there are still firms handling all their graphics and writing in-house, many are farming out the work to consultants. Leslie Saul of Leslie Saul Associates has used eye-catching materials designed for her firm by a graphic designer to announce the firm opening, to send Valentine greetings, and to keep her wide network informed about her firm and its work. She observes: “Maturity brings the knowledge that you don’t have to do everything better than everyone else—you can find others who can do it for you.”

No matter their age, years of experience, or track record, designers would do well to keep the following ten essentials in mind:

1. Have a clear vision and create a plan.
2. Use your network.
3. Build relationships.
4. Control overhead.
5. Make a commitment to technology.
6. Get the best advice you can from those experienced in the field.
7. Find a way to differentiate yourself.
8. Understand your clients’ values.
9. Keep your audiences informed about your firm and its work.

Two Start-Up Profiles: Young, Digital, and Good

The specific start-up profiles of the two firms selected by Michelle Negrette in the supplement below reveal universal issues that are faced by start-up and seasoned firms alike.

MICHELLE NEGRETTE holds a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Southern California, a Masters of Community and Regional Planning, and a Masters of Landscape Architecture from the University of New Mexico. She divides her time between a small multidisciplinary design consulting practice in Albuquerque and teaching design studio at the University of New Mexico.

any aspiring architects muse upon the idea of starting their own firm. After years of architecture classes, with someone else always critiquing the design and constraining projects, the idea of having autonomy is definitely appealing. Or maybe you are working in an architectural office and are tired of the daily grunt work, questioning whether what you are doing is really architecture or perhaps thinking you would handle the design of projects differently.

To find out what it is really like to start your own firm in the new millennium, I interviewed two young start-up architecture firms in Albuquerque, New Mexico: Environmental Dynamics and E_vok Interactive. These two firms consist of young architects, recently out of school, who know first-hand what it is like to be out on your own.

Example: Writing together of Rya E_y...
Environmental Dynamics began in 2000 as a joint venture between two partners while in the final semester of graduate school. Four years later, the firm has grown to ten people, with four partners and a staff of six. Their typical projects include commercial and residential with an annual project load of around 50. The firm's focus is on green technologies and sustainable resources stressing design excellence.

E_vok Interactive is the recent brainchild of four young partners, two still in the final phases of graduate school. Conceived in spring of 2003, the firm consists of the four founding partners and six part-time employees. The past year's projects have included residential, commercial, and institutional work in several states. The firm is rooted in information-based technologies and relies on interactive digital tools for research, design development, and document production as well as office management.

Experience

While the idea of having your own firm may seem appealing, actually starting the firm can be daunting. Sure, you have taken the classes, you can put together a tight set of construction documents, and you know all the tricks of the building code, but are you ready to do it on your own? I asked Mike Ryan of Environmental Dynamics (ED) and the team of four principals of E_vok Interactive (EI) to speak about preparing for the new responsibilities as principals of an architectural office.

What type of architectural or business experience did you and your partners have prior to starting a firm?

ED: We all had many years of experience at different levels prior to attending graduate school. Two of our partners have architect parents and grew up in the environment, getting a sense of the business end of things in addition to the production end. One of us had seven years of construction experience as well as six years of employment in architecture firms prior to graduate school and graduation, and one specialized in veterinary clinics during graduate school.

EI: I had worked for several small architecture firms on a part-time or full-time basis since completing high school 15 years ago. All four of us have had construction experience in conjunction with the typical architecture and design jobs. Both Derrick and Matt have had experience with a "high-design" architecture firm, and Jimmy worked for several years within a large, corporate firm. Our combined work experience has provided a solid design foundation, but our business experience has been more of a crash course over the past year.

What did you do to prepare for creating a new business?

ED: One strategy that seems to work very well for start-up firms is to set up the business near an established architectural firm. The large firm can use your labor and talents to supplement their fluctuating work load, and you can use their resources and have some predictable income. This gets
tricky if you grow too much and start competing for the same projects as the larger firm you are associating with, and you also run the risk of sharing some of the reputation (good or bad) of that larger firm.

**Ei:** I think it’s a continual process of getting ready. It’s a similar process to a professional athlete with practice in competition. Learning the new technology, pushing yourself to take care of the business part of it, and constant correspondence become your routine. And everything you do becomes preparation for future work.

**What parts of your architectural education versus practicing architecture were helpful to starting a business?**

**ED:** The required professional practice course and an elective real estate development course were the only classes that addressed business issues. I believe that if at least one third-year studio, for example, had been devoted to designing a project that was at least partially subject to the realities of the business end of the profession, many of the lessons in the professional practice course would have had more impact.

**Ei:** I found starting an architectural business to be really difficult because what you are told in school about practicing architecture is very much based on an old school way of practicing architecture. The business model is not as designed as it could be. Our business model is based on a lot of management theories and intelligence models that haven’t yet been introduced to a typical architecture firm. Since we are trying to do something new in architecture, there really isn’t a precedent for how it is supposed to work, so we have to base it on other professions or just forge ahead. Most people look at you and think, “You are too young for this, what are you trying to do, WHY are you doing that?! You should just be doing drawings for someone else.” I feel that this attitude, and the lack of cross-pollination, is why the business side of architecture is not really touched upon in school, at least not in any way to give someone the ability to design their business as they can design a building.

**In what areas did you feel unprepared? Did you take any additional classes or seminars or seek outside counsel?**

**ED:** We did not take any additional classes in business but sought as much outside counsel as would tolerate us! The pitfall here is that start-up companies rarely have lots of extra capital and cannot afford the best legal and accounting services. Early on, we hired a fresh face in the accounting world. Unfortunately, this person gave us some bad advice and a false sense of security when it came to taxes and payroll. Luckily we discovered most of our errors upon hiring a more established accounting firm, but we are still feeling the effects of our initial actions.

**Ei:** I was most unprepared for the polarized attitude toward youth. I thought that if you just did the work to the best of your ability and performed above expectations then you would be universally respected. As it turns out, you get out there and learn that the game is about a lot of other
things first—and then it's about the work. I was completely unprepared for that. Sometimes being young, innovative, and experimental can be an asset, other times a liability. There seems to be no middle ground.

What experience or knowledge would you have liked to have before starting a firm?

**ED**: I think greater experience and knowledge of client relations, time and money management, payroll and taxes, specifications, and marketing. I realize that most of these things would have come with a lengthy stay at an established firm, but these things are not readily available in architecture school or during the internship period.

**El**: Start the business before you're ready. One year before you decide to start a firm on your own, get a business license, get a bank account, start getting your ducks in a row, putting money away. I wish we had done that.

**Productivity and Money**

Many architecture students may be surprised to discover that there is more to practicing architecture than designing buildings. Designing buildings of course includes the building structure, the mechanical and electrical systems, code requirements, and dealing with all of the other entities that are required for a project to be permitted, bid, and constructed. Practicing architecture includes other very important nondesign activities primarily related to the acquisition and managing of finances. Here are Environmental Dynamics' and El's Interactive's experiences.

What is the biggest difference between practicing architecture and operating the business side of architecture?

**ED**: The business side is relentless while the architectural side can fluctuate with workload. What I mean by this is that payroll must be met and taxes paid even if the office is experiencing a slow period. The business side needs to inform the architecture without making architecture a slave to business. It is, however, difficult and time-consuming to track and control time and expenses on a project as well as do all those things required to make the project a success.

**El**: With regard to the business side, I felt most unprepared for procuring finances. And I feel that has been our biggest challenge. What designers need to understand about running a business is that, unless you get clients to pay you up-front and wait for the service, you are going to have to front all of the costs of developing their projects. Contractors, developers, and other business people understand this keenly. They know how to maneuver around the system, while architects are only their tools. I don't see any of us at El having any problems with completing any of the projects we have come across. Our client relationships have always been good too, it's just getting that bank to look at us and say, "Hey, we can lend some money to these people." We are beginning to redesign how we procure finances and look at nontraditional methods to support us.
Have you found it difficult to compete against more established firms?

**ED:** Yes, it is very difficult to compete against the more established firms, and almost impossible to land large projects because a start-up firm does not have the project experience required to earn enough points to be awarded the project.

**El:** Absolutely, however, that competition gives us an opportunity. In our process we incorporate all the technology pertinent to the project that we can muster, so we have the opportunity to expand the parameters of architecture. If we were only drawing with the pencil we would be limited to what we could produce. Presently, we are virtually limitless in our possibilities because of our methodologies. For example, wider references, deeper investigations, in shorter periods of time, allow us to redefine what the public realizes as architecture through the languages of meaning, reference, and systemic information. In truth, these expansions take us out of the realm of direct competition with more established architecture firms because what we engage in may or may not be traditionally considered in the realm of “architecture.”

What are some methods you have used to demonstrate competence and success as a “young” firm?

**ED:** Our firm uses a slightly different model from the traditional firm in that all of our principals are “working partners,” capable of, and expected to, produce all levels of the construction documents on AutoCAD in addition to their other office responsibilities. We have found that this approach reduces the number of errors in a set of drawings and can result in more efficiency in production. Clients also seem to appreciate that their project gets that kind of attention from a principal. I believe the energy we have as

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**Figure 3-1** Offices of the Southern Sandoval County Arroyo Flood Control Authority, Rio Rancho, New Mexico. Courtesy of Environmental Dynamics, Inc., architects.
a start-up firm is appreciated by some clients who believe we will put our hearts and souls into their project. Some clients know that a young firm will work extra hard to prove themselves and are willing to trade diligence, energy, and new ideas for experience.

**ED:** We capitalize on the fact that we are young and digital and good. We move forward really fast, turn projects around for clients, and get done what they need to get done. The big selling point is that we are young, just out of school, and they can expect something fresh and nontraditional from us.

**The Office**

These two young firms have shared their architectural background and their experiences in production and financial matters, but what about general office dynamics? Who is going to solicit work (unfortunately and contrary to popular belief, people do not typically walk in on a daily basis and ask you to design their dream home)? Who is going to take care of the legal aspects of the business (such as preparing and negotiating the contracts for work, the billing, and the insurance)? There is also the technological side—keeping up on the latest code requirements, the newest building materials, systems, and consumer products. And what about the employees? Someone has to make sure that the interns, the CAD people, and the project managers have clear instructions on how to keep projects moving everyday. These tasks and many more are imperative to the successful operation of an architectural firm. Here are some thoughts from our two firms:

**How have you selected the roles needed to make your office function and produce?**

**ED:** Our roles for the partners are based on interest and ability—and of course the roles will continually morph and overlap. We have one partner in charge of marketing in the established architectural arenas, one who works to find new market niches, one in charge of human resources and information technology, and one who maintains compliance with the corporation regulations and keeps the office updated on building codes.

**ED:** We started by trying to figure out where we all were in terms of design philosophy. Other than Christi, whose role was more apparent and established (as a licensed architect), we had to figure everything else out. We determined our representative roles as digital, “documental,” and technological. I am primarily responsible for all things comprising digital domains from the ether to computer-based design, to prestidigitation. Jimmy is responsible for all things documental, from site reconnaissance, to drafting organization, to financial statements. Matt is responsible for all things technological—meaning production and how things are produced. And finally, we have always maintained that Christi brings verification and validation to our studio, our work, and our design ethic. Although these responsibilities overlap, we realize that without overlap there would be no interactivity, which is at the core of our functional operations.
What would you like to share with current students about starting a firm and working in the architectural profession in the twenty-first century?

ED: If you have talent and drive, good intuition, some business acumen, a little capital, some potential clients, and some good luck, starting early is not a disadvantage at all! It can be stressful at times, but it can also be very exciting and open up limitless possibilities; it can teach you things about business, clients, personnel management, architecture, and construction that you may never get as an employee at another firm.

EI: The most important thing for any architect in the twenty-first century, or anyone else who does business for that matter, is the concept of information. Information has always been a high priority, but right now we have a confluence of information from myriad sources, and any good architect must survey that to understand how clients’ structures fit into their lives and fit into the landscape. To accomplish that well, you have to be apprised of all the salient information available and make use of it. The world is a much smaller place.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Based on your own experiences and these interviews, do you think it is important for architecture schools to provide more focused coursework on the business-side of architecture? If so, how and in what context?

2. What might be some ways that young architects who wish to start a firm can learn from the knowledge and experience of established architecture firms?

3. What are some challenges in starting a new firm that these principals may not have discussed?

4. How do you think the role of information technology has influenced the traditional model of the architectural firm? What are the advantages and disadvantages of technology for a young architectural firm?

Profiles in Courage: Three Firms

Why might you be interested in learning something about the following three firms? They have been selected for their representativeness and diversity—in size, philosophy of design, location of projects, profitability, and character of staff and principals. For all the differences, the firms depicted here share a common mission and are enormously successful at achieving it: Excellence in producing the product, excellence in providing the service, and enjoyment of what they do.

As you read through the sketches of the three practices, ask yourself these questions: What is good and bad about each? Would you want to intern in one of them, and why? Would you want to model your own practice after one of them—which one and why? Do the principals profiled motivate you to reflect on the impact of practice on architectural design in a positive or negative light? Is architecture really a commodity—does it have to be business? Can it be truly delightful in today's economy—as if the freedom and excitement of school studio never ended? Are the answers clear
What are some advantages and disadvantages of starting your own firm versus working for others?

**ED:** There is more risk and responsibility in running your own firm. The freedom you get from calling your own shots comes with the price tag of being ultimately responsible for calling them wrong. When you work for someone else, an error made might make you one of the unemployed, when you are your own boss, it can make you bankrupt. When you work for yourself, your schedule is more your own in that no person tells you when to be at work; instead your schedule is dictated by the workload and demands of the business—it becomes your master and slave.

**Et:** Rather than a predictable job with a firm, I now go work not always knowing what the day will bring. There is a sense of freedom and independence that is gained, but with this comes a sense of responsibility for myself and others. By becoming more connected with each and every job, work has become more satisfying. The choice to jump into this firm has frustrated me at times, but more than anything the experience has been invigorating and positive.

What are some myths you had about owning your own firm prior to actually experiencing it?

**ED:** I believed that work would be easier to come by, that if we completed one or two good projects, we would no longer have to worry about hunting down new work, it would just come to us. I believed that collecting money would not be one of the hardest parts of the business.

**Et:** I did have an idealized concept of what this would be, and that’s gone out the window. I felt happier once I let go of it. When you are working for someone and you are watching them make mistakes every day, or at least so you think, you feel that you’d just do them differently when you own your business. Then you end up making the same mistakes because you are in the same situation, and you realize that you were unaware of the context as to why those other people made that decision.

What are some advantages and disadvantages of starting your own firm early in your career versus after many years of experience?

**ED:** Young firms are susceptible to overdesigning projects. This could be a result of the principals’ experiences in studio, experiences that do not place limits on time and money. The down side to this is the potential of establishing an early reputation as a firm that cannot design a project on budget. This can be detrimental in securing future work, because most RFPs (Requests for Proposals) require a list of previous work that includes information on budget for the project and actual cost of the project.

**Et:** One of the biggest disadvantages of starting young is credibility with other architects, financial institutions, etc. Without twenty years of experience, it is really hard to get other people to believe in you. You don’t have the track record to let them know that they can trust you.