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ON THE COVER: Civitas is the lead urban designer and landscape architect for North Embarcadero, currently under construction, which will transform this working waterfront into a world-class amenity for San Diego, CA. Civitas founder Mark Johnson tells this small firm's story on page 14.

PHOTO: ANIMATE DIGITAL STUDIO, JOE CORDELLE

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SMPS members and their firms contributed photos used throughout this issue.

Small Firms Act Big

BY NANCY EGAN, FSMPS; MARJANNE PEARSON; AND MARK BUCKSHON

“Sometimes strategic change just means taking something from the periphery—an anomaly, a demonstration, a small innovation—and redefining it as central.”

—Rosabeth Moss Kanter

In writing about preactive strategy in the June issue of *Marketer*, we noted that firms of all sizes were thinking “preactively” to develop strategies that set them apart from other firms in ways that not only beat the competition but actually create new market space. Then we presented three out of the five case studies from some of the largest, albeit successful, firms in our industry: Gensler, HDR, and AECOM. Even TAYLOR at 75 is not a small firm. Only Van H. Gilbert Architect PC, with a staff of 25+, fits the description of what most of us think of as a small firm: fewer than 50 people. And there’s an argument to be made that, with 50 people, firms have developed leadership and practice infrastructures that are similar to larger practices.

Small firms are a big part of our professional services world. The American Institute of the Architects reports that 95 percent of U.S. architecture firms employ 50 or fewer people. The American Council of Engineering Companies says that two-thirds of member firms employ fewer than 25 people each. Focusing our attention exclusively on these practices, we find that many of them are able to leverage their size effectively. The agility to act quickly allows them to take advantage of disrupted markets, exploit new technologies, undertake research initiatives, add new services, team with surprising partners, and change the game.



Conversations with innovative small-firm leaders around the country, most often the founders and owners, revealed a distinctive mindset marked more by “Why not?” than “Why?” Few of the strategies deployed by these practitioners could not be adopted by larger firms. However, with less hierarchy, fewer internal stakeholders, and lots of economic pressure, small firms operate more readily as entrepreneurs.

In a recent post on the *Harvard Business Review* Blog online, Rosabeth Moss Kanter noted, “One secret of successful business and social entrepreneurs is that they act bigger than they are... bigger in terms of having the confidence to propel growth and set courageous goals.” A number of the practitioners we spoke to had created expanded platforms for their ideas using personal relationships and related networks plus positioning strategy to break into new territory or establish an outside, positive reputation relative to their size.

“You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is, it is an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.” While Rahm Emanuel, former chief of staff to President Obama and now mayor of Chicago, was referring to the 2008 economic meltdown, small firms are often well-positioned to respond quickly after natural disasters, putting their skills to work in the immediate aftermath of hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes. The best of them use the “crisis” to recognize needs and grow capabilities, whether it is in developing prototype solutions or expanded services.

Others see opportunity in less catastrophic change such as new regulations, zoning and code changes, or alternative delivery methodologies, helping clients navigate the unfamiliar and exploiting new rules to evolve new models. Small firms practice with hands-on, close attention to client requirements—often of necessity—that allows them to recognize client needs outside of the traditional scope of services and then mobilize to deliver them.



For More Information

“Eskew+Dumez+Ripple Is Rebuilding the City That Care Forgot [New Orleans]” by Kriston Capps
(*ARCHITECT Magazine*, April 2012)

www.architectmagazine.com/architects/eskewdumezripple.aspx

“Do You Want to Build a Startup or a Business?”
by Jonathan Fields

www.jonathanfields.com/blog/startup-or-business/

“Competition as a Crutch” by Seth Godin

http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2012/07/competition-as-a-crutch.html

“TEDxNASA: The Future Is Diverse and Unexpected”
by Frans Johansson

www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRAkko6WZbs

“Act Bigger Than You Are” by Rosabeth Moss Kanter
(HBR Blog Network)

<http://blogs.hbr.org/kanter/2012/07/act-bigger-than-you-are.html>

“If You Don’t Like Your Future, Rewrite Your Past”
by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (HBR Blog Network)

<http://blogs.hbr.org/kanter/2012/06/if-you-dont-like-your-future-r.html>

“Does Size Matter?” by Marjanne Pearson
(“Small-Firm Advantage,” *Marketer*, February 2008)

http://nextmoon.com/documents/SMPS_Size_0208.pdf

“What Is Competitive Intelligence?”
by A. Krista Sykes, PhD (*Marketer*, December 2011)

www.smps.org/resources/Marketer/

“David Slays Goliath” by Howard J. Wolff, FSMPS
(*Marketer*, December 2011)

www.smps.org/resources/Marketer/



For years, design professionals have used their academic posts as platforms for exploration of theory. Today, firms of all sizes are engaged in research. Although many firms are focused on benchmarking, best practices, or evidence-based design related to the specialist markets they serve, others are engaged in research related to materials, building prototypes, and applied technologies—endeavors that often move them beyond the strictures of traditional practice and into new market space.

“Is more always better? Sometimes, only better is better.”

—Seth Godin

In our discussions with the firms featured here, as well as a number of others of similar size with equally interesting stories to tell, we continually were impressed by the clarity that firm leaders had about what was most important. Regardless of the size of individual projects, they understand their work as part of larger societal and environmental concerns. They put a high value on developing vibrant firm cultures rewarding both individual initiative and collaboration.

Finally, as strategically grounded as these small-firm practitioners are, they actively “court serendipity” as author Frans Johansson recommends in his new book, *The Click Moment*. They are quick to get to unexpected meetings and consciously try to find unexpected insights. They also practice another of Johansson’s suggestions, making small, purposeful bets on ideas, people, and projects that are often outside the peripheral view of the larger firms.



In our earlier article, we observed, “The new economic and practice landscape requires a cultural shift in which flexibility, adaptability, transparency, and collaborative behavior are more valuable than traditional operating models and incremental change.” It’s not a matter of firm size but of willingness (and courage) to go beyond conventional wisdom and explore new worlds of opportunity.

The unifying theme in the accompanying case studies is the attitudes and approaches that these firms use to develop future-forward, proactive strategies, which allow them to thrive, despite the challenges presented by economic downturns and market evolution. **m**

About the Authors



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his blog, www.constructionmarketingideas.blogspot.com. Mark wrote on best practices in A/E/C strategic alliances in the February *Marketer*.

“Chance favors the prepared mind.”

—Louis Pasteur

Baker Design Group, Inc.

www.bdg-inc.com

<http://gathereducation.com/faq>

www.tedxnewengland.com/NE/

“Everything in life is about communications,” says Stephen Baker, president and founder of the Baker Design Group in Boston. “Do it well and thrive; do it poorly and starve (emotionally). Where your life goes depends on your ability to connect and communicate. Much of our work is focused on using *design* as a strategic tool for creating opportunities and removing the obstacles that prevent ideas from happening.”

Baker’s philosophy is the foundation for a business approach that helped to establish the 16-person architecture and interior design firm as a leader in the design of technologically enhanced collaboration and learning environments—spaces that support users’ needs and teaching (read ‘communication’) styles. The firm’s portfolio includes design innovation projects for most of the top business schools including Harvard and Stanford, corporate training centers for Unilever and CitiGroup, and even the furniture and technology design for a G8 Summit.

Given Baker’s commitment to design innovation and idea sharing, it is no surprise that he became a regular at the TED Conferences, the annual gathering of provocative minds from the worlds of technology, entertainment, and design. An attendee for years, he recognized that the advent of TEDx (locally sponsored events designed to give communities, organizations, and individuals the opportunity to stimulate dialogue through a TED-like experience) would be a natural platform and extension for the “ideas worth acting on” that had long been a part of his life, and the firm’s work.

TEDx New England debuted last fall, and while he confesses that it was daunting to organize, fund, and deliver, the success of the initial event, with Baker as curator, has the team readying the next event for this fall. His curation guide: “Storytelling and listening to these stories is the oldest form of teaching and learning. We seek to find the people in our region who can inspire others and help shape a better world by sharing their stories, passions, discoveries, and personal journeys.” Among those storytellers are personal friends and clients who have become friends—all with “ideas, inventions, research, and passions for solving problems and creating a brighter future.”

If leading a robust international design practice and curating TEDx New England were not enough, Stephen Baker is going deep into virtual design and education innovation with GatherEducation. Combining expertise in education, technology, and the desire to remove obstacles to learning, GatherEducation is an online 3D virtual-learning environment that recreates “online” the emotional and real-time connection between teachers and students experienced in a “real” classroom.

Baker combined his initial vision with partners who bring experience in online business and social media worlds plus video game programming left to the GatherEducation team. The goal: to make online-learning and teaching natural and easy, more engaging and collaborative, while improving accessibility at a lower cost. The program and technology embrace each instructor’s unique teaching style and eliminate the cumbersome technologies associated with other online education programs.

GatherEducation is being used by K–12 instructors, private tutors, higher education professors, and professional development/training organizations around the world. It is currently in private beta and is free to use.

MHP Structural Engineers

www.mhpse.com

In 1973, Garry D. Myers opened a small structural engineering office. Since that time, Long Beach, CA-based MHP Inc. has grown, adding clients and staff together with strategic mergers and acquisitions and transitioning ownership and leadership to a team of six partners. The new talent and fresh ideas that came with expansion complemented Myers' entrepreneurial approach to business. Building from a solid base of traditional structural design services in the earthquake-prone markets of Southern California and the West Coast, the 32-person firm developed special expertise in dealing with seismic risk—skills and experience that proved invaluable in the aftermath of the San Fernando, Whittier, Loma Prieta, Northridge, and Nisqually earthquakes.

With the experience of thousands of seismic evaluations, mitigations, and repairs, as well as the design of hundreds of structurally safe commercial and institutional buildings, the firm acquired an exceptional understanding of building performance under seismic loading. Recognizing that there was a broad spectrum of clients who needed and would value this expertise, MHP dedicated internal teams to develop and deliver specialized services for two distinct markets: one for seismic evaluation and strengthening of existing buildings and the other in due-diligence evaluations for earthquake loss, or probable maximum loss estimates.

"Seismic risk assignments are market-driven and time-sensitive," adds Brad Ferris, partner in charge of the division. "The deliverable is a report, but what clients really want is an expert who understands the entire structural design process and can help them assess the financial risk involved in a potential acquisition." With projects in both design and evaluation, MHP brings its knowledge of industry standards and city and agency requirements as well as expertise in computer modeling of building systems and construction experience.

MHP has established a national and an international reputation for its hazard risk assessment capabilities that combine high-tech analytic tools with a practical design approach. Although the firm is not the exclusive provider of services in these demanding markets, the specialization allows MHP's partners to position the firm differently. While they leverage their broad and deep expertise across all markets effectively, as specialists, they are market leaders with limited competition.

MKThink and Project FROG

www.mkthink.com

www.projectfrog.com

According to Christopher Hawthorne, "...there are few things as permanent as a temporary classroom."¹ He was writing about the work that San Francisco-based MKThink was doing in 2002 to explore new methods of designing temporary educational facilities.

Today, those modular buildings are a reality, with Project FROG "making bright, beautiful, efficient structures for all kinds of organizations."

How did a 35-person design firm make this happen?

MKThink brands itself as "the IDEAS company for the built environment" with primary practice areas in innovation, strategy, and architecture. According to principal Nate Goore, who leads the strategy practice, before the recession, the firm approached strategic services and design in a relatively linear way—presupposing a building solution, with the strategic service to ensure the appropriate one. With the recession, the client problems shifted from, "What should we make?" to, "Should we make it? What are the alternatives to making it?"

Goore says that the mental shift got the firm into modular classroom development. MKThink has always worked with education clients. In the early 2000s, it recognized clients wouldn't have the capital budgets that they used to have. In addition, portable facilities were attractive to clients because they were less expensive as well as a responsible way to handle the peaks and valleys of classroom demand. MKThink conducted research and found portables were mediocre in terms of environment, but they weren't terrible, and they were better than old, crumbling buildings.

MKThink started presenting its findings and getting published. When *Metropolis* wanted to write about it, the firm had only charts and graphs, so it started designing an architectural solution and ended up with a whole modular system that resulted in really great classroom environments. Ultimately, this building product was preapproved by the state and took only three months to assemble on site. As Goore says, "The appetite for it skyrocketed."

To sustain growth, the firm separated the product into a company run by principal Mark Miller, who began to raise outside funding from grants and venture capital; however, over time, they hired others to lead the business. Today, Project FROG has been on its own for about five years, and the three principals of MKThink are investors. For them, it was a natural fit—an opportunity for them to put their money where their mouths were.

Modative

<http://modative.com>

As a start-up in 2006, the three principals at Modative understood they needed to differentiate their fledgling firm, and they knew their ability to create high-quality, modern design wasn't enough in the competitive Los Angeles market. Pragmatically, they made the case for their understanding of the bigger picture of the design and project delivery process, explaining their approach in language that layman clients could understand on a user-friendly web site and blog.

They also saw an opportunity in the Small Lot Ordinance that the City of Los Angeles had implemented in 2004 as a way of providing a new type of housing for the city. "There was a void between single family and condos for a home that would have no one above or below you, no shared walls but still provided some space and was reasonably affordable," says Derek Leavitt, AIA, co-founder and principal. "It was a starter home for young professional Gen-Yers like us."

¹ *Classroom in a Can*, *Metropolis Magazine*, August/September 2004

Modative positioned itself as the “go-to” firm for small-lot subdivisions; studying the ordinance; creating a how-to guide for inexperienced, potential developers; and working with a few select clients to develop feasibility studies, gain entitlements, and actually move several projects to construction. Even with the upheaval in the housing market, the six-person firm has completed two small-lot projects, has another three under construction, and another seven in the works.

The Modative model for the prototype features modern design with two bedrooms, two baths, and ample living space in 1500 square feet, and it is simple to build. It is a model that has strong appeal for developers, whose costs and liability are lower than in a condominium, and for buyers, who enjoy the clean, livable designs at a good price.

Timothy Haahs and Associates, Inc.

www.timhaahs.com

At first blush, a Philadelphia-based parking consultant would seem to have little reason to contribute to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for the Asia and Pacific’s report on low-carbon green growth.

However, 40-employee Timothy Haahs and Associates, Inc. (TimHaahs), has a solid business reason for participating at the highest international level in promoting sustainable communities. The credibility and leadership filter down to the bread-and-butter work of designing parking structures around the United States and for select high-profile projects internationally.

“It seems counterintuitive,” says Rachel Yoka, LEED AP, CPSM, TimHaahs’ vice president for strategic business planning and sustainability. However, when parking facilities are designed in conjunction with transit and walking, fewer spaces are needed. Since parking can cost upwards of \$25,000 a space, reducing the parking requirements also reduces developers’ costs, creating a compelling economic argument for sustainability.

“There are a number of firms that provide parking consulting services,” she said. With the recession pressing, generalist designers and engineers have added parking structures to their repertoires. TimHaahs’ edge, besides its innovative and community-focused internal working culture, is its ability to show leadership in relevant national and international associations including U.N organizations.

She said the business has held its own through recent tough times and is now preparing for expansion, slowly and carefully. “We’re planning small-scale organic growth. We’re watching people in the industry who do good work and will make some strategic hires, either to add bench strength to our existing [three] offices or to open another office.”

“We want to do the best for our current clients, so they never leave,” Yoka said. “The same applies to our own staff—we keep our people happy and engaged and growing, as our clients.”

With an international sustainability reputation, TimHaahs’ ability to show local developers how they can save money by integrating their parking into larger, environmentally friendly plans allows the practice to stand out well ahead of the competition.

Utile Design Group www.utiledesign.com

Upon entering the Utile vestibule and going toward the stairs, you see a map of the city of Boston “framed” by links to the firm’s projects—an encapsulation of its unique approach to design and planning. At the top of the stairs, you walk into a hive of activity, with 20 Utilians working in a small but synergistic environment.

Architect Tim Love says that, when the firm started to take off in 2003, he and his collaborators recognized the need to focus on places, clients, opportunities, and ideas. They saw the firms “of their generation” going after objects (e.g., museums), but they saw opportunity in being involved with high-stakes development strategies through urban design and planning.

From the beginning, they were selective about what they pursued. In 2003, they won an on-call consulting contract with the Massachusetts Port Authority, selected over three well-established local firms. Utile liked working with the experts at the Port Authority, and they began to meet senior stakeholders. They were able to clarify the position that they held not only in the building process but in the regulatory process as well, and how to interact effectively with stakeholders, elected officials, policy makers and enforcers, and special interest groups.

Utile has built a portfolio by looking for “repeatable” projects that could be relevant for “other similar contexts and programs,” as well as projects that are adjacent to other projects. Its working relationships have led to networks of connections: Public agency clients led to other agency on-call consulting assignments, and the firm works with a “posse” of collaborators, from “big-firm buddies” for larger projects to consultants with specific expertise. As Love says, the goal is to “get things next to things, know everyone, and become indispensable.”

Utile cultivates strategic thinking, communication, and knowledge-sharing in everything it does. The firm believes that the design of everything matters, and it understands the value of pragmatism in solving complex problems. The Utile toolkit includes information design—web sites as platforms for projects, graphics that make complex ideas more intelligible, publications to support their ideas and expertise. It also has developed proprietary software to cycle through schematic design options, developing ROI analyses to assess the economic impact of its design.

The firm’s tagline says it all: “Utile Is a Design Firm Built Like a Think Tank.”

Utile on “Positioning the Practice”

1. Focus on a specific place.
2. Focus on the repeatable and not just the one-off.
3. Communicate and test your growing expertise by writing and teaching.
4. The design of everything matters.
5. Focus on your client’s priorities.
6. Collect smart people.
7. Run your design firm like a think tank.



FIRST PERSON:

THE FORK IN THE ROAD

BY MARK JOHNSON, FASLA



The 1990s were a hot time for our firm, growing from 15 people in 1990 to more than 50 by 1995. We had plenty of work, made a profit, and didn't have a lot of marketing expense. To our competitors, it looked like we were commanding the regional market, and to some extent we were. But margins were low, and management costs were high. The phone rang so often that we didn't have time to think. We were reactive and not in charge of our own destiny. At first, we thought we needed to focus on management systems, but we soon found the problem wasn't poor management, it was a lack of direction.

We had five shareholders, several project managers, and a great production team. We were a conventional landscape design firm, with principals going wherever they found projects. This unwittingly split our platform into segments, leading us to become a divergent set of groups held together by management. The quality of our work was high, but the content was low. Our design creativity and intellectual stimulus were thwarted by the need to manage too many small things and not enough important ones. It was time for Civitas to have an agenda. After 15 years of practice as a conventional design firm, at our core we were an urban firm, caring deeply about the quality of life and the health “of the environment in cities.” We were interested in making old cities better, not expanding them onto greenfield sites. We decided to shift our marketing focus onto only two market areas, in which we had relatively weak qualifications: the design of infill/brownfield development and the design of urban public space.

I studied our competitors and found that these project types were not well-defined markets. They were “overlap” markets, sometimes led by engineers, sometimes by architects, but rarely by landscape architects. Yet the history of these segments showed that failure was much more common than success. Neither the clients nor the designers were seeing the full complexity of problems and opportunities in both project types. The need and the opportunity were the same: for new vision and leadership to emerge to establish a richer, more diverse, and integrated understanding of how to reinvigorate old cities.

I decided to claim that territory. I began by analyzing a number of cities looking to understand what worked and what didn't. The common failure became obvious. Most clients had a short-term view of what the problems were and short-term resources to fix them, but cities require long-term, systemic solutions. That meant I had to change the way clients thought. I began by lecturing at Urban Land Institute, American Planning Association, American Society of Landscape Architects, American Institute of Architects and other conferences. I developed a high-impact message that resonated with my audience, purposely making my message bold and vivid. I wrote articles and began lecturing at universities. Soon I was being invited to speak at symposiums and forums that had specialized audiences. I became an expert in a field before that field was defined.

I also changed how we positioned ourselves for business development. We responded to RFPs, but meanwhile we reached out and proactively met with potential clients. In a three-year period, I met with mayors and planning directors from a dozen major cities. I was invited to several cities to sit on project review panels as an outside expert. Soon I was getting outreach calls from professionals and staff in these same cities. By the end of three years, I regularly was getting a heads-up on early phases of major projects. I was invited to make several trips to tour sites and met civic and elected leaders. To my surprise, however, it was the private sector that stepped up. I started getting calls from the owners of brownfield properties who wanted to find a way to redevelop, or from civic leaders who needed help changing the inertia of their political leaders. We had become successful.

During this transition, we learned that we also had to bring our entire platform to a new level of performance. Instead of having principals seek their own projects, we established a Strategy Team to plan our marketing campaigns cooperatively. Instead of relying on project managers, we established a Practice Team to constantly review and improve the creative process and output. Instead of thinking of management as a third-party activity, we established an Organization Team that plans every aspect of firm organization, culture, and financial accountability. We became a platform that blends topics across silos so that we can focus outwardly and not inwardly.

We are now practicing routinely in 10–15 cities at any given time. We enter at a high level and enjoy access to civic leaders, elected officials, and business, because we speak their language and understand their issues. To make a city great requires much more than design creativity: It takes creative design thinking that is grounded in reality. It takes setting direction around the biggest goals, like healthy people, places, and economies. With that thinking, we have moved further than we ever imagined. We are working with multiple healthcare clients rethinking the functional organization of their campuses. I have been lecturing globally on the role of design in supporting public health, and a \$2 billion company recently asked us to study its internal organization to help it become a more agile creative force in manufacturing high-tech products.

“The need and the opportunity were the same—for new vision and leadership to emerge to establish a richer, more diverse, and integrated understanding of how to reinvigorate old cities.”

We are a different firm that has weathered the recession and is rapidly growing again. We are now focusing on our next challenge: how to become the leading firm that brings together the full range of disciplines needed to build a city. We will do this by being integrators and provocateurs who shake the norms of each discipline to seek a higher level of achievement from all. Our key skill has, in fact, become the one that transformed us—working ahead of the game to change the way the game is played, using other people's expertise to support visions that are the most meaningful to everyone involved. ■

About the Author



The founder of Denver-based Civitas, Mark Johnson, FASLA, is a recognized thought leader and designer of policies, systems, and landscapes that regenerate cities. He can be reached at 303.571.0053. This is his first contribution to *Marketer*.