybe, if our alternatives are still cost efficient for our developer clients, they will buy them rather than “the same old crap.”

Finally, I see the talent that lies in our schools of architecture at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. It would blow your mind to see how creative these students can be in generating new designs in residential and commercial buildings.

If industry leaders would reflect on their days in school, when they were cutting their teeth on innovative designs, then perhaps they would understand where architecture is heading—toward answering the dreams of Modernism, solving the problems of a global architecture in terms of economy and environment, and supplying the

continued on page 24
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John P. Plageman
Architect-in-training
UNC–Charlotte

I find it curious that the very same issue of your magazine that was devoted to some of the century's most significant architects also included an essay that virtually denies that their collective work had any influence on residential architecture at all (January/February, Perspective, page 32). In his essay, Alvin Holm would have us believe in a black-and-white world where Modernism was a temporary lapse in good judgment leading to a bleak, sterile existence, while traditional architecture provides the warmth and human scale that people will always crave.

Dismissing the Modern movement as mere "revolutionary posturing," Mr. Holm fails to find any value in the reevaluation process itself. Granted, as in any revolution, the initial break from the past was severe and without compromise. But what evolved, and continues to evolve, was a broadening of human perspective. While some architects have headed in an avant-garde direction, others have brought more familiar themes to their work. If, as some have claimed, we have now come full circle, I would like to think that we have arrived at a fresh interpretation of the needs man has always felt—with a renewed respect for human space, and with generosity of detail and texture.

We architects love to talk about what makes for good architecture. Yet, as articulated in Sarah Susanka's wonderfully refreshing book *The Not So Big House*, what is truly relevant is what lifts the spirit of the clients we serve.

George Erdstein, Architect
Detroit
Dan Stokes,
Product Testing Manager

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wood work

With all the glass in this apartment," says architect Eric Haesloop, AIA, "we needed another material that would warm up the space and give it some solidity." That material was wood—three kinds of wood, to be exact.

Haesloop, of the San Francisco firm Turnbull Griffin Haesloop, used an anigre veneer obtained from a single tree to give the walls a smooth, silky texture. Maple covers the floors and ceilings. And cherry wood serves as an accent throughout the project.

The San Francisco renovation was the only apartment interior to win an honor award in the Architectural Woodwork Institute's 1998 Wood Design Awards Program. Haesloop was the project architect; the general contractor was Ryan Associates, also of San Francisco.—meghan drueding
who’s buying?

For its 23rd annual “Who’s Buying Homes in America” report, Chicago Title Corp. surveyed potential home buyers in 20 major metropolitan markets across the nation to come up with a profile of today’s typical home buyer. Here are some of the findings, as compared with 1997 figures:

- from 1997 to 1998, total home sales increased by 12.5 percent;
- the number of married buyers was 16.4 percent higher in 1998 than in 1997, but 13.6 percent more buyers in 1998 were widowed, divorced, or separated;
- the average family size of home buyers remained constant, at 2.8 people;
- the average age of second- or third-time buyers in 1998 was 41.1, the same as in 1996 and 1997.—m.d.

concrete solution

Should you follow pricey trends in selecting materials and finishes, knowing that in five years a home may appear dated? Or ignore them, driving away customers who desire the latest looks on their walls, ceilings, and other surfaces?

When it comes to the current craze for concrete, there’s a third option. Roe Inc., of Blaine, Wash., makes a clever concrete-patterned wallpaper that comes in two different prints, each with snap-tie impressions for a realistic, poured-concrete look. The 3-foot-wide rolls come in 10-meter and 50-meter lengths and retail at around $3 per square foot. The minute concrete loses its cachet, homeowners can simply strip the paper and begin again with whichever new surface has caught their fancy. After all, beauty is only skin deep.

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conferences and competitions

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summer school

Think of it as sleepover camp for architects. Yestermorrow Design and Build School’s two-week professional enrichment courses are held in the lush green mountains of Warren, Vt. The school is primarily directed at do-it-yourself homeowners, but its curriculum also contains a track designed specifically for architects and engineers. Course offerings in 1999 include “Ecological Design and Building,” a study of the principles of sustainable development, and “The Sellers’ Summer Studio,” an exploration of design/build that takes place at architect David Sellers’ home and workshop. The classes provide architects with an opportunity to sharpen their skills in a particular area, and to network with peers. For more information, call 888.496.5541 or go to www.yestermorrow.org.—m.d.
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download a dormer

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The Web site offers five catalogs, including a selection of single objects for sale, families of similar items, and complete libraries. Shoppers are given a thumbnail image of each item offered; if you want one, simply select the proper operating system (Mac or Windows 95/98 NT) and add it to your virtual shopping cart. Purchases are made through a secured credit-card billing system; a private password stores billing information for future visits. Each item takes about a minute to download.

In addition to providing objects, Correia is recruiting ArchiCAD users to sell their own creations on the service—a simple contract nets participants a 50-percent royalty on each sale.

For more information, call 415.621.7959 or e-mail david@objectsonline.com.—rich binsacca

bar back

Stuart Shayman Associates, of Northfield, Ill., backed this wet bar in a suburban Chicago home with the same tempered glass that stretches along the room's adjacent wall. The see-through solution allows more light into the room, without compromising storage space.—m.d.
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a trip to haiti

an architect encounters hope and ingenuity in one of the world’s poorest countries.

by thomas j. carleton, aia

For decades, I’ve wondered how I could contribute personally to the well-being of people who live in poor Third World nations. Last October, I spent eight days in Haiti. The trip rekindled my longing to use architecture to better the human condition. Words like bizarre, wonderful, exhausting, fascinating, and weird come to mind when I try to describe my visit to the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

volunteer work
You will not find Haiti in many tour books of the Caribbean. So why did I choose to go there? I was invited to go by Engineering Ministries International, a group of Christian design professionals in Colorado Springs, Colo. (You can contact EMI at 719.633.2078 or info@emiusa.org; Web site www.emiusa.org.) I had e-mailed them a note asking if they needed any help. Within three weeks, they booked me on a plane to Port-au-Prince, the country’s capital city.

In Port-au-Prince, I hooked up with several engineers who had volunteered to design an addition to a hospital on the north shore of the island. While waiting for the next flight, we relaxed on a hotel veranda and listened to fascinating stories about life in Haiti. Our host had just built a home in the city with EMI’s drawings. As we sipped native fruit juices, she pointed to an adjacent construction site and explained that most buildings in Haiti are constructed of concrete block made on site. Wood is scarce, and plywood is even rarer, she said. Consequently, Haitians have devised a unique method of building houses: They lay rows of concrete blocks, each flat on the underside and round on top, leaving gaps for smooth reinforcing rods between the blocks. Then, they hand-pour a concrete slurry to form a roof slab or intermediary floor.

another world
Later that day, as our Cessna descended into the city of Port-de-Paix, we could see people below bathing in a muddy river. We landed on a dirt airstrip adjacent to a dusty hut with walls of woven sticks. A few pieces of laundry hung nearby. I watched a woman sweep dirt from the front stoop of the hut. Despite her humble surroundings, continued on page 44
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there was pride in her appearance and demeanor. A small donkey bearing a thin woman ambled by. I was overwhelmed—not with pity, but with a deeply felt empathy.

Curious young Haitians surrounded the plane. In contrast to the more assertive crowd outside the airport in the capital, these youngsters were welcoming and friendly. Apparently, we were the event of the day.

We were greeted by Dr. Paul Eckhoff, the surgeon at the Center Medicale Beraca, a trauma center serving 100,000 people. The drive through Port-de-Paix was remarkable. The doctor expertly navigated the Jeep around potholes in the narrow, dusty road, which was clogged with people, mopeds, cars, and trucks.

The congested traffic squeezed along between plaster buildings covered with words in Creole. Many of the buildings were run-down; some were brightly painted. People were everywhere. All along the road were makeshift boutiques set up to sell wares of every description.

**settling in**

After a half-hour drive, we passed through the steel security gate of the residential compound where we would spend the next week. The accommodations were surprisingly pleasant—"old Florida" style with white stucco-covered walls, painted concrete floors, and metal roofs.

We were assigned our quarters, warned not to drink the tap water, and given instructions on how to use the mosquito repellent. Dr. Eckhoff gave me a package of malaria pills because of an outbreak of a particular strain in that part of Haiti.

Each evening, the electricity (and the fans) went off at around 9 p.m. and did not start up again until the next morning. That first night, I lay sweating beneath my bedsheets, which I did not dare remove for fear of being bitten by mosquitoes. The coolest part of the day came at 5 a.m., just before sunrise; that is also when the streets would come alive with the noise of cars and trucks and people.

**setting up shop**

We saw the hospital complex the next morning. Many of the buildings, particularly the patient wards, were in need of serious renovation or replacement. The oldest was made of rammed-earth walls with wood pole rafters and a rusting tin roof. While we were there, one patient, probably from a rural outpost, had trouble opening the door of a patient room because he had never encountered a doorknob and did not know how to twist it.

We set up shop for the week under two large fans in a conference room in the relatively new surgery building. During seven days of intensive brainstorming and planning, we completed hand drawings for a 50-bed addition, an admissions/records office, a dental suite, a pharmacy, a warehouse depot, and a residential apartment. At one point we built a full-scale mock-up of a typical patient room—complete with gurneys—in the grass.

"curious young haitians surrounded the plane, welcoming and friendly. apparently, we were the event of the day."
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outside our window, to check dimensions.

At the end of the week-long design charrette, we returned to Port-au-Prince. As before, entrepreneurs lined the street. Zoning is unheard of in Haiti. Modern gas stations press up against wood huts with thatched roofs. An industrial facility rubs shoulders with a colorful children's entertainment park. On the outskirts of town, many of the roads are not paved—or even graded—except for a

"I realized that what at first had appeared to be a building boom was actually an ongoing struggle to survive."

stretch of smooth asphalt that passes the president's home.

architecture of hope
I marveled at the many concrete block houses in varying stages of construction on both sides of the unpaved roads. When I asked why it was so common to see steel reinforcing bars sticking haphazardly out of concrete roofs, one of our guides explained to me that this was the "architecture of hope." Builders would add a few cement blocks at a time as they could afford it, eventually building the first floor with a flat roof, which would serve as the platform for the second floor. I realized that what at first had appeared to be a building boom was actually an ongoing struggle to survive.

Yet despite the dire conditions, most of the Haitians I talked to expressed optimism about their future. I was impressed by their faith, hope, and commitment to each other.

afterglow
Since returning to California, I have struggled to describe my "adventure" in Haiti, but words and photos seem inadequate. How do you talk about a life-changing cross-cultural experience without sounding melodramatic?

I look forward to traveling more for EMI. The actual destination seems almost irrelevant. I'm happy to go anywhere they need an architect—someone to listen, extend a helping hand, and offer some hope. ra

Thomas J. Carleton, AIA, is a sole proprietor in Salinas, Calif. He does a mixture of residential and commercial work, including custom homes, churches, retail stores, offices, and warehouses.
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by carolyn leber

Many architects see the process of photographing their projects as a sideline to the real work of designing homes—something to be taken care of if time and budget allow. But few other tools possess the image-enhancing powers of a well-developed photo portfolio. Not only does it show off your design acumen, but it tells a great deal about your firm’s vision of itself.

choosing a photographer

Every city has a bevy of architectural photographers who have worked for years to perfect their craft. To find the one that’s right for you, call architecture firms whose work you admire and ask for recommendations. Look through design sections of magazines, noting photographers’ credits for the images you like. Do the same with design books, looking for work from your area.

When evaluating photography, make certain images look evenly lit; offer vibrant, true color; and display striking textural combinations. Take note of both composition and subject matter. Remember that while your objective as an architect is to showcase your design work, the photographer’s goal is to render artistic pictures. At times these objectives are at cross purposes. Clever photographers resolve this disparity by choosing creative angles that represent both architecture and art.

a day’s work

Most photographers work on full or half-day schedules; few offer hourly rates. As a general rule of thumb, budget approximately $2,000 for a full day’s shoot, including material expenses. The number of images generated in a day’s work depends on the photographer, camera format, and lighting complexity.

Large-format cameras that produce 4-by-5-inch transparencies yield about six shots in a full day. “Four-by-five lenses are sharper and produce more sculptural transparencies,” says photographer Matthew Millman, who shoots for a number of high-profile publications. “Rooms with loads of drama are best photographed with large-format equipment. The scale is appropriate for capturing their elegance.”

Smaller-format cameras, such as those that use 2¼-inch film, can turn out as many as 10 to 12 shots per day. They work best in tight spaces such as bathrooms or bedrooms, where small details are important. I recommend staying away from 35mm for anything other than scouting shots. The result is too grainy and soft for architectural work.

Shot during the first 15 minutes of twilight—what photographers often call “the magic minute”—this photograph invites the viewer right into the house. The warm interior against the violet sky illustrates the organic nature of San Francisco architect Peter Plau’s design. The angle demonstrates the expansive scope of a 4x5 lens. The image was deliberately composed with clean reveals on both sides, as a potential cover shot to woo magazine publishers.

If you’ve ever attended a photo shoot, you’ve observed that setting up the lighting takes far longer than actually making the pictures. So if the house requires tricky lighting or has numerous reflective surfaces, expect a lower daily output from your photographer.

continued on page 52
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working out details
Whatever camera format you choose, make certain you specify—before the day of the shoot—how many shots you expect and which ones they are. If you intend to submit your finished shots for publication, be sure to clarify in advance whether the photographer expects you to collect usage fees. Many photographers grant unlimited usage rights as part of the fee you pay them, particularly if this intent is discussed in advance. Others are not as liberal in their terms and require publishers to pay for the use of each image.

Choose a photographer who is flexible about usage; after all, getting published is one of the reasons you got your work photographed in the first place!

art direction
When choosing what to photograph, pay special attention to kitchens and baths. As they review your portfolio, prospective clients will look at these rooms as a litmus test of your overall talent as an architect. Discuss with your photographer the leading features in each room to be shot. “Exotic wood veneers, dramatic mantels, staircases, unusual appliances—all should be emphasized in your photos,” says award-winning photographer John Sutton. “Judicious camera placement will demonstrate their relevance to the rest of the room.”

Don’t try one shot of a large room, hoping to impress with sheer size. The result is usually cold and unattractive. Instead, shoot a variety of well-composed vignettes that show off the architectural details you want clients to notice. In small rooms, avoid three-wall compositions. The bowling-alley effect makes the space look doubly cramped.

Open windows for a breezy, fresh-air look. And unless sun is pouring in the room, always light the fireplace. In kitchens, don’t point the camera down countertops as if coming in for a landing. Again, use the camera to point out details.

working with furnishings
What if the client’s furnishings don’t suit your design? Homeowners rarely have the time or money to deck out their new houses shortly after completion. And their tastes may not coincide with yours.

Many architects make the mistake of assuming that their work is best seen without client influence. But shoving all the furniture out of the frame will backfire. Empty rooms never read well (and magazines won’t publish them). Besides, future clients want to see how furnishable your rooms are.

Instead, position furniture so it’s inviting. Cover bad upholstery with throws. Set out props that look natural, such as cups of tea and open books. Use fruit and flowers to add texture and color. They can distract the eye from less-than-perfect furnishings, so use them liberally. Use props even in formal rooms, to avoid a stuffy, uptight image.

lasting impressions
As the saying goes, there are no second chances at first impressions. Great photographs have immediate impact, and they say more about your professionalism than any other single element. There simply is no substitute for a portfolio that sings your praises the minute the cover is flipped back.

Carolyn Leber is a publicist and freelance writer. Her San Francisco-based firm, Maverick Communications, specializes in architectural PR.

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Unfortunately, many people don’t know there’s a dramatic difference between dampproofing and the superior alternative of waterproofing.

The dampproofing approach.
The typical method of dampproofing involves applying a layer of unmodified asphalt that’s only 10 mils thick when cured. (Historically, this material wasn’t created to protect basements or even repel water. In fact, it’s a type of primer to prepare road surfaces for other materials.) It degrades quite quickly underground, becomes brittle and shatters at low temperatures. So even thicker applications would yield little, if any, improvement.

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*Source: USA Today, May 21, 1997 Builders reporting callbacks on basement leaks. **See limited warranty for details.
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Circle no. 28
TMS Architects, the firm that earned the judges' highest praise, is led by principals John Merkle (left) and William Soupcoff.
So concluded judge Tom Gallas at the end of a day spent scrutinizing the 16 architecture firms that entered residential architect's first annual Business Leadership Awards contest. Gallas and co-judge Bill Manion identified five firms that demonstrate excellence in residential architectural practice in each of five areas: practice management, marketing, design innovation, community service, and financial success. The winners are profiled on the following pages; TMS Architects, Portsmouth, N.H., took top honors.

The judges measured entries not against each other but against the profession's highest standards, looking for balanced, well-rounded firms. And while the honorees have very different organizational structures and areas of focus, Manion described each as having "a clear vision for the firm, a plan to fulfill that vision, sound execution of the plan, and work that reflects the vision." In short, these firms do things right.
balanced firm, well-rounded, relatively profitable, with a well-directed plan and good aesthetics.” Those were the characteristics that led the judges to rank TMS Architects first among near-equals in terms of business leadership.

One of the keys to the firm’s success is good old-fashioned trial and error—and the ability to learn from mistakes. Staff size expanded and contracted with the economy’s ups and downs in the early years; the experience wasn’t pleasant. That led to the decision that lean and efficient was the way to go, even in good times.

The partners knew automation could help cut expenses, but didn’t opt for off-the-shelf products. “We got software and hardware that fit our needs,” says John Merkle. “It’s a UNIX-based system. We avoided Bill Gates and all the software churning.” Today, TMS boasts more than a decade of experience on a stable system, with no time or money spent mastering upgrades or new operating systems. The firm’s two partners, plus nine staffers, handle nearly $700,000 worth of work. They also produce a healthy profit, more than half of which flows into pension and profit-sharing plans. Another third goes into bonuses, and about a tenth is channeled back into the business.

But even lean machines have to be fed. The judges called the TMS approach to marketing “exemplary,” and said that it “makes the firm a recognizable product.” The firm targets three areas: custom residential, private schools, and corporate commercial work, often with a historic or adaptive-use bent.

Marketing begins with quality photography. “We feel that striking photography speaks for itself,” says Merkle. For its brochures, the firm had designer Janet Prince create simple but attractive pieces with plenty of color photos and little copy. In addition to sending the brochures to prospects, the partners distribute them when they give seminars, and staff members send them to land purchasers who are likely to build, along with a letter introducing the firm.

Most of TMS’ marketing, though, is one-on-one: the networking that happens at chamber of commerce meetings, the referrals from satisfied clients, the school directors who talk with each other about the work TMS has done for them. (Even the brochure designer became a client.)

This tight focus is characteristic of the practice as a whole. Merkle says the
firm’s goal is to do everything more efficiently—which means not only using work time effectively, but also targeting the right markets, looking for the best clients, and charging appropriately.

Does a focus on efficiency mean that TMS risks burnout? “We’re up front about workload,” says Merkle. “When we consider taking a new job, we all discuss it over lunch, and decide if we can do it. We’re flexible and task-oriented when it comes to work. People can set their own hours as long as the work we’ve decided to do gets done.” And when it isn’t the right project, “We say no.”

The firm chooses its employees carefully, looking for hard workers who relish a challenge. “We hire character,” says Merkle. The partners see community involvement as one indicator of the kind of character they’re looking for in employees. TMS staff—including the partners—contribute design expertise to area schools and work directly with local children.

The next goal the partners see on the horizon is retirement. “Bill and I are both about 50,” says Merkle. “We’re looking to start the process of ownership transition.” It’s a process that’s likely to be as thoughtfully planned and well-managed as every other aspect of their business.

This vacation home on the coast of Maine (top and right) includes a curved second-story balcony overlooking the ocean, and a circular sunroom.
looney ricks kiss

"a part of our strategic plan," says Carson Looney. "we try to define the firm that will put us out of business—and become that firm." That no-holds-barred approach, noted the judges, has led directly to the firm’s "well-thought-out management structure."

LRK’s highly diversified practice includes residential, office/commercial, banking/financial, hospitality, and health-care projects, as well as land planning. Yet, it was clear to the judges that its managers “have a clear idea of who they are, and what they want to do.”

While LRK is large, it works like a collection of firms, each headed by a principal. The semi-autonomous divisions share design ideas. “We don’t do ‘market-ecture’,” says Looney. “We take traditional scale and proportion and update it” while maintaining its connection to history. “We do places that live well.” To help designers hew to that high standard, LRK holds regular design review sessions—with input from all divisions. “We express our opinions, but no one attacks anyone,” says Looney. “The review process is now part of our culture. People request that their projects be reviewed. I get input on my projects too.”

While design cross-pollination certainly fosters a sense of involvement and ownership, LRK goes a step further by creating actual owners. Company profits are distributed to employees as bonuses, and the company then invites those employees to buy stock. Of 138 employees, 33 own LRK stock. “Since we’ve sold stock,” says Looney, “we’ve never had a negative year.”

This plan also makes for easier transitions, since there’s a pool of owners to buy out any retiring partners. “If the firms we’d worked for before had done this,” says Looney, “we probably wouldn’t have left to start LRK.”

The firm’s approach to marketing begins with choosing good clients, giving them top-notch design and service, and then telling them what else LRK can do for them. The next step is letting the rest of the world know about their successes—which include more than 170 design and planning award-winning projects, including Harbor Town in Memphis and the Idea House in Celebration, Fla.

Community involvement is part of the mix too. Principals and associates serve in mayoral appointments on advisory boards for civic projects, and on nonprofit and professional boards. The firm also supports more than a dozen local charitable efforts. The judges summed it up best: “LRK is a sophisticated firm—a real standout.”

Photos this page: © 1998 Steve Hinds

LRK’s Caruth at Lincoln Park, in Dallas, features gables, porches, and brick walkways that evoke an earlier era. Paige Close, the company’s director of multifamily, led the design team for the project.
LRK's four principals are (clockwise from top) Frank Ricks, Darrell Russell, Carson Looney, and Richard Kiss.
mahoney architects

The firm's team includes (clockwise from top) Alex Terry, Colleen Mahoney, Laurie Friedman, and Don Hutchins. Faithful followers Kay Cee (left) and Piccola look on.
he judges were quick to pick up what Colleen Mahoney's firm is all about: "It's not just technical proficiency or marketing savvy—there's a sense of balance," they said.

There's the balance between work time and other time: "We never work overtime, weekends, late at night," says Mahoney. "I want each of us to have a life outside of the practice."

There's the balance that comes from variety in design challenges. She opened a second office in Petaluma because of the greater availability of commercial work there: "I want to avoid limiting myself to only residential. Diversity keeps my interest level up." The firm has taken nonresidential projects as diverse as a fire station and a Buddhist temple.

There's the balance between taking in and giving back. While she's content to work for the wealthy, Mahoney also gives her time to organizations like Rotary (past president), the chamber of commerce (executive board), Habitat for Humanity, and Christmas in April. She mentors college students, speaks to school classes about architecture, and works as an official at children's tae kwon do tournaments (she's a third-degree black belt).

And there's the balance between expertise and learning. The book she's currently cowriting, Great Chefs, Great Kitchens, will be published this fall. It explores how some of the country's greatest chefs set up their own kitchens. Mahoney pursued the project because she wanted to learn from people who really know how a kitchen should work. "I wanted to be a better kitchen designer. With kitchen projects becoming so expensive, the decisions we make about how to handle them should be more thoughtful," she says.

Since most of the firm's marketing and PR are handled by Mahoney and her staff, there's the need for balance there, too: "We've had to be very selective about competitions, because of the time involved. I would no more throw together an entry or an article than I would throw together a design."

Another balance point has to do with size. "When we were up to eight people," she says, "I felt as if things were dropping through the cracks." Instead of hiring more people, Mahoney has built a web of mutual support among the people she works with outside the firm. "The key word is trust," she says. "I trust the contractors and clients and they trust me. I tell my clients that it's not just me they're hiring—it's all the people I work with."

It's an approach that works for her, and that the judges found "invigorating."
terrific design talent alone doesn’t guarantee an architectural prac-
tice’s success—but it’s a great place to start. The judges
admired Schmitt Sampson’s “very strong design element.”
They liked the firm’s breadth of work too. The company excels
not only in high-end custom residential work but also in design for the
resort market and affordable housing.

Even the firm’s community involvement stems from its design work. By creating
plans for affordable vernacular housing in Charleston on a pro bono basis—plans built
out by governmental and nonprofit groups—Schmitt Sampson contributes to
better quality housing and more attractive neighborhoods.

Scott Sampson, whose expertise is in technical and production-management areas, entered into partnership with Chris
Schmitt about two years ago. Prior to that
time, Schmitt, who handles most of the
design work, had spent 11 years building the firm one top-notch project at a time.
The firm’s marketing plan was a bit less
clearly focused than the judges might have hoped for, but a company that wins
56 regional and national design awards, and has had projects appear in print locally and nationally 70 times, attracts
attention. People notice, seek the firm out, and sign on.

By coupling this media-buzz strategy with a long history of involvement with the
major players in the resort development community, Schmitt Sampson keeps the
firm active in the world of resort and hospitality work. Schmitt’s experience with
resort development (he worked on Sea Pines on Hilton Head and Kiawah islands in the ‘80s) led him to pursue an alterna-
tive pricing strategy for such projects. “We want to get paid what our work is worth, proportional to the end profit,” says
Schmitt. “Marketing firms who sell their services to developers get 1 percent of everything that ever gets sold. Why should architects settle for 5 percent of construction costs?”

Schmitt has been successful at implement-
ing this approach with “some of the higher-quality clients,” he says, and it has fostered a number of long-term client rela-
tionships. “We’re no longer practicing survival architecture,” he says.

Schmitt Sampson, said the judges, is “a practice that’s well-managed and in con-
trol.” The principals combine an astute ability to handle the business with a strat-
egy of using the firm’s strengths to the benefit of both clients and the community.
It’s an approach that works.
A talented firm's two pillars, Scott Sampson (left) and Chris Schmitt.
JH+P’s principals are (clockwise from topright) Bob James, Ron Harwick, Mike Arbour, and Mark Wolf.
n the early '80s, it seemed as if every bank, consortium, and scout troop was building multifamily housing in Dallas. When the market bottomed out, most multifamily architects scrambled for other niches. Not James, Harwick + Partners. Instead of a new product, JH+P looked for a new market. It took its show on the road, selling its expertise—top-quality multifamily, resort, and hospitality design—in cities with healthier economies.

It was clear to the judges that JH+P made a good choice. They praised the firm's design expertise, noting that its high-density urban projects don't look dense or forbidding. Instead, they are pleasant, inviting neighborhoods. According to Bob James, not everyone wants five acres in a suburb. "There's a vital urban experience that we can help provide," he says.

The firm's structure also impressed the judges. Two principals head each project team, and manage project design and administration from start to finish. Having principals involved throughout the process is not just good for quality control and production management—it's also a marketing strategy. "Our clients are never handed off to some guy in the back room," says James. "Staying involved means we learn early about new things our clients are planning."

Most marketing in the relatively small universe of developers boils down to networking. JH+P imposes a structure on its networking: Each principal is responsible for finding and selling to clients in one market segment, and the principals meet weekly to review their marketing efforts.

When it comes to community service, the firm's contributions are decidedly hands-on. Employees and partners work on Hearts & Hammers, a local volunteer rehab effort, and on CANstruction, a competition in which designers use cans of food to build structures. The food is then donated to local food banks.

The company's design work has had an impact on the community as well, especially in renovation work on apartment complexes. JH+P uses design to make such housing not only more attractive, but better. At one community, the residents credited the exterior changes—porches, better traffic flow, and improved landscaping—with reducing the community's crime rate by 20 percent. They threw a dinner for the JH+P team to thank them.

Ann Marie Moriarty is a freelance writer in Silver Spring, Md.

Dallas
Principals:
Robert H. James, AIA;
Ronald E. Harwick, AIA;
J. Mark Wolf, AIA;
Michael L. Arbour, AIA
Founded:
1979
Employees (including principals):
29 full-time
1998 pretax revenue:
$4.5 million
Gross revenue per employee:
$156,732

the judges

The judges for the Business Leadership Awards were Thomas M. Gallas, CPA, executive vice president of Torti Gallas and Partners/CHK, a Silver Spring, Md., urban and land planning and architecture firm; and William C. Manion, AIA, a partner in O'Neil and Manion Architects, P.A., Bethesda, Md., and recipient of an MBA from UCLA's Anderson School.

From its Dallas base, JH+P produces such multifamily projects as Jefferson Summit, in Orlando, Fla., (left) and Wildwood Gables, an Atlanta apartment renovation (right).
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houses

an inside look
at the project most dear
to an architect's heart:
his own home

by meghan drueding
“we made a decision
to use healthy, sustainable
materials that needed
as little refining as possible.”
—kirk gastinger, faia
Kansas City Prime

Kirk Gastinger, FAIA, approached the idea of designing and building a new home for himself and his family somewhat reluctantly. “We had lived in the same house for 16 years,” says the Kansas City, Mo., architect. “I didn’t have much of a desire to move.” But once his wife, Joan, convinced him of the merits of such a project, there was no stopping him. The couple bought a hilltop site in the same turn-of-the-century city neighborhood where their former house was located, and let their ideas percolate for four years.

As a principal at Gastinger Walker Harden Architects in Kansas City, one of Gastinger’s specialties is sustainable design. So he wanted a house that would reflect his commitment to environmentally sound architecture. As an avid gardener, his wife wanted a floor plan that was open to the outdoors—no easy feat in Kansas City’s four-season climate. Both agreed they needed enough room for their two college-age kids to visit on weekends. The final outcome: a 2,200-square-foot courtyard home that’s spare but comfortable, softened by folk art and brightened by abundant natural light.

“We made a decision to use healthy, sustainable materials that needed as little refining as possible,” says Gastinger. The home’s lack of carpeting reflects this choice. The flooring consists of natural materials such as slate and French limestone tile, which take less energy to produce than synthetic-fiber carpet. And, according to Gastinger, they’re easier to keep clean. On the south side of the house, expansive floor-to-ceiling windows capture sunlight and passive solar heat during the day. At night, the Gastingers cover the windows with indoor shutters that help the house retain heat; in the summertime, they leave them open to allow breezes to circulate throughout the first floor. Other environmentally conscious elements include limestone kitchen counters, a glass bridge that filters light from second-floor windows down into the first floor, and low-flow faucets that reduce water use by 40 percent.

A central radiant fireplace serves as the home’s primary heat source, as well as its visual and social hub. On a recommendation from the late architect Joseph Esherick, the Gastingers had the tiles that cover the hearth and chimney handmade at Moravian Tileworks in eastern Pennsylvania. Gastinger designed the 75 different tile patterns, and he and Joan selected the colors. “Kids, especially, love this fireplace,” he says. “It really establishes the dining room as the main gathering spot of the home.”

The home’s unusual C-shaped floor plan wraps around a courtyard that’s flanked by a sunroom and a covered porch. Both of the second-floor bedrooms have their own balconies with views into woods below. Neutral exterior colors and a mix of materials—bricks, concrete, stucco, and copper—help the home fit smoothly into the urban fabric of its architecturally eclectic neighborhood.

Project:
Gastinger residence, Kansas City, Mo.

Architect:
Kirk Gastinger, FAIA, Gastinger Walker Harden Architects, Kansas City

Contractor:
Franken-Polli Co., Kansas City
For 15 years, Bill Bocken, AIA, walked his dog past a clunky but charming 1912 Tudor in the Bankers Hill section of San Diego, picturing the improvements he’d make if he could get his hands on it. He finally did, and transformed it into this light-filled, shingle-sided bungalow—which still exudes the old-house character that attracted him in the first place.

Since the majority of Bocken’s work with the San Diego firm of Carrier Johnson involves large-scale commercial projects, he relishes any residential commissions that come his way. Yet he’s mindful of the havoc that an overly eager designer can wreak on a remodel. “So often, someone goes into an old house and says something is really charming and then they obliterate it,” he says. “I didn’t want to fall into that trap.”

Bocken moved in eight months before beginning to renovate, taking that time to analyze the way the spaces worked and to think about the play of light within the house. And when the project finally got under way, Bocken used what he already had. He relocated old interior French doors to the outside of the house, relieving the exterior dullness and allowing more sunlight inside. He had his contractor remove part of a cramped attic space above the main stairwell (left, bottom), replacing it with an operable skylight that helps brighten the first and second floors (right). And he hired an artisan to handcraft new exterior shingles to match the old shingles’ aged patina and irregular forms.

The old floor plan may have suited a World War I-era family, but the small, chopped-up rooms were inefficient for the new owner’s more casual, outdoors-oriented lifestyle. Bocken consolidated the kitchen, laundry, and breakfast areas and removed an obsolete sewing room to make room for an owners’ bath and dressing space. He also widened the narrow doorways into arches that better suit the home’s fanciful character.

In deciding what to do with the other building on the property—a six-car garage and former maid’s quarters—Bocken took a mixed-use approach. He kept the garage and added a loft for guests, as well as a large central design studio. The complex, which, like the main house, runs 4,000 square feet, also boosts privacy, blocking sight lines between Bocken’s home and the apartments and office buildings across the street. “When visitors come through the entry gates from the hustle and bustle of the city,” he says, “they can’t believe the tranquility. I still can’t believe it myself.”

project:
Bocken residence, San Diego

architect:
Bill Bocken, AIA, Carrier Johnson, San Diego

contractor:
Carl Tranberg Construction, San Diego
"so often, someone goes into an old house and says something is really charming and then they obliterate it. I didn’t want to fall into that trap." — Bill Bocken, AIA
“we went against local design trends—it was definitely a risk.”—Tony Abbate, AIA
When Tony Abbate, AIA, and his wife, Jaye, began building the duplex they'd designed for themselves in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., they weren't sure if they'd ever get to live in it. The couple acted as their own developer. In order to obtain bank loans for the project, they agreed to sell both units if selling just one didn't produce enough of a profit. Real estate agents warned them that the 2,000-square-foot, alley-loaded contemporary home they were planning wouldn't sell anywhere near what they were asking.

But the Abbates love the clean lines and uncluttered look of Modern houses, so they went ahead anyway. "Neither of the units has soaring volumes or convenient car space," says Abbate, who has his own firm in Fort Lauderdale. "We went against local design trends—it was definitely a risk." What the project does have is a respect for its neighborhood—Colee Hammock, the oldest area in the city—and an angular Modern façade.

The houses in Colee Hammock date from the early 1920s through the 1940s. The neighborhood is a mixture of single-family and multifamily bungalows, frame houses, and stucco Art Deco residences. A 10-foot-wide alley bisects each block, and zoning laws are strictly enforced. Parking is off-street or in the rear. "We stayed with the alley system that was already in place," says Abbate. "A one-car garage in the back was really the only way the plan would work with the zoning codes."

A long, narrow floor plan allowed the couple to preserve most of the mature live oak, mango, and gumbo-limbo trees that grow on their lot. An entry gate, a pebbled path to the front door, and a generous setback also help to align the home aesthetically with its older neighbors.

The site's buildable area was a total of 30 feet wide, which meant the Abbates' home could only be 15 feet across. Floor-to-ceiling windows and garden views, though, make it feel larger. Interior highlights include the prefabricated, slate-covered fireplace unit that separates the dining and living rooms and the clean, simple procession of rooms from the front of the house to the back. As an experiment in bringing more reflected natural light inside, Abbate designed aluminum exterior hoods for the living room and master bedroom windows.

The story ends happily. "We were lucky enough to find a buyer who was willing to pay the asking price, enabling us to keep the other unit," Abbate says. "He's a young guy who happens to love Modern architecture, and he's since become a great friend."

The Abbates hope to do more speculative development in Fort Lauderdale, possibly in the mixed-use arena.

**project:** Abbate residence, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

**architect:**
Tony Abbate, AIA, Anthony Abbate Architect, Fort Lauderdale

**contractor:**
Wynn Builders and Contractors, Fort Lauderdale

---

Tony Abbate’s stonemason brother covered the living room fireplace surround with Vermont slate (above, center). The prefab unit contains a powder room; its reverse side serves as a dining room wall (above, bottom).
Oh my!

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Remodeler - 1998 Remodeler brand use study - CertainTeed siding rated #1. 1997 Remodeling brand use study - CertainTeed vinyl windows and siding rated #1.
part of an architect’s job, besides designing homes and coddling clients, is knowing the building code. It’s a given: Clients expect your creations to meet code, chiefly because the vast majority can’t read working drawings or spec sheets and think egress is a rare bird. You know better, which is why you get the big bucks.

But meeting code is sometimes easier said than drawn. Neighborhood covenants may conflict with or append the current code; interpretation of a rule may be fuzzy, at best, and depend on who’s checking plans that day. Then, of course, the client may be married to an idea you know conflicts with code. Or, you may create a killer detail you feel meets code and achieves the perfect aesthetic, only to see it red-lined during approvals or tagged on inspection.

Which often leads to another client edict: Make it work anyway. “Our value to clients is finding creative solutions to existing conditions, including the code,” says Donald Evans, AIA, of The Evans Group, in Orlando, Fla. “We get paid to be problem solvers.”

For some architects, it’s a challenge they relish. “It’s not unusual for us to get involved in code issues,” says André Fontaine, AIA, an architect in Glenelg, Md. “If you just strictly follow what the code specifies, it crimps your opportunity to be creative.”

That said, the profession isn’t overly eager to go on record with questionable code conditions. Someone (usually the architect or designer) has to put his or her stamp on the plans, and the liability associated with a code violation, or even an approved variance, weighs heavily. “We never intentionally propose something that isn’t to code,” says architect Theo Adamstein of Adamstein and Demetriou, in Washington, D.C., echoing an ethic followed throughout the design profession.

“We strive for innovation within the code.”

And that’s exactly what the five projects featured here achieve. At first glance to a code wonk, some of these details might raise some eyebrows, but they’re all legal—if not always to the precise letter of the law.

by rich binsacca and rick vitullo, aia / illustrations by rick vitullo
t Lakes on Legacy Drive, a planned, 530-unit, single-family development north of Dallas, the CC&Rs restricted the use of second-story windows along the west elevation of homes built in two of the project’s gated villages. The developer, Blackard Industries, Dallas, cited several reasons for instituting the unusual rule, leading with privacy; if allowed, the windows in question would have overlooked neighboring backyards. Other considerations had to do with zero-lot setbacks and solar heat-gain concerns.

Orlando architect Donald Evans, AIA, hired to design a house in the custom village and four models in The Villas (a zero-lot plot of patio homes), didn’t blink. “The tighter the code, the more fun and challenging it is,” says Evans. “Codes aren’t negatives, they’re givens; like the topography or sun exposure.”

With a bit of creative floor planning, Evans arranged rooms so that those requiring windows are not on the west side of the house. On the west face, the plans show spaces that usually go windowless anyway, like closets and laundry rooms. Second stories are confined to the opposite side of the lot, limited to lofts, or simply eliminated.

In addition, Evans designed the patio homes’ kitchens without windows, either, at least on the elevation in question. Cabinets, appliances, and a butler’s pantry block the west wall, while the rest of the kitchen looks inward and gains light from windows along other elevations (see plan, left). “This rule has pushed builders here to offer something new and creative,” Evans says. “They couldn’t just use their stock plans.”

For the custom home (not shown), Evans took up a third of the off-limits elevation with the side of a single-car garage and the rest with a master bedroom, a shower, and a bump-out for a soaking tub. A quick glance at the plans shows a limited number of small windows along the west elevation of the single-story home that are spotted for ventilation, not views.

Evans also omitted a second floor on the west side of the custom home to avoid any conflicts with the code. “We didn’t want to ask any special favors [of the developer],” he says, noting he would have shied away from direct west views, anyway, because of the harsh sun exposure. “This project just made us think a little harder.”

“the tighter the code, the more fun and challenging it is.”

—Donald Evans, AIA

"the tighter the code, the more fun and challenging it is."
The outbuilding has the proper scale and materials to complement the main house (above, in background), and accommodates several diverse spaces, including a garage and a pool house.

"the character of the area is not a bunch of small buildings, but one or two that sit alone on the landscape."—Frederic Schwartz, AIA

For New York architect Frederic Schwartz, AIA, the rules governing outbuildings on his clients' property were not only restrictive, but ran counter to the historic character of the neighborhood. Local zoning laws allowed up to three distinct (and presumably detached) structures: a dedicated garage, an art studio, and a pool house. None of them could be built as a second or "sister" residence to the main house (the goal being to discourage investment or rental property).

There was one variance, however: "If you connect the buildings with breezeways, the code allows you to provide full services," Schwartz says, "but that design doesn't fit the makeup of the area."

So Schwartz turned the zoning rule on its ear and designed a single building that combines the three uses under one roof. He arranged the structure so that it could be easily remodeled into a self-sufficient livable space after final inspection. "If you frame it smartly, the owners have the option to finish it the way they want," says Schwartz.

For example, a storage area on one side of the garage can convert to a staircase to the art studio above, and the tiny, linear cabana along the back of the garage has room for a kitchenette along the existing plumbing wall. The building already contains an allowable bath (see illustration, above).

Despite skirting code, Schwartz is comfortable with the project. His solution works aesthetically and gratified his clients. What they do with the building after occupancy, he says, doesn't concern him. "The form of the building and the materials we used fit with the site and the style of the main house," he says. "The character of the area is not a bunch of small buildings, but one or two that sit alone on the landscape."
"the clients weren't willing to eliminate windows, so we had to come up with something different." — Catherine B. Scott

brace yourself

On an almost daily basis, plan checkers at the Boise, Idaho, City Building Department red-line residential plans to enforce a more restrictive interpretation of adequate wall bracing at building corners and around windows and doors. "Architects and their clients want to use more glass in their designs, but the rule often limits it," says department official Marlene Sothard, referring to the code section requiring a 4-foot panel of solid bracing every 25 feet and at corners. "The code is difficult for architects and builders to understand and apply. There are, in fact, lots of ways to satisfy it."

One local designer, Catherine B. Scott, has used everything from massive moment frames to simple hold-downs to carry necessary loads and stresses in her projects. For a 3,763-square-foot, two-story stucco home (above), Scott wanted to use as much wall area as possible to gain light from a southwest exposure. The rooms that would benefit were a sunroom, a dining room, and a family room. "The clients weren't willing to eliminate windows [to meet the basic code]," she says, "so we had to come up with something different."

With her structural engineer, Scott selected one wall to carry the load and catch the lateral stresses lost at the corner returns, some of which measured just a foot across. Instead of piers under that wall (for a crawl-space foundation), she designed a full stem wall along its entire length; on both sides of the framed wall (from plate to plate), she specified 1/4-inch plywood sheathing. Anchor bolts hold the sill plates to the stem wall where two door openings and a Murphy bed frame intrude on the studs. "This is a good hybrid alternative to a moment frame or to just hold-downs," Scott says.
Stop me if you’ve heard this one: The local historical society requires new homes of historic ilk to match the massing and scale in every detail to houses built hundreds of years before, but the building code demands modern health and safety provisions. For Peter Zimmerman Architects, in Berwyn, Pa., a firm that specializes in historic replication and restoration, those potentially conflicting commands came to a head during the construction of a Federal-style house in Nantucket, Mass.

The big bugaboo was egress for two bedrooms located in the third-level attic space. Code required at least one point of emergency egress from every bedroom and specified a minimum free opening of 5.7 square feet. That effectively ruled out historically correct double-hung dormer windows, which would be too small to meet code.

Project architect Michael Pentz worked with his Marvin Windows rep to solve the problem. Selecting from the company’s standard specs, Pentz found a standard casement window that met the size requirements and the free-opening code requirements. (The window also opens without special tools or cranks, another edict.) Because Marvin makes each unit to order, Pentz was able to specify true-divided-light casements with a historically correct, six-over-six pattern and mullion profile (below, left). “Even though they’re casements, they look like double-hungs from the exterior,” he says.

In similar circumstances for another project, the firm employed tilt-sash double-hungs to meet egress requirements (below, right). Though the design is chiefly intended to ease cleaning chores, tilting the window’s two sashes inward also creates an opening that is wide enough to meet egress requirements. Both ideas have gained the approval of various historical commissions the firm encounters in its work.
“people understand the implications of their built world more than we give them credit for.” — André Fontaine, AIA

hanging handrail

Of all the code provisions, those governing stairs and balustrades are arguably the most stringent. Anything short of a solid wall from the handrail to the treads, it seems, gets scrutinized.

For architect André Fontaine, AIA, in Glenelg, Md., such restrictions sometimes call for bending the code as far as it will go. A recent remodeling job involved reconfiguring an existing staircase leading down into a basement office. The challenge was to keep the staircase as minimal as possible, to match the design of the office.

Fontaine took a hard look at local code and discovered that railings are not needed for rises up to 30 inches. By applying that ruling to his stairway, he was able to leave the bottom three-plus steps railing free. The eight steps at the top of the staircase are protected by a wall from the floor above, and thus do not require balusters. That left only a small section in the middle of the staircase that required railings (see illustration).

“There’s actually about 12 inches of horizontal run that is in violation,” Fontaine says, “but even just a couple of balusters [to fill that space at a local code minimum of 6 inches apart] would have compromised the design.” To gain occupancy, the owners wrote a letter verifying that they knew of the violation and were waiving the responsibility of the inspector to red-tag it.

Without balusters, Fontaine had some fun with the stair’s handrail. He continued the railings from the main-floor hallway down below the floor and connected them to a suspended handrail. That created an upside-down balustrade that extends the entire run of the staircase.

While Fontaine doesn’t make a habit of designing against code, he does think people are more careful and aware of their surroundings than the building code assumes. “I consider the clients’ lifestyle and the severity of the design relative to their safety,” he says, noting that the couple who own this particular house do not have children. And while he’d never leave out a smoke detector, he says, “I believe people understand the implications of their built world more than we give them credit for.”

Rich Binsacca is a freelance writer in Boise, Idaho. Rick Vitullo, AIA, is founder and principal of Oak Leaf Studio Architects, Crownsville, Md.
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tower power

Designer Richard Holbrook describes his new Levity Collection of office furnishings as “the next best thing to a wearable computer.” Made for Herman Miller Inc., in Zeeland, Mich., the suite of freestanding furniture makes work comfortable for users of all sizes, shapes, and physical abilities.

Shown here is the Interactive Tower, a height-adjustable desk that accommodates a variety of working positions, from standing to sitting on the floor. A sliding keyboard surface enables users to choose their distance from the monitor; fold-down surfaces on either side supply further work space. Document stands flank the monitor. The entire unit is mounted on casters. Other products in the line include a wheeled cart that stores large documents or drawings, and a mobile, height-adjustable table.

Each of the items in the Levity Collection can be used alone or with other Herman Miller products. The Interactive Tower retails for $5,034. For additional information, contact Herman Miller at 616.654.8739.

round tables

In celebration of its 60th anniversary, Knoll, of East Greenville, Pa., has introduced the Maya Lin Collection, subtitled “the earth is (not) flat.” Lin, a nationally known artist and designer, says the furniture was inspired by her “love of the land.” Rounded shapes and playful colors distinguish the collection; the low, elliptical cement tables and seats shown above—dubbed Stones—come in four shades and measure between 10 and 15 inches high. Other pieces in the line include meeting and dining tables, chairs, and a chaise longue. The Stones are at home in both residential and office settings and can be used indoors and outdoors; prices start at $315 apiece. Optional cushions are available in a variety of fabrics. For more information, contact Knoll at 1.800.445.5045.

screen play

Both functional and decorative, panels divide work spaces and jazz up an office’s appearance. Lincoln, R.I.-based Zero U.S. Corp.’s new line of modular panels is manufactured in Alessandria, Italy, of flame-resistant steel with a special finish that is sprayed and then baked on. The straight and curved panels can be combined in an array of configurations. They are available in four models and six dimensions, ranging from 19 to 78 inches high. The micro-perforated steel Tribeca panel pictured here has a tubular frame and is available in an aluminum finish. Individual panels range in price from $70 to $250. For additional information, contact Zero U.S. Corp. at 401.724.4470. —deena shehata
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countdown to 2000

how to prepare your firm for Y2K.

by kendall holmes

By now, no doubt, you've heard of the Y2K bug, a computer glitch that could cause many computers to recognize the year 2000 as the year 1900. And you're probably hoping that, as a residential architect, you'll be relatively immune to Y2K's sting.

You may be right—providing you plan ahead and get a bit lucky.

By planning ahead, you can ensure that your computers and software won't quit on you come next January. You can minimize your chances of being slapped with a lawsuit by homeowners annoyed that products you specified failed because of Y2K. And you can make sure that materials you're specifying for future jobs—particularly materials from foreign sources—will be readily available early next year.

As for the luck you may need, while you could always revert to the drafting table to finish a job, no one really knows how other cogs within the construction industry—contractors, building-materials suppliers, and the shipping industry—will fare. Also, some economists warn that the public's fear of the Y2K bug may itself dampen the economy, whether or not those fears prove to be justified.

"I'm not one of those people who get panicky about year 2000 problems," says Timothy Toomey, AIA, an architect and lawyer. Toomey is chief administrative officer and in-house counsel for Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott, a large Boston architecture firm. As such, he's in charge of the firm's Y2K planning efforts. "If you take reasonable steps to protect yourself, and use common sense, you shouldn't have too many problems. Of course, ask me on January 2 next year and I may have an entirely different answer."

continued on page 98
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Working Drawings 3D Renderings Material-Take-Offs
What are the issues that may confront residential architects? And what steps should you take to protect yourself? Let’s start close to home, in your office.

**hardware**
First, you’ll need to make sure your computers are Y2K-ready, since software relies on hardware to supply a correct date and time.

Apple promises that all Macintosh computers manufactured since 1984 will behave properly once the new century begins. On the PC side, it’s more of a mixed bag. In general, experts say most Pentium-class and higher PCs should behave okay, while older computers may have problems.

For a more definitive answer, you might want to have a technician check your machines. Or, if you do your own detective work, many computer magazines run stories on how to diagnose a computer. The January 1999 issue of *Windows Magazine* offers a particularly clear explanation.

**software**
Once you've made sure your computers are okay, check your software. If you do your design and drafting work on a computer, industry leader Autodesk says all versions of AutoCAD Release 12 and later are fully Y2K-compliant, as are the company’s plug-in add-ons for the program. Over at rival Graphisoft, versions 5.0 and newer of ArchiCAD also are Y2K-ready. Neither company, though, offers any assurances about older releases of these popular programs. Nor does either plan to test older releases.

What about accounting software? Industry leader Intuit says this year’s versions of its popular Quicken and QuickBooks programs are Y2K-ready. But its tests show some products released as late as 1998 could misbehave. And as for even older versions, Intuit has no plans to test for Y2K compliance. You'll encounter a similar story if you use competitor Peachtree’s products.

At Microsoft, versions of Word, Access, Project, and Excel released as recently as a year ago could falter without a free patch, available through the company’s Web site.

**product availability**
Will the products you normally specify be readily available early next year? It will pay to check carefully as you design jobs that will go into production early in 2000.

A U.S. Senate study released in March warned of a “high probability” of economic disruptions in Latin America, Africa, and Asia—ominous news for anyone needing reassurances about the availability of building materials, which in today’s global economy are as likely to come from Malaysia as from Michigan.

Equally troubling, that same Senate study warned that because the maritime industry is running behind in its Y2K preparations, shipments of goods by sea could be disrupted—meaning that even if the foreign products you need get produced, they may arrive late.

**global issues**
There’s little work for a residential architect when builders aren’t building or consumers aren’t buying homes.

Even if the public’s unease about the Y2K bug doesn’t hamper the economy next year, the construction companies with which you work may be facing their own Y2K troubles.

Indeed, in a recent study prepared for the federal government, a leading worldwide consultant on the Y2K bug warns that there’s going to be problems with equipment where neither the architect nor the homeowner ever stops to think that there might be a faulty computer chip inside.

To evaluate your products’ readiness, get on the phone with manufacturers—or get on the Web (see “resources,” page 100).
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These Web sites can help you determine the readiness of your software:

**QuickBooks**
www.intuit.com

**Quicken**
www.intuit.com

**Peachtree**
www.peachtree.com

**Autodesk**
www.autodesk.com

**Graphisoft**
www.graphisoft.com

**Microsoft**
www.microsoft.com

**Windows Magazine**
www.winmag.com/library/1999/0101/fea0061.htm

This site contains a helpful story on the Y2K bug; the article includes a self-diagnostic test for your computers.

The following sites are devoted to Y2K issues:

**CNET**
www.cnet.com

**GartnerGroup**
www.gartnerweb.com

think the Y2K bug is overblown as far as residential architects are concerned.”

Kendall Holmes is a freelance writer in Silver Spring, Md.
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not too many years ago, basements were deemed fit for mechanical equipment, wood shops, and little else. Anything stored down there bred mold and mildew. Damp-proofing was rudimentary at best—usually just a coat of tar swabbed on foundation walls.

Today, we demand better. In many markets, real estate costs have made even basement space too dear to leave unfinished. Belmont, Mass., architect Andrew Weaver says, “Now, people want to use every square inch of their homes.”

Delivering a finished basement that stays dry begins with proper siting, grading, foundation drainage, and backfill. But improved basement waterproofing systems offer an extra measure of security in areas with problematic siting or soil conditions. Given the difficulty of repairing a problem foundation, waterproofing systems are attractive for just about any project.

And when the water stays out, everyone benefits. Architects can assure clients subgrade rooms will stay dry and comfortable. Homeowners don’t have to worry about their carpets mildewing or about breathing mold spores when they head downstairs. If those aren’t reasons enough to look closer at waterproofing, your local code enforcement officer may give you another incentive.

While CABO requires damp-proofing for two-family and single-family foundation walls that enclose habitable or storage space, many local jurisdictions mandate full-fledged waterproofing.

material differences

The enemy of a dry basement is moisture in the surrounding soil or, more specifically, the hydrostatic pressure that drives moisture from saturated backfill through foundation walls. To keep basements dry, manufacturers offer an array of coatings, membranes, and foundation boards. All work by repelling water from foundation walls and diverting it into footing drainage systems.

“Water will converge to backfill no matter where you live,” says Remington, Va., foundation contractor Dennis McNally. The arid Southwest, with less than 10 inches of annual rainfall, has the most favorable conditions. Most other areas of the country, however, have relatively moist soil fed by aquifers located near the surface. Those regions demand thorough basement waterproofing.

The first line of defense, and the only effort necessary in the Southwest, is a coating brushed, rolled, troweled, or sprayed onto the exterior of the foundation wall.

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Circle no. 233
combined with other coatings or products for true waterproofing. As a single-coat solution for sites with high water-table conditions, Weaver specs Thoroseal, a cement-based coating. The product’s acrylic admixture bonds the cement tightly to foundation walls. As a result, manufacturer Harris Specialty Chemicals says, it holds back hydrostatic pressure of 200 psi.

Some cement-based coatings can be applied to the inside of the wall, but they’re best for patching leaks during renovation. Architects don’t rely on interior waterproofing for new construction. “If you do it right outside, you shouldn’t have to do it inside,” says Greensburg, Pa., architect Jack Sillaman.

One benefit of cement-based coatings is that they mix easily and clean up with water. But they can crack and admit moisture if foundation walls settle. That’s why Bethesda, Md., architect Jeff Rubin prefers elastomeric coatings. These resilient, asphalt-polyvinyl compounds stretch to bridge cracks. If walls settle and move, they move, too, maintaining the integrity of the coating.

Watertight membranes offer another layer of protection. These sheets or rolls of high-density polyethylene or rubberized asphalt are easier to apply than coatings and, say some architects, are better at stopping water. Unlike coatings, they can be used as vapor barriers under floors. On walls, they can be used alone or in combination with a coating. Sillaman favors the layered approach. “If the coating cracks, the membrane takes up the movement of the wall.” But he doesn’t stop there. “You also need foundation board to keep the backfill from puncturing the membrane,” he says.

on board
Foundation board is the final waterproofing layer applied to a subgrade wall. Made of fiberglass or polypropylene topped with a filter material, the boards come in 4-by-4-foot and 4-by-8-foot widths and in thicknesses from ⅛ inch to 2¼ inches. The filter material wicks water from the soil; grooves beneath the filter channel it safely into foundation drainage. “Definitely use foundation board where there’s a lot of water, like a spring or something,” says Sillaman.

Given their composition, foundation boards also help insulate walls, delivering typical R-values of 3.1 to 10. A few plastic waterproofing panels are designed for interior application to hide ugly, crumbling walls and direct leaks into drainage. However, as with interior coatings, most architects steer away from interior applications. “It’s the wrong place to stop water,” says Pittsburgh architect Charles DeLisio.

To avoid the trouble of mixing and matching components, several manufacturers offer complete basement waterproofing systems. These systems feature:

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**What’s your spec?**

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<td>Aqua-Lock Waterproofing Materials</td>
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Intricate a variety of products designed to work with each other. Typical systems include drainage devices, coatings, repair compounds, and membranes. A few also offer foundation boards. Sillaman often specs Koch Materials Co.’s Tuff-N-Dri Exterior Foundation Waterproofing System. It consists of a sprayed-on elastomeric coating and fiberglass foundation boards. Sillaman especially likes the five-year warranty and the ease of ordering. “It’s nice having one system,” he says.

downsides

Unfortunately, basement waterproofing is only as good as the installer applying the material. This is especially true of hand-applied coatings. “Whenever there’s that human element, there’s a potential for problems,” says Rubin. Sillaman agrees. “I waterproofed my house,” he says, “and even though I troweled on the mastic 1/8 inch thick, you could still see pinholes in it.” To guard against human error, some manufacturers allow only specially trained contractors to apply their products.

If you’re new to waterproofing, the product choices can be daunting. Selecting a basement waterproofing system certainly isn’t as easy as picking out a sink. As an alternative to trial and error, seek recommendations from the folks in the trenches. Foundation contractors are as familiar with local soil conditions as anyone, and often know what system will work best in a given situation. “I learned about waterproofing products by talking to the old guys who have been doing it for years,” says DeLisio.

go with the flow

No waterproofing material is a substitute for adequate drainage. Given enough time, saturated backfill will push water through almost any moisture protection. The trick is to provide a surface conducive to drainage rather than absorption, and subsurface conditions that make the path of least resistance into a footing drain rather than through the basement wall. Still, waterproofing is a must in areas with wet soil and provides a reassuring backup in normal conditions. Don’t just apply waterproofing and hope for the best, though. Effective waterproofing is site-specific. Assess soil conditions during excavation and waterproof accordingly. “Once water gets into a basement, it’s a lost cause,” says McNally. That needn’t happen to you.

Jill Tunick is a freelance writer in Arlington, Va.
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In traditional architecture, fixed walls with doorways are used to divide spaces into smaller units. Usually, a hinged door permits passage between the rooms. In more open, modern plans, however, or in large spaces that occasionally will be divided into two, a conventional door won’t work. No one wants to have to swing a 10-foot-wide door to obtain privacy.

Fortunately, well-designed sliding doors can offer a viable, attractive alternative, as Cecil, Pierce and Associates, Architects, has found. In two projects that required both the separation and occasional union of spaces, the New York City-based firm used large sliding doors to blur the line between door and wall.

In the first project, a postwar-building apartment, the clients wanted their living room and library to function separately or as one room as desired. The door dividing the spaces had to be detailed to meet both needs, and for an economical price.

The architect’s solution was a large pocket door composed of a series of four standard, solid-core, birch-veneer doors measuring 8 feet by 2 feet by 1½ inches. Cecil, Pierce biscuit-joined the doors together and covered the joints with ¼-by-1½-inch lattice strips. The resulting 8-by-8-foot unit hangs from a track recessed into the door head, with an edge

continued on page 112
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pull as the only visible hardware. When closed, the door looks like a nicely detailed paneled wall, appropriate in tone for both the library and the living room.

In another project, the architect renovated a 2,000-square-foot Soho loft in an industrial-type building. The client wanted to be able to divide and secure different areas of the apartment at different times of day.

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Rick Vitullo, AIA, is founder and principal of Oak Leaf Studio Architects, Crownsville, Md.

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<th>Page</th>
<th>Circle</th>
<th>Phone No.</th>
<th>Fax</th>
<th>Web Site/e-mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>-</td>
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</tr>
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Circle No. 426
Five miles south of the Third Beach trailhead in Washington state’s Olympic National Park lies Strawberry Point. It’s a rock—maybe 200 feet tall—that’s connected to the shore by a sandbar. The point itself is splitting apart, leaving a 100-foot-high by 5-foot-wide crack running through it from end to end. This small, beautiful mountain reminds me of the titanic forces of geology, weather, and life that shape this world.

But it’s not just the rock and the surrounding beaches that make this my favorite place. It’s the whole choreography of getting there that draws my family and me to Strawberry Point.

The walk begins in an ancient forest where each tree grows from the decaying trunk of its ancestor. The quiet solemnity here always makes us whisper when we speak. In the distance we can hear the sound of the crashing surf, and before long we break out to the ocean.

When we walk along the beach, our footprints in the sand are erased almost as quickly as we lay them down. I wonder how many thousands of human feet (shod and unshod) have tread here. Farther on, we test our strength on the headlands, where we can observe the forces of weather and life eroding the edge of the continent. The combination of physical exertion, powerful visuals, and the acoustics of the surf makes the two hours it takes to get to Strawberry Point pass quickly.

Once we’ve arrived, we can sit on the sand and share the sensations of all those who came before and loved this spot. By our physically intimate interaction with the place, we are transported, temporarily and emotionally. There are lessons here for architects—or for anyone who choreographs movement into or through our landscapes.