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Today's Architects Studio: An Evolution Or Revolution?

Created By: [Luis, A. Lira](#) **On** Mon, Dec 05, 2011 10:32 AM



The traditional architect's studio which commonly starts out of one's garage is taking a different turn.

Over the past years, we have seen businesses fold and along with it, traditional architect jobs vanished. While architect positions decreased in light of the current economy, surprisingly, numerous start-up architecture firms increased. The quintessential architecture firm, unlike other industries, has been one that is easy to open as a business due to the low capital requirements. As soon as they get the elusive license to practice the profession, the next natural step for architects was starting up an office, more commonly out of their garages.

Recently, a new breed of office set-ups have emerged such as the virtual office and co-working spaces. These architecture studios appear nothing like their predecessors. *"I think that there will be factors that will encourage architects to become more virtual as opposed to being more co-located. As they evolve, firms are going to have to look for those functions that lend themselves to being distributed as opposed to being co-located,"* says **Ray Kogan, AIA, 2011 Chair of the Practice Management Knowledge Community and President of Kogan & Company.**

Virtual office as architecture studio

Quintessential firms had been traditionally started out of one's garage. It seems likely that the virtual office, with the blending of home and work where the ultimate goal is that of efficiency,


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becomes a natural alternative to setting up an architecture office. Providers of this setup include **Regus**, who offers clients *"a big business image without the big price tag. It's great for start-up, small and home-based businesses or those looking for risk-free expansion into new markets."*

Technology plays an important role in the emergence of the virtual office concept. It dates as far back as the Industrial Revolution where telecommuting was first introduced. With the advent of the Information Age, we saw how it evolved to what it is today from when it was first conceptualized by **Alf Moufarrige**, Founder of **Servcorp**, as an offshoot from the executive suites industry. It is essentially space utilization complemented with professional live communications. Overhead costs are minimized, while professionalism gets maximized, partly because of the non-existent burden of health care costs of employees, records, payroll, insurance and rent, and the traditional paid time-off.

From an environmental standpoint, firms leveraging this office setup can reduce their carbon footprint as a result of minimizing, if not completely eliminating the traditional daily commute. From a work/life balance standpoint, it gives more flexibility since one spends less time on the road and more time on what matters most.

Architects are not the only ones who see the benefit in this type of setup. Other common virtual office users include entrepreneurs, service-based professionals, and business consultants. Surprisingly in a recessionary economy, there is notable growth within this industry across the globe. On top of that, it is easy for our current technologies to support its infrastructure.

Will we then see architecture firms becoming full virtual offices in the coming years? There are three levels at play that will need to be addressed for an architecture studio to work as a virtual office: coordinated level which is critical during production, collaborative level which is critical during design, and communicative level which is critical for project management. *"For example, I can imagine production positions being distributed anywhere on the globe. People can work and coordinate those kind of activities together (virtually). Design is a little bit more of a challenge because design is more of a collaborative activity than a coordinated activity. Production being coordinated, design is really (about) people working together in real time with a whole lot of interactivity and is a little bit more difficult to do when you're not co-located. Finally, I think Project Management is probably the biggest challenge because those people will need to be in close communication with clients, the rest of the project team, and at times with the*

contractor. But over time, I can imagine that an (architecture) office will become more distributed and much less co-located," explains **Ray Kogan, AIA**.

Co-working space as architecture studio

As a business, this co-working environment focuses on the idea of community from making it as easy as possible for entrepreneurs to get a turn-key office space in a good location, to having a cost effective option, equipped with all the tools needed to run a company, to sponsoring community lunches once a month. The draw was how this co-working space was designed--it gives the tenants the ability to collaborate, making it more conducive to interaction with other tenants, resulting in sharing of ideas, thus building a community.

With access to an office space 24/7, co-working has become an attractive alternative for people who travel a lot, those working in projects with teams in different geographic locations and time zones, or perhaps those who just requires more flexibility than what a traditional office open from 9am - 5pm can accommodate.

"There's a sense of being independent (as an entrepreneur) and yet part of a group. We have a lot of people who will still be here (co-working) whether the economy is good or bad. I do think the economy propels that aspect (of entrepreneurship) but as the economy gets better, I don't think entrepreneurship would dry up as a result of a good economy." For example at OfficePort CHI, currently *"We had one business start out as a one-desk operation, then upgraded to an office suite, and has now hired 2 people, and has 2 interns,"* explains **James Carver** of **OfficePort CHI**, a co-working office in the heart of the Chicago Loop.

Challenges to be addressed in virtual offices or co-working spaces

Ray Kogan, AIA, foresees some challenges to the changing environment of architecture studios. "One of them is supervising. How can a more senior architect supervise someone on their team in doing something when they're not there to look over their shoulder and show them how to do something. There are challenges that even the best of technology can't quite take the place of somebody coming up to your desk and giving you a suggestion, some bit of advice, correction, or maybe even handing you a little sketch. The interrelationships are little bit difficult also.

People can talk. People can video chat but it's still not quite the same thing as sitting next to each other and pointing in gesture. Mentoring is another topic entirely. It doesn't work quite as well if you're not near them."

Offices have seen an evolution over the years. With the changing tide of the economy coupled with a new generation entering the workforce exposed to technology far more advanced than what existed in generations prior, attitudes toward work are quickly evolving. **Wired** magazine featured an [article](#) about the changing attitudes toward work and how it helped shape the design of office spaces from the past, the present, and what we can expect in the future.

Perhaps the future of the architecture studio is one that would be revolutionary in a way that it becomes a hybrid of a virtual office and a co-working environment.

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Ken Gallegos December 09, 2011 10:26 am

There is a bit of a disconnect these days with architecture studios. I come from a fairly recent graduating architecture class (1997). Our studio environment was traditional in the sense that no one had computers at their desks. Everyone drafted, with pencils, t-squares, maylines, erasers, etc. We had to go to the computer lab to use the new "virtual" drafting programs. Hand sketching, hand rendering is becoming a lost art due to the computer nowadays. Recent graduates are missing the master builder aspect of their architectural education. Yes, the profession is transforming with the times and we all have to adapt, but good old fashion pen on paper skills need to be exercised. Ideas flow faster this way.

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