

Career and the profession

How many hats should an architect wear?

By Kathleen M. O'Donnell, November 27, 2018



GA STUDIO IN BESSEMER, ALABAMA LAUNCHED MANUFACTURING COMPANY BLOX, WHICH TRANSFORMED THE FIRM INTO 21ST CENTURY MULTIDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE WHERE ARCHITECTS AND MANUFACTURERS WORK SIDE BY SIDE.

Is multidisciplinary practice the past, present, or future of architecture?

Market factors and new technologies are simultaneously shifting architects into areas of specialization and broadening their skillsets. Work has become more efficient but also more intense, and firms are reacting—taking advantage of new opportunities and navigating their challenges. Over the last decade, the share of architecture firms classified as “multidisciplinary” has increased by 10 percentage points, now almost matching the number of single-discipline firms, according to *The Business of Architecture 2018*, the biannual AIA firm survey report.

To pinpoint the root of this trend, AIA’s research and practice team, led by managing director Michele Russo, started by taking a close look at the economic forces that have affected the industry in recent years. “During the Great Recession, firms diversified their practices to capture the work available because while billings were down, inquiries were up,” Russo says. Architecture firms needed to offer bids for more—and more diverse—projects to win work and remain afloat.

For some firms, remaining in business during the recession meant downsizing, and many architects and emerging professionals were left jobless. New York-based architect Jessica Sheridan, AIA, was working towards licensure at small firm Helpert Architects, where she was laid off when funding fell through on her primary project. While she took the time to focus on the Architect Registration Examination (ARE), Sheridan noticed many other emerging professionals coped differently, often by starting their own firms. “It was a really creative time for small firms to think about who they were,” she says. “They were starting from scratch instead of looking to the more traditional ways firms had been established and the way we saw our careers.”

The risky move to start a firm in a downturn worked for some in the long term, but it’s likely that many small-firm owners and sole practitioners took their diverse skills and services back to larger companies when the economy bounced back, which Russo identifies as a second reason for the trend. Since the recession, the share of multidisciplinary firms “has remained at a high as firms have acquired smaller practices in order to build the staff needed to capture work,” she says.

Offering a broad range of services to accommodate different types and scopes of work was critical for even the largest firms such as Gensler, where Sheridan eventually landed a position. “They were seeing an upturn after the dip in the economy sooner than other firms were, which is I think why they were hiring sooner,” she says, noting that she was attracted to a larger multidisciplinary firm for the job security and growth potential.

Sheridan, who assumes a position on the AIA Board of Directors in December, says that most of the work she completed in her first few years at Gensler was brought on by the downturn. When large companies downsized or shifted market focus and needed to reconfigure their workplaces, they hired established firms they knew and trusted for consolidations. “Even when they weren’t building big projects, or when big office overhauls were slowing down, there was still a need to consolidate and a need to do smaller projects,” she says. Building trust even through the worst economy in recent memory affected the profession in big ways; repeat clients remain the largest source of firm billings, according to *The Business of Architecture 2018*.

The Great Recession, though tough on the building industries overall, spurred deeper relationships with clients and contributed to a more flexible workforce, one that was willing to take on a wider range

Defining multidisciplinary

Multidisciplinary practice can be misinterpreted or ill-defined. “I think there’s a lot of ambiguity about what it means in the industry,” says Andrea Love, AIA, principal and director of building science at Payette. Those outside the AEC fields, and even some working in them, understandably tend to believe that a multidisciplinary firm is one that offers architectural design services for a variety of building typologies. As outlined in AIA research, though, multidisciplinary refers to a firm that offers services outside of traditional architectural design, regardless of the building types they typically work on. The firm survey outlines additional services such as interior design, engineering, planning, zoning and code compliance, and pre-design services, and leaves an open answer field for firms to add other specialties.

To some, like Jamie Aycock, AIA, an architect with over 40 years of experience, offering a broad range of services is just what being an architect has always meant. “When I was in school, I learned about land planning, civil engineering, and structural design. Traditionally, that was the way an architect was taught,” he says.

Aycock, who serves as an advisor with the [AIA Center for Practice](#), believes that the rise of lawsuits and liabilities on architects from the 1950s through the 1980s, and the construction documents developed as a result, “left a void that others were willing to fill” and reduced the services architects were comfortable offering. “We birthed construction managers, program managers, and a host of other specialties like planning and interior design as individual professions,” he indicates. He recalls that architects felt like they had to specialize solely in design services in order to protect themselves.

“There are so many facets architecture touches that you need to understand. – Andrea Love, AIA

Multidisciplinary practice may not be something new or trending, but rather a return to the foundations of architectural education and practice, just defined a different way. “Architecture has always been a Renaissance field,” says Love. “There are so many facets architecture touches that you need to understand. I think the ability to speak more of those languages and have those perspectives is a good thing for the industry.”

Aycock says his firm, Giattina Aycock Architecture Studio in Bessemer, Alabama, wasn’t truly multidisciplinary until recently, despite the fact that it has offered building and interior design, master planning, site design, feasibility studies, and related services for the last 60 years. After the recession, GA Studio launched BLOX, a company that designs and manufactures medical modules and building components, which has completely transformed the practice, putting architects and builders side by side. Though Aycock doesn’t see many architecture firms doing exactly what his has, he thinks that

more architects need to open up their minds to think about all the possibilities of multidisciplinary practice. “Architects have to do that if they’re going to survive,” he says.

Beyond an explanation of what services a firm offers, multidisciplinary also can define the way in which individual project work gets done. Architects at Payette often refer to their practice as “interdisciplinary,” as project teams routinely include landscape and interior design, programming and planning, and traditional architectural design. Love says Payette’s Boston office also has a group of people the firm refers to as “the engine,” which consists of architects and professionals from outside of practice who specialize in areas like computation, VR, and fabrication.

Similarly, New York’s Mancini Duffy, where Sheridan is now a senior associate, puts technology and research at the center of its multidisciplinary practice. Architects there engage with clients in collaborative working sessions, leveraging different communication and design tools to update plans in real time. Changing up traditional client presentation methods by designing *with* the client rather than *presenting to* the client, they expedite decision-making and project planning. “The process is a lot messier, but it’s a window into how we work,” she says, “It’s great for clients to see and understand and know what they’re paying for.”

Sheridan thinks continuing to build trusting relationships with clients—one of the key ways multidisciplinary firms stayed in business during the recession—will also be the best way forward for them. “The future of our profession hinges on that relationship, that clients understand what we bring to the table that isn’t just a pretty drawing or a document set that’s going to get them a permit,” she says. “It’s thinking through a problem together.”

A solid future for firms

In a recent AIA.org poll, 89 percent of respondents agreed that multidisciplinary practice is the future of the profession. Going multidisciplinary may be crucial for firm survival once again, as economists predict that the next downturn is imminent, possibly beginning within the next two years. About the trend toward multidisciplinary practice, Russo says, “Firms are working to future-proof and remain ready for the next downturn. With a slower economy potentially emerging, firms are looking to remain ready for the business that will be available.” She adds that AIA will continue to evaluate the way practices are categorized and described in research to accommodate for new firm models.

"Firms are working to future-proof and remain ready for the next downturn." -Michele Russo

As multidisciplinary continues to grow in popularity, it’s important to understand that it’s not just good for business with clients, it’s good for employees, too. Working within a variety of disciplines on a range

of projects can also offer immense satisfaction, holding promise for the future architectural workforce. At GA Studio and BLOX, Aycock observes the value for emerging professionals who get to work on physically piecing together buildings with their hands. At Payette, Love, who operates as a building scientist, researcher, and designer, says she enjoys “wearing different hats.”

Sheridan and her colleagues like to pursue multiple roles on a project at Mancini Duffy, and she knows a diverse workload makes her better at her job—especially serving clients who are looking outward and seeking to expand their portfolios. “Personally, it’s really rewarding to jump from one site to another or one type of project to another,” she says. “But I’m also able to bring that expertise back to my clients who might be looking at other industries for knowledge and information.”

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Kathleen M. O’Donnell is a writer/editor at AIA, specializing in practice and professional development topics and Institute coverage.