

the indispensable architect

adapting to an unpredictable economy means finding your inner entrepreneur.

by cheryl weber, leed ap

“a rchitects don’t manufacture nails, assemble windows, or chop down trees,” wrote marketing guru Seth Godin in a recent blog post. “Instead, they take existing components and assemble them in interesting and important ways.” He went on to compare such skills to those of “organizational architects,” business-savvy people who know how to find suppliers, tie together disparate resources, and weave them into a venture that scales. “You either need to become one or hire one,” he wrote.

It’s an intriguing analogy. If entrepreneurs think like architects, why don’t more architects think like entrepreneurs? Probably because running a business is primarily a left-brain function. It’s one thing to use design tools to solve programming and aesthetic challenges, and another to dream up an innovative business model and make it fly.

Nonetheless, it seems everyone must be an entrepreneur nowadays as traditional paths of doing business disintegrate across professions. The challenges of the past five



James Yang

years have been especially daunting for architects, from new technologies and processes to a basic shift in client attitudes. More firms are stepping out of their comfort zone to reconsider how they run their business, how projects are delivered, and who they might collaborate with to

land new work.

James P. Cramer, Hon. AIA, and Scott Simpson, FAIA, LEED AP, foresaw this sea change in *The Next Architect: A New Twist on the Future of Design* (Greenway Communications, 2007). They point out that architecture is focused on aesthetics, as it should

be. But the truth is a great-looking building is only one measure of an architect’s worth. The rest is about creating value in other ways. When competition is fierce, how well architects define and communicate the full spectrum of that value can mean the difference be-
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practice

tween a business that thrives and one that struggles.

“Clients care about a great many things in addition to appearance: capital cost, speed, efficiency, productivity, operating cost, maintenance cost, the approvals process, and so forth,” the authors write. “All of them can be expressed as value propositions by using the proper metrics. If you want to know what’s really important to your client, all you have to do is ask. Only then will you—and they—know how valuable great design can be.”

building teams

Architects tend to live in an insular world, and clients

may be looking for different things from what architects are programmed to provide, agrees Raymond F. Kogan, AIA, principal of Kogan & Co., a consultancy for architecture and engineering firms in Arlington, Va. “The biggest challenge for architects is to resist the temptation to be everything to everyone,” he says. “Clients want to hire architects with very focused areas of expertise who can help them in specific ways.”

For example, builders usually are looking for smart housing solutions that appeal to a narrow demographic group. Whether it’s empty-nesters moving back to the city or parents raising

blog spot:

A conversation with BUILD partner Andrew van Leeuwen, who authors the firm’s blog at blog.buildllc.com.

What is the guiding principle behind your blog?

It started four years ago after a conversation with an architect friend. We were working on our first rainscreen system and wanted to know the name of the waterproof membrane he’d used, but he wouldn’t give it to us. We decided we’d do everything we could to be the kind of architects who share information. We put up a lot of technical posts—details we’ve drawn, links to companies that helped put them together. We got tired of architecture being this mysterious black box.

Are there any rules?

The content has to be useful, and we do not accept advertising. We are approached weekly by manufacturers who want to advertise on our blog. We don’t want to make money off the blog, but it pays indirectly by leading to clients or networking opportunities. And we post often enough—Tuesdays and Fridays—to keep it fresh but avoid bugging people.

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What’s this about a senior field correspondent?

We use the term jokingly, but Josiah Johnson is a friend who’s addicted to good design. He has a habit of emailing us cool projects and products. We finally realized that this information was so valuable we should turn it into a blog post, so he contributes every other month.

Have you tracked leads from the blog?

When we ask new clients how they heard about us, their answer is usually blog-related. The clients we attract are digitally savvy, often working for software companies in Seattle, and the Internet is their main channel for exploring who’s out there. One of our clients started a blog to document their house’s construction, which became very popular.

What have you learned?

The blog is constantly telling us what it wants to be. It’s fun to blow off steam once in a while or put up a humorous post, but we find that people like us to remain serious, sticking to the details of architecture. And the audience out there is great. We try to invite differing opinions and more information about an idea or product, and we learn a great deal from the comments section.—c.w.

“clients care about a great many things in addition to appearance. if you want to know what’s really important to a client, all you have to do is ask.”

—the next architect: a new twist on the future of design, by james p. cramer, hon. aia, and scott simpson, faia, leed ap

small children, architects need to know more about that market than their builder clients. “Wouldn’t it be great if your architect came to you with something you didn’t know? ‘Here’s a concept of a way to serve your market. We can help because we understand it so well,’” Kogan says.

Entrepreneurs know how to recognize and

exploit opportunities, but they also have strong team-building skills. In 2006, Jared Della Valle, AIA, president of Alloy Development in Brooklyn, N.Y., parlayed his working relationship with a client into a partnership that today finances the firm’s development projects.

“The CEO of our company *continued on page 28*

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practice

does more than \$1 billion a year in business,” Della Valle says. “We use her financial strength to support our company.”

Patient relationship-building is at the heart of its project acquisitions, too. One building recently landed in Alloy’s lap four years after the firm lost a bid to buy it. Della Valle befriended the buyer of a 100-year-old landmarked warehouse at 192 Water Street, Brooklyn. When the developer ran into financial trouble on the project, Alloy offered to be a surrogate, raising new equity while taking on the existing debt. Title on the building, which now contains nine condo units, was subsequently transferred to Alloy.

“You try to make acquisitions through business relationships, where people have made offers on things and couldn’t solve the problem,” he says. “That’s our core skill, and when we design for ourselves it’s very profitable. The process is faster, we don’t have to make presentations, and we’re determining the value.”

Della Valle, who has master’s degrees in architecture and construction management, says Alloy held its own during the recession because its business model is based on seeking large returns over a long period, not waiting for clients or making monthly overhead. Tellingly, traditional skills such as designing and documenting represent only one-fifth of his time. The

rest is spent creating pro formas to analyze projects’ financial strength and convincing contractors, buyers, and investors to participate in the process.

It’s not for everyone. “A lot can happen between the start of a project and the end more than three years later,” he says. “You’re forced into difficult decisions and have to keep your promises. I’m at risk for more than I’m worth, and every day, dollar, and decision matters. You either thrive on that level of stress, or not.”

Nevertheless, Della Valle doesn’t buy into the myth that business and creative mindsets don’t mix. He and the firm’s two other architects are all “rain-makers” who have a spirit of achievement, he says. “They aggressively pursue a task and get it done. That’s the personality trait we’re interested in, and is a skill set in itself.”

Another critical test of the next architect, according to Cramer and Simpson, is the ability to streamline design and construction. Excess is out as clients are increasingly focused on budgets, sustainability, and speed. They want architects who have vision, but also take responsibility. That means inviting contractors to the table before budgets are set to advise on how design decisions affect the schedule, logistics, and cost. It also presents the opportunity for leadership, as architects have “the most influence over the size,

shape, appearance, function, cost, and ultimate value of a project,” the authors write. They should be the ones organizing and managing the team.

Chicago architect Randy Deutsch, AIA, LEED AP, thinks so, too. “There will always be a need for designers, whether boutique firms or not, but design will represent a smaller portion of what’s looked for,” says Deutsch, the author of *BIM and Integrated Design: Strategies for Architectural Practice* (Wiley, 2011).

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—kristine fallon, faia

Deutsch is so convinced that intensive collaboration is the way of the future that he’s planning the 2014 launch of the Integrated School of Building, an academic degree program featuring a multidisciplinary curriculum that brings together architects, engineers, and contractors. “I think the profession’s forward momentum will not be linear, but will require involvement from many people simultaneously,” he says.

The subject of building information modeling (BIM) invariably comes up in discussions about where

delivery methodologies are headed. And while there is disagreement over its current practicality on residential-scale work, the technology, however it evolves, bridges the gap between digital experimentation and real-world architecture. As such, it offers architects the potential for moving beyond a one-liner role.

“Certainly contractors are using BIM to cement relationships with clients and deliver more services during and post construction,” says IT consultant

Kristine Fallon, FAIA, president of Chicago-based Kristine Fallon Associates. “They’re looking at it as a tremendous leveler to improve prestige and establish long-lasting relationships. I don’t see architects doing this as aggressively.”

Even if a contractor is not working in BIM, architects using it are forced to meet early and often with the contractor to get information for the model, thus reducing the uncertainties of costs and schedule, Deutsch says. It also encourages mentoring up and down

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the in-house hierarchy: Senior staff with building knowledge can learn from digitally savvy younger talent, and vice versa.

“Something else will supplant BIM, and more quickly than we might imagine,” Deutsch says. “The point is, architects need to swing from design towards construction, and we’re in a position to make the first move.” Something architects can do now, he adds, is to treat emerging ideas as a learning opportunity and acquire the technology needed to face new challenges while coping with its limits.

A good example of this get-it-done attitude is Boiled Architecture, a start-up based in San Francisco that operates as a virtual office. Oscia Wilson, AIA, LEED AP, launched the firm this past July with three partners in Oakland, Hercules, and San Leandro, Calif. “When you’re setting up a new firm from scratch, you can figure out what really is the most logical way to operate,” she says, “because you aren’t burdened by the legacy of ‘we bought this so we have to keep using it.’”

Wilson is tapping the latest technologies to run a lean, nimble operation. The

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—andrew van leeuwen

partners meet in person on Fridays, but in between they text, Skype, and Google Chat. OpeningDesign, a free Internet-based design tool, lets them talk and sketch together in real time. And the web application Podio gives everyone access to contacts,

calendars, financials, and marketing materials. “It has a Twitter-style feed, so whenever I enter new information, the others know,” Wilson says. But how will clients perceive a virtual office? So far the architects are meeting clients at their own offices or at jobsites, though the firm also will use an office co-op close to public transit—space it could never afford to rent outright.

With a decentralized business, Wilson is researching cloud servers so builders can access BIM and AutoCAD files. That’s necessary because Boiled Architecture uses an integrated project delivery contract in which the architect and general contractor are equal parties on the commercial tenant improvement and small health care projects it targets. The working relationship is reinforced when the architect and builder are on the same contract, Wilson says. “It’s the fastest way to get contractors’ feedback. They’re thrilled to have documents that aren’t riddled with errors, and they’re not fighting with the owner to get paid for the extra work that entails.”

Some firms never lose the ethic of the small, scrappy startup. In 1999, BUILD principals Kevin Eckert and Andrew van Leeuwen founded their Seattle firm on the owner-builder concept, which means clients hire them to manage design and construction on projects ranging from single-family homes to mixed use. They have four employees, including one who runs a cabinetry shop. The partners “got tired of how expensive modern cabinetry is and saw an opportunity for doing it better and less expensively.

“Clients are less dreamy” than they were a couple of years ago, van Leeuwen says. “They’re interested in how much it costs and when it will be done, but still within the brackets of capital A architecture. We can charge less for design because we wear a lot of hats. We take care of everything from pricing to scheduling and finished photography”—and write a popular blog, too.

starting a conversation

While technological innovations are changing the nature of work, they’re also quietly tweaking the image of the ivory-tower architect unilaterally handing down design edicts. The increased emphasis on online and interactive media, for exam-

ple, forces firms to define their identity in a language lay people can understand. Boston architect Katy Flammia, AIA, LEED AP, principal of THEREdesign, realized this recently when she rebranded her 15-year-old business.

“Quite a few firms here are started by academic types whose websites are so complicated you can’t get to what you want. You

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start to think maybe this is what it’s like to work with them, too,” she says. “We wanted ours to show that we’re easy to talk to and not full of hype.”

Instead of focusing on a public message, Flammia and her staff asked themselves a question they often pose to clients, and one every entrepreneur must inevitably answer: What do we care about? “The bell for me is that I’m able to affect a life, culture, or company in some way that improves the client’s

situation,” she says. “This approach helps us make sure the project has real significance and is not just the trendy thing this year.”

Throughout history, architects have adapted to change by acquiring new skills and attitudes, and this is one of those times. Several years ago, Fivecat Studio principal Mark R. LePage, AIA, LEED AP, took a 15-week Academy for Entrepreneurial Excellence course at Westchester Community College near his home in Westchester, N.Y. There he learned a system for closing sales.

LePage, who started the Entrepreneur Architect group on LinkedIn, also is a prolific social networker. In addition to Facebook and Twitter accounts, he writes two blogs: Living Well in Westchester targets potential clients; the other, Entrepreneur Architect, is a networking forum for architects. “People who weren’t really looking at branding and business solutions are becoming more interested now,” he says. “I think that’s why the LinkedIn group is so active.”

Job creators are needed in this economy: problem solvers who inspire while keeping a watchful eye on the bottom line, theirs and their clients’. “We’ve always been nuts and bolts kind of guys,” van Leeuwen says. “We wake up and put both feet on the ground, and we think that’s become more desirable to clients.” ra



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