Chapter 3

The Firm: Commodity and Delight

The purpose of having a structure or organization—a firm for the practice of architecture—no matter what size, is to support the execution of projects while ensuring the firm’s own long-term health. How the firm is structured will depend upon the personality and goals of the principals and the nature of the clients.

Specific management of projects should be suggested by the character of the projects themselves. For example, small versus large projects implies two different methodologies; similarly, different building and client types (i.e., public or private sector) will require a different focus on design, documentation, and service delivery. Areas of expertise and interest of principals and staff and details of project requirements and constraints will all have an impact on management. Peter Piven, FAIA, of The Coxe Group has written, “There is no ‘right’ way to organize and schedule projects... The trick is to consider each project situation as unique within the context of a process that is flexible enough to be applied differently to different project situations.”

The message is that firm structure must be customized and periodically evaluated to maintain relevance, to effectively utilize all the firm’s resources, and ultimately to provide a satisfying environment that promotes the best possible work in the most efficient manner.

“To accomplish great things one must not only act, but also dream, not only plan, but also believe.” This quote is from a strategic plan of the architectural firm Russell Gibson von Dohlen. Here’s another quote from a vision statement from the website of Bohlin Cywinski Jackson (www.bcj.com): “Belief in the sensuality of place, the emotive qualities of materials, and the ability to give pleasure and insight, to comfort, and to transport, can produce humane and spirited architecture. It is our belief that exceptional architecture comes from the search for solutions which respond to the particular circumstances inherent in each situation.” It is not a bad idea to introduce a strategic planning effort or vision statement with some poetry. It is a stirring way to begin conceptualizing the “design of a practice.” Ellen Flynn-Heapes, a management consultant, invokes a more pragmatic style; she stated that strategic planning “involves appraising the firm’s current situation; defining a vision for the future; charting a path toward these goals; and setting the plan in motion.” It is important to have a framework that frees you to focus on doing

---

1This appeared in the March/April 1986 issue of Architectural Technology.
the projects and that ensures you will indeed have projects to be free to work on, that you’ll be able to pay the rent and meet payroll, avoid litigation, and eventually pass the practice on to your kids.

So, there is much variability in the way firms operate and manage projects. This chapter includes a case study (ABC/Prieto Haskell) that illustrates how messy the business side of practice can be and how clashes of personalities and missions within the firm must be recognized and reconciled. Three very different firms are profiled as a basis for reflecting on how it is that issues of practice are interrelated and what it can mean firsthand to operate a firm.

For more information on issues of firm culture, refer to Chapter 11 for discussions on leadership and mentorship and Chapter 4 for working in groups and collaborative processes. For an excellent and comprehensive discussion on legal aspects of firm organization—proprietorship, partnership, and corporations—refer to The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice (any recent edition).

Design Firm Typologies

I asked Peter Piven, FAIA, to describe the nature of the professional practice course he has taught at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and at the University of Pennsylvania. The course is especially intriguing since Piven applies the “SuperPositioning Model” from a book he coauthored, Success Strategies for Design Professionals (McGraw-Hill, 1987), to ways in which students can “design” their own careers and future firms.

Armed with information on how to recognize different typologies in firms, students and graduate architects can then tailor their job search to maximize what they want to learn (and from whom) during internship. The message is to take control of your future: Conduct a thorough investigation of what’s out there, recognize the advantages and disadvantages of different types of practice, and do some sole searching to determine what firm characteristics are most consistent with your goals. Piven gives a structure to the process of this exploration, explaining how to do it and what to look for.

PETER PIVEN, FAIA, is the Philadelphia-based Principal Consultant of The Coxe Group, Inc., the oldest and largest multidiscipline firm providing management consulting services exclusively to design professionals. Mr. Piven instructs the Seminar in Architectural Practice at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and starting a Design Firm at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design summer program. He has taught The Design of Design Organizations at the University of Pennsylvania and the Management Seminar at Drexel University. © Peter Piven, FAIA, Peter Piven, FAIA, Principal Consultant, The Coxe Group, Inc.

I n the Autumn of 1993, Donald Watson, then Dean of the School of Architecture at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, invited Weld Coxe and me to assume responsibility for what was then called the Seminar in Architectural Practice. We agreed to do it on the condition that we could restructure the course to address the important matter of career planning.

Three noteworthy premises underlay our thinking, our proposal to
change the thrust of the course to focus on career planning and the curriculum we developed:

1. Students in and graduates of architectural programs need to be able to better plan their posteducation apprenticeships and careers.
2. To plan, they must recognize the differences in design organizations and determine for themselves the right fit for their talents and goals.
3. To make such determinations, they must learn that, ultimately, they must take responsibility for their own learning.

Our proposal having been accepted, the following course objectives were developed:

- Expose students to the diversity of paths, roles, and opportunities available to them.
- Provide students with the understanding and perspective to make appropriate career choices and the apprenticeship plans to achieve them.
- Provide a foundation for understanding the nature and substance of practice to provide a framework for ongoing self-learning to complement other academic and office experiences.

The pedagogical “design” balanced assigned readings, class discussion based on the readings, class lectures to expound and amplify, field trips, student reports and in-class presentations, and papers. The teaching plan incorporated an important idea—that although there would be recommended, and sometimes required, readings, the students would become responsible for identifying what they wanted and needed to learn by learning to ask appropriate questions, not only in class but also in the firms they would be visiting on field trips.

**Alternative Archetypes**

In *Success Strategies for Design Professionals*, (McGraw-Hill, 1987), the authors presented a model to better describe the relationship between the delivery system used by firms to execute projects and how the organization itself is structured and run. This “SuperPositioning Model” derives from an understanding of the two driving forces that shape the operation, management, and organization of any design firm: (1) its choice of technology, the particular operating system or process employed by the firm to do its work, and (2) the collective values of the firm’s principals.

**Design Technologies**

Architectural firms exist to respond to three essentially different sectors of the marketplace, which we define as *Strong Idea, Strong Service,* and *Strong Delivery.* (See the case study “ABC/Prieto Haskell,” pages 109–117, and its analysis, pages 117–123, for another discussion of these types of organizations.) “Strong Idea” firms are organized to deliver singular expertise or innovation on unique projects. The design technology of Strong Idea firms frequently depends on one or a few outstanding experts, or gurus.
“Strong Service” firms are organized to deliver experience and reliability, especially on complex assignments. Their delivery technology is designed to provide comprehensive services to clients who want to be closely involved in the process.

“Strong Delivery” firms are organized to provide highly efficient service on similar or routine assignments, often to clients who seek more of a product than a service. The project technology of a delivery firm is designed to repeat previous solutions over and over again with highly reliable technical, cost, and schedule compliance.

The essential design technologies of architectural firms, practiced in response to clients’ needs and the firms’ abilities and interests, influence:

- Choice of project process
- Project decision making
- Staffing at the middle of the firm and below
- Identification of the firm’s best markets
- What the firm sells
- What the firm can charge
- Best management style

**Organizational Values**

The second driving force that shapes architectural firms is the values of the professionals leading the firm. These values are reflections of the essential upbringing and personas of the individuals who hold them. The choice of values is a personal, largely self-serving one, derived from how individual architects view their missions in life and what they hope to get out of their lives in return for working. The choice can be understood as a spectrum with practice-centered firms at one end and business-centered firms at the other.

Professionals with strong practice values see their calling as a way of life and typically have as their major goal the opportunity to serve others and produce examples of the disciplines they represent. They evaluate their success qualitatively. The questions, “How do we feel about what we are doing?” and “How did the job come out?” are elemental for them. Business-centered professionals do what they do more as a means of livelihood and are more likely to evaluate their success quantitatively. For those with strong business values, the elemental question would more likely relate to the tangible rewards of their efforts—“How did we do?”

The dominant value systems of those that lead the firm, and therefore the firm’s values, whether practice-centered or business-centered, influence:

- Organizational structure
- Organizational decision making
- Staffing at the top
- Marketing strategies
- Identification of the firm’s best clients
- Marketing organization
- Profit strategy
- Rewards
- Management style
When the axes of the two key driving forces—technology and values—are looked at in combination and the axes are displayed perpendicularly, they form a matrix within which it is possible to identify six essentially different types of firms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice-centered</th>
<th>Business-centered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong Delivery</td>
<td>Strong Delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice-centered</td>
<td>Business-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Service</td>
<td>Strong Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice-centered</td>
<td>Business-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Idea</td>
<td>Strong Idea</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on their technologies and values, these different firms will have essentially different characters and characteristics in every area of practice. They will look and act differently with respect to their:

- Project process and decision making
- Organizational structure and decision making
- Staff recruitment and development
- Sales message and type of client
- Marketing approach and marketing organization
- Pricing and rewards
- Leadership and management

The article "Charting Your Course," by Weld Coxe et al., was required reading in the seminar; those interested in a more complete exposition of the subject read *Success Strategies for Design Professionals*. After extensive class discussion, the students visited architecture firms; their assignment was to ask the questions that would, at a minimum, allow them to identify what kind of firm it was, for example, its values and technologies, without asking the obvious question, "Where are you in the Model?" However, in almost every case, the students went beyond the questions that would reveal type and asked questions about recruitment policies, intern roles and responsibilities, professional growth, and compensation.

The result of the readings, discussions, visits, and questions was a clear understanding that:

- The profession is broader than the students knew.
- Firms are different.
- The differences are significant and visible.

---

• There is no one definition of success.
• They have the ability to make choices.
• The choices are personal.
• Perhaps most important, they themselves are different and capable
  of contributing in different ways.

Firm Start-Ups

Many architecture students (and practitioners) aspire to run their own
firms, and this is surely one manifestation of the American dream. Is it still
possible in today’s economy? Jill Weber addresses this question below and
describes what it takes to launch a practice.

Being your own boss has great rewards, but it requires an entrepre-
neurial spirit, which is perhaps even more important than capital. Four dif-
fences between employees and entrepreneurs have been cited by indus-
trial psychologist Craig Schneier. Where do you fit?

1. **Risk tolerance.** Entrepreneurs must be able to handle a good deal of
risk.
2. **Need for interaction.** The loneliness of the sole proprietor is not for
everyone.
3. **Ego.** Strokes are few and far between away from a more corporate
environment.
4. **Control.** Achieving this is probably the single most important rea-
son architects choose to go out on their own.

**JILL WEBER** is the founder of the Boston Society of Architects Marketing Service and Jill Weber
Associates. She is a marketing consultant to the design industry and has helped over seventy firms
manage and market their professional practices in creative, entrepreneurial, and proactive ways. Ms.
Weber has developed and led professional development courses for the Harvard University
Graduate School of Design, the American Marketing Association, The Coxe Group, Inc., and
the Society for Marketing Professional Services.

Hundreds of architectural firms are founded each
year and anecdotal data indicates that firm formation is grow-
ing at an increased rate. What does it take to get started, what is the
business outlook, and what do firms need to do to get work and to be suc-
cessful? To get a snapshot of start-
up firms in the last decade, we re-
cently interviewed principals of
several young architectural firms.

All provided insights and perspectives about choices, flexibility, entrepre-
neurship, and values that may be useful to the countless others contem-
plating such a move.

Most of the firms with whom we spoke are young and small, but there
is a distinction to be made. While firms started within the past five to eight
years are generally considered “young” in the chronological sense, many
have been started by principals with many years of experience and hun-
dreds of strong contacts between them. This distinction can give firms an