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the lowdown

... on the
downturn

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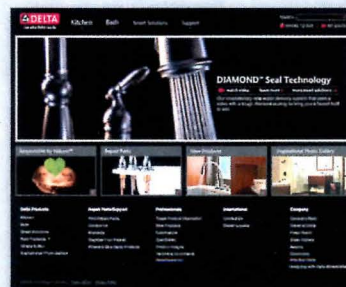
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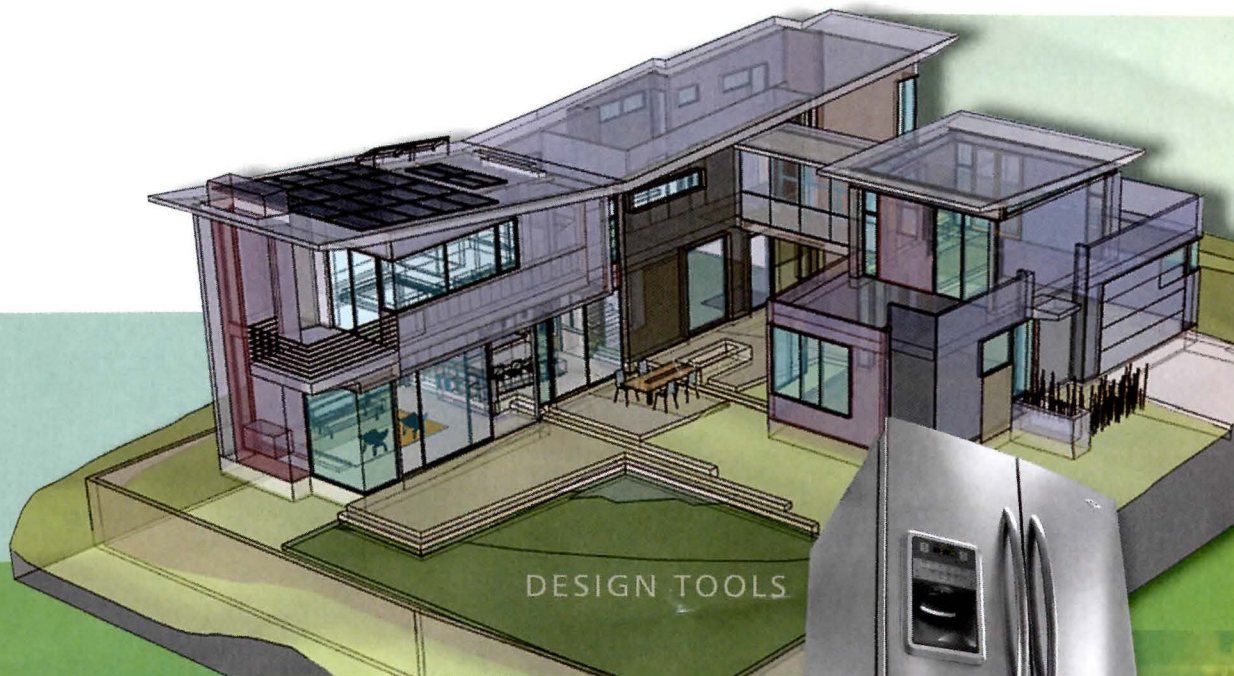
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contents



page 35

In Seattle, Mithun is staying strong through the downturn with an unwavering dedication to density. Photo: Doug J. Scott, www.dougscott.com. Cover photo: DavidSharpe.com.

from the editor... page 11

home front... page 12

How will the housing bust reshape the American house as we know it? We asked visionaries, architects, and educators to gaze into the near future of residential design.

green piece... page 15

Chris Krager of KRDB sells his SOL in Austin, Texas.

green pieces... page 16

Smarter choices for the future.

k + b studio... page 18

Mark English's redo of a Sausalito, Calif., retreat overlooking San Francisco Bay is so satisfying, the owners decided to anchor there permanently.



practice... page 25

Now more than ever, value is in the eye of the beholder. But if that beholder is a bank appraiser dedicated to the gospel of comps, architects' unique work can suffer from serious undervaluation. Here's a look at how high-design architects tip the scales back in their favor.



cover story... page 35

word on the street

Everyone knows times are tough in the housing industry. Just how tough and for whom? We talked with architects across the country, identifying some hopeful signs of strength and some key survival tips amid the deepening unease.

by Shelley D. Hutchins, Meghan Drueding, Nigel F. Maynard, and Marla Misek Clark

shelter lab... page 47

Subdivide and conquer is the new mantra for a group of affordable housing entrepreneurs in Austin, Texas.

doctor spec... page 49

Are your wall systems as stalwart as they should be?

new material... page 52

All the new that's fit to print.

workspace... page 56

Instead of moving, Boora Architects decided to green in place.

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01 MEGA-ARBEL

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from the editor

the new, new reality

more with less is here to stay.

by s. claire conroy

I am old enough to remember a few economic downturns. I graduated from college in June 1982, a date right smack in the middle of the worst recession since the Great Depression. I retreated to my parents' dark, musty basement while I hunted for a job. With no skills, no experience, and facing 10 percent unemployment nationwide, my search took about a year. Ultimately, it resulted in a lousy, lowly position with a tiny public relations firm in Washington, D.C., for \$10,000 a year and no benefits.

I thought I was wasting my time in that PR job but, as it turned out, I picked up a few inside-Washington skills that prepared me for my next leap. When the clouds lifted in 1983, I landed a coveted job as an editorial assistant at a city magazine here in D.C. My salary skyrocketed to \$12,000 a year and included subsidized health benefits. I was on my way.

I moved up the ranks at the magazine until another recession hit in early 1991 and the magazine folded, putting me and my colleagues out of work. It also put nearly a third of the magazines across the country out of

business too. Next thing I knew, I was competing with all of those experienced and talented journalists for the same, very scarce jobs.

At this point my personal overhead was higher; I had a life above ground in a sunny rental apartment and a car loan to pay. Petrified of poverty and boomer-ang-ing back to my parents' basement, I lived frugally and took on as much freelance work as I could find. Eventually, I lucked into a temporary gig filling in for an editor on maternity leave at *Architecture* magazine. I beat out one of my former colleagues for the job.

Within a couple of months, I saw an ad in the paper for a job with my current employer, Hanley Wood. The company was looking for a managing editor to handle five startup magazines. That was an unheard-of number to juggle in my experience at the time. But it was the new reality of doing more with less. I got the job, beating out the same former colleague I'd trumped for the *Architecture* gig. (But I handed off my position at *Architecture* to her for the remainder of its duration.)

Almost 18 years later, I remember those "more with less" times vividly. And here they are again. In fact, more



Mark Robert Halper

with *far* less is the mantra these days, as we race to feed seemingly insatiable conduits of information in this hyper-technological age.

That's part of what makes this recession so much scarier than the previous ones. How we work and with whom are changing at lightspeed. So much of what we felt we knew is unknown to us now. This time, we are subsumed in the fearing of fear itself. When will things get better? Or will they—heaven forbid—get worse? This may not be an official financial depression yet, but it feels like a far-reaching emotional one. And for creative professionals, who need a certain lightness of heart to tap into the deepest veins

of inspiration, this state is downright debilitating.

My experience with recessions tells me we'll eventually see better times. And the expansiveness that buoys the creative spirit will return. But my intuition also tells me we'd better get used to doing more with less than we ever thought possible. It is the new, new reality. Some relief will come, but not until we crack the code of this workplace revolution. ... Leaner and smarter staffs; more productive and entrepreneurial collaborations with other people and other companies. We'll fly even higher—no safety net to break the fall. *ra*

Comments? E-mail cconroy@hanleywood.com.

home front

news from the leading edge of residential design.

après le downturn

We asked visionary architects, designers, and cultural philosophers to predict how the downturn may transform housing. Here's what they told us:

"Portions of the housing stock will need changes just to respond to the behavioral patterns of the population over the next three to five years. People will say, 'I'm not going to commute an hour anymore.' Infill, multifamily, and existing-home renovations will be the early leaders in the recovery."—R. Nicholas Loope, FAIA, HL Design Build, Phoenix

"We should see a return to the careful and innovative designing of spaces scaled to life in a time of diminished prosperity, to houses that perform environmentally, and to the careful making of houses to the highest standards, since good design, superior fabrication, and intelligent innovation in small-scaled things are the marks of all good design and not simply add-ons at a late stage of customization."—Barry Bergdoll, The Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design, The Museum of Modern Art, New York City

"Location-efficient mortgages should be the norm and will rise in importance—giving homeowners a break for choosing a place where they can do without a car. The crises ahead, and the need to retool living environments, should be understood through a hopeful lens—a chance to build homes that encourage us to reconnect to our landscapes and communities, and to each other."—Tim Beatley, Teresa Heinz Professor of Sustainable Communities, University of Virginia School of Architecture, Charlottesville, Va.

"In most cases, the commercial world cannot deliver housing of the necessary quality within the demands of the standard financial calculation. The difference between good and bad architecture is often 5 percent—a 5 percent that the free market can't provide. We should find a way around this hurdle, for a country can't be great and compromised at an architectural level."—Alain de Botton, architectural critic and writer, London

"This is the time to mobilize the bright people at universities and think tanks to

George E. Brown

find a better way to affect land use—encourage clustered housing, infill, links to transportation lines. If we began to think about how things are built in a collective way, it could have a significant impact not only on how America looks but in the kind of energy we use.”—Barton Myers, FAIA, Barton Myers Associates, Los Angeles

“This market movement will encourage the kind of innovation that’s desperately needed in energy production, resulting in houses that will not be off the grid but feeding it. Like the Japanese did with automobiles in the 1970s, architects who can get better-designed, more-efficient houses to market quickly are likely to do very well.”—Sarah Susanka, FAIA, Susanka Studios, Raleigh, N.C.

“My experience with recoveries from recession is that in most cases, the housing market returns to its old ways. Those of us who are involved in the factory-built housing market hope that inroads will be made, but this can only happen if there is the opportunity to

“I see our new domestic environment becoming more casual, technological, aesthetic, democratic, and engaging. Not house as a machine, but house as a nucleus of the digital age—a marriage of the artificial and nature, where beauty and well-being are priorities.”

—Karim Rashid, Karim Rashid Inc., New York City



RomanLeo

develop large communities with enough quantity to drive the costs down.”—Ray Kappe, FAIA, Kappe Architects/Planners, Pacific Palisades, Calif.

“Real estate in the center [of Phoenix] is holding its value. It’s a simple message that exurbia is increasingly tenuous. We’ve got to build houses as well as we can in terms of green technology, but also put them in the right places and connect them to transit options and bike lanes.”—Nancy Levinson, director, Phoenix Urban Research Laboratory, Arizona State University, Phoenix

“I hope the current housing conditions will liberate people from ‘resale value’ thinking. Quality of life is measured in many more years and much greater pleasure than in how to sell one’s home

as quickly as possible to the highest bidder. While reduced leverage may make for smaller and fewer projects, it may also mean that those projects are more sincerely considered and more deeply appreciated.”—Lynnette Widder, AIA, Aardvarchitecture, New York City, and head, Department of Architecture, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, R.I.

“Those who already have houses and had been thinking of purchasing a larger house might opt for renovating what they have. I can see an escalation in interior work rather than new work from the ground up. I think there will always be a market for McMansions, but the numbers will likely decline as people become more focused on affordability and environmental responsibility.”—Matilda McQuaid, deputy curatorial director, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York City

“What the bust will mean now, as it did in the 1970s and early ’90s, is that architects can show we’re useful in marshalling limited resources in construction, and in mitigating the heating and cooling costs created by fuel price increases. Architects who feel that value is the essential core of the service they offer will have more value to people than they had during the boom.”—Duo Dickinson, AIA, Duo Dickinson Architect, Madison, Conn.

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J. Ignaszewski

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—Kurt Creager, executive director, Stardust Center for Affordable Homes and the Family, Arizona State University, Phoenix

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green piece

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One trickle-down effect of the green revolution is the growing recognition that social and economic sustainability should be part of the picture. KRDB of Austin, Texas, aims to cover those bases at SOL (Solutions Oriented Living), a mixed-income community on the city's east side. The parameters are impressive: a 5.5-acre tract of 40 units on 38 lots within walking distance of schools and commerce. Most of the homes will produce as much energy as they use over the course of a year, and 16 units are reserved for families at 40 percent to 60 percent below the city's median household income. "The goal for this project was a broader and more holistic

definition of sustainability," says principal Chris Krager, AIA.

SOL is the design/build/develop firm's largest project to date, and Krager spent two years doing cost-benefit calculations and puzzling together a development model that has many moving parts. Local subsidies of \$1.4 million reduced the out-of-pocket costs of the \$8 million project, and KRDB traded some profits for security by preselling the 16 affordable units at a below-market price (\$150 per square foot) to the local Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corp. The group, which hopes to hold them in a 99-year land trust, will sell half of those units and manage the others as rentals.

The market-rate homes, constructed with SIPs, rely on passive and geothermal heating and cooling, solar arrays, and other measures to achieve net-zero energy use. Affordable units feature modular construction with 2x6 exterior wall framing and will include solar panels or solar-ready wiring, depending on whether additional grants come through. All the 1,000-square-foot to 1,800-square-foot homes are stylishly modern, with metal roofs and stucco, fiber cement, and wood exteriors.

KRDB broke ground on the houses last December and plans to finish up this summer. "We see this as a transportable model," Krager says. "We're looking around the country for another city that has the right set of circumstances and incentives to do our next SOL project."—cheryl weber



At SOL, market-rate and low-income dwellings are indistinguishable. Downzoning lot sizes allowed for public open space, and stormwater will be handled with a subgrade filtration pond—the first in Austin. Krager used EnergyGauge software to model the cost/benefit relationships of various building envelope, mechanical, and solar array systems.



Renderings and site plan: Courtesy KRDB



green pieces

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the low-down

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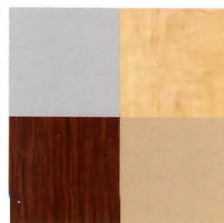
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k + b studio

kitchen: a place for everything

Mark English, AIA, renovated this Sausalito, Calif., house to serve as a weekend retreat. But he did such a great job designing for his clients' lifestyle that the couple now lives and works in the house full time. The small, yet sleek kitchen overlooking San Francisco Bay helped inspire the move. Designed for a "no-nonsense, CEO-type husband who does all of the cooking," the kitchen "is masculine in both materials and function," English says.

An eight-burner commercial-style range with a super-sized hood anchors the 18-foot-by-18-foot space. Two steel rails bolted to the wall behind the stove keep pans at hand, while a mirrored wall behind the stove "visually doubles the room's size and reflects views of the bay," English says. A custom stainless steel island sits opposite the range and between the main sink and refrigerator, so people can access either without getting in the chef's way.

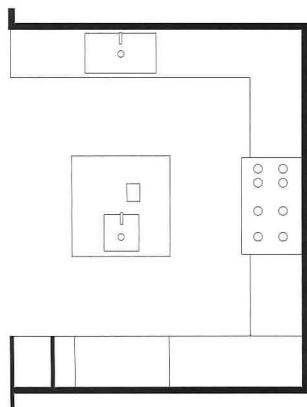
Knowing the island would be used as prep space, English designed it to accommodate a host of cooking accoutrements. Knives and utensils fill its shallow top drawers; vinegars, oils, and large pots occupy the deeper spaces below. Cabinets on the far side—within reach of the main sink—conceal trash and recycling bins.

The oversized stainless fridge is surrounded by a floor-to-ceiling wall of storage, thereby granting the husband's wish for everything to have a place. English

actually had his clients "count every can of food and pot in their current kitchen" to approximate the amount and type of cabinets that would be needed. Pantry foodstuffs, a built-in coffee maker, an appliance garage, and even a stepladder for reaching upper shelves are contained within the cabinetry wall.

Simple materials give the compact space a straightforward, low-maintenance look. MDF doors and drawer fronts are finished with pre-catalyzed, integrated cream-colored lacquer. Elongated steel hardware matches appliance detailing. And a dropped ceiling outfitted with compact fluorescent lighting distinguishes the airy alcove from its adjacent great room.

project continued on page 20



Architect Mark English designed the island to look and function as "a single piece of equipment." Its square shape matches the room configuration and maximizes work-space.



English feared the mirrored wall would collect water splashes if continued behind the sink. So he sandblasted it and tucked it under a long stainless steel shelf. It reflects light back onto the black granite and contributes a feeling of greater depth to the small space.



Photos: Claudio Santini

architect: Mark English Architects,
San Francisco

general contractor: Landmark Builders,
Novato, Calif.

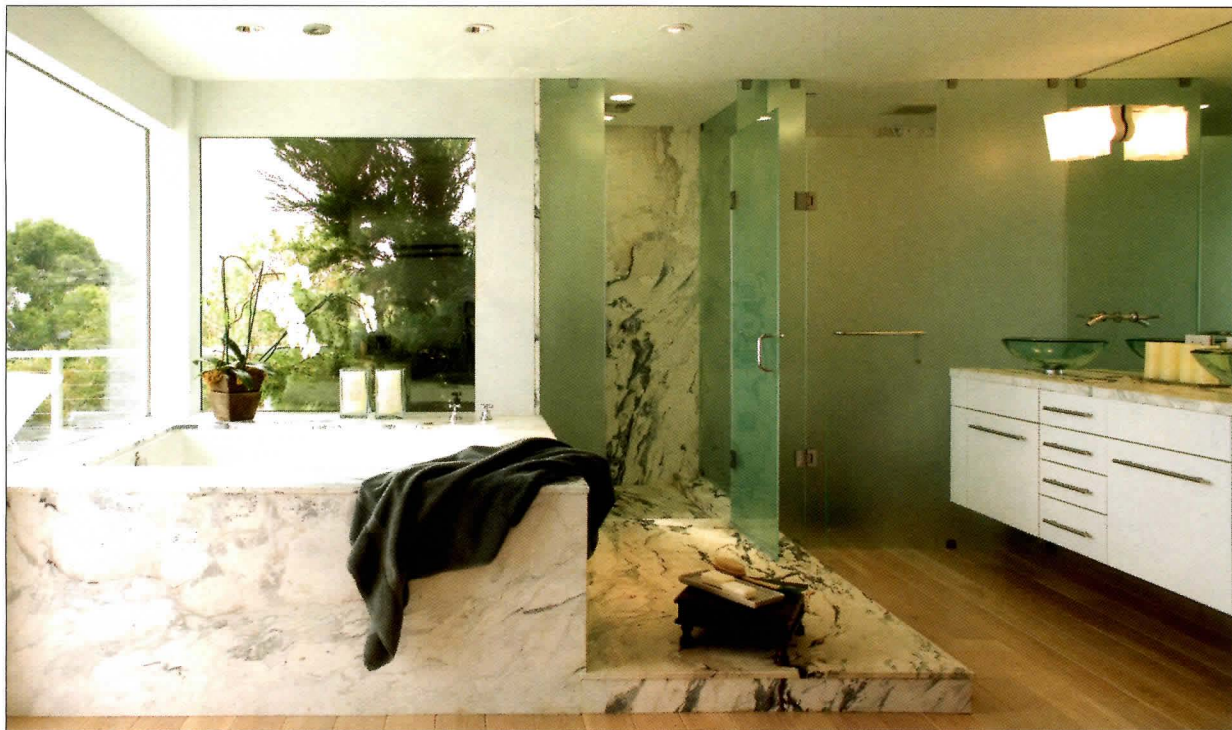
cabinetmaker: Mueller Nicholls,
Oakland, Calif.

glass backsplash fabricator:
Bendheim West, Oakland

resources: bathroom fittings and fixtures:
Kohler Co.; hardware: Doug Mockett &
Co.; kitchen fittings: Blanco America;
refrigerator: Thermador; stove and hood:
Viking Range Corp.

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bath: bay watch



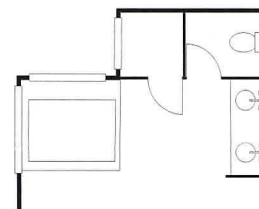
Photos: Claudio Santini

In the bath, window openings mimic tub dimensions, and the ceiling-mounted tub filler aligns with recessed light fixtures. Such symmetry has a soothing effect, says architect Mark English.

Unlike the kitchen, the master bath upstairs is anything but subdued. Here, the clients wanted a luxurious retreat from which they could savor the spectacular views of Alcatraz, Angel Island, and other prime San Francisco Bay locales. The room's grand gesture is a marble-encased, nearly 2-foot-deep corner bathtub with sybaritic settings. "They see bathing as a heightened function," English says of his clients, "so we raised the tub to give it sacred prominence." A ceiling-mounted tub filler and a marble plinth enhance the tub's ceremonial feel.

The same marble tops the cantilevered double vanity on which twin glass vessel sinks perch. "I use a floating vanity pretty often, because I like seeing the floor continue," he explains. White lacquered custom cabinets provide a simple foil to the heavily veined marble above and the pillowed-oak floors below. In the shower, a 2-inch step-down in the marble platform prevents water from spilling over.

Because the bathroom backs up to the garage, natural light is restricted on two sides. That limitation—plus the area's notoriously foggy mornings—made bright, reflective surfaces a must. A mirrored wall above the vanity helps reflect views and daylight into the space. And sandblasted glass enclosures for the shower and adjacent toilet give the owners privacy where they need it without cutting off light.—*shelley d. hutchins*



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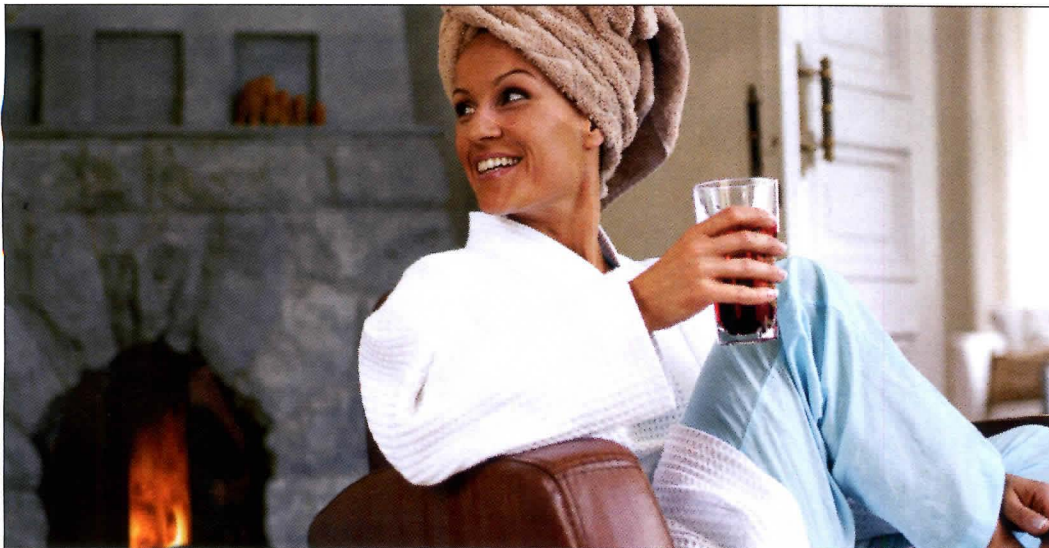
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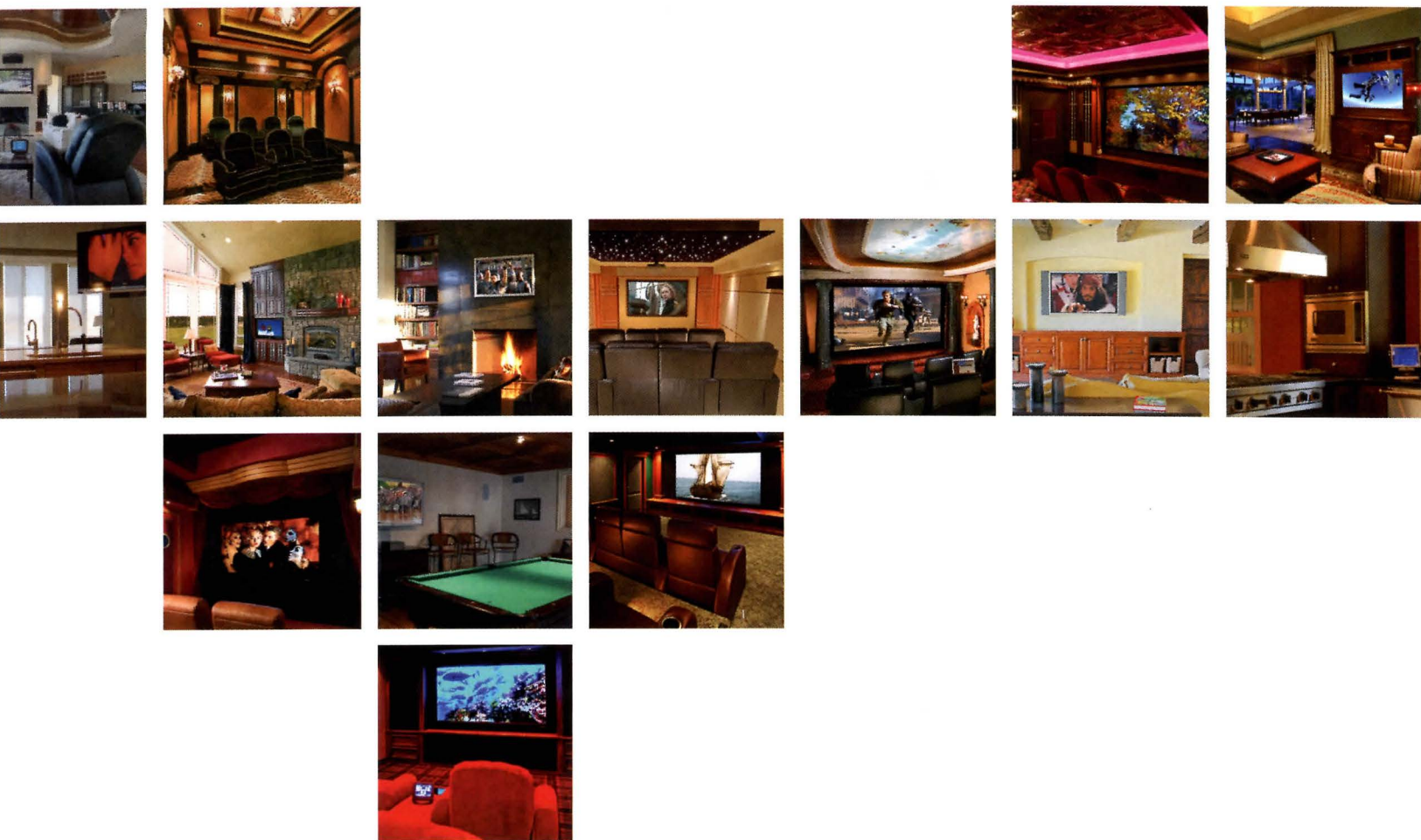
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an honest appraisal

determining the bank value of an architect-designed house in a skittish economy.

by cheryl weber

From the bailout of failed investment banks to the deflating real estate market, the question of how to calculate value is on a lot of people's minds these days. During the joyride, houses of every ilk were routinely overpriced as appraisals became unmoored from any objective standards. As the dust settles, architects and their clients are back to grappling with the pesky appraisal issues they encountered before the boom. That is, totting up the cost of land, construction, and design doesn't always produce a loan-to-value ratio that enables clients to turn their construction loans into mortgages. And in this traumatized lending climate, the process is even trickier.

What is a house worth? To set a price, appraisers call up recent sales of homes in a neighborhood, comparing such items as size, number of bedrooms, and the quality of kitchens and baths. That checklist approach makes sense in builder-designed communities where economies of scale resulted in overall similarities. But the "comp" method on which banks base their loan risk has little to do with the expressive, one-of-a-kind

residences that architects design.

The reality, sadly, is that the system is wired for the common denominator. Lenders care less about an award-winning design than they do about how quickly they can sell the house if the owner can't pay the mortgage. And while it's true that the free market

ultimately determines a house's worth, architects and their clients are finding that value judgments can't be left to chance. "You can't ask someone who deals with numbers every day to distinguish a better floor plan," says Eric Rawlings, AIA, principal of Rawlings Design in Decatur, Ga. "They don't know where to begin."

That's why some architects are taking appraisers under their wing. Erik Lerner, AIA, an architect and real estate broker in Beverly Hills, Calif., routinely points out the subtler attributes of the architect-designed homes he sells. An excerpt from a Web site he prepared to advertise a new home by

continued on page 26



Ken Orvidas

Predock Frane Architects reads: "The home's formal street elevation gives way to open, casual interior spaces, which follow the descending contours of the lushly landscaped site to a shaded glen at the rear. The design makes much of its connection between the inside and the outdoors, using an array of skylights and windows at the perimeter and an internal court to distribute daylight and

a really impressive design feat on a challenging site. On a more ordinary house you'll notice a difference in the quality of light and natural ventilation."

Anecdotal evidence suggests that more new homes are failing to appraise at a price the buyer wants to pay, Lerner says. "Banks are reluctant to make loans altogether, so the idea of a house appraising for a premium

"you can't ask someone who deals with numbers every day to distinguish a better floor plan. they don't know where to begin."

—eric rawlings, aia

provide natural ventilation throughout."

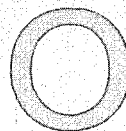
Those features are obvious to professional designers, but they're often overlooked by Realtors and real estate appraisers focused on granite countertops, cherry cabinets, and hardwood floors. Even if appraisers notice these qualities, they might not be able to articulate their benefits well enough to justify a higher price point. "My job of pointing out why the spatial qualities [of an architect-designed home] are superior to the builder house next door is easy," says Lerner, who works in the market's upper echelons. "Every room in this house has daylight on at least two sides, which is

they previously didn't understand is definitely a much harder sell now. Our market favors the buyer with a lot of cash, and that's true for the general market now as well."

a cut above

Of course, there are ways to get around the appraisal system. For the deep-pocketed clients of high-end firms like San Antonio-based LakelFlato Architects, bank loans have barely been an issue. Those who do finance their projects are usually building on remote ranch properties (and not comparing themselves to anyone) or in areas with historically high real estate values. When problems arise, the firm shows

show and tell



il prices, climate change, and the credit crisis all will fundamentally change the way in which cities are built, and the value of real estate," predicts John Brown, RAIC, an architecture professor at the University of Calgary in Alberta. He's also the founder of housebrand, a design/build/furnish firm that gives middle-class consumers an alternative to mainstream production homes, and a companion Web site called Slow Home (www.theslowhome.com).

Since embedding himself in the housing market by adding the Realtor hat 14 years ago, Brown has been talking to appraisers about such things as the difference that \$30,000 worth of windows makes, and why that should be reflected in the home's value. His firm, housebrand, builds or renovates about 40 dwellings a year in inner-city Calgary (ranging in construction cost from \$150,000 to \$3 million), and they're starting to resell for 10 percent to 50 percent higher than others on the block. In addition to their superior design, Brown chalks up the success to his relationship with a bank and the three appraisers whom he trusts to value the projects. "My role as Realtor and contractor and architect erases the perception—rampant but not true—of the flighty architect," he says. "Your work carries some weight if you can provide market data and tangibly [explain] why a house sold for \$50,000 more." It's akin, Brown adds, to changing a value determination based on a better lot, view, or street, and appraisers get that shift. But whether they feel comfortable putting their name on the line is a matter of time and experience.

"We're at the beginning of a pretty radical shift in the way the housing market works," he says, "and it's a huge opportunity for architects to get involved and not just complain."—c.w.

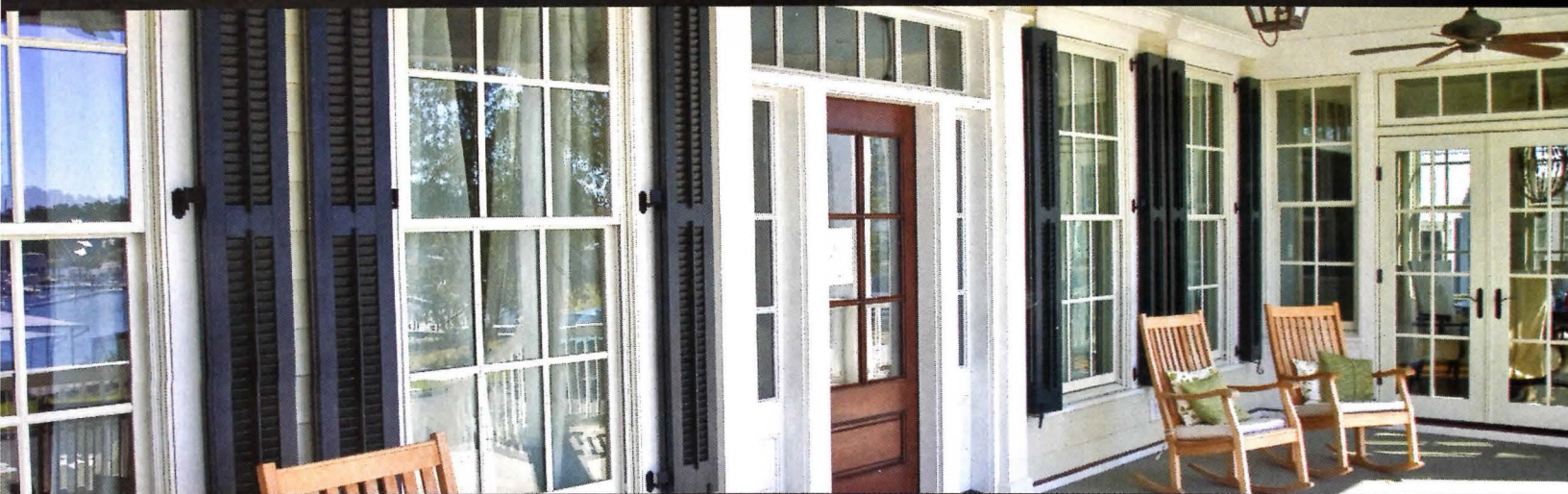
appraisers other homes they've designed in the city or suggests they call other architects to check the construction cost of similar projects. "The lender is looking at the creditworthiness of the owner more than comps," says partner Karla Greer, AIA. "They also realize that many areas are in transition and the project may create a market for more to come."

Working often in the tight-knit architectural community of Venice, Calif., near his office in Santa Monica, David Hertz, FAIA, LEED AP, also steers appraisers to other homes of similar caliber. But in this rarefied housing environment, real estate rules can be broken. On a spec house for a Hollywood director completed last

continued on page 28

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October, “we argued over comp value with the owner all through construction,” Hertz says. “He wanted to compromise, but we convinced him that if you go the distance with materials and make an architectural statement, you can reach way outside of averages for a buyer who’s not stuck in the fray of comps.” The owner was hoping for \$2 million to break even, Hertz says, and the house sold in seven days for \$3.24 million (more than \$1,600 per square foot) to one of the Pritzkers, of Pritzker Architecture Prize fame. “They would never have bought a house that was just run-of-the-mill,” he says.

Other times, appraisals do matter. When a recent European client wanted a minimalist house with open rooms and cabinetry rather than closets, Hertz explained that it wouldn’t appraise well without a closet in every bedroom and full baths. “People hate full baths because they take up space and the tubs are never used,” Hertz explains, “but we end up putting them in, because some appraiser 50 years ago said a bathtub makes it a full bath, or a closet makes it a full bedroom. We end up giving the bank sets of drawings that have closets, but the client can choose not to build them out.” Still, he allows, it’s not the ideal solution.

To ensure bank values align with construction costs, Michael Ryan, AIA, Loveladies, N.J., provides quantifiable market data

in the form of plans and materials costs when asked. He occasionally gets calls from appraisers seeking to validate the costs quoted by the homeowner. “A lot of times they’re looking to us to tell them how to value the house,” Ryan says. He’s noticed that while many appraisers simply drive up to the house, those who go inside quickly grasp the intangible merits like day-lighting and layout.

Like Ryan, Lerner runs construction data with appraisers when necessary. And making the case for existing homes often involves casting a wider geographic net. Coming up

banks, Lerner says. Most people recognize pedigree and the premium that goes with it. “They know who Schindler, Wright, and Gehry are but not necessarily the younger architects who are doing good work—a Warren Wagner, AIA; Jesse Bornstein, AIA; Lorcan O’Herlihy, AIA; or Studio Pali Fekete architects, for example.” In those cases, Lerner is quick to point out the use of innovative, yet practical materials such as rainscreens that protect the exterior, engineered wood floors that save natural resources, or the extra care the architect took to create sight lines.

“banks are reluctant to make loans altogether, so the idea of a house appraising for a premium they previously didn’t understand is definitely a much harder sell now. our market favors the buyer with a lot of cash, and that’s true for the general market now as well.”

—erik lerner, aia

with a number on a Neutra home, for example, might mean comparing 10 other homes by the architect outside the customary one-mile radius and adjusting for neighborhood to establish a price that better reflects the architecture. In some regards, iconic homes have become an easier sell to

Even though such research can be done on the fly, appraisers are supposed to inform clients if they don’t have experience with unusual properties or haven’t worked in a particular community. “Not every appraiser should take an assignment like this; they’ll

continued on page 30

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miss something and get it wrong," says Lawrence Netterville, executive vice president of the National Society of Real Estate Appraisers in St. Louis. He explains that valuing a unique property means drilling down to submarkets to see who's competing for it and what kinds of characteristics they're looking for, and then looking at comparables and adjusting for differences. He advises owners to check the appraiser's credentials. On the other hand, a house that costs more than \$100 per square foot more to build than its neighbors raises a red flag about the market's ability to absorb it. "The way we look at it is that banks are taking a defensive position: What if I can't move my money?" Netterville says. "They don't care how hip or cool it is from an ecological or other standpoint, if the design is so unique and nonconforming that it will narrow the field of buyers."

Appraiser Alan F. Simmons, SRPA, LEED AP, Colorado Springs, Colo., agrees that a property's uniqueness cuts both ways. "The estimate is based on market value, not on the one out of 20 homeowners who might appreciate something super-personalized the architect did," he says. "The further you get from the standard norm, the higher the chance that some of the costs won't translate into value." The average buyer, he adds, is still most influenced by kitchens and baths. However, Simmons

recognizes that "dealing with an unusual house is a two-way street. We would need to get plans or specs and interview the builder,

the life-cycle analysis and return on investment, but the pattern is still emerging. Five years from now we'll have more market

"people hate full baths because they take up space and the tubs are never used, but we end up putting them in, because some appraiser 50 years ago said a bathtub makes it a full bath, or a closet makes it a full bedroom."

—david hertz, faia, leed ap

architect, or cost estimator to find out what makes it different, and would figure in the architect's fee."

Green homes will soon be getting the credit they deserve, thanks to coursework Simmons recently developed for the Appraisal Institute in Chicago. An online seminar on how to value green residential properties debuted last November, and this year Simmons will take the show on the road. Energy efficiency, the most quantifiable component, is weighted the most heavily. So far, benefits such as better indoor air quality and the use of recycled materials don't directly translate to value in an appraiser's book. "The biggest factors are utility cost, water usage, durable materials, and low maintenance, which translate to functional utility," Simmons says. "We try to look at

evidence on the value of green homes."

award-winner or white elephant

The comp method is the easiest way to value a house, but it's not the only way. An alternative is to look at a house's components and consider their replacement value, like an insurance company does, suggests Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, a partner at Eck MacNeely Architects in Boston. In the old days, he half-jokingly offered his clients the option of giving him a percentage of the house's increased value in lieu of a design fee. "The truth is that if they'd taken me up on it 20 years ago, I'd be richer than I am now," he says. "Architects' houses are better built, sited, and detailed. And they generally hold up, as long as the style—and I hate that

word—is consistent with the tradition in New England in our area.”

These days, though, even a small deviation from the norm can be a sticking point. “Even in my genre, which is a mix [of modern and traditional], some banks are saying that they don’t feel it’s a house they could underwrite because it’s a little too different from the rest of the houses in the neighborhood,” Eck says. “I find that extraordinary.” A recent example is a post-and-beam house he designed with living spaces on the second floor to catch a better view of the swamp. The client is searching for a mortgage, and in this skittish economy, the bank

didn’t want to touch it.

Given the experience of the past five years, Eck is dubious that appraisals offer a reliable standard of worth. In perfect hindsight, he says, using the comp system alone to justify the worth of a house has been a wholesale failure. “If appraisers had been more honest and professional during the last five years, some of these increased values would have had more realism to them,” he says. As a case in point, Eck recently purchased a house for \$300,000 less than what he estimates it cost the owners to build four years ago. He put a good chunk of money down, and the house was appraised at slightly

more than the value of the mortgage. “The number didn’t reflect anything except safety to the bank,” Eck says. “If he’d asked what was put into it—construction cost, value of the land—it would have been much higher. Appraisers in this climate are reluctant to say a house is worth \$100,000 more than you paid for it. Either that, or they need to get with it and look at the value of houses in a hard sense, because now more than ever, people are looking for real value.”

But in a subjective world, the value of some one-off homes will always be in the eye of the beholder. Tom Kundig, FAIA, a principal at Olson Sundberg Kundig

Allen Architects, Seattle, tells the story of a client who spent \$1.1 million on her house and land. Shortly after completion, the property was judged to be worth about \$600,000 by an appraiser who viewed it as an ugly concrete bunker—a teardown. Six months later, though, a prospective client of Kundig’s walked through the house and offered her \$3.5 million in cash. “It’s a strange marketplace,” he says. “On one hand you have an appraiser who doesn’t know what he’s looking at, and on the other, it doesn’t matter how much it costs to people with means. It’s not a financial matter: They just want what they want.” *ra*



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word *on the* street



the lowdown
on the downturn from
residential architects
across the country—and
verities from veterans of
similar slowdowns.

by shelley d. hutchins,
meghan drueding,
nigel f. maynard,
and marla misek clark

as creeping paralysis makes its way across the U.S. economy, residential architects are beginning to feel parts of their practices go numb. The effect is varied in date of onset and severity, but no one is immune.

As we talked with firms across the country about their experiences with the downturn, we gained important insights that may help others plan for the future. One is that those specializing in sustainable design appear more insulated from the slings and arrows of this misfortune. And smaller,

more established practices also stand on firmer ground, as they're able to draw from a long list of repeat clients. Further, custom architects who have several projects in early construction are discovering the real meaning of luck. But six months from now, the edge of the cliff looms.

So it's no wonder that everyone is crossing fingers for a swift recovery—before firms run out of cash reserves, before principals forgo their own salaries to save their businesses, before the most cherished employees are laid off, or before the shop must close altogether.

venerable voices

veteran professionals offer advice to young architects facing their first economic downturn.

"Fasten your seat belts, because things happen very quickly. One of the biggest mistakes people make is to hold onto staff when you don't have the work. Because of the diversity of our projects, we didn't really feel the last two downturns, but combined with all the other issues, this one seems to have the potential to be more severe, because it's affecting not only the private sector but also local, county, and state governments."

—Suman Sorg, FAIA, Sorg and Associates, Washington, D.C.

"Know no job that you are too good or too talented to do; hope that you said 'thanks' to those you passed on the way up the ladder; and give at least 110 percent to get a new client and 150 percent to keep him."

—James L. Strickland, Historical Concepts, Peachtree City, Ga.

"Don't panic, but be realistic about your workload and the staff it will take to complete it. The most painful thing I have to do in my practice is letting people go because there isn't enough work. I take this as

continued on page 37

chuck swartz, aia, leed ap, and beth reader, aia

reader & swartz architects, winchester, va.

www.readerswartz.com

Reader & Swartz Architects was founded during a recession. "Beth got laid off and I had the brilliant idea of quitting and starting our own firm," says Chuck Swartz, AIA, LEED AP. The couple began in 1990 with no money or projects and have grown the firm cautiously. Such wariness helped them make smart decisions last year: they didn't fill an open position or update their CAD system, and they refinanced their office building to consolidate debt and lower payments. "We've been expecting a downturn—not for Western civilization's entire financial system to dissolve—but we've expected a slowdown for a couple of years," Swartz says.

"Our builders are looking for jobs, so we're preparing for it to hit us next," Reader, AIA, adds. For now, new-client interviews are up. The couple credit their rural location for steady business: Swartz likens their role in Winchester, Va., to that of a small-town doctor who does a little of everything. Residential work accounts for about 70 percent of the firm's portfolio, with banks, a



Chuck Swartz, AIA, LEED AP, and Beth Reader, AIA

age of firm: 18 years

firm specialty: Single-family residential and small-scale commercial
staff: 7 (2005); 7 (2008); 7 (2009, projected)

total revenue: \$712,000 (2005); \$875,000 to \$900,000 (2008); \$700,000 (2009, projected)

completed projects: 9 (2005); 9 (2008); 8 (2009, projected)

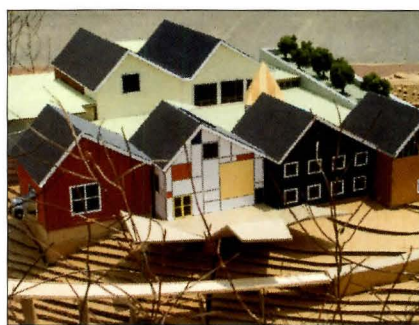
bandstand, historic restorations, and more making up the rest.

This conservative business model, plus a liberal approach to taking any project they find interesting, is keeping Reader and Swartz solvent for now. And a healthy sense of humor may lead to future income—the office joke being that they can design snarky T-shirts to see them through.

More seriously, the co-principals think the downturn will be good for housing in the long run. They see heightened interest in renewable energy and nontoxic materials, as well as more clients who want to renovate rather than tear down. "If there's a silver lining, it's that our profession is getting back to doing the right thing—making buildings and the environment better," Reader says.—s.d.h.



Current residential commissions include the adaptive reuse of a loft for an avid art- and book-collecting client (top) and the transformation of a 1970s tract house into a sustainable custom home (above). For the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum (right), the architects are pursuing a LEED Platinum rating.



Portrait and renderings: Courtesy Reader & Swartz Architects

venerable voices

michael g. imber, faia

michael g. imber architects, san antonio
www.michaelgimber.com

A few years ago, Michael G. Imber, FAIA, was approached about working on a large development. His firm designs primarily high-end custom residential and has since its inception in 1992, so Imber thought carefully before accepting the offer. "We had this opportunity to get involved with New Urbanism and we ultimately felt it wouldn't diminish our design quality," he says. "Custom work is still the mainstay of our business, but this job helped diversify the scope of projects we design."

That initial collaboration led to other offers. The firm's portfolio now includes custom and production residential, urban planning, civic, and commercial buildings in such locations as Colorado, Costa Rica, Maine, Mississippi, Scotland, and Spain. It's that range of project size, type, and location that Imber believes will carry them through this recession. He also expanded by launching an interior design division in 2003. Mohon-Imber Interiors "is the busiest it's ever been," he says.

While several custom clients have put projects on hold, others are taking advantage of the lull to build now, while talented people are available. "As for our development



Imber was inspired by estates along the Mediterranean and rugged Texas Hill Country landscape when designing this stone courtyard (above) for a planned community. Detailing for a custom residence (below) exudes Old World style, while its autoclaved aerated block structure employs contemporary green building practices.

work, our partners are continuing more slowly or laying the groundwork for projects planned for two or three years from now," Imber explains. He adds that "internationally, our projects don't seem to be impacted, but everyone is more cautious."

The firm is still cutting back as a precaution. Imber says he's always had a conservative approach to spending and a solid cache of reserves, but recently the office instituted a hiring freeze and canceled the annual staff retreat. "We never expected the entire country to suffer like this," Imber says, "but we hope our diversity will carry us through."—*s.d.h.*

a personal failure, because I know how hard my staff has worked. You can only survive this downturn by facing the facts and preserving the assets of the firm, which can take many forms: less hours, pay cuts, staff reductions, etc. If you have mentors who are in a business other than architecture, now's the time to reach out for advice. Most will probably advise to cut soon and cut deep. We have to realize it's a business and we have to make the hard business decisions."

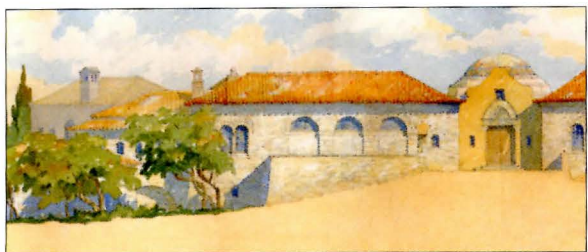
—Donald Jacobs, AIA, JZMK Partners, Irvine, Calif.

"Some of our clients who are traders are saying this one is going to be long and deep. In this climate, you have to be prepared to do anything. Enter competitions or attend more seminars, because you have time for them. Be flexible and stay optimistic. Train as an interior designer. Write articles and do research—especially on sustainable products. Institutional work will go on, so get on the list, even though it may mean working on mediocre buildings. Volunteer where you can. You have to put yourself out there. Don't give up."

—Margaret McCurry, FAIA, IIDA, ASID, Tigerman McCurry Architects, Chicago

"There's a large number of places in the United States—

continued on page 38



Portrait and renderings: Courtesy Michael G. Imber Architects



age of firm: 17 years
firm specialty: High-end residential and traditional neighborhood design
staff: 13 (2005); 17 (2008); 17 (2009, projected)
total revenue: Withheld
completed projects: 5 (2005); 4 (2008); 7 (2009, projected)

Michael G. Imber, FAIA

venerable voices

small towns—that are radically underserved by designers. If I were graduating from school now, I would get in a car with an itinerant team of people who know a complementary set of skills and go to a county in Alabama or Nebraska. I would go to the planning department and ask who the progressive mayors are and say, What can we offer in design services? Sketch a fire station, or a housing development, and then go and get grants. Like small-town doctors, they could become small-town architects, circuit-riding designers. It would be like traveling bards in the Middle Ages. There are interiors of restaurants in New York City that receive more design services than entire counties in the suburbs.”

—Andrés Duany, FAIA, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., Miami

“There aren’t easy answers. Looking back, the architects who managed in the long run to benefit from a recession used that time to look at what else they could be doing. They managed to move into new areas that were growing, which are the areas that tend to be strong after a recession. A lot of architects who in the last recession were doing nothing but private work figured out how to leverage their experience into institutional work, and now they’re handling this recession better. One of the biggest

continued on page 39

word on the street

robert luntz, aia, and joseph tanney, aia
resolution: 4 architecture, new york city
www.re4a.com



Robert Luntz, AIA (left), and Joseph Tanney, AIA

age of firm: 19 years

firm specialty: Custom houses (both prefab and site-built), loft interiors, and commercial

staff: 10 to 12 (2005); 10 to 12 (2008); 10 to 12 (2009, projected)

total revenue: Down 1 percent to 2 percent from 2005 (2008); down 1 percent to 2 percent from 2008 (2009, projected)

completed projects: 10 (2005); 10 (2008); 10 to 15 (2009, projected)

Joseph Tanney, AIA, recalls the early 1990s’ recession with a hint of nostalgia. “We had just started; we were too dumb to know what was going on,” says the co-architect, with partner Robert Luntz, AIA, of the first *Dwell* Home. “There’s something to be said for being young and optimistic.” This time around, Tanney and Luntz know well the risks of practicing architecture in a down market. “We’ve been lucky,” Tanney says. “But we do sense the environment around us slowing up.”

Their New York City firm, Resolution: 4 Architecture (Res: 4), is holding fairly steady so far. Its diverse project portfolio, which includes modular houses, site-built houses, loft interiors, and offices, gives it a ready-made set of checks and balances against a volatile economy. Some residential projects have been put on hold, but others are moving ahead as planned. The firm’s commercial side, meanwhile, has picked up considerably. Much of its current work consists of office projects, including a 100,000-square-foot master plan in San Francisco and the expansion of the New York City headquarters for Equinox Fitness Clubs.

Despite the overall market slowdown, Tanney and Luntz’s vision for Res: 4’s future remains unchanged. They plan to maintain their mix of residential and commercial work, with prefab as a crucial component. Currently they’ve got about a dozen modular houses built, another dozen under construction, and a third dozen on the boards.

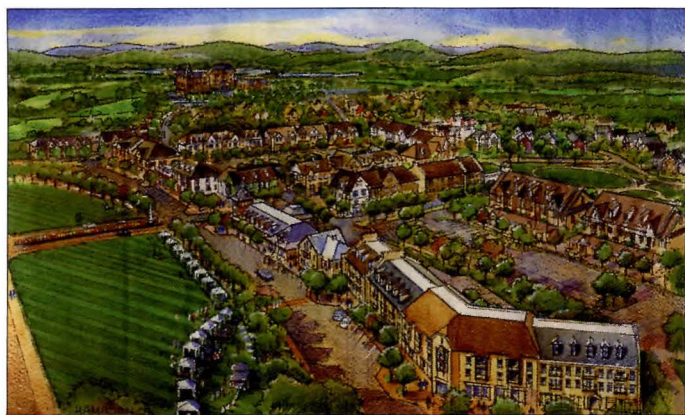
They’re also working with developers to create entire modular communities. “During these sort-of unsure times, aspects of the prefab method of delivery are more predictable,” Tanney opines. “There’s a certain knowability about the process.”—*m.d.*



Portrait and renderings: Courtesy Resolution: 4 Architecture

Among the firm’s modular homes in the design phase are the Manhattan Beach House (top) in Brooklyn, N.Y., and the FitHouse (left) in Sagaponack, N.Y.

j. carson looney, faia
looney ricks kiss, memphis, tenn.
www.lrk.com



age of firm: 25 years
firm specialty: Planning, single-family production and custom, multifamily, mixed-use, commercial, and interiors
staff: 165 (2005); 240 (prior to layoffs in early 2008), 146 (end of 2008); 144 (2009, projected)
total revenue: \$27.1 million (2005); \$33.5 million (2008); +/- \$25 million (2009, projected)
completed projects: 303 (2005); 370 (2008); Unknown (2009)

Master planning—including for such projects as the Waterfront Lanier Harbor Marina community (right) and Town Center at Ross Bridge (top)—is a large part of LRK's work. Gables Villa Rosa (above) is a 245-unit luxury rental.

Memphis, Tenn.-based Looney Ricks Kiss (LRK) is an award-winning 25-year-old firm that had only reduced staff once prior to 2008. "We were fortunate that the very first real slowdown where we had to lay anyone off for lack of work was after 9/11," says principal J. Carson Looney, FAIA.

But LRK—coming off its most financially successful year in 2007—had to trim numbers twice in 2008 as large-scale projects got shelved, production home builders lost financing, and custom clients got nervous. "From

September through October, almost every time the phone rang, I'd hear two words" from custom clients, he says: "On hold! The project is on hold." Only a few custom projects proceeded as planned, he adds.

In addition to layoffs, LRK closed its Boulder, Colo., location and downsized small offices in the resort town of Rosemary Beach, Fla., and in Baton Rouge, La. Like everyone else, Looney is unsure what happens next. "I don't know about tomorrow," he says. "I don't know if we'll land a job or lose two more. I literally don't know."

There's no quick fix, but Looney says the new administration can help by promising to hold off on any tax increases for at least 24 months. "That's a big one that would open some floodgates," he says. Moreover, lending institutions need to find a way to distinguish between good, viable projects and bad ones.

For projects that have moved forward, clients are scaling back and asking the firm to trim costs. "All the fluff is gone," he says.—*n.f.m.*



J. Carson Looney, FAIA



Portrait and renderings: Courtesy Looney Ricks Kiss; Photo: Steve Hinds Photography

venerable voices

mistakes is to cut marketing expenses. You should be out talking to people—that's hugely important at a time like this."

—David Dixon, FAIA, Goody Clancy, Boston

"Look at product design ideas that address overlooked social and environmental needs. A lot of them have to do with the design of communities. Then you've got to start looking at your office and doing the things you hate, like trimming back talented staff. I've been through, I don't know, six downturns? I've lost track. This one's much different because there are so many factors causing it. You can't put your finger on just one thing."

—Barry A. Berkus, AIA, Berkus Design Studio, Scottsdale, Ariz., and B3 Architects, Santa Barbara, Calif.

"Just do good work. Whatever commission you have, make it the best you've ever done. Nothing sells like good work."

—Frank D. Welch, FAIA, Frank Welch and Associates, Dallas

"Get lean fast! I think firms don't understand how quickly money runs out. It doesn't mean not doing any project PR, but it does mean really curtailing expenses. One of the things that keeps you from not having enough work is being in more than one market.

continued on page 40

venerable voices

word on the street

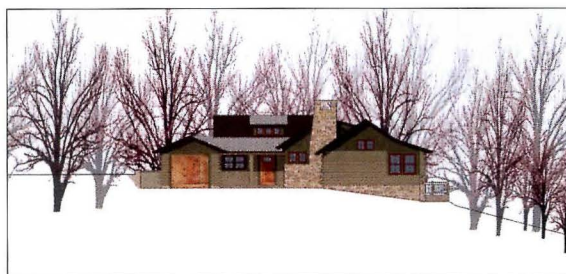
There are still things going on—public work, planning, low-income housing. [The downturn has] been so abrupt, at least in California: it felt like the bottom fell out in about five seconds. Contractors ran out of work immediately. That makes me think people are not only not commissioning new work but canceling work already commissioned. It's hard to tell how bad things are going to get."

—Anne Fougeron, AIA, Fougeron Architecture, San Francisco

"Don't panic. Continue to focus on what you do best. Steer your practice with a steady hand, but don't ignore the warning signs when they appear. Downsize your practice to match your workload when necessary. Position your practice to catch the upturn when it comes and see this circumstance as an opportunity to be a more resourceful architect. Every downturn is different. One of the big differences in our current situation is that it has emerged, in part, from a loss of confidence in the residential real estate market. Projects that were based on economic models of continued rising values were the first to collapse. This may signal the beginning of some new trends. For one, people will return to the idea that one's home is primarily a place to live—not the keystone of one's investment portfolio.

continued on page 42

christine l. albertsson, aia, and todd p. hansen, aia
albertsson hansen architecture, minneapolis
www.aharchitecture.com



Christine L. Albertsson, AIA, and Todd P. Hansen, AIA

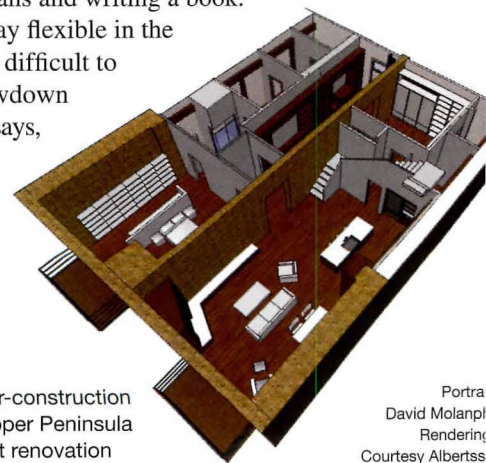
age of firm: 9 years
firm specialty: Custom homes, residential remodeling, and churches
staff: 9, including 3 part-time (2005); 11, including 3 part-time (2008); 7, all part-time (2009, projected)
total revenue: \$614,600 (2005); \$986,000 (2008); \$500,000 (2009, projected)
completed projects: 9 (2005); 17 (2008); 9 to 12 (2009, projected)

Last summer, Albertsson Hansen Architecture seemed on track for one of its best years ever. The Minneapolis firm had found a niche designing residential remodels and new houses, and had added staff each year since its start in 2000. Husband-and-wife owners Todd P. Hansen, AIA, and Christine L. Albertsson, AIA, considered moving the office into a larger space, but decided against it.

That turned out to be a wise choice. When the financial crisis shook global markets last September, it also rattled the psyches (and investments) of the firm's clientele. One customer whose house had just started construction pulled out, and so did one whose addition was about to break ground. Many others with projects in earlier phases opted to postpone. "It happened very suddenly," Hansen remembers. "We had a very high number of calls and interviews in [early] September. Some have gone ahead, but most are putting it off until this

fall." And the cost-estimation process has grown longer as current clients search for lower prices. Albertsson and Hansen have laid off a few employees and asked the rest to work 80 percent of their usual hours. "Our priority had been to try to retain as much of our staff as possible," Albertsson says. "But the severity of the downturn is proving to be far too great for that to happen."

She and Hansen are looking to make their services more accessible by offering varying levels of design involvement at different price points. And they're exploring—in very preliminary fashion—the ideas of selling house plans and writing a book. They're also trying to stay flexible in the face of uncertainty. "It's difficult to know how long of a slowdown to prepare for," Hansen says, echoing the concerns of peers across the country.—*m.d.*



Among Albertsson Hansen's under-construction projects are a residence on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (top) and a historic loft renovation in Minneapolis (right).

Portra
David Molanpl
Rendering
Courtesy Albertss
Hansen Architect

eric naslund, faia, and john sheehan, aia
 studio e architects, san diego
www.studioearchitects.com

When the principals at Studio E Architects fell into designing a charter school a few years ago, little did they know the project type would help see them through the current downturn. "It was the darndest thing," says Eric Naslund, FAIA, who runs the San Diego firm with John Sheehan, AIA. "We got hired by someone who didn't want an architect that had done schools before. The client wanted a fresh approach." That particular project has been finished for two years now, and the firm has a couple more charter schools currently under construction.

Affordable and market-rate housing had traditionally served as Studio E's stock-in-trade, but developers willing to bankroll the latter are few and far between these days. "We've seen the market-rate side

dry up," Naslund says. Affordable housing has maintained a foothold so far, he adds, because the tax credits that finance it still have some value on the open market. "Right now affordable housing is still pretty steady. But if there's a financial meltdown beyond where we are now, all bets are off."

Thanks to its involvement in schools, campus housing, and affordable housing, Studio E remains busy. But Naslund and Sheehan did temporarily reduce their staff's hours last summer, cutting their own salaries proportionally. They also froze yearly cost-of-living adjustments; asked their one employee in an Escondido, Calif., satellite office to start working from home; and cut back spending on the annual holiday party. "I don't know that I have a hard-and-fast prediction," Naslund says. "We're hoping this doesn't go deeper. And we're hoping we'll get out of this downturn in six to nine months."—*m.d.*

Studio E is currently designing West Village (above), a mixed-use student housing project at the University of California, Davis. The firm's recently built affordable housing includes Coronado Villa (left) in Coronado, Calif., and Auburn Park (below) in San Diego.



Portraits and rendering: Courtesy Studio E Architects; Photos: John Durant (top) and Applied Photography & Graphic Services (above)



Eric Naslund, FAIA, and John Sheehan, AIA

age of firm: 23 years

firm specialty: Affordable and market-rate housing, campus housing, charter schools, and custom homes

staff: 15 (2005); 15 (2008); 15 (2009, projected)

total revenue: Down 5 percent from 2005 (2008); down 1 percent to 5 percent from 2008 (2009, projected)

completed projects: 31 (2005); 21 (2008); 12 to 15 (2009, projected)

venerable voices

word on the street

And there may be a new emphasis on improving, adding on, and remodeling existing homes instead of trading up—a sustainable strategy.”

—Peter Q. Bohlin, FAIA, Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

“We used to brag that our firm was recession-proof because of the nature of our work and our client base. Things must be bad out there, because we now have jobs being put on hold. Even if our clients can still afford to build, they want to wait and see what happens. Our advice to young firms is to do whatever you need to do to stay in business without compromising your integrity. Look for jobs in or out of architecture that don’t require you to make bad buildings. Our theory of how to build a successful practice is to stay in one place and to do good work long enough for it to catch up with you.”

—Stuart Cohen, FAIA, and Julie Hacker, AIA, Stuart Cohen & Julie Hacker Architects, Evanston, Ill.

“Get venerable as quickly as you can—not by age, but by having a history of happy clients for whom you have given your best. When times get tough, they will still be there—for small renovations, their office, or a weekend house. For life. Put whatever downtime you have back into improving the work. It will pay off in the short

continued on page 44

jay janette, aia, and david goldberg, aia
mithun, seattle
www.mithun.com

Seattle-based Mithun always considered itself a regional firm with a strong focus on residential planning and design work, but in 2008 the collective opened a San Francisco office in a move forward as a more diverse and, it hopes, recession-proof company.

“Residential work has always been a core part of our office, but it’s now balanced with civic projects for cities, governments, institutions, nonprofit groups, and universities,” says David Goldberg, AIA, the firm’s managing principal. “When there’s a downturn in one market or the other, we do feel it, but the other sides pick up.”

Still, the firm isn’t immune to the ups and downs of the economy and has reduced staff. “The workload has dropped as clients are unable to get financing due to the credit crisis,” Goldberg says. “We strategically adjusted staff size to keep it in balance with the projected workflow.”

During the housing boom, the 60-year-old Mithun became selective, favoring only the best projects, says principal Jay Janette, AIA. “We kept condo work to 30 percent, just to minimize our exposure to market fluctuations,” he explains. It also hired people capable of handling different project types if the market shifts and integrated landscape architecture and urban design to tackle more geographically diverse work. In recent years, Mithun has strengthened its commitment to sustainable design. “A number of years ago, we instituted a policy to accept only residential planning and design work that had a density of eight units per acre,” Goldberg says. But in 2007, “we moved it up to 14 units per acre. That was about positioning ourselves for the wave of urbanization and transit-oriented development that’s happening around the world.”

The strategy may be paying off. “As we have begun to focus on more urban development—specifically transit-oriented ones—what we’re starting to see is a surge in public/private partnerships,” Janette says. “That has created an opportunity to stabilize during a downturn.”—*n.f.m.*

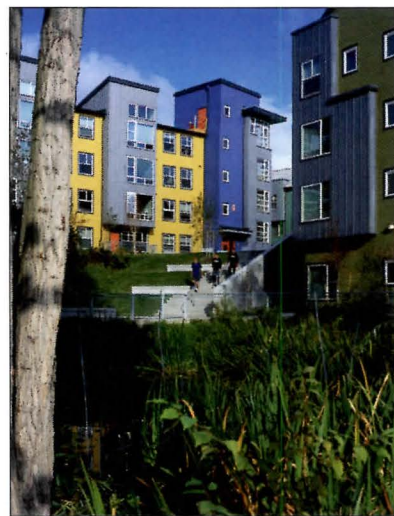


Jay Janette, AIA (left), and David Goldberg, AIA

age of firm: 60 years
firm specialty: Multifamily residential, mixed-use, and community master planning
staff: 149 (2005); 212 (prior to layoffs in early 2008), 189 (end of 2008); 189 (2009, projected)
total revenue: \$29 million (2005); \$32 million (2008); Unknown (2009)
completed projects: Withheld



Mithun’s sustainable design work includes Project Green (above), in an Austin, Texas, decommissioned water-treatment plant, and Nordheim Court (below), a LEED-certified student housing project at the University of Washington.



Portraits: Courtesy Mithun, Juan Hernandez;
Rendering: Courtesy Mithun;
Photo: Doug J. Scott, www.dougscott.com

david arkin, aia, leed ap, and anni tilt

arkin tilt architects: ecological planning and design, berkeley, calif.
www.arkintilt.com



David Arkin, AIA, LEED AP, and Anni Tilt have a hard time turning people away. Clients seek out the firm for its expertise in sustainable design, and the husband-and-wife-led team enjoys taking on a mix of residential, commercial, and community projects. The current roster includes custom houses, a biofuel station, pro bono work for Heifer International (a world hunger organization), a winery renovation, and an organic farm. Given the firm's aversion to

saying no and the growing demand for green design, the troubled economy brought about a somewhat welcome slowdown. "Frankly, we've been too busy," Tilt says, "so having projects go on hold has kind of saved us."

Arkin and Tilt fear it will get worse, however. They already maintain a low-cost personal lifestyle, thanks to a solar-powered house, electric car, kids in public schools, and biking to work. But they're planning ahead professionally to keep their team in place. "We're interviewing more and going after projects that may not be perfect for us," Arkin explains, "but we have a wonderful group of people here, and no matter what, we're going to keep everyone employed."

Arkin has given lectures since the firm's inception, and he plans to increase those talks as a way to gain exposure. The couple have discussed the idea of developing their own small-scale infill project if commissions dwindle. And they'll continue accepting a wide range of project types, as long as the client is committed to sustainable building. "Ecological design is a niche market," Tilt says, "but it applies to everything."

Sustainable architecture may be a niche market right now, but Arkin and Tilt predict that this current crisis will help promote a future full of smarter, smaller buildings.—s.d.h.

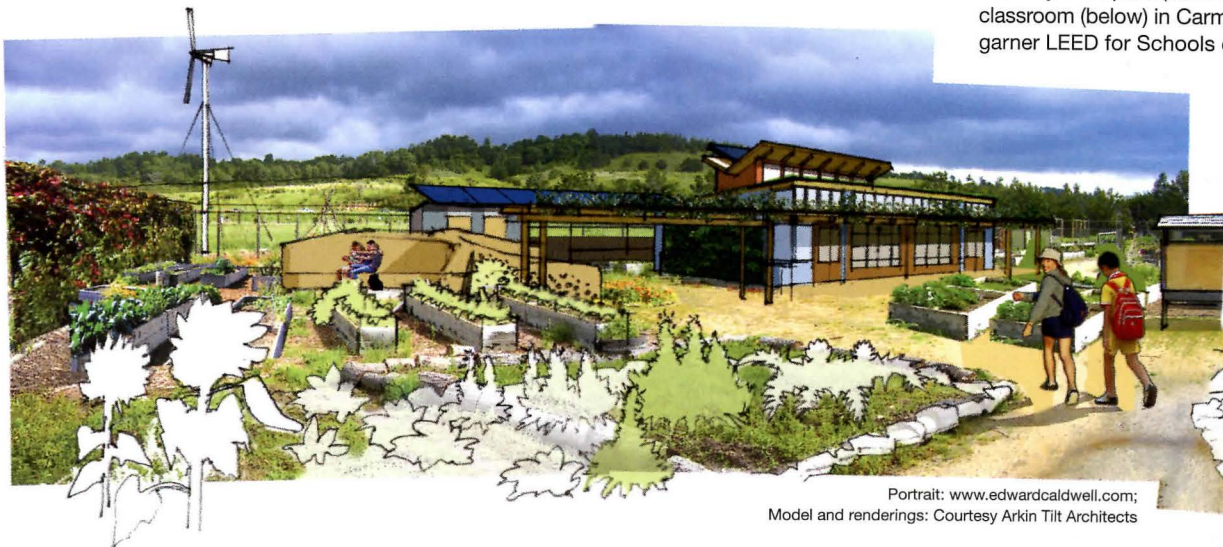
age of firm: 11 years
firm specialty: Sustainable residential and commercial architecture and planning
staff: 7 (2005); 8 (2008); 8 (2009, projected)
total revenue: \$574,000 (2005); \$778,000 (2008); \$830,000 (2009, projected)
completed projects: 6 (2005); 4 (2008); 8 (2009, projected)



David Arkin, AIA, LEED AP, and Anni Tilt



A Sonoma Valley organic farmhouse (top left) focuses on outdoor living. Two halves of a donated home are reconfigured to create ranger offices and public facilities at a Bay Area park (above). A portable classroom (below) in Carmel, Calif., should garner LEED for Schools certification.



Portrait: www.edwardcaldwell.com;
Model and renderings: Courtesy Arkin Tilt Architects

venerable voices

word on the street

and long term—and in getting it seen through awards and publications. Stay small, in good times and bad. No firm does better work by being larger, and staying lean helps weather the storms.”

—Mark McInturff, FAIA, McInturff Architects, Bethesda, Md.

“I’ve been through three downturns and probably wouldn’t have known they were happening except by listening to the news. This one I’m calling the “Bergdorf Goodman recession” because, for the first time, high-end stores are reporting downturns, and it scares me! Fortunately, I’ve been fairly conservative and have the cash reserves to keep my team together, which is most important to me—but it comes down to a matter of time. How long can you stay alive on the respirator? Every time the phone rings, I get nervous, but for now, most of our clients are going ahead. I would tell young firms to build up an emergency fund that can carry your office for four or five months. As soon as your intuition warns you things might change, listen to it. We’re talking about retracting to the second floor and trying to rent out the first floor of our building. We definitely have kicked up our marketing. You have to keep your face and name fresh in people’s minds.”

—Wayne L. Good, FAIA, Good Architecture, Annapolis, Md.

Sprocket Design-Build excels at attached infill housing, such as the Q-MOD townhomes (below). The firm converted an old office building into Inca Studios (right), a live/work lofts project in Denver’s arts district.



Portrait, photo, and rendering: Courtesy Sprocket Design-Build



William Moore, AIA

william moore, aia
sprocket design-build, denver
www.sprocketdb.com

William Moore, AIA, started his Denver-based design/build firm in 1996, after he could only find work as a carpenter. He shuttered it a year later to do infill work as an architect in San Francisco. “At the time, Sprocket was a fledgling operation,” he says. “The infill market was still slow here, so I wasn’t leaving much.”

Moore reopened his firm upon returning to Denver in 2000, and it took off. Fueled by speculative infill housing, Sprocket grew to 20 employees and was responsible for the design and construction of countless condo and row house projects. The firm built its own work, as well as that of fellow firms, and was a partner developer on other projects. “It was very steady, if not exponential, growth,” he says.

With residential growth now stagnant, commercial work—especially renovations of existing properties—currently accounts for 60 percent of the firm’s total. “The speculative residential market is pretty much gone,” Moore acknowledges. “We have a couple that we’re involved in, but no clients are coming to us for that.” Instead, the firm has had to accept more single-family commissions. “That’s the kind of work we didn’t prefer, to be honest, but we are now saying yes.”

Given the tough year ahead, Moore has had to scale back his staff to 12, including several part-time interns and contract staff. “It has been very traumatic, especially since the designers and architects I laid off were highly skilled and talented people,” he says.

In prescient anticipation of the slowdown, Moore sold Sprocket’s office building in 2007 and moved the firm to a smaller space. He’s also taking a more active role in finding work. His prediction for the future? “The housing boom created a lot of excess,” he says. “When the market returns, architects will be making fewer things—but smaller and better things.”—n.f.m.



mark peters, aia

studio dwell architects, chicago

www.studiodwell.com

Mark Peters, AIA, hadn't realized his young firm would be hitting the five-year milestone in 2009—until it was pointed out to him. "The years just kind of pass by when you're busy," he explains.

And how. Since founding Studio Dwell Architects at the height of the housing boom in 2004, the Wisconsin native and his staff have built a reputation for, as Peters describes it, "simple spaces with a simple palette and a well-developed program." The Chicago-based firm's highest-profile projects have generated plenty of buzz locally and earned multiple awards, including several from this magazine.

And yet, in this withering economy, Peters describes his current outlook as "cautious." Work is steady—developers, especially, have flocked to the firm in recent months because they think its brand of livable midsize modern housing can sell—but he isn't expecting a great year. "We have five or six custom single-family houses and four multifamily projects right now," he says. "Everything in Chicago is full steam ahead. It's the out-of-state projects that are on hold or delayed—a reality he chalks up to Chicago having "a bigger audience with a bit more money to spend."

Still, he knows that, too, could change. "We won't really know how the year will go until spring," when the first of two work surges traditionally occurs, he says. "If our spring is slow, the whole year will be slow." Should that happen, Peters expects Studio Dwell to do some things it's never done before. "If we find ourselves with time on our hands, we'll finally organize the office. We'll start to market ourselves. I'm not focused on getting projects just to keep busy. We'll figure out a way to keep working, no matter what it takes."—*m.m.c.*

Studio Dwell's current mix of single- and multifamily projects includes 2215 W. McLean (bottom), a 5,000-square-foot house in Chicago's Bucktown neighborhood, and 1530 N. Jackson (below), a six-unit condominium in Milwaukee. Construction wraps on the former in June and begins on the latter by mid-year.



Mark Peters, AIA

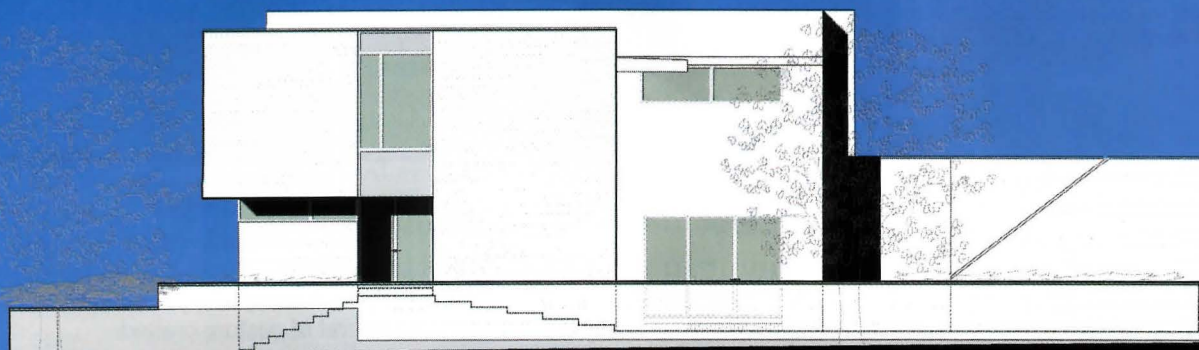
age of firm: 5 years (in June)

firm specialty: Custom single-family and multifamily residential (including mixed-use)

staff: 3 (2005); 6 (2008); 8 (2009, projected)

total revenue: \$237,000 (2005); \$492,000 (2008); \$600,000 (2009, projected)

completed projects: 8 (2005); 10 (2008); 10 (2009, projected)

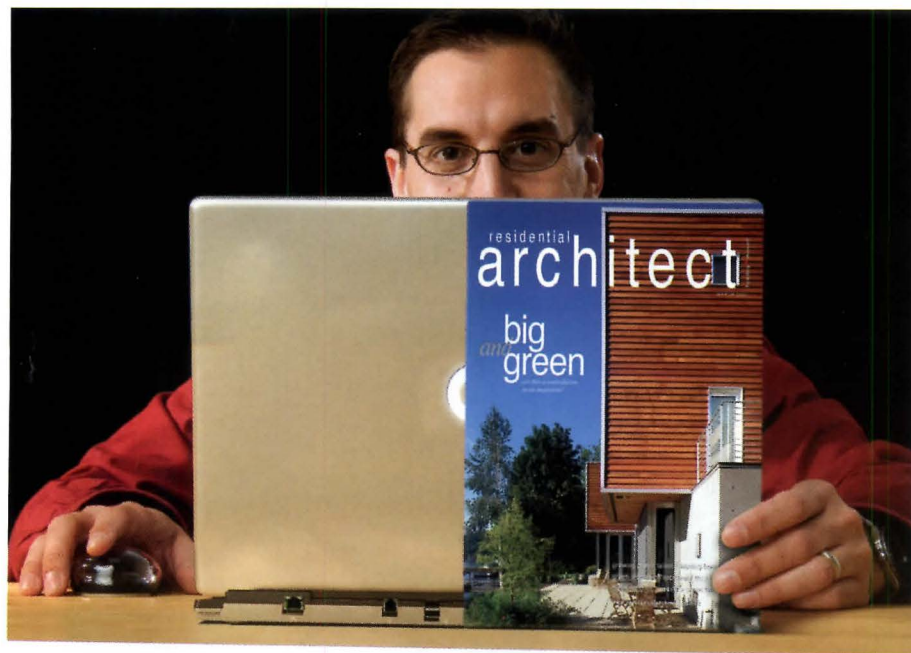


Portrait: Bob Coscarelli; Renderings: Courtesy Studio Dwell Architects (above) and Studio 2a

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great walls

is your building envelope as good as it should be?

by nigel f. maynard

John Dennis Murphey, AIA, used to specify his exterior walls the way everyone else did—with 2x4 studs, fiberglass insulation, sheathing, and so on—but very little about his walls is the same anymore. Today he designs high-performing exterior walls that are better because the highly variable climate in metropolitan Washington, D.C., demands it.

“We’re in an area where you don’t know what it’s going to be outside,” says the principal of Chevy Chase, Md.-based Meditch Murphey Architects. “We’re in the middle [of the Atlantic Coast], so it could be cold, rainy, or hot and humid.”

outer limits

The building envelope is perhaps the least sexy topic to discuss with a client, but few areas of a house are more important. As the first line of defense against the elements, the wall (and roof) is of utmost importance, but many design professionals overlook elements that could have potentially damaging consequences.

“Not being careful about keeping the walls watertight—that’s, by far, the single biggest error” design professionals make, says

architect Peter L. Pfeiffer, FAIA, of Barley & Pfeiffer Architects in Austin, Texas. “It’s not just another thing you have to do; [keeping the moisture out] is one of the most important things you have to do.” But it’s more than a matter of moisture protection, says Pfeiffer, who’s also a building scientist and green design consultant. Architects must design for “total wall efficiency” based on their regional climate.

“If you’re in a very cold climate, having high R-value is clearly going to benefit you,” Pfeiffer says. “Having something like a solar radiation barrier probably isn’t going to be all that important, but a good air-sealed wall is very important.” And because almost all homeowners use air conditioning in the summer, the house has to be tight and efficient to contain the cooling, he adds.

Galen Ohmart, AIA, LEED AP, has developed specs that work well for his rainy Oregon climate. “I like ICF, aerated concrete, and Faswall [by Philomath, Ore.-based ShelterWorks], which is made with wood fiber and concrete,” says the principal of SOLARC Architecture and Engineering in Eugene and Portland. If Ohmart is doing wood framing,



Courtesy Benjamin Obdyke

Home Slicker is a three-dimensional nylon matrix that provides a space for drainage behind cladding. It also creates a thermal break and pressure equalization, which helps eliminate trapped moisture.

he thermally separates the inside wall from the outside. “I like using staggered-stud framing with 2x4s on a 2x6 or 2x8 plate,” he says. “Then I prefer sprayed foam insulation, which really fills the cavity between the studs.” The staggered method, he says, breaks thermal bridging because studs never touch the inside wall. If cost is an issue, he foams the first 2 inches to seal the building, then uses fiberglass for the rest of the cavity.

Angela M. Dean, AIA, LEED AP, principal of AMD Architecture in Salt Lake City, says she optimizes

passive solar for her mild climate. She also specifies ICF for basements and Faswall or structural insulated panels for the main structure. “It’s going well, but it’s not the least expensive option,” she says, though it allows the wall to breathe. Dean is also a fan of 2x6 framing with blown-in foam or cellulose insulation to cut thermal bridging. “By code, you can still get away with 2x4 framing, but it’s not a good idea,” she says.

brand-new way

Washington’s heat and humidity, and its moderately

continued on page 50

new material

by nigel f. maynard

déjà flue

EcoSmart's Retro fireplace was inspired by 1960s pop culture motifs, with rounded corners and a tube design that suits various architectural styles. Measuring roughly 35 inches high by 35 inches wide, the indoor/outdoor unit has a fiberglass surround, stainless steel firebox, and glass screen. It burns ethanol and is produced in eight colors.

EcoSmart, 310.914.3335; www.ecosmartfire.com.



give me liberty

Liberty is a new collection of colorful transparent glass mosaic tiles from Miami-based Trend USA. Made from hand-cut glass, the tiles are produced in a variety of idiosyncratic but compatible shapes and then assembled on a sheet measuring roughly 12 inches by 10 inches. Seven standard colors are available, but other hues can be special-ordered. Trend USA, 866.508.7363; www.trendgroup-usa.com.



studio time

The Studio Collection is a line of home technology devices affordably priced from around \$7.50 (for wall plates) to \$1,380 (for a whole-house audio system). Inspired by global color and design trends, On-Q/Legrand designed the collection—including this titanium-edged wall plate—in bright hues such as Spanish red. It comes in 16 other colors. On-Q/Legrand, 800.321.2343; www.onqlegrand.com.

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workspace

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Where do we go from here? That was the existential (and practical) question Boora Architects faced in fall 2005, with the end of its lease at the historic Morgan Building in downtown Portland, Ore., looming. As employees weighed in on strategic priorities for the 47-year-old firm—including a philosophical shift toward a more collaborative working environment—one primary goal emerged: by 2016, “our work would be healing the earth and improving the human condition,” explains principal John Meadows, AIA, LEED AP. Doing such mitzvahs

from a “transit-rich location” was equally important, since 80 percent of the staff doesn’t drive to work.

Months later, the Boora team decided it could achieve what it wanted within its existing 26,000-square-foot, E-shaped space. With LEED Platinum as an end goal, every design decision was made to “maximize light, natural ventilation, and flexibility,” Meadows says. Removing the dropped ceiling added 3 feet of height for longer views. Making windows operable; installing temperature, motion,

and daylight sensors; and positioning modular workstations in the structural bay between the perimeter wall and first row of exposed concrete columns also answered essential requirements.

When privacy is needed, pivoting wall panels and tracked curtains are deployed to define meeting spaces in the largely open middle section.

Boora’s pursuit of a better tomorrow is already paying dividends. The building’s new owners were so impressed by the remodel that they’ve asked the firm to help them earn LEED certification for the entire structure.—*marla misek clark*



Photos: Tim Griffith



Courtesy Boora Architects

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