

# No Building Contractor? No Problem

Architect Peter Gluck is redesigning the business of building by cutting out the middleman, and saving clients money in the process

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Peter Gluck sits on the couch of his office loft recalling the house that "broke his back." In the working environment of that project, the tensions between his architectural firm, Peter Gluck & Partners, and the general contractor were so high that the construction dragged on for what seemed like forever. Inefficiencies abounded.

As he concludes his story, his son, Thomas, the other principal architect at the firm, comes by with a dusty design plan that falls heavily on the table where he drops it. "This is how we used to do business," he says.

By that he means that the firm used to operate as most architects do: designing a building, creating construction drawings, and turning those over to a contractor who carries out the construction. But too often communications—or miscommunications—between the design and construction teams cause delays and costly mistakes. This, says Gluck, was happening on too many projects, and the architects often wound up doing cleanup construction. Which is how, some 10 years ago, they hit on the idea that they could cut out the general contractor, take full liability for the project, and start working on-site as construction managers themselves.

## An Integrated Process

These days, the firm handles a project from beginning to end, handing off drawings to its integrated construction arm for the building phase. The architects know that construction requires huge investments of time and money, but by offering these services, the partners deliver clients a more efficient, and therefore less expensive, project.

"We don't have two separate departments," says Thomas, referring to the firm and its construction arm, ARCS. "One person can design one day and be a construction worker the next. It's a very integrated process." In the past, architects have typically participated in design/build projects only when they were brought on as consultants by a developer for a specific project. Peter Gluck's firm is the first to make building an official part of its business.

The shift in the company has brought about changes not only in the construction process but in the drawing stage, and even staffing. The firm now looks for architects with an eye for design and a head for the practical details of construction management. And at the initial design stage, says L.J. Porter, who came to the firm halfway through its transition in 2001, "Because we're so connected to the end product while it's being done, we pick up on all the idiosyncratic things that normally get overlooked by architects. That saves a lot of time and money down the line."

### **Holistic Process**

He points out a drawing of a mechanical infrastructure. Because Porter knows the drawing inside out, he immediately caught a circuit error that might only have been caught later by the mechanical consultants, saving both the time and expense of rewiring.

Thinking more holistically about a building, its structural systems, and construction needs has in some cases influenced the designs. In an effort to make a building more green, for instance, they developed a way of burying it in the ground, giving them a natural green roof—the lawn.

The firm's relationship to subcontractors also has changed. Besides soliciting their services directly, architects at Peter Gluck have learned to alter their drawings and work side by side with workers during installation. While this took some getting used to, subcontractors who have worked with the company now appreciate that they don't have to wait around for a problem to work its way up the hierarchy and back down again.

### **Cutting Costs, Not Corners**

"What we discovered over the several projects we've done with them is having direct communication with the architect on site helps create a better finished product," says David Erbsen, the president and owner of United Construction, a local contractor in Aspen, Colo., who worked on an affordable housing project there with the firm.

"I was able to get a vision of what they were trying to achieve very quickly, and at the same time it was very functional. I was impressed we were able to hit both levels without involving the middleman."

Without a general contractor taking a cut, and with fewer adjustments being made late in the project, the firm is able to cut costs without cutting corners. This has resulted in yet another shift: The company now concentrates on providing high-end buildings and specialty housing—including affordable housing, inner-city institutions, and residential green initiatives—for clients on a tight budget.

The most stunning example of this is the Little Ajax Affordable Housing project in Aspen, a town where "affordable housing" is an oxymoron. Recently awarded the 2007 Architecture Merit Award by the AIA New York Chapter and an AIA National Green Award, the luxurious-looking family units near ski resorts offer convenience for the service personnel who otherwise could only afford housing miles away. Overall, the 44-bedroom, 17-family complex cost \$158 per square foot, an incredible rate considering the high cost of materials in Aspen and its \$220-per-square-foot average development cost.

### **Inside-Out Approach**

One of the tricks the firm uses to keep costs down is to design from the inside out. "We have no idea what the exterior of a building looks like, so that's the fast-track aspect of it," says Gluck. "All the stuff that New York architects spend their time doing, that stuff comes last for us. It's not that we don't focus on it, but we focus on it when we know how much money we have and when we really have an idea of what the scope of the project is."

From the client perspective, one of the few potential downsides of the firm's expansion into construction is that it eliminates the "checks and balances" provided when a general contractor is involved. To put some accountability back into their process, Gluck and Partners has launched a password-protected Web site that allows clients to view every piece of paperwork on the project, from the original contract to requisitions.

It's too soon to tell whether or not this model of architectural firm will gain any momentum among competitors of Peter Gluck and Partners, but for now it's certainly keeping the architects, their clients, and their subcontractors happy. "Architects have been relegated to making cartoons that somebody else takes apart and stitches back together to look like Frankenstein," says Gluck. "We know how to do this and we'll never go back to the old way."