Glowing with Admiration

The A&D community speaks out about which firms in the industry it most admires, and why

By Jennifer Thiele Busch

A design firm can be judged by many different criteria, but surely size and annual billings are no true indication of excellence. The design industry, as a whole, is a rather conscientious lot, for whom ranks of employees, numbers of offices, and dollars and cents are often less impressive qualities in an employer or potential employer than more subjective qualities like design capabilities, employee development, and firm culture. To prove it, Contract asked the commercial design community what qualities the profession values most in an architecture/interior design firm, and what design firms they most admire. Interestingly, the results show that bigger is indeed considered better—but for far different reasons than sheer size.

In our first annual Most Admired Design Firms survey, Contract polled 4,500 design professionals, including AIA, IDA, and ASID members, and asked respondents to rank a given list of criteria—including design capabilities, culture, business development strategies, type of project work, employee development, client/vendor relationships, compensation, client list, legacy, and career advancement—in order of importance. With those criteria in mind, respondents were then asked to provide a list, in no specific order, of the three design firms in the industry that they most admire.

The survey results indicated that design capabilities overwhelmingly ranked highest among the qualities most valued in a design firm, with 42.9% of respondents indicating that a firm’s abilities to produce compelling design solutions is considered most important (an overwhelming 71.1% listed it among their top three most important criteria). To put the emphasis on this quality in perspective, the second most frequent response was firm culture, ranked most important by only 15.6% of respondents (and ranked among the top three by 43.8% of respondents). Ranking surprisingly low on the list of qualities most valued was compensation, salary & benefits, chosen by 4.3% of respondents, and career advancement, which came in last place, chosen as the most important criteria by only 2.7% of respondents.

It is in no way shocking that architects and interior designers—the most successful of whom are typically motivated by an enduring passion for their profession—would choose design capabilities as their most important quality in a design firm. Nor that they would emphasize firm culture, which can foster meaningful camaraderie and help spark creativity and inspiration. However, does the fact that compensation and career advancement rank low on the list suggest that a good many designers undervalue personal progress? The survey results clearly indicate, after all, that the industry is far more impressed by design excellence—and other more subjective qualities, including mentoring, type of project work, and client relationships, all of which ranked higher than compensation and career advancement—than it is by dollars and cents. All in all, it appears from this cross-section of respondents that the real personal rewards of a design career have more to do with doing what you love and who you do it with than making a fortune doing it—an optimistic outlook in an economically troubling time.

When compared to the list of most admired design firms, this data might be interpreted in yet another way. Our survey’s top three most admired design firms—Gensler, HOK, and SOM—have in fact proven to be the breeding grounds for design excellence, continuously spawning some of the most successful and well-respected designers in the industry. Numerous young designers with real talent and high aspirations come to work for any of these three giants to learn the business—the stuff that design education is notoriously lacking—and for the opportunity to work with other talented designers in an environment where the standards are extremely high and the competition is fierce. (Bearing this out, 32% of respondents ranked coaching, mentoring, and employee development among their top three most important criteria in a design firm.) Some of the most entrepreneurial of...
these young designers actually have no intention of staying in these large firms and moving up their corporate ranks. Instead, they emerge with the design skills, the business skills, and the confidence to join smaller firms as principals, or establish their own firms. Thus, the quest for career advancement is rewarded in a different way. The financial rewards come with success.

As for the top 10 Most Admired Design Firms, Gensler won handily among respondents—and this was regardless of the qualities they listed as most valued. For example, 36.8% of people who listed design capabilities among their top three most important criteria also chose Gensler as one of their top three most admired firms. The next closest ranking was SOM, ranked among the top three firms 41.4% of respondents who chose design capabilities among their top three most important qualities, followed by HOK, ranked among the top three firms by 39.3% of respondents who chose design capabilities among their top three most important qualities. On the other hand, among the respondents who listed legacy—which took ninth place on the list of most valued qualities—as one of their top three most important qualities, Gensler was still chosen among the top three design firms by 34.6% of respondents, followed by HOK and SOM, both mentioned as most admired by 10.3% of those respondents.

HOK and SOM also made strong showings for second and third place in the most admired ranking, respectively, but the absolute certainty of those ranking was more nebulous. For example, among respondents for whom business development strategies, career advancement, client/vendor relationships, coaching, mentoring, and employee development, and type of project work matter most, more people mentioned HOK as one of their top three most admired firms than SOM. Among respondents for whom client list, compensation, salary & benefits, and design capabilities are among the three most important qualities, SOM was listed among the top three most admired firms more often than HOK. And for those respondents who value firm culture and legacy, HOK and SOM were mentioned among the top three an equal number of times. To be fair, these two firms are quite evenly matched in terms of admiration.

The 10 Most Admired Design Firms:

1. Gensler
2. Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum (HOK)
3. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM)
4. Perkins & Will
5. Interior Architects (IA)
6. NBBJ
7. RTKL
8. Kohn, Pedersen, Fox (KPF) STUDIOS
9. Gehry Partners
10. Thompson Ventulett Stainback (TVS)

The list of the top 10 most admired design firms according to our survey—which also includes Perkins & Will, IA, RTKL, NBBJ, SOM, STUDIOS, Gehry Partners, and TVS—came as surprises, since each of these firms is known and highly respected in the industry for the quality of their work, the expertise of their staff, and their business acumen. Many have also prospered through many decades of economic cycles—the current downturn being one of the most challenging—and the inevitable tide of leadership transition. Indeed, a majority of designers in their own successful practices today have probably had an employment stint with one or more of these firms, which no doubt makes them sentimental favorites.

At the very least, most designers in practice today have had a competitive brush with one of our survey’s top 10. Respondents did list business development strategies as their third most valued quality in a design firm (this was a weak third place, with 8.4% of respondents ranking it as their most important criteria, but it ranked sixth on the list of top three most valued qualities in a design firm, having been chosen by a solid 26.4% of respondents). And a formidable competitor is often an admired one.

For the record, Environments Group, Hirsch Bedner Associates, Rockwell Group, Gresham Smith, Hillier, Callison, Cesar Pelli, Lehman-Smith-McLeish, and VOA all ranked in the top 20, and ADD Inc., Leo Daly, Todd Williams, Billie Tsien, Wilson & Associates, William McDonough & Associates, Richard Meier, Smith Group, and Zimmer Gunsul Frasch ranked in the top 30, though in many cases the margins between them are too narrow to indicate exact placement, and the margins between the lower half of the 21 to 40 group and the next 10 were too narrow to afford any clear indication of triumph. After that, the survey results fall off with numerous firms, including some outstanding small firms, being mentioned by a statistically insignificant number of respondents. A powerful argument can be made that this has less to do with design excellence than with the fact that some lesser well-known firms are indicated by some of our respondents. As a first annual More/less Design Firms Survey, express in the words their professional strengths, and their own comments about why they believe their peers do.
First and foremost a design firm, Gensler comprises individuals who believe passionately that design enhances organizational performance and profoundly affects the quality of people's lives. "We're students of human performance and behavioral responses to the environment, and we use that knowledge to shape our design work," explains Ed Friedrichs, chief executive officer and president of Gensler, which has been quietly fostering sustainability since long before it became fashionable. According to Friedrichs, 80 to 85 percent of the firm's work is repeat, referral, or extension business. Many relationships span decades—both with client companies and with individuals within organizations. "Trust takes a long time to build and can be destroyed in an instant," says Friedrichs. "But in the design profession, where we work with projects that span years, trust is the most important characteristic of our relationships."

Gensler's leadership team has by and large grown up in the firm, a testimony to the emphasis it continues to place on coaching and mentoring. "Design professionals should begin their careers as generalists, learning to appreciate the broad array of skills needed to serve a client," adds Friedrichs. "But as they grow, we encourage them to develop one or more unique areas of specialization. No individual practitioner can be all things to all people, so specialization has become vitally important. Clients expect it, want it, and, frankly, they deserve it."

"We have no full-time marketers out selling the firm," says Friedrichs. Its strongest growth and development strategy is the work done by the people. "If they're really satisfied, they'll tell someone," he adds. "Our three greatest assets are: our people; the culture of collegiality, collaboration, and integrity; and our client relationships and the deep level of trust they place in us. These attributes most help us to serve our clients well."
At HOK, design is not an abstract exercise in combining shapes, forms, and materials. It's a problem-solving effort. "By elevating problem-solving to an art form, we create spaces that enrich how people work, heal, worship, discover, learn, and travel," says Juliete Lam, IIDA, senior principal, director of interiors, HOK. The firm fosters an entrepreneurial culture and recognition for achievement among its employees. Launched in 1995, HOK University provides targeted, business-specific, non-intrusive professional development opportunities for all employees. This program received the AIA Award for Excellence for supporting continuous learning at HOK.

A pioneer in the architectural profession in developing specialty sectors, HOK committed early in its history to organization by key markets or business units. HOK operates under a ‘OneFirm’ initiative, a concept that emerged from the corporate philosophy that HOK can—and should—deliver a full complement of services, including technology tools and resources to clients, no matter where, when, or how they are required. Specializing in building types such as corporate, research & development, transportation, sports, health care, educational and justice has also been vital to the success of the firm. The marketing prowess of HOK is legendary among its peers. Every office and organizational unit in the firm has a marketing program in place with meaningful goals and a plan for achieving them. Particular emphasis is placed on communicating HOK’s leading edge in technology to prospective clients.

The legacy of HOK, established by its original founders, is to sustain a practice with the appropriate balance of design, marketing, and management on a firm-wide basis and at the local office level. Perhaps the three greatest strengths of the firm lie in its design capability, employee development, and market sector specialization. In combination, these attributes have contributed to the firm’s success and respect throughout its 48-year history.

*International Investment Bank, Los Angeles (top; photo by Heidi Blessing); John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, N.J. (bottom; photo by Peter Paige).*
Across all its divisions, SOM is driven by the idea of innovation, according to Steven A. Apking, partner. SOM. The firm's consulting services often lead to research that results in the creation of new workplace models and innovative furniture to support them. "Often we pair with other professions such as technology consultants, business consultants, and cultural anthropologists," says Apking. While SOM prides itself on its creativity, it also emphasizes the importance of practicality—especially when communicating with clients. "We do tangible workplace models that show immediate impact on the client, not a written report," says Apking. "We tend to work for the same clients for a long time," he asks. "They see us as an instrumental part of the thinking and running of the business."

SOM benefits from a tightly knit culture and an extremely competitive environment. "If someone is producing something really amazing, it will win the admiration of their colleagues here. It's not about the school you went to or seniority," explains Apking. "It's all about the quality of work. People are judged by their output." At SOM there's room for different backgrounds and points of view, but diversity is sought after because the people who are different from each other help.

The firm's mentoring program sends young people to work in different offices across the organization. "One benefit of working at SOM is the access that you get to work on extraordinary projects all over the place," that come to us by virtue of SOM's impressive quality of our work," According to Apking, the firm's top three strengths are its design capability, culture, and team. "They're all linked together: how we work and see ourselves. You have to live up to the principles of those which we have gone..."
Perkins & Will’s practice has always been centered on the goal of creating humanistic environments attuned to the needs of the individual user. Characterized by a design approach to institutional building types—whose hallmark has been the synthesis of client, site, and programmatic concerns—the firm’s philosophy also recognizes that a building can’t be truly functional unless it lifts people’s spirits. Perkins & Will is not set up in a hierarchy, but on a level chain of command. “The end result,” according to Gary Wheeler, managing principal, Perkins & Will, “is the collaboration and cross-disciplinary teamwork, based on knowledge sharing, expertise, and innovation of process, project, and client. It’s unusual in a large firm.”

Perkins & Will’s business development strategy revolves around the concept of national market sectors, a client-based philosophy to generate clients in a cross-market fashion and enable all markets to marshal each one’s resources in all offices without additional costs. It’s not uncommon for the marketing effort for an interior design commission to represent the talent and expertise of four offices.

Wheeler thinks knowledge, people, and the strong belief in developing relationships with clients are the firm’s top strengths. “There is a need to retain and develop the core attributes to serve our clients at present, past, and future,” explains Wheeler. “As our organization has grown and strengthened, our collective resources have expanded to include an even wider range of skills and depth of capabilities. Utilizing our knowledge and expertise from throughout our organization, we are able to harness and apply resources from around the country to the benefit of specific projects and distinct client needs. He adds, “The best design addresses how users function, how values are embodied in a building, and how design relates to the community at large.”

Fallon Worldwide, Minneapolis (right: photo by Hedrich Blessing).

IA, Interior Architects is one of the few large firms to focus exclusively on interior architecture. IA hires architects, interior designers, industrial designers, graphic designers, and others who understand that design supports the goals of a corporation or an institution. “Sometimes good design is published or wins awards, but it should always meet the needs of a company and enhance the employees’ work life,” says David B. Mourning, president and CEO of IA, Interior Architects. “We measure the quality of our design by asking ourselves whether we exceeded the client’s expectations.”

According to Mourning, the firm’s culture is based on answering “yes” to this question. “If we have a beautiful photograph and an unhappy client we have not succeeded,” he adds.

In the beginning, IA worked mostly with financial services firms. Over time it has broadened considerably to include law firms, high technology, institutional and more recently, hospitality. “Our clients tell us that it is important to them that we are not using the interior architecture project to try and create a large building commission,” says Mourning. “They appreciate the impartiality.”

According to Mourning, the firm’s top three strengths are the fact that it’s a global design firm that focuses exclusively on interior architecture; 16 offices allow it to be large enough to serve global companies with multiple locations and experiences; the principal involvement of the senior management team in every major design market; and the senior management team has less turnover. “We like to think one reason young professionals come to IA is that they have more opportunity earlier in their careers than many competitors. At the senior level, we have our hands on some of the best in the business. When we have developed a managing principal they often stay very long time.”

Financial Services Firm, San Francisco (above: photo © David Wakely).
“We believe design ideas that arise from multiple perspectives are more powerful than those coming from a single point of view,” says Scott Wyatt, partner, NBBJ, an integrated, multidisciplinary firm that prides itself on its entrepreneurial culture. “Expression of individual points of view, development of diverse skills, and critical thinking are not just strongly encouraged at NBBJ; they are required,” adds Wyatt. Employee development is actively encouraged through two popular programs. “Passagiate” is a two-week journey to destinations outside the United States to study design and its application throughout history. “Leading Change” is a program to develop staff at all levels by pairing future leaders of the firm with mentors who help them explore their potential as change agents.

“We work with clients as design partners so business development is viewed as relationship building,” says Wyatt. NBBJ seeks out leading-edge companies and business leaders who believe that places are catalysts for change and innovation. In fact, many of the firm’s clients are trend setters within their respective fields. Joining forces promotes new levels of achievement through design. “Our vision is to be both an idea firm and a design firm,” adds Wyatt. “To realize this, we overlay an ‘integrated design’ philosophy on projects that is both a process and an outcome.” As a process, it’s guided by the belief that the most enlightened design work is produced by many minds, disciplines, and viewpoints collaborating without boundaries or hierarchy. “As an outcome,” adds Wyatt, “an integrated design product has organic integrity: elements rely on one another functionally and aesthetically—and, having anticipated the evolution of the user’s needs, the outcome delivers high performance over the long term.”

Wyatt thinks NBBJ’s greatest strengths are its design abilities, entrepreneurial and collaborative culture, and relationships with clients and vendors. “We believe ‘place’ can be a powerful catalyst for positive change—cities, communities, organizations, people’s lives—so we take the long and broad view in everything we do,” he says.


altimore Museum of Science and Technology (right: photo by Tim Griffith).

RTKL

“Our company is organized to encourage the creative process and deliver quality at all levels across a broad spectrum of design services,” says Paul F. Jacob, III, vice chairman, RTKL, whose design process is interactive, iterative, and involves many disciplines in a collaborative environment. Jacob feels that this diversity keeps the team sharp, seeing things from multiple perspectives. “We learn from one another and things can truly take off when different perspectives are brought to the table,” he explains. “We like to focus not on the length of a client list, but on its inclusion of excellent companies.”

According to Jacob, ownership transition is truly one of the most difficult challenges an architecture practice can face. RTKL is on its third generation of leaders and has already identified the fourth. “We are fortunate that our challenge is less transferring leadership than retaining and celebrating the DNA of what made the firm succeed in the first place,” he adds. RTKL has made conscious moves to keep alive the historic and cultural element of the practice—that of a true partnership—because of the belief that it’s absolutely crucial that everyone in the firm understands the past in order to know where the firm is going.

RTKL’s greatest strength, by far, is our employees. Our human capital is our greatest asset and our ability to grow and thrive. Rich diversity reflects the projects and the places in which we practice.” Diversity of experience—which keeps the practice nimble, creative, and honest—is also key. “Our third greatest strength is our collaborative spirit,” adds Jacob. “We’re not the type of practice that dictates a preconceived solution. We emphasize process and analysis: an approach that comes from our roots in urban design. It relies on consensus-building, the input of project stakeholders, and the exchange of ideas.”

Shanghai Museum of Science and Technology.
"When we founded Kohn Pedersen Fox (KPF), our mandate was to create a firm that would provide outstanding design and excellent execution of drawings," says A. Eugene Kohn, principal, Kohn Pederson Fox. "We wanted to make a real contribution to the built environment and to foresee a practice that would primarily focus on urban architecture, particularly urban commercial architecture—which is crucial to the economic prosperity of our cities and the quality of life of its citizens." According to Kohn, another goal was to create a firm that would grow and have a long life—a life that would continue after the three founders had moved on. Creating a firm with the future in mind would provide opportunities for young architects to grow within the firm, to be promoted, and ultimately to have the opportunity to become partners. "We wanted our firm to grow professionally and creatively, as well as financially," he adds. "We wanted to attend to client needs by meeting budgets and schedules, and we wanted to form relationships with those clients."

Kohn thinks KPF's top three strengths are the firm's strong design capabilities, the relationships that are formed with clients, and the career advancement opportunities offered to employees. "Our success as an international award-winning firm has been the result of collaboration and dialogue throughout the design process," says Kohn. An open exchange of ideas with the client, and among the various members of each project team, ensures that all approaches are discussed, and helps to craft a more complete structure.

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"We were founded and organized around the philosophy of pursuing the best design opportunities, regardless of program or location," says Todd DeGarmo, principal, STUDIOS architecture, which has its roots in Silicon Valley. "The firm's culture is highly entrepreneurial and thrives on leadership at every level. The people attracted by this culture are those that require an almost constant sense of learning and want to be involved in all parts of the practice. "We create paths that allow our staff to have very broad experiences," says DeGarmo, "working on many phases of projects in broad sectors from high tech to law to civic institutions on buildings and interiors. There is always something new to learn. It is the source of our energy."

STUDIOS targets one or two new project types or geographic locations per year. The firm's clients tend to be highly interested in design as well as innovation, and they desire to be very involved in the project. Processes are highly interactive, not formal. Clients get to see their ideas incorporated and developed in a way that they could not have imagined. "This process creates an almost spiritual bond between them and the product," says DeGarmo. "As a consequence, our specifications rarely carry an 'as equal' clause."

"It is hard to imagine any principal of a successful organization not primarily crediting their clients and people with their success; however, I would have to say that our culture of design leadership is the key to our success," DeGarmo adds. "That culture attracts the best clients. Those clients bring with them great projects that in turn attract and retain the best people. It is vital that we protect and nurture that culture," says DeGarmo. "Every policy that we have—from compensation to marketing to communication—needs to reinforce a culture of design excellence and innovation."
special report

Gehry Partners

Gehry Partners is a full-service firm with broad international experience in museum, theater, performance, institutional, commercial, and residential projects. The three senior partners of the firm—Frank Gehry, James Gymph, and Randy Jefferson—work as a team in the development of all projects undertaken by the firm, with Frank Gehry leading the design effort and James Gymph and Randy Jefferson complementing his work with their extensive experience in project management and in the development of technical systems.

At the heart of the firm's approach to design is a process that has been developed over many years in which the client is brought fully into the design process as part of the design team, making the design a true working collaboration between the firm and the client. The design process is based on extensive physical modeling at multiple scales. The models explore both the functional and sculptural aspects of the project in a medium understood by designers and laypeople alike. Very early in the process, actual building materials and large-scale mock-ups are employed to promote understanding of the design. Working simultaneously with materials and systems at the detail level and with the formal image at the urban scale, the project evolves in response to the programmatic and budgetary goals defined by the client.

The Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles (right), is scheduled for opening in October, 2003.

TVS

TVS was founded on the basis of inspired design and close dialogue with its clients. The firm created new directions in architecture and interior design, developed and retained the most talented designers in the business, and was honored with the AIA 2002 Architecture Firm Award, which recognizes the height of design excellence in a collaborative practice. Organized in studios, TVS works on every project with the resources necessary to balance design, technology, and business. Principals assign and lead teams with the experience appropriate to all aspects of the project, providing continuity throughout the process. "Collaboration is integral to TVS' culture," says Helen Hatch, senior principal, TVS. "Within the firm there aren't a few star designers that dictate design. As a result, the design process is truly a collaborative experience within the studio and with the client.

"Our biggest asset is our people," says Hatch. "A lot of time goes into educating our employees because our future success of TVS is closely linked to the success and talent of the corporation." Amongst other informalized training programs, TVS has instituted a development program that trains architects with three years of advanced experience before they take their examinations. "Our three greatest strengths are design capabilities, client/vendor relationships and culture which encompasses coaching," says Hatch.

"Our key to success is collaboration. We try to incorporate this into everything we do, whether it is with our clients, our vendors or with associated architects and consultants." According to Hatch, good clients make good projects. "It's because of our clients that we have been as successful.

CBL Offices, Chattanooga, Tenn., (left photo by Brian Gassel-TV5).