

Group 70 Ltd. may be the largest architectural firm in the nation to have a woman president.

Sheryl Seaman: Architecture's Leading Lady

By Diana Lomont

When Sheryl Seaman graduated from the University of Hawaii School of Architecture 17 years ago, one of her professors asked her what she was going to do with her life.

"I said, well I thought I might go out and get a job as an architect." Seaman still remembers her professor's reaction. "He just was, 'Oh, you can't be serious.'"

But Seaman never let negative attitudes of others hold her back. And if that professor is still around today, he would see that times have changed. Back in the early '70s, Seaman was a young mother and one of the few women students majoring in architecture. Today, she is president of Group 70 Ltd., one of the fastest growing architectural firms in the United States.

Seaman took over the reins in March, succeeding Norman Hong, who remains as a director of the 135-member firm, with Francis Wong retaining his position as chairman and chief executive officer. The move makes Group 70 probably the largest architectural firm in the nation to be directed by a woman, according to the American Institute of Architects' national headquarters in Washington D.C., which also reports that women as registered architects comprise only 6 percent of its membership. Seaman doesn't feel unusual as a woman president—she was groomed for the position for two



Sheryl Seaman may take her work seriously, but says she never takes herself too seriously.

years. (Group 70 changes presidents every five to six years.) But she can't help but be glad for breaking through the glass ceiling that forces so many other women architects to start their own firms.

"I think it's great because it shows what is naturally occurring in the architectural profession," she says. Seaman recalls that when she went to school, there was only about one woman in every other architecture class. Today, she says, it's not uncommon for women to occupy more than half the seats in an architecture class.

"So it's a profession where women are going to become more and more visible," says Seaman, who appears as a role model to high school students when she talks about career opportunities in architecture for men and women.

During her 17 years in Hawaii's architectural circuit, Seaman admits having encountered some negative reactions toward her presence in a male-dominated industry. But she never paid much attention to them. "To me, that kind of attitude is not something that should in any way hold people back," she explains. "It's out there, it exists. It's sort of like a rainy day. It's not very much fun, but it's not going to ruin everything. You just got to keep doing what it is you needed to do in spite of a rainy day."

Seaman is not only an example of a woman breaking through traditional boundaries of society, but a testament

to surviving and succeeding in the modern age. She has been a single parent for 13 years, sending her daughter Chandra to Iolani School and Georgetown University, from where she graduated last month.

Seaman has made Hawaii her home for most of her life. She came to the Islands in 1962 on an old Matson cruise ship at the age of 15 with her parents (her father was transferred here in the Army). Growing up in a military family, she has lived in many places across the United States, including California, Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, Virginia, Kansas and Colorado, as well as in Mexico and Spain for brief periods. She loves to travel; last month she took a trip to Spain with her daughter.

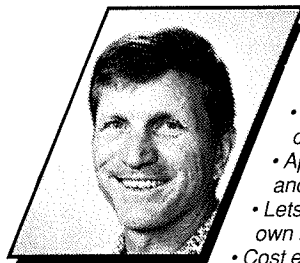
After graduating from college, Seaman found her first architectural job

Seaman takes on her executive role at an exciting time; Group 70's employee count nearly doubled in the last year.

with Media Five. There, she gained experience in various lines of work, including planning, multimedia production and construction administration, in addition to architectural design. In 1978, she joined Group 70 when there were only a dozen other employees and was quickly named an associate. Projects she's been involved in over the years include the First Federal Savings & Loan building, the former Banyan Gardens Restaurant in Waikiki, the University of Hawaii's long-range master plan, the upcoming Kawela Bay Resort I and II in Kahuku, and a hotel/condominium golf club project in Okinawa. In 1983, she was named a partner of Group 70, and shortly afterwards initiated the firm's interior design group, which is currently staffed by 13 full-time designers.

Seaman takes on her executive role at an exciting time. Recently, the firm has grown dramatically. In April 1989,

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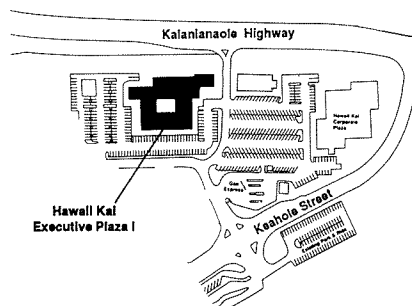
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Group 70 celebrated the addition of its 70th employee. By a year later, the employee count nearly doubled to 135.

With that growth has come Group 70's expansion into the Pacific Basin. The firm has a 15-person office in the Philippines, providing production services for the development of the Nansey Resort in Saipan and a golf club house and hotel/condominium in Okinawa. Staff are currently doing the design work for hotel projects in Tahiti and New Caledonia.

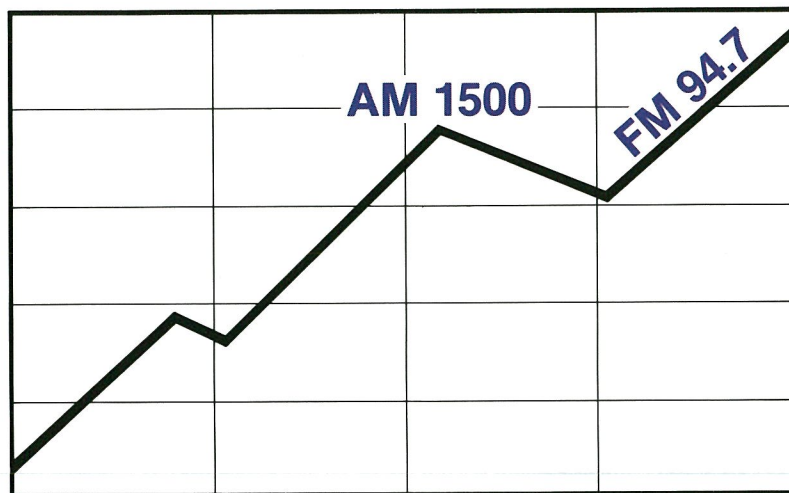
In Hawaii, other recent projects of Group 70 include the Koele Lodge and Manele Bay Hotel on Lanai, the Embassy Suites in Wailea, and Keoniloa Resort in Poipu. The firm has also done the conceptual plans for The Princess Hotel in Kona, and is working on the master plan for the Sea Mountain resort in Punaluu on the Big Island, as well as designing the new Maui Palms Hotel in Kahului. Overall, the company is involved in projects valued in excess of \$1 billion.

Last year, Group 70's activity added up to \$14 million in gross revenues, a figure that the firm projects to rise to \$18 million in 1990. Business is so healthy that Seaman shares an inside joke with her colleagues to not answer the phone because it might be another project. In fact, the partners do turn down new work that would jeopardize the attention given to ongoing projects. One of Group 70's founding principles is priority dedication to longtime clients.

As a manager, Seaman describes her style as "hands-on." Former president Hong agrees. "She tries to touch bases with as many people as possible on a daily basis," he says. But Seaman is quick to point out that managing the firm involves equal input from all five principals. "If an issue comes up in our partners meeting, and one of us feels negative towards it, it doesn't happen," she relates.

Seaman has plenty of opportunity to practice her hands-on style of management. She meets weekly with a management committee comprised of her four partners and 17 associates, who together review all the facets of managing the firm, from allocating manpower to conducting staff evalua-

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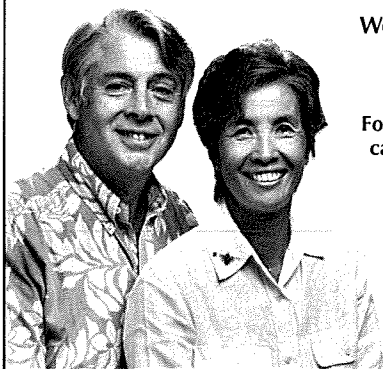
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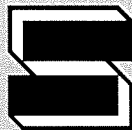


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tions. Seaman also makes her monthly rounds with some dozen standing committees that discuss everything from staff education, quality control and project management to interior design, computers and the company newsletter. And then there are the weekly Friday staff meetings that everyone, including Seaman, attends.

The sense of teamwork that the firm promotes is a reflection of the Christian principles by which Group 70 seeks to operate. "The greatest commandment in the Bible is to do unto others as you would have others do unto you," says Seaman. "And we really believe that applies to management of employees, as well as cooperation with each other as principals and all the other things involved in day-to-day life."

One activity that demonstrates Group 70's commitment to its staff is the firm's mentor program, where every employee, including secretaries,

*"If an issue comes up in
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is assigned to someone with more experience to help guide his or her career development.

One of Seaman's challenges as president will be to keep a sense of union in the firm, which is now split into two locations. The \$800,000 renovation of Group 70's Bethel Street location is finally complete after nearly two years. Those offices house the administration, accounting, architecture, planning and graphics departments. The firm's other half, around the corner on South King Street, include the interior design, computers and construction administration departments plus two projects.

Seaman appears stern and serious in a professional company photo. But upon meeting the brunette, one can see that pictures can be deceiving. (In fact, her colleagues have told her to have a new picture taken.) Friendly, open and jovial are words that come to mind after a chummy chat with Ms. Pres. The three words Hong chooses

to describe his successor are "personable, dynamic, talkative." Oda says she's "funny, extremely intelligent and very capable." Her relaxed manner of talking in a voice that wavers slightly hints at an artsy side to her. In fact, during her college days she worked part-time at the original India Imports. It's hard to believe that before pursuing architecture she had intended to major in the sciences, perhaps chemistry or physics. She did take two-and-a-half years of calculus even though only two semesters were required as an architecture major. However, she also began her university studies with two years of art classes before joining the architecture school, and does admit that she "probably leans more toward the artistic side."

If she does, though, there's no dreamy tendency to accompany it. Seaman says she likes to handle problems head-on "before things get hysterical." While she still may be new on the bridge of Group 70's ship, her commitment definitely shows. She tries not to take work home with her, but she's at the office most weekends and gets to work at 6:15 a.m. two or three mornings a week, which "sometimes turns into five." She also does her share of community work, as secretary of the Honolulu chapter of the AIA, director of the Honolulu chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers, and board member of the American Heart Association's Windward Division.

Understandably, Seaman has little free time, but she does manage to take her two golden retrievers out for daily walks around her Kailua home or on the beach. She also enjoys playing squash and badminton, and recently took up golf to play in a company tournament. "I'm not a threat to the women's pro tour," she quips, laughing heartily.

One character trait that everyone who knows Seaman is sure to recognize is her sense of humor. Although she takes her work "very seriously," she never takes herself too seriously, she says. "If you take yourself too seriously, then everyone else gets backed off and you don't get the communication you want in order to solve the problems that arise." **\$**

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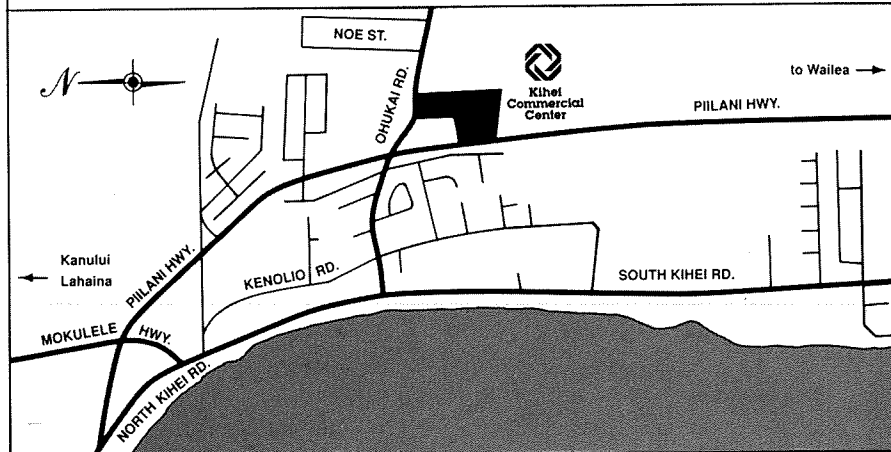
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