

Our Practice



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Seldom recognized by awards programs or celebrated in glossy photographs is one of an architectural firm's most important and ongoing creative acts: that of 'designing' itself. Today, just as thirty years ago, the success of many firms derives from specialization or firm growth, measured by size of staff or revenue. Other firms achieve notoriety through invention. While this is often seen as architectural progress it often places novelty or fashion ahead of serving clients and users—those who pay for, live, play, and work in the places we design. So what have we done differently?

In the early days of our practice, we asked what conditions would enable our firm to foster design collaboration among principals and staff, promote rigor and invention in the creative process, and remain profitable and supportive of the clients we serve. A mantra of 'No More Than Six Projects in Design' was adopted

to ensure that each of the firm's principals remains actively engaged with design for a limited number of projects at any given moment. This has kept us from spreading ourselves too thinly and losing touch with our clients, yet has allowed the scale of those six projects to grow significantly with time. We learned that an office size of between forty and fifty people was perfect for us, and it has been.

We shared the vision of creating a diversified practice that encouraged specific expertise to grow naturally from our common experience. This was an early choice that bucked the common wisdom of the time but allowed us to continue to invent ourselves and grow as architects.

In the uncertain times of recent years, previous clients have come back to us, often with a new program or building type that was different from our first experience together. New clients likewise have seen that we are able to succeed with a broad

range of program types. A major reason they choose to work with us is because they recognize our commitment to learning—and to addressing the unique challenges of their projects.

Often, though, our vision for the firm has been clearest when we agreed on what we didn't want. We have long believed that practicing architecture is most rewarding when it has the potential to achieve real civic scale and consequence. Single-family house commissions were easy to come by in the early years, but ultimately we felt they would hold us back from the scale of work to which we aspired. Likewise, we resolved to forgo competitions on multiple grounds.

With rare exception, competitions are a poor investment of time and resources for an architectural firm and, more importantly, they isolate designers from the natural exchange of ideas between clients and architects that

make architecture meaningful. Lastly, in a world of increasingly global interaction, we have resisted taking on international work. The intensive travel and time commitment that foreign projects require, we feel, can take away from forging strong relationships with existing clients here in the United States.

Another key tenet of our practice, which grew out of our early experience designing affordable housing, is that quality and invention must be achieved within the rigors of very real budgets. Bill Rawn has a guiding expression: we get to do 'two or three things special' on each project and everything else should follow convention. It might be hard to prove, but this rigor has undoubtedly contributed to our longevity as a collaboration of principals, the continuity of our staff, our track record with repeat clients, and our success in having the vast majority of our work (over three decades) actually built.

Reflecting on the works represented within this volume, the greatest value of the way we have 'designed' our practice is that it promotes meritocracy and entrepreneurship. Indeed, the same core tenets have guided and sustained us over thirty years. But our work is always evolving, with each project informing the next and—more importantly—with each designer learning and growing. Our practice has led to an environment in which staff have opportunities to develop new skills, investigate unfamiliar ideas, and forge powerful relationships both within and outside our office. Supported by a firmly rooted approach to 'practice,' we can explore, collaborate, innovate, and ultimately create new leaders in design.