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CRAN CHRONICLE

Letter from the CRAN Chair

By James A. Walbridge, AIA

Happy New Year and welcome to 2015. This is the third consecutive year publishing the CRAN Chronicle! I wanted everyone to know how hard the CRAN Communications Committee and the Chronicle Team have worked to develop, refine and maintain such a high caliber publication; all from a volunteer effort. We are very proud of their accomplishments.

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"CRAN is an AIA Knowledge Community that represents architects who practice custom residential architecture. It provides support, advocacy and education for its members, while maintaining a neutral stance with regards to style."

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Project Profile

Stanwood Residence

By Larry Paschall, AIA

What began as an ambitious renovation and addition to a 1961 residence morphed over time into working within the existing footprint to find the space needed to satisfy the program and not overbuild within the neighborhood.

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Architect: Larry Paschall, AIA – HPD Architecture LLC

Features

From the Collective to the Collaborative: A Tale of Post-Recession Rebirth

By Bryan Anderson, AIA | [SALA Architects](#)

Like many of our clients, I was familiar with SALA long before I became a principal, associate, or even a

student intern. Unlike most clients, I was in junior high when I was clipping my favorite images and collecting them in a three-ring binder. I wanted to design houses and where better to live my dream than at the firm regularly appearing in every pre-*dwell* home design magazine available to me?

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Perspectives from a Solo Practitioner

By Cary Westerbeck | *westerbeck|architecture llc*

I remember the date. It was February 27, 2009 that my adventure began. My time with a well-established Seattle firm for which I'd been working almost five years, came to an abrupt halt. For the previous years all two-dozen staff had been working 32-hour weeks as our once large backlog of projects dwindled to almost nothing.

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Structuring a Small Residential Firm for Success

*By Kevin Harris, FAIA |* *Kevin Harris, Architect, LLC*

When starting my practice in 1982, I somewhat naively equated success with survival, and was convinced that producing good work in my community would just about guarantee both. Building a sound reputation in your community for quality design has played an important role however, additional items helped convert my mere survival into relative success.

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21st Century Residential Architecture Business Models

By Jared Banks, AIA | Shoegnome, LLC
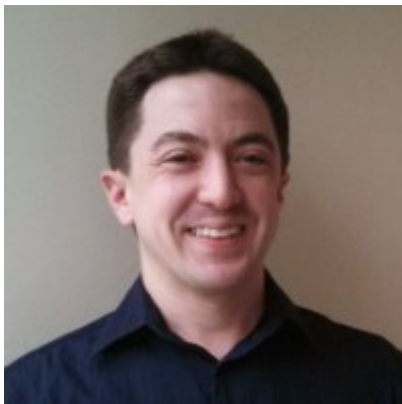
I didn't have a plan when I quit my day job and turned by side business into my full time gig. An old classmate had coincidentally contacted me the week before I quit, providing me enough work for the next few months. But I had no idea how to find clients. So I reached out to an atypical group of people who I knew needed help with residential design: other architects.

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Building Blocks Series: "Have You Talked with the Builder Today?"

By John Altobello (part 1 of 2) | [John Altobello Architecture](#)

A successful project is not just about the architect's relationship with the homeowner and the need to come up with the design that best reflects the client's goals. Another pivotal player in the mix is the builder. It will become apparent in the following interview with builder Stephen Payne why his participation in the workings of a vibrant team is critical to a project's success.

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In the News

Join the CRANversation

If you haven't been following along lately, you may have missed some of the recent attention grabbing articles calling into question the architect's role in contemporary society.

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The Owner | Architect Contract: New CRAN TV Series Video Now Available

Before commencing work with your Architect, it's important to establish a Contract. There is no one-size-fits-all contract, but there are several important bases to cover AND pitfalls to avoid. A good place to start is with an AIA Contract. It is always best to seek the guidance of an attorney to choose the best agreement and make edits. Make sure your contract covers the basics, your architect's responsibilities, a project schedule, and a few more miscellaneous items.

Learn More

Upcoming Events

CRAN Events at the 2015 AIA National Convention

ATLAIANTA! AIA Convention 2015 May 14-16, Atlanta

EV210: Cocktails and Controversy: Custom Residential Architects Forum
May 14, 2015 \ 4:00 PM - 5:30 PM \ Fee: $10

Join the AIA Custom Residential Architects' Network (CRAN) and our sponsor for a lively, interactive, and collaborative forum over cocktails. During this moderated exchange, we'll share insights and anecdotes regarding the challenges and triumphs faced by today's residential architects. CRAN provides support, advocacy, and education to everyone involved in custom residential design.

EV214: Reception for SPP, CRAN, and Housing Knowledge Communities
May 14, 2015 \ 6:00 PM - 8:00 PM \ Fee: $0

Enjoy a relaxing evening with your peers in an intimate setting at a local venue. Join architects, leaders, small firm owners, and AIA members with diverse interests ranging from small projects to custom residential design to affordable housing. The informal reception will provide opportunities for networking and sharing of best practices.

Save the Date! 2015 CRAN Symposium

Mark your calendar for **September 19-23, 2015** and join AIA CRAN in Minneapolis, MN.

Please look for more details to follow at a later date.

FREE Webinar: Using AIA Tools to Manage Legal Issues on Sustainable Projects

Sponsored by the AIA Small Project Practitioners (SPP) Knowledge Community and AIA Contract Documents
Tuesday, March 3, 2015 | 1:00 - 2:00 PM ET | **Earn 1.0 AIA HSW LU**

Through an exploration of the design-bid-build and construction management delivery models, participants in this course will understand the unique roles, responsibilities, risks and opportunities unique to sustainable design and construction projects and discover how to reduce, or better allocate, contractual risks using the AIA's *Sustainable Projects Contract Documents* and the revised *AIA Sustainability Guide*.

Learning Objectives:
Participants attending this webinar will:

1. Examine how a clear understanding of each party's unique roles and responsibilities will reduce project delays and misunderstandings; contribute to a successful sustainable project; and enhance the health and well-being of building occupants.
2. Discover the unique contractual risks architects, owners and contractors face when designing, constructing, or operating sustainable projects.
3. Identify the key contractual modifications that help alleviate the risks and

Earn 1.0 AIA HSW LU

challenges of Sustainable Design and Construction and understand the business and practice implications to be considered by owners, architects and contractors.

4. Explore new sustainable concepts related to the Construction Management delivery model and how these concepts contrast with the typical design-bid-build delivery model.

Register Now

FREE Webinar: Meeting Challenges & Overcoming Obstacles During CCA- Approaches Toward Best Practice

Sponsored by the AIA Construction Contract Administration (CCA) Knowledge Community
Wednesday, March 25, 2015 | 1:00 - 2:00 PM ET | **Earn 1.0 AIA LUs** | Learn more

An approach toward ideas for advancing the effectiveness and value of architectural service provided in the construction contract administration phase. Identifying some of the challenges encountered during this phase, ideas for establishing a methodology in anticipation, to avoid them and preparations made to surmount them.

Learning Objectives:
Participants attending this webinar will:

1. Be able to evaluate and develop approaches toward preparedness and beneficial staff training.
2. Discuss the benefits of CCA staff involvement in the project design and documentation process and potential toward proper interpretation of the contract documents.
3. Understand the necessity, objectives and value of a clearly defined scope of services.
4. Develop an understanding of the approaches toward controlling the CCA procedures and process.

Earn 1.0 AIA LUs

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Resources

Architectural Business Reources

This issue of the CRAN Chronicle is focused on the architectural business and the structure of various architectural firms. As a committee, we thought it would be beneficial to this issue to include a list of resources which focus on the business of architecture.

Read more

Archived CRAN Webinar: Incorporating the Top Trends for Residential Landscape Design

In winter 2014, ASLA polled residential landscape architects about the estimated popularity of various design elements for 2014. During this presentation, Jennifer introduced the most popular design features sought out by homeowners and identified how architects can incorporate such features into their projects. Participants were introduced to various eco-friendly practices in landscape design, including permeable paving, drip irrigation and LED lighting - and understand when their use is appropriate.

In case you missed the live webinar, you can now access the YouTube video, PDF and Q&A documents.

Learn More

New! AIAU Courses for CRAN Members

Take the latest courses in residential architecture on AIAU. New courses include the best of the fall CRAN Symposium, firm strategies for sustainability, netzero residential construction, and managing design-build projects.

You'll learn from top instructors on your schedule, from anywhere in the world. Once you complete a course, we'll automatically update your AIA transcript with your continuing education credits.

Check out these great courses:

CRAN Symposium 2014: Paradise Planned│**Earns 1 LU / HSW / RIBA**

CRAN Symposium 2014: Traditions of Home│**Earns 1 LU / HSW / RIBA**

CRAN Symposium 2014: The New Modern House│**Earns 1.5 LUs / HSW / RIBA**

CRAN Symposium 2014: The New Traditional House │ Earns 1.5 LUs / HSW / RIBA

Profiting From Design Build for a Residential Practice │ Earns 1.5 LUs / RIBA

Avoiding or Reducing Architect–Contractor Conflicts in Small Projects │ Earns 1.5 LUs / RIBA

Fundamentals of NetZero Residential Construction │ Earns 1 LU / HSW/ RIBA

Small Firm Sustainable Strategies: Applying Sustainable Principles to Small Projects │ Earns 1.50 LUs / HSW/GBCI / RIBA

Individual courses are $25 for AIA members and $40 for non-members. Buy four or more courses and save 15%, no promo code needed.

Check out more great courses on AIAU >

Did you know anyone can join AIA Custom Residential Architects Network for FREE? Sign-up on AIA KnowledgeNet and start a discussion in the AIA CRAN Discussion Forum.

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Last year witnessed more milestones and achievements that we should be proud of. Here are some highlights:

The 2014 CRAN Symposium, "The Architecture of Influence", held in Charleston, South Carolina, was a success on many levels. The attendance nearly doubled, the speakers and sessions were fantastic, the house tour was well organized and the hospitality from the host CRAN chapter and AIA members, let alone the residents of Charleston, was most gracious.

The AIA National Repositioning Grant CRAN was awarded, for its CRANtv program, witnessed the creation of five short TV episodes that have been met with much applause. These TV episodes can be viewed on the AIA CRAN webpage and on the AIA CRAN You Tube page.

CRAN's continued involvement at the AIA National Convention, last year held in Chicago, brought us the CRAN Forum "Coffee and Controversy – The Residential Architect Speaks Out", a joint reception with the Small Project Practitioners and Housing Knowledge Communities, an architectural trolley tour, one pre-convention workshop and three continuing education sessions, all geared towards the residential practitioner.

An effort by CRAN to begin discussions with Houzz, on how better representation by AIA Architects might be acknowledged, was the genesis ultimately leading to the strategic alliance between Houzz and the National AIA announced at the national convention last year in Chicago. Houzz's first action for this strategic alliance with the National AIA was to partner with CRAN to film and capture the education programs from the CRAN Symposium in Charleston and live stream them to a national and international audience; a first for both AIA National and CRAN. This grassroots effort by CRAN to advocate for the profession, all

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conceived and coordinated within CRAN, is a wonderful example for the Institute's Repositioning Initiative. This change within the AIA and within the profession came from its members and in this case, came from the CRAN Knowledge Community of the AIA.

CRAN's goal of bringing the Emerging Professionals to the table was formally realized last year with the development and creation of CRAN's Emerging Professionals Committee. This group of highly motivated, young constituents of the profession, quickly mobilized and set up an agenda towards establishing the committee - they have set high goals for the future. The creation of this committee is a strong example of inclusivity and further strengthens CRAN's mission to support the profession and all its members whom practice residential architecture.

These highlights from last year, all built upon the fabulous volunteer efforts of CRAN's members and its hard-working Advocacy, Communication, Education, Emerging Professional, Membership and Sponsorship committees, are very inspirational. However, they also serve as instigators towards looking at bigger issues we all face in the profession. We, the members of the AIA and of CRAN, have much more to do to build a better relationship between what we do as architects and how the public perceives what we do and how we do it. Every small contribution towards this larger realization and goal ultimately benefits us all and serves to create an environment where architecture is valued as an integral and essential component in all our lives.

Finally, CRAN is fortunate to have the support from the National AIA through a phenomenal staff whom, have been tasked to work with us towards accomplishing our goals. Within the Institute's Knowledge Community family, CRAN is known as the "over-achievers" and has a reputation for extraordinary commitment and volunteer efforts. The staff at AIA National also possesses the same commitment and without them, we could not have achieved the level of success we currently enjoy.

I challenge you to think about what you can do as an individual, as part of a collective, as part of the profession and as a member of society at large, to see what can be done when like-minded individuals bond together for a greater good than their own personal agenda.

Please join us, the Custom Residential Architects Network, a Knowledge Community of the American Institute of Architects, to move 2015 along with style and panache towards raising the bar for the AIA, for CRAN and for the profession.

James A. Walbridge, AIA, 2015 Custom Residential Architects Network Chair

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Stanwood Residence

Posted By: **Christopher J. Glapinski AIA** February 02, 2015 7:48 pm
Posted In: **Custom Residential Architects Network**

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Description

What began as an ambitious renovation and addition to a 1961 residence morphed over time into working within the existing footprint to find the space needed to satisfy the program and not overbuild within the neighborhood. The floor plan had the typical three bedroom, two bath, galley kitchen configuration of most homes built during that time. The original owner had made minor modifications over the 40 years they had lived there. However, the layout had remained the same. The Client's original program called for a new Kitchen in what had been the front Den area; a generous addition to the Master Bedroom area to create a new Master Suite; creation of a Laundry room and stair out of Bedroom 3; and a new second floor with a Guest Bedroom, Bath, and full-time Office for one half of the couple. At the end of the day, however, once costs and what the neighborhood would support were taken into consideration, the client decided to pull back and re-examine what they were really hoping to accomplish: a larger Master Closet and Master Bath; an Office; a dedicated Laundry; some additional storage; and a new Kitchen where both Owners could cook without stepping on one another. Closer examination of the existing layout revealed the spaces needed to accomplish the Client's program without pricing their home out of their neighborhood or adding a second floor that would loom over their neighbor. The end result was a home the Client could live in for another 40 years.

Project Details

Location: Dallas, Texas
Date of Completion: November 2014
Builder: Sardone Construction
Architect: Larry Paschall, AIA – HPD Architecture LLC
Building Footprint: 2,215 sq ft
Gross Conditioned Space: 1,670 sq ft

Program

A complete interior and exterior renovation of a 1961 residence. Interior of the home was taken back to stud and reframed to create a new Entry, combined Living and Dining room, new Kitchen, new Coat closet, new Laundry, larger Master Closet, and new Master Bath. Remaining spaces were updated including new flooring, paint, and light fixtures. Plumbing and electrical were also brought up to code. Remaining aluminum windows were replaced with thermally broken steel windows.

The home's exterior had the existing stone accent wall and existing siding replaced with shou sugi ban vertical tongue and groove planks. Brick and remaining wood soffits were painted to compliment the stain on the new siding. Composition shingles were replaced with anodized bronze standing seam metal roofing.

Major Materials and Systems

Closed cell neoprene insulation for the building envelope, tankless water heater, standing seam metal roof, shou sugi ban siding, and thermally broken steel windows.

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From the Collective to the Collaborative: A Tale of Post-Recession Rebirth

By Bryan Anderson, AIA | SALA Architects | http://salaarc.com/bryan-anderson/

Like many of our clients, I was familiar with SALA long before I became a principal, associate, or even a student intern. Unlike most clients, I was in junior high when I was clipping my favorite images and collecting them in a three-ring binder. I wanted to design houses and where better to live my dream than at the firm regularly appearing in every pre-*dwell* home design magazine available to me? A fortuitous remodel of my aunt and uncle's farmhouse and Dale Mulfinger's willingness to meet with an eager student from an out-of-state architecture program led to a summer internship and invitation to return after graduation.

Shortly after I joined the firm as a full-time intern, the firm was awarded "Rising Star" status by *Residential Architect* magazine in June 2000. Now, nearly 15 years later, that article represents the beginning of my tenure, but only the halfway point in the creation and experiment of the firm's lateral model. In 1983, founding partners Dale Mulfinger and Sarah Susanka saw opportunity in "society's desire to build," and particularly, to build better. To accommodate the demand they quickly uncovered, they designed the firm for expansion. *Residential Architect* summarized the model this way:

> The horizontal structure they had established was designed to accommodate growth; each partner handled a project independently from start to finish, so more architects simply meant the firm could accept more commissions. The unique setup, more like a law firm than a traditional architecture firm, also gave young architects the opportunity to do more substantive work than they'd be able to do elsewhere.

Fundamentally, the model remains in place today, but 30 years after it began a question looms: should it? As a young intern fresh out of North Dakota State University's BArch program, I flourished in this growth model. From student intern in 1999 to the most recently elected principal and managing partner, the model has granted me every opportunity. But my timing was also fortunate. The 2000's were boom years at SALA that saw substantial growth, propelled by the success of Sarah Susanka's *Not So Big House* series, and successive tech and prolonged housing bubbles. Opportunity for growth abounded, at least until 2007. With much of our work tied to the availability of residential mortgages, we felt the recession acutely and have emerged from the gloom into a very different landscape.

In the same years, Pinterest and Houzz began encouraging home design enthusiasts to share ideas, cable has given us the endless fallacies of HGTV, and *dwell* has made "modern" ubiquitous. Design savvy clients and builders are drawing from all of these resources to produce market-friendly housing for an HGTV design fee, chipping away at the value proposition of residential architecture.

All of this begs the question of whether or not our horizontal growth model is sustainable in this new environment. The model certainly retains benefits. Residential work *is* accessible to young and developing professionals, even if building science and sustainability programs have made it more complex. We maintain the benefit of our varied

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design language and cumulative experience. We still benefit from the substantive work afforded each of us working in small teams—with senior architects learning just as much from the young, particularly where technology is concerned. An executive committee distributes management responsibility to human resources, marketing, and financial roles to maintain time for design and project management.

But there are real challenges. Unable to retain our firm size through the recession, our own growth model sprouted much of our talented competition. Within SALA, we learned a top-heavy structure through a period of light work creates internal competition. We realized without market growth or attrition, there is little opportunity for emerging talent to advance. While our horizontal model promotes design diversity, it also complicates branding and identity. It expects each project architect to be a successful salesperson, designer, manager, marketer, and technician, without providing opportunity for transfer of these skills between principals except in high fee structures.

So I return to the accolades from *Residential Architect*: "SALA's holistic approach attracts skilled people and frees them to do their best work." Shortcomings exist, but I believe in this goal. I experienced the model thrive in good times and I learned from the bad. I look at our young and emerging staff and imagine how their path can be allowed to follow my own, and how their generational and social idiosyncrasies will improve upon it. I can't help but think of SALA's model as a metaphor for the profession—specifically those in residential practice—in this new post-recession era: our firm structures must support collaboration to increase our value in the marketplace. The current strengths in the SALA model are those that nurture the group. One of Dale's residential practice tenets is, "Buildings are the Answer, Architecture is the Question." We have to ask, as residential architects in this new market, what makes us relevant? Houses will be built with or without us, but we have the knowledge to make them better. By shifting our framework from the collective to the collaborative, I believe we will be stronger advocates for our homes and our profession.

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Perspectives From a Solo Practitioner

By Cary Westerbeck | [*westerbeck|architecture llc*](#)

I remember the date. It was February 27, 2009 that my adventure began. My time with a well-established Seattle firm for which I'd been working almost five years, came to an abrupt halt. For the previous years all two-dozen staff had been working 32-hour weeks as our once large backlog of projects dwindled to almost nothing. On this February Friday I'd just finished up a week of unpaid time off. One of the partners called, informing me that three more of us would be laid off today. I consoled myself with the fact that I was at least part of what would be the last wave of layoffs, which would leave the firm with a skeleton crew of partners, principals, and associates to get the remaining trickle of work done.

Thus began what I call the best terrible thing that ever happened to me: my entry into the world of being a sole practitioner architect. It's been six years since that day, and fall of 2015 will be the sixth anniversary for westerbeck architecture.

Being asked by a CRAN editor to write a short piece here gives me the opportunity to reflect on what I've learned the past six years, and what has kept my little firm growing. I'm one of those people energized by change, recognizing it as opportunity, so being laid off was exciting and freeing for me and less scary than I thought it would feel.

Of course, I tried to find work with other firms for months, while attending business classes sponsored by the state of Washington and all the while taking on small projects from friends, family and neighbors. By fall of 2009 I was completing my licensing, so it was time to formally launch my firm. There have been ups and downs since then, but the rewards of solo practice are sufficient to keep me going.

So, in no special order, here are six observations on six years of working solo.

I'm on my own. Sure, I can design any way I want, work from home in a t-shirt, represent myself to clients any way I choose, use my preferred software. But it's also completely up to me to find work, represent myself as a professional, build a portfolio, review the codes, figure out that waterproofing detail, keep up on taxes, market, maintain my learning credits, coordinate with consultants and design and build successful projects that result in clients who will refer me to others, all while making sure my business is viable and profitable. There is no safety net, and I must be a jack-of-all-trades, failing at none. It's exhilarating, but exhausting at times.

And yet I'm not an island. It's critical to me and my practice that I stay in touch with fellow architects and share information freely. I talk regularly with a number of architect friends who have also built firms since 2008. We share info on contracts, process, marketing, business, design and anything that comes up. A small group of us have just started a group to meet quarterly to help each other run our practices better. In addition to this, I have been following Mark LePage's Entrepreneur Architect and Enoch Sears' Business of Architecture, both since their early days. Both of these have been

enormously helpful resources for me as a sole practitioner and push me to improve my practice, try out new processes, and progress as an architect and businessperson.

Learning to be selective. Starting out I was willing to take almost any project. It was hard to say no. I quickly learned that, as Mark LePage says, some of the best projects are the ones we didn't take. Each project I take impacts the next as I build a body of work, like attracting like, building a reputation. Each year I've become more selective, looking for clients who will be great to work with, and I put a priority on taking projects that I anticipate will enhance my portfolio, leading to more desirable work. In time I've cultivated my ability to sense a quality client and project with increasing success.

Business practices matter. Perhaps one of the most impactful realizations I've had in these six years is how much running an architecture firm is about running a successful business. You can be a gifted designer, but if you don't know how to write a proposal, manage a project, make a profit, and get your practice through the slow times, you will fail. Designing is just a small part of what I do, and I'm just expected to be good at it and produce quality documents. The lion's share of my work is maintaining the business so I can keep doing the designs and producing good work and making happy clients. One way I do this is by building and maintaining systems. I have some, and I need to build more. Things such as invoicing the same day each month, carefully tracking time, and using good contracts for every project create predictability for clients and myself.

Learning to grow. With 2014 my best year yet, I'm struggling with how to grow. I've worked out of a home office and had the schedule flexibility to be present for my two young girls and it's been a boon to our family life. The next challenge is how to capitalize on the current demand for architectural services and carefully grow my practice. I've committed to more work in early 2015 thanks to help from willing contract architects I can put to work. Soon I'll be moving my office into a small space I own a few miles away. Thanks to low overhead, I'll finally have a space in which to meet clients and contractors, work alongside collaborators, pull together material palettes, and increase my presence in a nearby small town that is booming. While many are moving from rented offices to home and virtual studios, the opposite move seems right for me at this point for growing and establishing my firm in the local market.

Time to re-claim the master builder role. As many architects are realizing, we've conceded a lot of control to other project team members through the decades for fear of liability. Contractors, developers, interior designers, and other consultants have been willing to take on tasks we've shied away from, often resulting in a weaker project in the end. Add to this, clients who want to zig when we say zag, and the feeling the architect has lost control is magnified. On the contrary, with more control by the architect, liability can be minimized as we have our hand on the project from day one through completion.

In the interest of moving back toward a master builder role for the architect, I'm learning what it will take to develop and build my own projects. I recently completed the Architect as Developer course by Jonathan Segal. The course bowled me over and caused me to change how I think about practicing going forward. The architect as developer and builder has always seemed natural to me, and I'm pursuing this avenue. The next frontier is to be my own client and do my own work. Our recent property purchase mentioned above is located in a small, historic downtown core in a Seattle suburb, zoned for mixed use and high density. Plans are already underway for a seven unit loft building with retail and offices at street level. Ideally, we'll be building within seven years on this lot using the process laid out in the Architect as Developer course.

Solo architectural practice has been one of the toughest adventures I've ever been on. The pressure never lets up, and yet the exciting and rewarding experiences still outweigh the days of tedium and trouble in running the firm from day to day. There's always something to get excited about next, and each day is different. The exhilaration of running my own business and doing my own designs for clients is addictive. I strive to remain a student in everything I do, being open to better ways of practicing, while cultivating an understanding of what I'm doing right and capitalizing on that success each day. With some luck and continued hard work I expect another six years and six more observations to share when the time comes.

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Structuring A Small Residential Firm For Success

By Kevin Harris, FAIA | Kevin Harris, Architect, LLC | www.kevinharrisarchitect.com

When starting my practice in 1982, I somewhat naively equated success with survival, and was convinced that producing good work in my community would just about guarantee both. Building a sound reputation in your community for quality design has played an important role however, additional items helped convert my mere survival into relative success. My measure is maintaining a business that financed my practice, my wife and I, my sailboat, and raising our three daughters from private tuition pre-school through college, debutante balls, one marriage, and savings in anticipation of two more.

Important items I am happy to share include balancing paying with non-paying clients, guiding the decision process, maintaining appropriate staff, systematizing processes, and deciding between design-bid-build or design-build approaches.

Balancing Paying vs. Non-paying Clients

Looking back, I owe much of my success and reputation to work for my non-paying clients. They gave me introductions to and networking opportunities with powerful business leaders in my community. Each exposed my work in the public eye where design merit rapidly builds positive reputations. Clients were selectively chosen by my levels of interest, design challenge, and potential to improve my city. These are all pro-bono projects, and in moderation, can be satisfying on many levels. Needless to say, with this larger reputation, ample paying clients will continually appear.

Decision process guidance

Working with my custom residential clients over the years, I've come to realize that designing their homes didn't begin with determining which style to employ. In fact, any authentic style is the conclusive result of many factors, and develops toward the end of the design process, not the beginning. Experience has taught me how to save an enormous amount of time in design explorations by avoiding premature conclusion "tails" wagging the bigger body of decisions (the "dog") and frustrating forward process. There is a natural hierarchy when certain decisions should be made, and better results occur when each is addressed in order of relative influence. It is helpful to identify early in the process the big programmatic decisions; choices that promise to be hard, if not impossible, to change later. Once these are selected, you can direct the focus to refine the myriad of smaller decisions; selections that can readily change without major disruption. To illustrate to my clients what I am talking about, I share a metaphor of a pilot landing a plane. Locating the airfield target, the pilot orients the plane starting with a view from 5,000 feet. He then glides lower, making subtle adjustments, flies even lower while employing finer adjustments until he nears the runway and lands. I guide my clients through the design process by first taking in the big picture and gradually zeroing in on finer details in iterative passes. I refer to the process as the **hierarchy of design**—a sequence that begins with the neighborhood (the big picture) and then drops lower and lower to focus on the lot, floor plan, style and finish details. In this way decisions, that are typically harder (if not impossible) to change later in the process, are soundly determined before switching

your focus to more detailed and independently adjustable decisions. For example, too often homeowners will select a floor plan independent of and before choosing their parcel, and discovering too late that the great exterior views are impossible when the afternoon sun overpowers the living room, or that their perfect master bathroom is open to view from the neighbor's living room. These and many other issues presented by the site selected are discoverable early in the process and should influence the floor plan. A floor plan is more easily adjustable than is a neighbor's house, or light from the predictable path of the sun.

I share my belief that true style is the result of a series of influences, and should only be determined near the end of the process. Determining an authentic look that is appropriate is that conclusive finishing flourish of style.

Maintaining appropriate staffing

Employing too few in our office, and you can say goodbye to weekends, vacations, and family. Have too many, and you'll soon discover that there are many ways staff can bust a project's design budget. So how do you decide upon "appropriate" staffing positions? The answer will vary with your own abilities, propensities, and pain tolerance for too much work. I get this from the advice of a friend and successful entrepreneur who suggested that it was time to hire "whenever doing it your self begins to hurt too much".

For me, I have been as small as myself and in good times have expanded to as many as 12 employees. The search for proper balance is ongoing. Training new staff is expensive, but so is keeping underutilized positions. Lately I have become quite comfortable with a total staff of 7; myself, three interns, a newly licensed former senior intern (who acts as a project manager), an office manager / bookkeeper/ PR director/ overall motivational guru (my attorney wife who prefers running my office to practicing law), and a part time, but very capable, student worker. I also rely upon outside professionals for tax preparations and the care and feeding of my digital and networking environments.

As far as numbers are concerned, my own capacity for directly managing technical staff is maximized with four interns. Current expansion plans are to limit future growth to that 4:1 ratio of architect to support technical staff as successive interns become licensed. Once they grow as project managers, it becomes time to groom them for future partnership.

Systematize your process

Looking back at how I designed homes over the decades, I realized that I was instinctively repeating an identifiable process that guided how I "intuitively" approached each project. Committing these major steps to paper allowed me to better communicate expectations to my staff while providing clients with a road map of expectations along their way. Knowing the 'big picture' process helps everyone sequence and batch limited decision energy where it best aids the entire effort. I share my design process protocol to help clients orchestrate their decisions in concert with the project team.

Identify your own design sequence preferences, record them on paper and start sharing that process of expectations to everyone involved. Having a standard sequence of operations is an enormous help to you, your clients, and your staff. Having it committed to paper helps with its communication, and can guide managed growth should you choose to enlarge your operation.

Design, design-build, or a combination

The traditional design-bid-build approach engages the contractor after final drawings have been prepared and promises identifying the lowest price for work described in the drawings. Design-build engages the contractor simultaneous with the designer and can promise to save both time and costs. Both are on their surface have advantages, so why do I not use either one?

I started my practice using the design-bid-build process, and soon experienced disappointment with the approach. Relying upon commodity information from cost estimating manuals as a guide, I found they did not provide the accurate pricing needed for preliminary selections or decision-making. This resulted in client decisions based on an optimism unfiltered by the reality of actual costs, and ultimately not supported by their budget. The drawings I prepared included the features and items I believed they wanted, and the multiple bidder process did identify a "lowest price" for the work.

However, this effort rapidly escalated into a very cumbersome, frustrating, and expensive exercise whenever the low bid exceeded the available budget. My use of this traditional

design-bid-build process more often became the design-bid-re-design- re-bid-construction process. Once the preferred bidder revealed the detailed costing, I would re-visit all preferences and selections with my client and contractor, suggest alternatives, rearrange and reduce the project scope, and otherwise modify the drawings to accurately reflect all changes before a final re-pricing. This second effort was both time consuming and emotionally exhausting.

Custom residential design involves balancing many variables. Knowing the individual cost is important in deciding each selection. When one item seems too pricey, lower-cost alternates are readily considered. This selection-feedback- decision process is not unlike adjusting an individual track on a recording studio soundboard. The technician focuses on a single track of the overall mix, and makes subtle adjustments that affect the final outcome.

The cost of each material selection, customized feature, and fixture can be equated to the hundreds of individual dials and dozens of equalizer slide bars on a soundboard. The seemingly simple adjustment of volume, bass, and treble for a single instrument or voice, when combined with all of the other inputs, becomes quite complicated. The final recording is not released for play (construction) until the overall mix (final drawings) of all tracks (selections) has been artfully adjusted and approved. For a custom house, these settings represent the quantity, quality, and cost of each specific selection, including customized items. The "final cut" that is released represents the final drawings used for construction.

I knew the key to a better design process and selections decision-making was the procurement of price feedback as a decision tool. Getting such information under the design-bid-build approach proved difficult, if not impossible. It was unreasonable to expect a reputable contractor to invest the 40 or more hours required to pre-bid a project, with only a one in three (or less) chance of winning the final bid.

One immediate option was for me to consider the design-build process and become my own contractor. This was problematic for me, as I found my plate was consistently full with just the concerns and demands of practicing architecture – and there was no room for adding the contractor's responsibilities. It had taken me decades of education and experience to reach a comfortable level of professional competence just with architecture. I can only imagine how much longer it might take to also reach a comparable level with contracting. Hats off and admiration to those hearty architects that are also contractors!

I needed to find a more reliable method of sharing anticipated prices, but one that did not require mastering an additional learning curve. My solution is a hybrid approach combining the economic discipline of competitive bidding with the advantages of ready access to craftsman and accurate pricing during the detailed design and selection process. My clients select a specific contractor after schematic design, and the contractor provides cost feedback for decisions before I begin preparing the final drawings. By selecting the contractor early, both he and his craftsmen can now safely invest the time required to estimate costs, knowing that they will most likely have the job. The economic check and balance from competitive bidding remains, but moves down a notch from general contractors to between material suppliers and multiple sub-contractors.

Conclusion

For my own practice of custom residential design, seven staff is a sustainable size. I continue to reap benefits from my early pro-bono "non-paying" clients and have greatly increased production efficiencies through standardizing my processes. I am also happy with the early pricing feedback from selecting contractors prior to design development, and am likely to always be impressed by those CRAN members who successfully practice design-build.

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21st Century Residential Architecture Business Models

By Jared Banks, AIA | Shoegnome, LLC | www.shoegnome.com

Part 1: Freelancers

I didn't have a plan when I quit my day job and turned by side business into my full time gig. An old classmate had coincidentally contacted me the week before I quit, providing me enough work for the next few months. But I had no idea how to find clients. So I reached out to an atypical group of people who I knew needed help with residential design: other architects.

Thanks to many recent advances, especially in production software and Internet access, the ability to work remotely—either across town or across the globe—has never been easier. The resulting cultural and technological changes have turned the concept of a freelance residential architect from a difficult proposition to a powerful and viable business opportunity. Having spent the past five years as a freelance architect, I've pulled together my advice to someone else contemplating the path of freelance residential architect (or someone looking to hire one).

1. **Formal over Informal.** Don't fear formal contracts. Get things in writing. Don't be afraid of protecting yourself (and your time and money) by making your relationship with your client formally and legally clear from the beginning. When will you be paid, who will pay you, what's the fee structure, who's responsible for what and when. These are all good things to get clarified up front. Preferably in writing. It'll also help your client remember that you should be treated like a fellow business, and not an employee. *Now for honesty:* over the past five years, I didn't do this for the majority of my work (though I've gotten a little better with each project). Only one time did it go horribly wrong. One time. That was three years ago, and it still burns. But I also learned from that experience to be VERY careful about whom I work with. Again don't follow my example. Err on the side of formality. It's worth it.

2. **Think about your portfolio.** When you agree to work with another design professional, make sure you talk about images and credit at the beginning of the process. Get something in writing as part of your agreement. At the start of the project ask about getting finished images or using the work for your own needs after everything is done. With digital collaboration, you and your client might be hundreds or thousands of miles apart, so hopefully they don't see you as competition. If you don't do this, you might find you have very little to show after years of collaborating on beautifully executed work.

3. **Think about your exit strategy.** Do you want to stay a freelance architect forever? If not, how do you go from freelance to firm? I don't have the answers (yet), but it's something to think about. If you like the life of a freelance architect, think about growing from freelance architect to production firm (more on that in Part 2 of this article).

4. **Beware of tricky End Times.** When you transition out of being a freelancer (because

you find your own traditional clients, because you want to re-enter the normal firm world as an employee, because you want to become a stay at home parent…) be wary of the classic *Hollywood bank robber trap*—just one more project then you're out. From my experience there is always another great freelance opportunity around the corner. At some point you need the courage to say no, to say this is the last one.

5. **Learn when to say no**. When anyone goes off on their own (as a freelancer or firm), we tend to say yes to everything: we need work and we need money. But at some point you start getting enough work that you don't need to say yes to everyone. And in fact you learn that you CAN'T say yes to everyone, without making massive changes or sacrifices. Learn to be picky. Learn to say no before you are trying to say no for the first time, to your last freelance project; or before you are too stressed to think straight. Think about why you are accepting work. Is it money, client personality, project type, etc. It will be something. What is your brand? Think back to your exit strategy and portfolio. How will your projects and clients support those two things?

6. **Accept that you will become lopsided.** Freelancers don't do everything, just what is hard or no fun for others. You will gain tons of experience in certain aspects of our profession, but be completely devoid in others. Embrace this as a strength or work hard (ask) to keep yourself balanced however possible.

7. **Find a niche.** It might be something like LEED expertise or being a PHCC. Or it might be speed, availability, or detailing. Or it might be special knowledge like being an expert at ArchiCAD, Revit, or some other program. Find your niche and then invest in it. Make others connect you and that need together. Don't fear a small niche. The bigger the niche, the more people there will be trying to fill it (hence LEED as a niche probably isn't the wisest move). Everybody "knows" that Revit is the most popular BIM program out there. But I've staked my career on the unintuitive truth that the lesser used ArchiCAD is a better software to build a business on, because that niche is the right size for successful freelancing, and actually provides more opportunities for what I want to do.

8. **Always grow your niche to avoid being pigeonholed.** Find tangential interests and grow towards them. Use your niche to expand your services and abilities towards what you eventually want to do. Remember that niche and passion will overlap, but won't be a perfect fit. That's okay. Being passionate about design isn't a niche. Being good at rendering is. For myself, being knowledgeable and curious about technology and using that to improve design (via BIM tools) is a niche that I will transform into something I can build an architecture firm on.

9. **When you find your niche, make sure it includes technology.** People need technology savvy help. Embrace technology and make sure you know enough. Then learn more. Part of every freelancer's job is to understand current and future trends in architectural production. If technology (production software, rendering, etc.) and social media scare you, freelancing is going to be hard, and probably not for you. Unless you have a time machine and can travel back at least twenty or thirty years.

10. **Don't fear social media, embrace it.** Marketing is not a dirty word. If you have a niche, you need to become known. If you are unknown, you won't be trusted. Make it so others find you. That means be on LinkedIn, be on Facebook, perhaps on Twitter, and participate in forums that relate to your niche. If you tell someone you are an expert in X, but they can't find proof of that on the Internet, don't expect them to believe you. When people look for a solution to their problems and find a wonderful person who can help them rather than just a complex answer that they have to implement themselves, they will be happy to explore the idea of hiring a freelancer.

11. **If you are unhappy with your work, figure out why and fix it.** Unhappy freelancers miss deadlines, do worse work, or just turn into monsters to their families. The upside to freelancing is good money, good clients, and insulation from many of the annoyances of our profession. The downside is a distance from decisions and thus a loss of control, especially regarding deadlines. Be VERY aware of your happiness level as a freelancer. If you are unhappy, stressed, and always short on time, those are signs to reevaluate your business model.

Part 2: Residential Production Firms

If one enjoys being a freelance architect; if one likes helping other architects, designers, and contractors do their best work; if one enjoys the focus on production and doesn't mind the distance from the initial design process; if one prefers the elegant process of refinement and problem solving that comes with taking a project from schematic design to

permit; if one prefers their clients to be building professionals rather than home owners but still loves residential design; then I have a business proposition for you. Look at being a freelance residential architect as the first step to building a residential production firm.

From my experience there is a huge demand for a production firm that focuses on residential projects. So much of the residential market is sole practitioners and small firms. They often have huge swings in workflow, get asked to do things they aren't structured to handle (because of scope or time), and most importantly are faced with ever-rising technological challenges. Freelancers offer a micro solution to these issues: tech-savvy architects who can help out, regardless of their physical proximity to the design architect or the project location. But production firms focused on solving the problems of the residential world would be a macro solution. A residential production firm would be a valuable money-spinner for our segment of the profession. A residential production firm wouldn't be about bringing costs down (though it would); it'd be about increased focus across the profession. A residential production firm would improve quality while allowing for greater quantity.

Many (most, all?) architects recognize the increasing technological demands of our profession. Like it or not, we are now an artistic, technological based profession. And that is not what most (many, all?) of us signed up for. Providing the technological power to the small residential firm through a residential focused production firm is a goldmine. It would benefit everyone involved. It would allow individual architects to focus on what they do best (client management, detailing, production, visualization, initial design, construction management, etc.) and then team up with other experienced, knowledgeable architects who have different strengths. It would also allow all firms involved to be streamlined and lean. No need for boutique firms to grow their production staff or bulk up on the aspects of their business they are not known for. Instead they could stay lean and nimble, which is advantageous for a firm focused on cultivating high design. Not only that, but the residential production firm would be an ideal place for many younger practitioners to get mentored in the means of production—and a place for older architects looking to wind down their careers.

The future is about collaboration and flexibility. Freelancers and residential production firms are poised to greatly enhance the residential architecture community in the coming years. Who's with me?

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Have You Talked With The Builder Today?

Some words of wisdom highlighting the builder's critical role.

Interview by John Altobello, John Altobello Architecture with Stephen Payne, Payne/Bouchier, Inc., Fine Builders

A successful project is not just about the architect's relationship with the homeowner and the need to come up with the design that best reflects the client's goals. Another pivotal player in the mix is the builder. It will become apparent in the following interview with builder Stephen Payne why his participation in the workings of a vibrant team is critical to a project's success.

After dropping out of college in 1972, Stephen Payne worked in a woodshop in New Mexico. He then moved back to Boston where he worked at Downes Millwork, here the main focus was short runs of 19th century reproduction standing and running trim. When that business sold, he moved on to another Boston shop owned by the Dixon Brothers, where he built cabinets and made sash and doors.

With a couple of years of cabinetwork and construction in the Los Angeles area behind him, Steve again returned to Boston to join with his brother Tom, and Oliver Bouchier, to found Payne/Bouchier. The threesome started out as a woodshop that fabricated and installed custom architectural millwork. Their client base was primarily general contractors. In the course of doing their work, they often found themselves at the mercy of, what seemed to them, poor communication between the primary players on a project; client, architect and builder. The frustration that this engendered was what caused them to expand from a custom woodshop to a full service general contractor, Payne/Bouchier, Inc., Fine Builders.

Make sure the design direction flowing to the builder is coherent.

JA: I've always been of the mindset that openness, a flowing communication among principal players is critical to a successful job, where architect, contractor, homeowner, interior designer and other design professionals are all on the same page.

In your experience, what is the glue that holds the cast of characters together? What makes for good communication among the team? What has been your most important contribution to the team?

SP: The most critical element is an engaged client who believes in the team approach and knows that part of their role is to establish the division of labor. A project runs best when all the players are at the table from the outset and understand their roles. The builder's list of responsibilities can be relatively easy to establish. Clear delineation of where responsibilities begin and end for architect, interior designer, and landscape architect is a more complex task. We are working on a project right now that has a large team. There is an architectural firm from Boston, an architectural firm from California, an interior design firm from California, a landscape architecture firm from Boston, Boston based structural, mechanical, geo-technical, and civil engineers, and several key subcontractors, with design input from around the US and Europe. A lot of the players are used to being the smartest

person in the room and certainly more expert in their field than whomever they are talking to. Part of my job is to channel the talent so that the design direction that flows to us, the builder, is coherent.

All design direction needs to come from the architect.

JA: In the collaborative approach to a design and construction project, what do you see as the architect's principal role? Have there been times when one player vied with another to be leader of the pack? If there was a conflict, how was it resolved?

SP: All design direction, to the builder, should come from the architect. Any design initiative, whether proposed by the interior designer or the in-house mechanical engineer from the design/build HVAC contractor, should be reviewed, approved, and codified by the architect. The architect is the one with the formal training in the key disciplines, and the one who is ultimately responsible for the function/form blend.

We had a project where the interiors person did not keep the architect or me, the builder, current with her decisions. She issued a painting schedule to the painter unbeknownst to the other team members. There were no dates accompanying the schedule. Because everyone was not on the same page, and the hierarchy of information flow was disregarded, the painting job cost the owner 50% more than what is should have. This situation could have been avoided if the channels of communication had been open.

Design goals are the architect's call.

JA: Have you collaborated closely with an architect on a specific project? Was there give and take on design issues? Did you ever find that design goals and construction goals were at odds? How did you and the architect resolve the differences?

SP: We collaborate closely with every architect on every project. There is always give and take and always some level of disagreement about aesthetic issues. The resolution is always the same. Once I have said my piece, and know I have been heard, I say, "You're the architect, your call."

We did a remodel of a house on the seacoast. I enlisted an architect and an interior designer and a landscape architect. Along with me and the owner, this constituted the team. The architect was slow getting out of the gate. Deep into the project, the architect came up with the idea of a copper-clad oriel. The design didn't fit within the gable that had already been built. The roof pitch required for completion of the new design was much steeper than what I had constructed. The owner was in agreement that the new design element would add to the overall design integrity. Even though the change would expand the budget, and that it was an after-thought to the initial design, I bowed to the architect's wisdom. And so we went ahead with his revised plans.

Provide excellent documentation.

JA: What can architects do to improve communication with their builder? Give a specific example from an actual project illustrating good or bad architect-driven communication.

SP: The answer is boringly simple. Good nomenclature, enumeration, and date stamping. Number and date your SK's, keep track of them, publish and re-publish SK logs. Don't change the number or name of a room after it has once been numbered and named. Revision dates, written large, are an essential tool for the builder to ensure that he and his subcontractors are keeping up with current thinking.

We are doing a job right now with a Boston architecture firm who have seemingly mastered the art of construction administration. We are in year three of an elaborate residential renovation. There are vast quantities of drawings and sketches. These architects have set up a DropBox account where we can always easily find the most up-to-date drawings, as well as access whatever obsolete drawings we may need for discussions with subcontractors about base contracts and change orders.

(Part 2 of this interview will be featured in the next issue of the CRAN Chronicle.)

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Join the CRANversation

If you haven't been following along lately, you may have missed some of the recent attention grabbing articles calling into question the architect's role in contemporary society.

In their much-publicized New York Times op-ed, "How to Rebuild Architecture," Steven Bingler and Martin C. Pedersen claim that contemporary architects have "both [a] physical and spiritual disconnect…attempting to sell the public buildings and neighborhoods they don't particularly want, in a language they don't understand."

In response, "The New York Times Versus Architecture," Aaron Betsky of *Architect* magazine dismisses Bingler and Pedersen's position as cliché, and instead argues that the role of today's architect is to foster experimentation with the aim of "figuring out how to make our human-built world better." He goes on to point out that architecture, "[in] truth…is made for those who have the means to commission it, and reflects their values and priorities."

In his Huffington Post article, "The Failures of Architecture Criticism," Lance Hosey questions whether architects can best serve their clients—both direct (patrons) and indirect (occupants)—by creating a "built environment [that will] nourish and enrich their lives." In contrast to the "architect-as-artist" stereotype, he cites architects that employ credible scientific research, such as "the innate human attraction to nature's patterns of space, shape, and texture" in their design methodology.

Architects that specialize in custom residential design are seldom lumped in with the "starchitects" that dominate national architectural debate, yet the work we do designing homes and, by extension, neighborhoods certainly has the power to connect or disconnect with the public. So what do you think? **Are we best serving the needs of society? Or, have we lost touch with the aspirations of the general population?**

For other commentary on this topic, please see: "The Architects, Together and Apart."

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Editorial Note: This issue of the CRAN Chronicle is focused on the architectural business and the structure of various architectural firms. As a committee, we thought it would be beneficial to this issue to include a list of resources which focus on the business of architecture.

This link will take you to Architect magazine's business articles, featured in current and past issues.

This article, "Incorporating Your Practice," featured in Architect magazine, discusses the strategy for incorporating your business.

This article in Architect magazine is titled "How to Structure Your Firm".

This article, "Informed Decisions for Investing in the Future," addresses the physical space architects work, and invest, in.

This article, "Revamp Your Website," focuses on the firm's website design, offering suggestions for creating a stronger internet presence.

The AIA has published a book called, "Architect's Essentials of Starting, Assessing, and Transitioning a Design Firm." This is a helpful guide to all those who are starting or currently in charge of running a design firm.

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