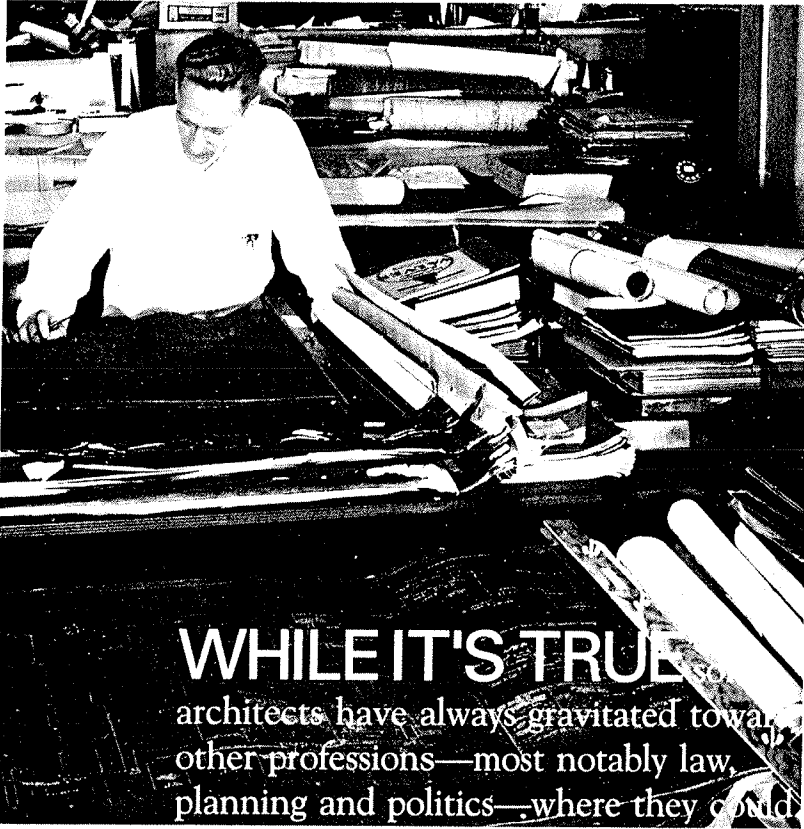


# AN ARCHITECT'S ALTERNATIVES



Courtesy of Holabird & Root.

**WHILE IT'S TRUE** architects have always gravitated toward other professions—most notably law, planning and politics—where they could use their design and business skills to influence their communities, the transition has been a troublesome one attempted by very few. Architects, though well-regarded visionaries, have not been valued for their business acumen and, therefore, positions other than that of designer have been hard to come by.

Why then are an increasing number of architects opting to pursue business opportunities with non-design firms? Economics is an obvious answer, but other trends have had a more profound influence than you might think.

by Carolyn Richman

The depressed economy of the late 1980s and early 1990s caused many architects to emigrate, whether by choice or necessity, to non-design firms. At the same time, doors that were once closed to design professionals began to creep open as the business community was forced to consolidate positions and replace one-track managers with those with more diverse skills who were able to provide solutions to intricate problems. Architects were recognized as highly-skilled project, construction and facilities managers and, in greater numbers, started working for banks, law firms, retail chains, corporations, real estate developers, public planning departments and CAD firms.

Initially, very few non-design jobs were available without additional education. An architecture degree and work experience was valued in only one area—design. Architects were expected to have a master's degree in business administration, finance or urban planning. Scant credibility was given to the marketing, management, budgeting, planning and negotiating skills architects

develop in their work with clients. Today, though, many companies no longer require additional business degrees but instead seek out appropriate work experience.

**Julie Keverian, a CAD specialist with one of Chicago's largest public companies, successfully propelled a career with a major architectural firm into a position in a corporate environment through her knowledge and experience with design-oriented computer software.**

"I was given a great opportunity at KNIGHT Architects when CAD was brought into the office," Keverian explained. "After my initial training, I decided that I wanted to specialize in computer applications."

Acquiring the necessary work experience is only a part of what architects must do to make themselves marketable to non-design firms. A tailored resume and creative job hunt are critical. A standard resume is unlikely to reveal the scope of an architect's talents, business sense and vision, and prospective employers are unlikely to spend time ferreting out hidden skills. Candidates must provide a clear, precise vitae, relating specific professional experiences to the prospective employer's requirements.

"Once you have a foundation, network," Keverian said. "My AIA involvement got me my current job. I ran into my [then future] boss at an AIA meeting and he mentioned he was hiring. Don't be afraid to try something different. Take a risk."

Though the changing economy has directed some architects towards jobs outside of design firms, others have gone in search of the professional life they once believed they would find in a design firm.

**Steven Haemmerle is a registered architect**

who, after several years in an architecture firm, received his MBA from the University of Chicago and is now working as a development manager for the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority. Haemmerle did not leave his design firm because of the recession but instead went looking for a position which would afford him the kind of influence he had hoped to have as a "traditional" architect.

IT BECAME APPARENT TO ME THAT A GREAT NUMBER OF SIGNIFICANT DECISIONS AFFECTING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT WERE BEING MADE BY DEVELOPERS, NOT ARCHITECTS.

"It became apparent to me that a great number of significant decisions affecting the built environment were being made by developers, not architects," Haemmerle said. "It seemed the developer was now at the center of the process that, in the past, was centered around the architect. I wanted to be at the center of this process; that's what led me into real estate development."

Other architects echo Haemmerle's desire. The most often cited reasons for choosing an alternative career path are compensation, job security and recognition.

#### COMPENSATION

The business community generally does not perceive that architects produce a product, but instead sees architects as

responsible for only a small portion of the overall project. As long as architects are only compensated for the design portion of the project development, their fees will remain low. However, when architects are employed in broader managerial roles which enlist not only their design skills but business know-how as well, their income is more closely aligned with their business counterparts.

#### JOB SECURITY

The architecture industry has always been more dramatically affected by fluctuations in the economy than corporate America. The majority of architects who have left architecture firms believe greater job security exists elsewhere.

#### RECOGNITION

Most professionals change jobs because they feel under-appreciated and seek recognition. Instead of being one among many in a design firm, architects employed by non-design firms have few peers with similar education, experience and job responsibilities. As a result, they perceive their contribution to the firm's success as unique and highly valued.

"As project managers, we organize the process by which to solve a particular problem whether in a design firm or a non-design firm," explained John Howard, vice president of corporate development at Golub & Company. "Generally, we're more visible in firms outside the profession because our value stands out."

**Dan Garber, a registered architect who is now a development project manager for LaSalle Partners believes the profession will be better served if architecture schools and practicing professionals prepare young architects for alternative career paths. Design is of the utmost importance yet, he**

said, architectural graduates will remain at a competitive disadvantage in the job market without business management skills.

"Architecture is in the service of much greater issues," Garber said, "However, architects are horribly under-educated as to what those issues are. The architectural profession's view seems to be that it is unnecessary to know those other values."

In a recent *Architecture* article, Roger Lewis, FAIA supported Garber's view when he wrote, "Why not more energetically encourage some students to pursue further

specialized education and careers in management, leading to positions of control in government and corporate America?"

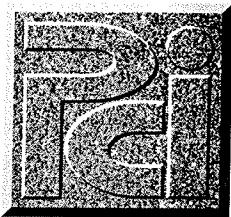
Lewis argued that future architects may "earn more money and realize more professional satisfaction by procuring and guiding design than by actually carrying it out."

At a time when the supply of future architects exceeds the expected demand, it is in the best interest of architecture to prepare its practitioners for non-design opportunities, as they are best positioned to

illustrate how architects, with their unique vision, work ethic and management skills, enhance the business process. By more strongly supporting alternative career paths, architects will remain leaders in the creation of space.

*Carolyn Richman manages the architecture and engineering group of Cook Associates, Inc. She specializes in executive search and placement for the building industries.*

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