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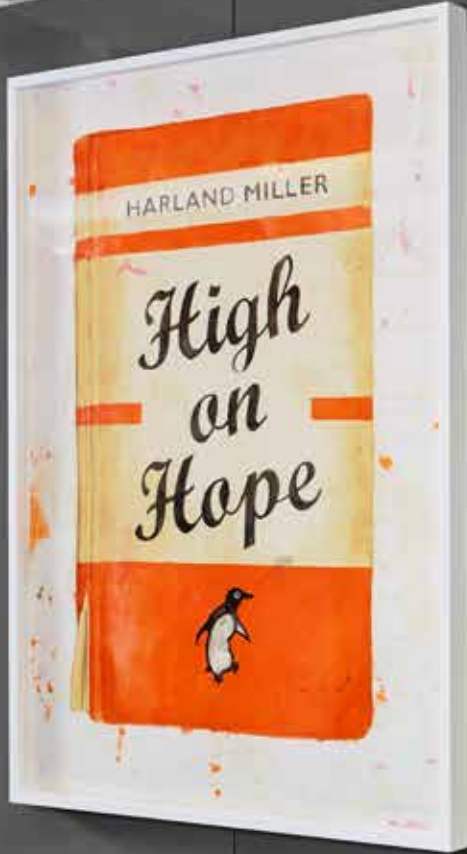
# THE REGISTRY

COMMERCIAL AND RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE NEWS

THE



BAY AREA COMMERCIAL AND  
RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE:  
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## DESIGNING REAL ESTATE

A DEEP LOOK INTO SOME OF THE  
REGION'S MOST CREATIVE OFFICE  
SPACES AND AN ANALYSIS OF THE  
INDUSTRY ACROSS SEVERAL SECTORS



# KEEPING THE CONVERSATION GOING

NINE ARCHITECTURE FIRMS PROVIDE INSIGHT ON RIDING THE ECONOMIC CYCLE

By *Kenneth Caldwell*

*“San Francisco is a city of dreamers and Peter Pans, but also of skeptics and traditionalists. It’s a mix that keeps the conversation going and pushes us to find new alleyways and avenues.”*



With such a prolonged real estate boom, there has been concern about an inevitable downturn, and architects are often hard hit by fluctuations in the market. We asked some of the leading firms in San Francisco why they’ve been successful in the last decade and how they are prepared for a possible market correction. For each firm, we posed the same questions to a principal and to a more junior staff member. A few themes emerged. Although most firms specialize in a few markets, they pursue diversity within their specialization. There is now a recognition that maintaining relationships between commissions is essential, and that hiring carefully is critical.

**Q. WHAT HAS ACCOUNTED FOR YOUR FIRM'S SUCCESS/GROWTH/STABILITY OVER THE LAST DECADE?**

*Naomi Miroglio, FAIA, Principal, Architectural Resources Group*

Diversity in our client base has been key to our firm’s success, as we strive to maintain a healthy mix of public and private work, both large and small. Our public and non-profit clients were essential to our practice during the recession. Maintaining talent has also been key to our growth and stability, and a transition involving our next generation of firm leadership has been an exciting part of the last few years.

*Alison Spicer, LEED AP, Senior Associate, Marketing Manager, Architectural Resources Group*

As a multidisciplinary firm, we are able to work on a wider variety of projects and fulfill more roles on a project than a traditional architecture firm can. Since we have architects, historians, planners and conservators under one roof, there are a lot of opportunities for us to collaborate with a wider variety of firms and entities. It is the relationships that we



Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects (LMSA):  
Photography by: Bruce Damonte for CCA Blattner Hall.



Kuth Ranieri:  
Photography by:  
Bruce Damonte for Balboa Pool

form with clients and collaborators, the talent and dedication of our staff, plus the consistency and quality of our work, that factor into ARG's success and stability.

**David Baker**, FAIA, Principal, David Baker Architects

We've built on our history of designing and realizing high-design, high-density, multifaceted urban communities, and at the same time, we've transitioned to a much more collaborative and inclusive internal culture.

**Brad Leibin**, AIA, Associate, David Baker Architects

A big part of it is culture. That means hiring the right people who share our values and our excitement about the work, then giving them space and support to contribute. Another big piece is adaptability. I credit David Baker's leadership with keeping us at the forefront of technologies both on the design and construction side. Our modular construction practice is a good example — it was rather limited when I began here and is now a very robust area of thought leadership for our firm.

**Elizabeth Ranieri**, FAIA, LEED AP, Principal, Kuth Ranieri Architects

We decided to change the scale of projects we pursued, because we wanted to have more impact in the public realm. Previously, the firm focused on small, private commissions based largely on social relationships, and then large urban

interventions that were mostly a result of design competitions. Byron and I wanted to work on environments that touched more people. Doing this meant reaching out to potential collaborators, forming teams and sharing our ideas in new ways. The strategy worked, and that meant we needed to grow the firm.

**M. Juno Song**, Designer, Kuth Ranieri Architects

It has been a great few years for many architectural firms in terms of growth and stability. A growing economy certainly has helped, but I believe that Kuth Ranieri has done an extraordinary job in diversifying our portfolio as well as the types of work we pursue. We have projects at all scales, of all types, and with a variety of partners, joint ventures, and entities, and as a result, I believe the Kuth Ranieri team has become more adept, more efficient and more knowledgeable.

**Marsha Maytum**, FAIA, LEED AP, Principal, Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects

Over the last twenty years, we have always maintained a variety of project types, which has resulted in our firm's ability to ride the economic wave through several recessions. Our firm has focused on mission-driven projects in three areas — affordable/supportive housing, education and community projects — which gives us the ability to respond to the changing marketplace. We have also been strategic in our business practices and maintained a lean approach to our firm operations.



Kuth Ranieri:  
Photography by:  
Jason O'Rear for SFO Big Room.



**Ryan Jang, AIA, LEED AP, Associate Principal, Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects**

The mission-driven focus of our practice and corresponding project types has given us the ability to recruit an exceptionally engaged and talented staff. The result is a studio culture composed of individuals with diverse perspectives and experiences but connected with shared values. As a result, we have been able to develop deep and long-standing relationships with our institutional, nonprofit and affordable housing developer clients, and we have had the opportunity to collaborate on multiple buildings or projects for many of them.

**Eric S. Robinson, AIA, Principal, Paulett Taggart Architects**

Our success, growth and stability are directly related to our commitment to making good design accessible to everyone regardless of their economic station. We attract clients who share our values for social and environmental equity. This has resulted in strong, long-term relationships and repeat clients. We've been fortunate that our expertise in affordable housing has involved us in major urban redevelopment projects such as the Hope SF project at Hunters View and the new LEED Platinum neighborhood at Treasure Island.

**Roselie Enriquez Ledda, Senior Associate, Paulett Taggart Architects**

Our clients (in the nonprofit housing development sector in particular) all know each other, and I believe our firm

has developed a good reputation for good design, creative problem-solving and collaborative team players. We've also partnered with other architecture firms to better position ourselves in pursuit of certain projects. We like working with designers with similar values and different perspectives. This has allowed us to diversify our portfolio of building types (in terms of programs, construction types, etc.).

**Primo Orpilla, Founder and Principal, Studio O+A**

From the beginning, when it was just Verda and me knocking out space plans in Silicon Valley, we were always delving into the underlying meaning of what we were doing. Why is this space more effective than that space? What do people want from their work? O+A has made a decades-long study of what makes people tick at work, and because that changes from year to year and generation to generation, we have remained right on the front lines of change.

**Chase Lunt, Project Designer, Studio O+A**

Our people all have hidden interests and unique perspectives. And so we've broadened our expertise beyond workplace design and interiors to all sorts of other things, like graphic design, product design, community outreach and experimental pop-ups. We're always evolving. Finally, I'd have to count San Francisco as a reason for O+A's longevity. This is a city of dreamers and Peter Pans, but also of skeptics and traditionalists. It's a mix that keeps the conversation going and pushes us to find new alleyways and avenues.



TEF Design:  
Photography by: Bruce Damonte for Stanford Neuroscience.

**Christopher Roach**, AIA, Principal, Studio Vara

When Maura Abernethy and I launched Studio VARA in 2013, we set out to build a practice that would both endure economic cycles and last beyond our own tenure as leaders of the firm. While we were only four people in a shared office space, with one or two residential projects, we laid the foundation for building a larger firm by thinking 10 years or more into the future. We have invested in our infrastructure, systems and personnel as if we were a larger and more established firm than we were, so we were able to capitalize on the opportunities that came to us.

**Rebal Knayzeh**, Assoc. AIA, Associate, Studio Vara

I would reverse the order of the list in the question to stability, then growth, then success. Our firm's stability is indexed through a variety of markers, including talent retention, meaningful participation, individualized attention and clear growth paths. In a similar way, a project's success hinges on creative thinking, client appreciation and care of individual relationships. Studio VARA's growth comes from engendering a strong studio culture while creating a safe space for exploration and skill development.

**Douglas Tom**, FAIA, Principal, TEF Design

We like to say that we don't chase projects, we cultivate clients. We've been able to cultivate several very stable clients — the City of San Francisco, the Presidio Trust, Kaiser Permanente, Stanford Healthcare and the University of California (multiple campuses), to name a few. Also, we've recruited a new principal, Andrew Wolfram, who is a preservation specialist and who brought with him developer clients, a client type that we had never cultivated before.

**Maryam Rostami**, Architect and Associate, TEF Design

I attribute growth at TEF to longer-term deepening relationships and widening community connections. For example, when I go to an event with founding partner Doug Tom, I get to see the many bonds he has with a variety of people. This connectedness has come not only from his ability to reach out, but also from the regard that people have for him. It's also the case that one of our areas of expertise, healthcare, has grown significantly in the past several years, which certainly has boosted our growth.

**William Turner**, AIA, LEED AP, NCARB, Principal, Valerio Dewalt Train

First, we apply a research-based design approach to all our projects, big or small. This investment at the beginning of each project ensures that we tailor the design to the specific problem at hand, rather than seeking to apply any specific design trends or aesthetic. Second, our studio is composed of dedicated and passionate architects and designers who understand the importance of serving our clients well. We strive to maintain staffing continuity on a project, so the design intent is carried through to the last detail during construction.

**Siobhan Klinkenberg**, Assoc. AIA, Valerio Dewalt Train

Valerio Dewalt Train is not afraid to give young designers important tasks and provide them with resources to make sure they're able to follow through on a variety of projects. Personally, I have been given a wide range of responsibilities that have allowed me to grow as a designer, and I also have a versatile group of peers to learn from. The firm's research-based design process lets us collaborate across all of our offices and provides opportunity to expand across the country, especially on the West Coast.

**Q. HOW IS YOUR FIRM PREPARED FOR A POTENTIAL DOWNTURN?**

**Naomi Miroglio**, FAIA, Principal, Architectural Resources Group

The potential for a downturn in the economy is ever-present in our planning. We work hard to maintain our strong and diverse client relationships and to promote a fiscally conservative approach to our practice. The field of preservation is changing rapidly — the reuse and adaptation of existing buildings is becoming more and more prevalent, especially in established communities where vacant and/or developable land is scarce.

**Alison Spicer**, LEED AP, Senior Associate, Marketing Manager, Architectural Resources Group

Business management and project management go hand-in-hand at ARG. We are careful not to overstaff projects, so when work does slow down, we don't necessarily have to lay off staff. Most importantly, though, is that we have been strategic in the sectors we work in. Our work is fairly well distributed among private, public, institutional, civic and other projects, which helps to lessen the impact of a downturn on any one of those sectors.

**David Baker**, FAIA, Principal, David Baker Architects

In the past, the cyclical offset between market-rate and non-profit housing has helped us survive the periodic economic winters. Our affordable housing clients benefit from lower construction costs during recessions, and their funding is long-term and tends to bridge the downturns.

**Brad Leibin**, AIA, Associate, David Baker Architects

While our primary focus is housing, we try to stay diversified within that sector. Historically, this has served us well. When the market-rate work slows, the affordable housing work seems to pick up, and vice versa. Within the last five years or so, we have been trying to expand the diversity of our work streams further by building our hospitality, interiors and urban planning practices.

**Elizabeth Ranieri**, FAIA, LEED AP, Principal, Kuth Ranieri Architects

Keeping a diversity of project types is key, as is seeing the relationships between projects and finding new possibilities within them. Our rebuilding of a major airport terminal (in joint venture with Gensler) also includes a temporary café and a co-location workspace that could speak to smaller interim-use projects. Our recent renovation of a midcentury pool (in joint venture with ELS) is also about making an energy-intensive building work better, both environmentally and socially.

**M. Juno Song**, Designer, Kuth Ranieri Architects

Diversifying our portfolio has allowed us to be more independent of trends, markets or sectors that might have a potential or sudden downturn. Due to all the experience each individual team member has gained over the last couple of years, I believe Kuth Ranieri runs a fairly lean and efficient

team. Everyone is capable of putting on many different hats for the firm. I think this allows us to continue forward with growth in the good times, while also giving us a bit of flexibility during a downturn.

**Marsha Maytum**, FAIA, LEED AP, Principal, Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects

We plan to maintain our proven approach in dealing with the next economic swings. Our world and profession continue to change at an unprecedented pace with new technologies, new challenges and new opportunities. We will continue to strive to contribute to our community and address the most critical issues of our generation — curbing climate change and creating a regenerative, equitable and carbon-neutral future.

**Ryan Jang**, AIA, LEED AP, Associate Principal, Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects

We view the inevitable forthcoming change in the economy and our industry as an occasion to refine and strengthen our practice and projects. In previous times of uncertainty and scarcity, we have needed to respond with greater creativity and efficiency, both for the buildings we design and within the operations of our practice. We welcome opportunities to renew our focus on social and environmental sustainability and emerge with greater commitment to design innovation.

**Eric S. Robinson**, AIA, Principal, Paulett Taggart Architects

We've taken a number of steps to mitigate the impact of the next downturn. These include focusing on our repeat client relationships, pursuing a variety of project types at a variety of scales, balancing ground-up construction projects with renovation/rehab projects, working with both public and private clients, controlling operation costs and saving a healthy portion of our profit each year in preparation for a slowdown.

**Roselie Enriquez Ledda**, Senior Associate, Paulett Taggart Architects

From conversations with the principals, I know that they believe it's financially prudent to save some of the yields of a particularly profitable period, because the economic cycle will inevitably bring lower periods. Also, this is not a firm that hires and lets go of staff on a per-project basis. Staff longevity and principal involvement on all projects

are goals. Therefore, they try to maintain a certain number of active projects and control hiring. The firm also works to have a fairly diverse portfolio of project types.

**Primo Orpilla**, *Founder and Principal, Studio O+A*

I think we're in a stronger position today than we've ever been in terms of the kinds of clients we're working with and the team we have in place to do the work. Our people are incredibly creative and resourceful. But I'm not convinced a downturn is going to happen, at least not in the way we've seen in the past. The last dot.com bust came about because the technology hadn't caught up to the aspirations people had for it — people were trying to do things that the world was not yet wired for. We're wired for it now. In the absence of some huge catastrophe, I don't see that energy disappearing all at once.

**Chase Lunt**, *Project Designer, Studio O+A*

We try not to repeat ourselves, so I think we're less likely to get stuck in a rut that then dries up. We're always looking for new design markets and new services we can provide. A lot of industries are only now waking up to the benefits of design. We're reaching out to them. And O+A keeps developing new services, like design consulting, brand development and design guidelines development. If there's a downturn coming, it's going to have to be pretty sweeping to cool all the pies we have our fingers in.

**Christopher Roach**, *AIA, Principal, Studio Vara*

We invest as much time, resources and creative energy into building the firm and managing its growth as we do any of our architecture projects. We use the planning and projective tools available to us to map out long-term strategies and plan for multiple contingencies. We continue to diversify our market sectors as well as our services, allowing us to be nimble and pivot quickly as work ebbs and flows. But it's just as important to invest heavily in our staff and build a strong, cohesive and collaborative office culture.

**Rebal Knayzeh**, *Assoc. AIA, Associate, Studio Vara*

A design firm's strongest asset is its talent. Fostering leadership and allowing for (at times unforeseen) opportunities for creative thinking naturally provides paths of diversification. This allows for quick reactions to evolving situations, such as a potential slowdown.

**Douglas Tom**, *FAIA, Principal, TEF Design*

Our diversity of clients has led to a diversity of project types. This diversity is, in some ways, a hedge against a recession in that downturn funding cycles will vary. Developers will likely be hit first, with the economic effects on the public sector coming later. Also, the array of stable clients will, hopefully, mean that they will most likely always have projects to do.

**Maryam Rostami**, *Architect and Associate, TEF Design*

Our hope is that being generalists is part of what will buoy us through an inevitable downturn. We have a mix of private and public types of projects and a diversity of client types within those categories, such that if a certain sector gets hit first, it will be possible for us to continue working in various other sectors. Additionally, we have a mix of large and small projects in the office sector, which will also help with stability.

**William Turner**, *AIA, LEED AP, NCARB, Principal, Valerio Dewalt Train*

We strive to maintain a diverse practice in terms of project types and clientele. That has served us well, as the economy tends to influence our different project types in different ways. Furthermore, it keeps our team engaged and energized, because people work across our different project types to provide fresh thinking. Through our multifamily housing projects, we have explored modular construction techniques that have significantly increased the pace of project delivery.

**Siobhan Klinkenberg**, *Assoc. AIA, Valerio Dewalt Train*

Our work is focused on pushing the boundaries of the design industry across all our project types. This innovation-focused approach helps create more business opportunities for the firm that will allow us to build upon our prior achievements. With offices in Palo Alto, San Francisco, Denver and Chicago, we are poised to tackle the challenges of developing in these rapidly developing areas. Also, we invest in a strong and dedicated workforce, research and technology, and our core design principles — ingenuity, vision, curiosity, tenacity and authenticity. ●