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Redesigned Practice

A sluggish economy and a spirit of entrepreneurship prompt many architects to diversify their services and develop new business models

BY LISA DELGADO

A growing number of NYC architects and designers are applying their design skills to a new challenge: remaking their own practices. Fresh business approaches and partnerships are the order of the day, sometimes spurred by the pressures of the recession, sometimes by a passion for exploring related fields.

Long known for its forays into development, SHoP Architects recently has been gaining traction in construction management and giving it a high-tech update. In 2007, SHoP Construction Services launched, which is a separate business entity but shares SHoP Architects' office space. The new business manages a mix of building projects, including some designed by SHoP Architects, such as the Barclays Center, and some by other firms.

Over the past dozen years, SHoP has focused strongly "on how to use modeling software to not only improve the way we design, but how we execute our projects in the field," says Christopher Sharples, AIA, a principal of SHoP Architects and SHoP Construction. Increasingly, the role of an architect is "not just to make great designs and then hand them off to the builder, but to work with the builder in realizing those projects," he adds. "That's really at the core of where we think the role of the architect is going."

In its construction management approach, SHoP Construction is distinguished by its enthusiastic embrace of technology to streamline the design-to-construction process and boost collaboration between architects, builders, and clients. The company's services include developing building information models and leading the virtual design and construction process. In addition to using common software such as Revit and Navisworks, SHoP has been developing some of its own technologies, including a VDC portal. "This is a Web-based interface that project stakeholders use to engage an information model live on their own website and interact with that model," says Jonathan L. Mallie, AIA, a principal/managing director of SHoP Construction and a principal of SHoP Architects. "So they wouldn't necessarily see the model only in a project meeting; they could be at their desk and research information."



Task Name	MA_200-200	Program Name	Task Group	13.726	Qty Required	1011	Layout	1 of 101
Number of Sheets with Same Layout	1	Sheet Group	2	101	Qty Required	1011	Layout	1 of 101
Material	A300	Sheet Length	100' 00"	Sheet X Used	100' 00"	Sheet Number	100	
Thickness	0.110	Sheet Width	42' 00"	Sheet Y Used	42' 00"	Sheet Location		
Sheet Name	001.00	Cutting Time	42' 00"	Cutting Length	100' 00"	Qty Required		
Part ID	Part Name	Qty Req	Qty Issued	Qty On Hand	Order Number	Structure Number	Shop Order Number	Customer

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—Christopher Sharples, AIA

(top left) SHoP Architects used CATIA to create this design model of the weathering steel latticework that wraps around the Barclays Center.

(bottom left) SHoP Construction used SigmaNEST software to flatten the curved geometries in the design model and to nest the panels efficiently within larger steel sheets. Here, four panels are nested within a single sheet. Altogether, 12,000 uniquely-sized steel panels make up the latticework.

(right) SHoP Construction uses a custom barcode-scanning iPhone app to track each panel as it is waterjet cut, bent, preweathered, assembled, and installed.



©SHoP Architects/SHoP Construction

SHoP is also developing iPhone and iPad apps to allow users to access building models. One of its iPhone apps is tracking the steel panels in the Barclays Center project, for example. "As the panels are being fabricated, pre-weathered, assembled, and shipped, they're tracked through an automated iPhone application that updates a database," Mallie explains.

Despite the recession (or perhaps because of it), the construction management company has grown from seven members to 27. The tight economy is boosting the building industry's interest in the efficiencies of a virtual design and construction process, according to Mallie. "There's a huge learning curve going on," he says. "Not everyone is ready for it or willing, but there's a strong need, so people are far more open to it."

Developing a different direction

For Jared Della Valle, AIA, LEED AP, branching out into real-estate development has paradoxically helped bring him deeper into the world of architectural design. He rose to fame in the local architecture community as co-founder of Della Valle Bernheimer (DVB), and in 2006 he co-founded Alloy Development, a design-oriented development and consulting company that has often served as the developer for DVB's designs. Last summer, Della Valle resigned from DVB (now named Bernheimer Architecture and headed by Andrew Bernheimer, AIA) to focus exclusively on his work at Alloy. The

two companies plan to continue collaborating; one recent joint project is 192 Water Street, a former warehouse converted into residential lofts in Brooklyn's DUMBO.

The news of Della Valle's departure surprised some. "Everybody asked, 'Aren't you going to miss architecture?' I told them, 'No, I get to do more of it,'" he says. Since he and others in Alloy are architects by training, the company designs a lot of its development projects, he explains. Without having to deal with an outside client, the architects have more control over the outcome.

The downside of development is the stress of putting your financial assets on the line. "It's a hugely risky proposition, and certainly not for everyone," Della Valle remarks. "It's not a hobby." One reason he decided to leave DVB was that it was tricky to balance the demands of both jobs. At Alloy, he says, "I'm personally at risk for the properties and the projects I work on, and it's hard to manage private clients at the same time." It's rare to see companies like Alloy, which blend development and design so thoroughly in their work, Della Valle says, citing FLANK and Tamarkin Co. as examples. "It is a new practice type," he observes. But for him, it offers the best of both worlds.

"I probably spend more time designing now than I did as a 'full-time architect,'" he says. "It's weird; the further I get from architecture and the closer I get to development, the closer I am

to architecture. By that I mean, we get complete control over all the detail resolution and decisions without having to ask a 'client.' We don't make any presentations. We're on fire all day long — we're making decisions for ourselves."

Furnishing new revenue

Other architects are diversifying their skills and revenue base by taking up furniture design. In 2009, Susan Doban, AIA, of Doban Architecture teamed up with furniture designer Jason Gorsline to found Think Fabricate, a company that designs and makes furniture and other products. Doban's architecture firm and Think Fabricate frequently work together on projects, and some staff work for both. However, they are separate business entities for liability and branding reasons. "We wanted to establish a clear, fresh identity for products and furnishings in the marketplace," Doban says. The two companies share office space in downtown Brooklyn, but the furniture business also has a fabrication shop in East Williamsburg.

Think Fabricate was born out of a longstanding collaboration and creative affinity between Doban and Gorsline that began in 2007, when Gorsline designed some furniture for Doban's home. The furniture company wasn't founded as a reaction to the recession, but the diversification has proven helpful in a fluc-



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Alloy Development/Bernheimer Architecture joint project: 192 Water Street is a former warehouse being converted into residential lofts in Brooklyn's DUMBO.

tuating market. As far as the stream of architecture projects, “since we were doing a lot of public work, that has gone down a little bit this year,” Doban says. “But Think Fabricate’s work seems to be picking up, which is a good thing about diversifying.”

et al. collaborative, a Brooklyn- and Detroit-based firm, has also found that doing a mix of architecture and furniture design has helped it weather the recession while satisfying its multidisciplinary interests. As a young firm that started up in 2009, it had to be flexible, sometimes searching out projects overseas or taking on small-scale local furniture projects.

For the firm, furniture design can be just as interesting as bigger architectural projects. “Design, to us, is design,” says partner Manu Garza, Assoc. AIA. “It doesn’t matter the scale of the project, because for us it’s about a series of observations and the connection we feel with each client.” One plus of the furniture projects, he adds, is “how quickly you can produce something and the immediate gratification you feel.”

Using the buddy system

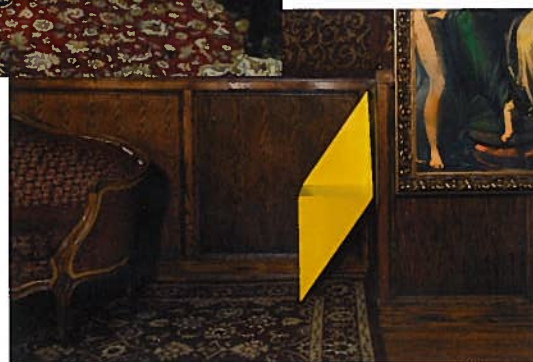
Another approach is to team up with a different architecture firm to offer expanded services. That’s what Spacesmith and Aedas (then named Davis Brody Bond Aedas) did in May, when they formed an unusual partnership. The two firms are still separate business entities, but Aedas now owns a share of the smaller firm, which moved into Aedas’s office. Essentially, Spacesmith is now a firm within the larger firm, and they frequently share staff.

Spacesmith is a small boutique firm known for its work in interiors, while Aedas is a large international firm that historically has focused less on interiors, at least locally. When they first



©Photos by Warren Chow

(above and right) et al. Collaborative: Designed in collaboration with industrial designer William Lee, LEAN has a dual function: it’s a coffee table when set on its side, and a chair when stood upright in a corner.



“If everybody’s well fed, you’re doing the same kind of work you’ve always done, and there’s lots of it, then you don’t even have time to think about new strategy. I think these downs are a time to regroup and ask, ‘Where do we want to be going forward?’”

—Jane Smith, AIA, IIDA

(below) Doban Architecture’s sister company, Think Fabricate, developed the Stepping Stones Collection, which includes a lacquered credenza with bamboo plywood doors and a recycled marble top.



©Ben Kulo Photography

began collaborating last year, “it became clear quickly that each of us had good things that the other wanted or needed for diversity and strength,” recalls Jane Smith, AIA, IIDA, a partner of Spacesmith. By forming the partnership, “we now have that depth we wanted, and Aedas Americas now has a strong interior architecture practice.”

By keeping the two firms legally separate, the smaller firm gets to keep its identity and its status as a woman-owned business. Some Aedas partners have also become partners in Spacesmith, but Smith owns 51% of the company. Thus it’s not a case of a larger firm gobbling up a smaller firm, whose identity soon disappears. When Smith was first contemplating the partnership, the terms “made it very easy to say, ‘What’s not to like about this?’ We’re going to try it out, and if it doesn’t work, my company is still intact,” she remarks.

The recession was one impetus for the new partnership, according to Smith. “The competition is getting stiffer, and you have to find a way to meet the marketplace,” she says. “If everybody’s well fed, you’re doing the same kind of work you’ve always done, and there’s lots of it, then you don’t even have time to think about new strategy. I think these downs are a time to regroup and ask, ‘Where do we want to be going forward?’ To run firms that are basically entrepreneurial, you’ve got to be ahead of the game.” ■

Lisa Delgado is a freelance journalist who has written for e-Oculus, *The Architect’s Newspaper*, *Architectural Record*, *Blueprint*, and *Wired*, among other publications.