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BEST PRACTICES

Think Big

By [Ernest Beck](#)



Small firms get pigeonholed as small-scale designers. Partner up, says Joel Sanders, founder of Joel Sanders Architect, to get projects that are larger and more diverse in scope.

Credit: Sioux Nesi

With a 13-person staff and projects that run the gamut from high-end residential to retail, academic institutions, and public parks, New York-based Joel Sanders Architect is a small practice with a big portfolio. Founder Joel Sanders, AIA, who established the studio in 1986, says the firm's goal is to create provocative, innovative design at a range of scales and building types. That can be a daunting challenge for any small firm, especially at a time when global megafirms can deploy huge resources to secure assignments. To compete, Sanders teams with outside collaborators and experts and closely manages daily operations. He spoke to architect about what works best when his small firm wants to scale up.

Diversify to thrive.

There are many models for small offices, and some do specialize. But having a diverse range means more opportunities than having a focus on small-scale, single-

building-type projects, Sanders says. Unfortunately, some people equate small office with small scale and perceived limitations. "My objective is a broad range of projects and building scales to avoid being pigeonholed in any particular area."

Reach out to collaborators.

Of course, no firm can do it all. Sometimes you have to play with the big boys. "So forge collaborations with other firms that have project-specific complementary skills," he suggests. "For example, we're working with large firms like Haeahn Architecture and RMJM on a complex of high-rise residential towers in Seoul, South Korea. And we partner with Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners, tapping into their preservation expertise, on GSA projects." For small firms, partnerships help expand horizons.

Cross professional borders.

Don't be afraid to reach across the aisle to other design professionals, such as landscape architects, Sanders recommends. You can question existing professional divisions between disciplines "and create interdisciplinary collaborations." Put it this way to a client: Don't just hire an architect and then ask someone to put in trees.

Partner from start to finish.

You can do more as a team from the very beginning, Sanders says, as with his collaboration with landscape architects Balmori Associates to transform the median strip parks composing the Broadway Malls in New York City. "We were together from inception and bidding to completion."

Know yourself, and adventurous clients will follow.

Establish a distinct philosophy that defines your firm, Sanders offers. For example, he is concerned with the architectural consequences of how contemporary issues such as digital technology and new family structures transform lifestyles. That worldview has attracted open-minded clients from New York University to a developer building an LGBT retirement community that explores issues of aging and family identity.

Hire multitasking staff.

In a small firm, you need people who fit the jack-of-all-trades definition, Sanders says. "They must be flexible and nimble types who can roll with the punches and shift between projects and do a lot of everything," he explains. It's critical to work in teams on everything from preparing construction documents to presentations—and to be sure, it's not for everyone. "We look for people who want to experience the full spectrum of being an architect."

Those who can, teach.

Getting out of the office and into the classroom keeps you in the loop on current discourse and informs work generated at the office, Sanders believes. You meet and interact with colleagues and potential collaborators. What's more, "it provides a talented pool of potential staff," says Sanders, who is an adjunct professor at the Yale School of Architecture.

Run a lean machine.

"In an ideal world, you'd want the resources of a large firm to run the office," he says. "We'd like to have that but we make do with an office manager, a bookkeeper, and three associates." The hard-working office manager handles marketing and press and keeps the trains running on time—reminding everyone to meet deadlines.

Stay involved.

One of the biggest challenges of running a small office is balancing day-to-day administrative demands with design, without losing touch with the work and the clients. That's why he gets involved in every aspect of the job. "It can be overwhelming sometimes," Sanders says. "But I'd rather be involved than lose touch. For me, that's what the passion of architecture is all about."

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