Critical Practice

Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture
East Central Regional Meeting
October 13-14, 1994
University of Cincinnati
The Horizontal Professional Organization: The Law Office Model as Model For Architectural Practice

Dale Mulfinger
University of Minnesota

Robert Gutman wrote in *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* that one of the greatest challenges facing the architectural profession was, "the need to have a competent organization exhibiting high morale and motivated to produce good work." The horizontally structured law office model is one possible structure worthy of further exploration for the practice of architecture. This paper will report on this writer's first hand experience of ten years extrapolating this model for an architectural firm in the Midwest that has grown from two to thirty personnel.

One potential organizational model worthy of exploration is that practiced in most law firms. Senior lawyers hire junior lawyers with intentions of weaning them towards self sufficiency. Law firms hire the brightest and the best because they stake their future on growth through youth. They encourage young lawyers to build a portfolio of clients and, amazingly, even when such portfolios are built, these lawyers remain in the fold.

What's different about architecture, according to the recent PA article, is that we eat our young. With low pay and positions
engendering low self esteem we relegate interns to positions of subservience. Some interns persevere, others perish, giving up the profession they have invested so much in. In an interview with a recent graduate she referred to internship, "as seeking employment where it was least painful to pay her dues." No one had proposed the possibility to her of nurturing her new found professional knowledge while also investing in her entrepreneurial independent spirit. Had she been a young lawyer, both conditions would be common.

At Mulfinger, Susanka & Mahady Architects we have been extrapolating the horizontal law office model to an architectural context. We have also been searching for other architectural firms that share these views. Our program began not as an altruistic model a priori to our firm but as a pragmatic response to business opportunity.

Three years into the firm our work load exceeded the design capability of our two partners, Sarah Susanka and myself. We had nurtured a market of house remodeling, additions and new homes built on customer satisfaction, friendly fees and press coverage of our work. A call came in for another kitchen remodeling at a time when Sarah & I were over worked. Although we sought out and considered additional partners, nothing had worked out. I informed the incoming caller that our associate, Sam Alexander could take her call, negotiate a fee and design the project on his own. Talking long enough for Sam to hear this introduction, he ad-libbed beautifully as I passed the call to him. Thus began our belief that associates could perform as partners do in the market place of serving the public. An additional partner, six associates, two would be associates, and nine years later our firm now serves nearly two hundred clients a year with gross fees over a million dollars. Success in architecture firms is not new and our growth has not been mercurial. What appears to be unique is our horizontal structure and in particular our policy of weaning our interns to positions of self reliance. We have actively pursued the law office model and continue to refine its application to architecture. Although we have pursued other architectural firms who might utilize this model, we have yet to find a replica.

A firm that is close to ours in structure is Wheeler Kearns, "A collective practice of architects." Their model of several partners appears similar to that began by the Architects Collaborative (TAC) several years ago. Of particular similarity is their beginning with several married partners as TAC did in the 40's. I had the opportunity to work for TAC in the late sixties. As a young intern
the collaborative process had given way to the hierarchical teamwork approach common to CRS and other large firms in the nation. Today, with original partners no longer at TAC and the Collaborative format discarded TAC has not been able to transcend the nineties economic downtown in New England and exist as a shadow of their original presence in the marketplace of both ideas and construction. Wheeler Kearns is surviving, but has yet to grow and fully test the constructs and breadth of their collaborative model.

A long history exists of collaborative spirit in the architects office. B.M. Boyle noted of H.H. Richardson in the 1880's;

"the Collaborative effort which had typified Richardson's Parisian atelier experiences was transposed by him to the field of office practice, again in distinction from the French method. Until ill health restricted his activities, Richardson himself participated in every part of the work of his office, and encouraged a similar degree of participation by his associates. The members of Richardson's office were a team, and all participated in the work, from the highest to the lowest, the older and more experienced helping the younger and less skillful, and deliberately infusing the work process with a sense of fraternity and sharing."4

Thus the collaborative office common to Richardson, TAC and currently Wheeler Kearns might present us with some of the most human organizations available to architects. The collaborative process contrasts with either the hierarchical hero office of Frank Lloyd Wright or Frank Gehry and the departmental offices common to large contemporary firms. Collaboration, as I have witnessed it is characterized as a group effort in the name of the company. One, or a few members, are aided by others to complete the design of a project. Generally team membership is stratified, and name recognition of individuals is subdued. Often what begins as the collaboration efforts of equal or near equal partners, most commonly past architecture school classmates, evolves to oligarchy as the firm grows.

Boyle concludes that, "there is no ideal method or organization in the modern architectural profession."5 Since no ideal exists, a reasonable question might be, have we tested a broad range of alternative models, and have we documented the results? Boyle alludes, "that the profession of architecture as it is understood today was created in the nineteenth century, is imitation of medicine and law."6 The medical model of specialization might be akin to our professions departmental model, where a firm is segmented into promotion and management, design, construction
documents, specification, and construction observation. However, this model has not been supported by the institutionalization of academic programs in specialties. Architecture’s professional academic programs remain similar to that of law, the creation of a generalist. Surprisingly our discipline’s office managerial models have not followed the architecture underpinning.

At Mullfnger, Susanka & Mahady Architects, Inc. we have found the law office model to have the following benefits:

- individual authorship = high morale and high quality
- each architect is entrepreneurially empowered
- partners can share administration burden
- negotiating fees = understanding and controlling their own billing rate = personal control of earnings
- direct connection to self worth in larger community context
- this is the model most current graduates are trained for, approximates the studio
- “the firm” is thus a place of sharing not the sheriffs department
- students intern as participants, like law clerks, they perform preliminary professional tasks
- promotes professionalism, graduates feel professional rather than as technicians
- teaches learning from mistakes, accepting external responsibility
- promotes recognition of individuals, public promotion of individuals; firm grows as individuals grow
- staff understands need for public discourse of professional ideas to insure client base of compatible interests

Robert Gutman notes that,

“the temperament of architects reinforced by educational experiences yields an employee population who probably are more prone than other professional workers to insist on autonomy. Furthermore, the determination of design quality depends on informed, but intuitive, judgments. This method of evaluation limits the power of senior managers and administrators to impose their own standards on lower level employees. It is just this fear, that judgment based on status, age and experience will not carry the weight that it does in other professions, that leads older architects and principals to adopt a dictatorial manner. In turn, younger architects are inclined to demand greater autonomy than they are capable of exercising.”
At our firm since our work type is that of residences, the learning
curve is swift and the weaning process easy so we appear to
have the benefits of professional autonomy without significantly
over taxing professional capability. Sharing of information along
with professional collaboration aid is the process.

Judith Blair in her seminal text, Architects and Firms, A Sociological
Perspective on Architectural Practice, suggests that "there is
nothing that resides in power that makes it restrictive to a zero-
sum solution...that when the power of workers is greatly expand-
ed, the power of management does not decline."8 As partners
we have not been over burdened with management. While our
associates have been able to broaden their client portfolios, we
too have expanded ours, sustaining our personal interest and per-
formance in the design process, client management and con-
struction observation. We can concur with Blair's survey result of
152 firms and 400 architects in which she states, "the results of my
analysis indicate that more voice is better than less for the perfor-
ance of the firm. The wider the participation in major items of
the firm's agenda, the more likely it is that the firm will do superior
work."9

Superior work in this instance, must be defined in both market
terms and or the desire of young professionals to join our ranks.
Our firm can not define superior work as having received awards.
Although we do occasionally compete for local and national
professional awards, we have seldom been successful. This may
in part be due to our lack of interest in the avant guard. We
appear to be more interested in the arriere guard as Ken
Frampton has alluded to in his treatise on critical regionalism.10
We definitely align with Blair's/Foster's characterization of slow
radicals...

"the convictions of artists surpass the tastes of the public and only
gradually change opinions and affect social change...the ideas
of working architects are precociously ahead of their buildings
and are barely in accordance with firm agendas, which are
attuned to the practicality of architecture."11

Since all our staff are interested in filling their portfolio's with built
work, the practicality of building and the direct connection to
client understanding of aesthetic parti's tends to make our work
less avant garde. Design juries tend to award the avant garde.
Our work has received considerable interest as craft (six articles in
Fine Homebuilding) and we have found great interest in lay press
for both our ideas and our work (over 100 articles in local and
national daily's and monthly journals.) Whether there is a direct
connection to a rear guard view and the horizontal structure is
difficult to assess, but my experience suggests may firms promote
an avant guard view as if it were a well schooled thing to do, but
rarely are these architects genuine believes in the party line.

Another great benefits of the horizontal office is the breath of
design thought, aesthetic parti’s and technological agendas
explored. With eleven designers in lead design positions we
appear to regale in each others accomplishments. We appear
to have little of the common and destructive fight over design
credit referred to in Larry Hirschhom’s article, “Developing and
Evaluation talent in Architectural Firms.” In Hirschhom’s hypo-
thesis for a new model of firm culture he endorses the notion that a
firm should

“...support more than one design aesthetic...multiple design aest-
hetics enable younger architects to shapes their development in
ways that fit their talents...moreover, if the firm’s leadership can
stimulate interaction between the design aesthetics - through
firm-wide review, collaboration, or a policy that requires the sepa-
rate studios to design for different types of buildings - then the firm
as a whole is open to the evolution of styles and aesthetics in the
marketplace the firm’s design culture becomes increasingly col-
laborative in character.”

The multiple design aesthetic has given the firm a positive pluralis-
tic connection to popular culture, or as guest William Carswell
noted upon reviewing our display, “your populists.”

It is quite possible that the law office model, as practiced in our
firm or as maybe interpreted by others could significantly rescue
architecture from its current position of diminishing cultural value.
If our firm can grow to twenty five personnel serving only residen-
tial clientele in a three million population market then it is possibly
that adoption and trial of this model in both other venues and
through other markets might address Linda Groat’s concerns in
“Rescuing Architecture from the Cul-de-Sac.” Her critique of
modernity and its implication for architecture has lead her to sug-
gest a culturalist perspective for architecture...

“this means that architecture like other cultural artifacts forms an
essential part of the vast array of cultural relations that serve as
the source and nourishment for individual development...archi-
tecture is the cumulative product of vast interlocking groups of
individuals...it shares in the messy diversity of any pluralistic enter-
prise...a culturalist perspective clearly asserts a powerful and rele-
vant role for the architect as a guardian of and contributor to a
grand heritage, fully engaged in the discourse of our culture. This role simultaneously entails far more responsibility and a far greater significance than most architects currently conceive of for themselves. Let us hope that we can all rise to the occasion.⁴¹

Coming from a background of having worked for over a dozen firms in the first twenty years of intern and professional life I feel myself finally lifting from all fours and almost walking erect.