



Voices of Design Leadership

**Insights from Top
Collaborative Design Firms**

Ken Sanders FAIA

WILEY

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Part One
Introductions

Chapter 1

Why This Book?

If you want to learn something, read about it. If you want to understand something, write about it. If you want to master something, teach it.

- Yogi BhaJan

One of the most rewarding experiences of my architecture career was co-leading three separate classes of Gensler University (GU), the global design firm's accelerated leadership development program. In addition to collaborative workshops, office visits, and virtual meetings, students of each class heard from influential speakers who included clients, consultants, educators, and researchers. Today, most of those GU graduates are leading Gensler offices or their own firms. Helping others achieve success has been central to my leadership roles at multiple design firms and served as a key motivation for writing this book.

Recent events provided additional encouragement. Here in the US, we are finally confronting the lingering discrimination in our society and our shared responsibility to address it. But the architecture profession has much more work to do. The nation's largest minority-owned architecture firm, Moody Nolan, was appropriately recognized in 2021 by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) with the Architecture Firm Award. MASS Design Group, an innovative non-profit focused on serving the underserved, earned the same award in 2022. Of the ten firms recognized between 2011 and 2020, however, over two-thirds of the Principals still leading those firms are white men.

Today, it is more important than ever that we showcase and learn from design leaders who look like the world, and who bring diverse life experiences and cultural backgrounds to their work. Individually, each of the sixteen people interviewed for this book stands on their own as a successful and influential design leader. Collectively, they express what design leadership in our profession can and should look like.

Prior to Gensler, I worked at four other exceptional design firms. In chronological order, they are: EHDD; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; LPA; and ZGF Architects. Of the five firms including Gensler, four were honored by the AIA with the Architecture Firm Award. One of the four has earned the honor twice and the fifth has earned the AIA California Firm Award twice.

I mention these awards not to burnish my own reputation; in fact, I have joked with colleagues for years that all five firms earned them while I worked elsewhere. I mention them to highlight my good fortune. I have had the opportunity to collaborate with - and learn from - hundreds of talented design leaders over the past forty years.

During that time, I have observed the most effective way in which design leaders can share what they learn is through storytelling. Relatable stories are what young professionals most often remember and apply to their own careers, more than company policies, guidelines, or checklists. When they hear personal stories from a design leader who inspired a client, seized an opportunity, discovered a key insight, made a difficult decision, or creatively overcame an obstacle, they better retain and more effectively leverage the lessons and insights.

And that is why the sixteen individuals featured in *Voices of Design Leadership* speak in their own words and tell their own stories. My authorship role is not to represent their

points of view with excerpts, but to engage in conversations that allow each person to express themselves in open dialogue.

The Voices

Among thousands of talented and influential design leaders around the world, how were these sixteen selected? In addition to demographic diversity, I sought to include a variety of leadership roles: architect, interior designer, research leader, urban designer, educator, sustainability advocate, and business executive. Some are founders or co-founders of their firms, while others are second, third, or fourth generation leaders.

The types of firms are diverse as well: for-profit, non-profit, single-discipline, multi-discipline, and client. They are engaged in a range of geographies, market sectors, and project types, and vary in size from less than 25 people to over 5,000. The two clients, Google and The Walt Disney Company, are substantially larger, with over 140,000 and 200,000 employees, respectively. The oldest design firm, Perkins&Will, was founded in 1935. MASS Design Group, the youngest, was incorporated in 2010.

The sixteen leaders are a blend of old friends and new. I began by reaching out to individuals who inspired me during my own professional journey.

Marsha Maytum, for example, I have known for over four decades. We met at EHDD in 1980, where I started my first job after graduating from UC Berkeley. Marsha made a lasting impression with her talent, generosity, and gracious personal style. Today she is a Principal at Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects.

I met **Wendy Rogers** in 1987 while I worked at LPA, when she joined the firm as a new graduate. Wendy has always

been passionate, curious, and eager to embrace new opportunity, and her journey from intern to CEO at the same firm is an inspiring one.

Sharron van der Meulen and I worked together at ZGF's office in Portland, Oregon, during the 1990s. In 2019, Sharron became one of the first women partners in ZGF's eighty-year history. As her responsibilities expanded over the years, she always maintained her authentic leadership voice: smart, modest, funny, and optimistic.

Three design leaders I befriended during my seventeen years at Gensler. **Andre Brumfield** is a Principal and Cities & Urban Design Leader and currently serves on firm's Board of Directors. **Barbara Bouza** was co-Managing Director of Gensler's Los Angeles office and is now President, Walt Disney Imagineering, at The Walt Disney Company. I met **Michelle Kaufmann** while she worked at X, the research subsidiary of Google, and we collaborated on two projects for Google Real Estate and Workplace Services (REWS). Today, she is Head of R+D for the Built Environment at Google.

Phil Harrison and I became friends through our participation in the Design Futures Council, where we both serve as Senior Fellows. As CEO of Perkins&Will, Phil is a leader with contagious energy who has piloted the firm's impressive growth for over two decades.

Prior to starting this book, I spoke to **Rafael Viñoly** just once in 2007. At the time, we were both working on the CityCenter development in Las Vegas for MGM Resorts International. How did we meet? After a full day of client meetings, I gave him a ride to the airport. Our brief but memorable conversation in transit - as well as his eponymous firm's impressive portfolio of award-winning projects - encouraged me to reconnect.

To round out the group of sixteen, I reached out to design leaders I had never met before, based on their personal reputation and published work. They include **Colin Koop**, Design Partner at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; **Ana Pinto-Alexander**, Health Interiors Principal at HKS; **Mustafa Chehabeddine**, Principal at KPF; and **Mariko Masuoka**, Design Principal at Pelli Clarke & Partners.

Two design leaders have firmwide oversight responsibilities in sustainability or research: **Margaret Montgomery**, Principal and Global Sustainable Practice Leader at NBBJ, and **Billie Faircloth**, Partner and Research Director at KieranTimberlake. And **Nader Tehrani** wears two design leadership hats: one as the Founder and Principal Designer at NADAAA, and the other as Dean of the Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture of The Cooper Union.

Finally, one of the most inspiring leaders I was privileged to meet is also the youngest: **Alan Ricks**, Founding Principal and Chief Design Officer of the non-profit MASS Design Group, the firm honored by the AIA with the 2022 Architecture Firm Award. His innovative practice brings integrated design and construction services to communities around the world that need them the most and are in the least advantaged position to obtain them.

Together, the sixteen leaders represent a wide variety of demographics, firm types, roles, and expertise. Their individual journeys demonstrate there are many paths to career success. My sincere hope is this book will help educate and inspire our next generation of design leaders, particularly women, people of color, and immigrants, and I am profoundly grateful to each of the sixteen design leaders for participating.

The Work

My first book, *The Digital Architect*, was published in 1996 and focused on the emergence of digital technology in the architecture profession. In its final chapter, "Atoms Versus Bits," I wrote about my experience working on the Monterey Bay Aquarium at EHDD. I was initially hired by the firm to build a 1/8-inch-scale physical model of the aquarium and subsequently drew all of the construction document floor plans, reflecting ceiling plans, building sections, and interior elevations. None of this, by the way, was done with computers.

I was also provided the opportunity to detail the acrylic viewing windows for the aquarium's large saltwater tanks, one of which is a two-level otter habitat adjacent to the main entrance lobby. As I wrote in the book's concluding paragraphs:

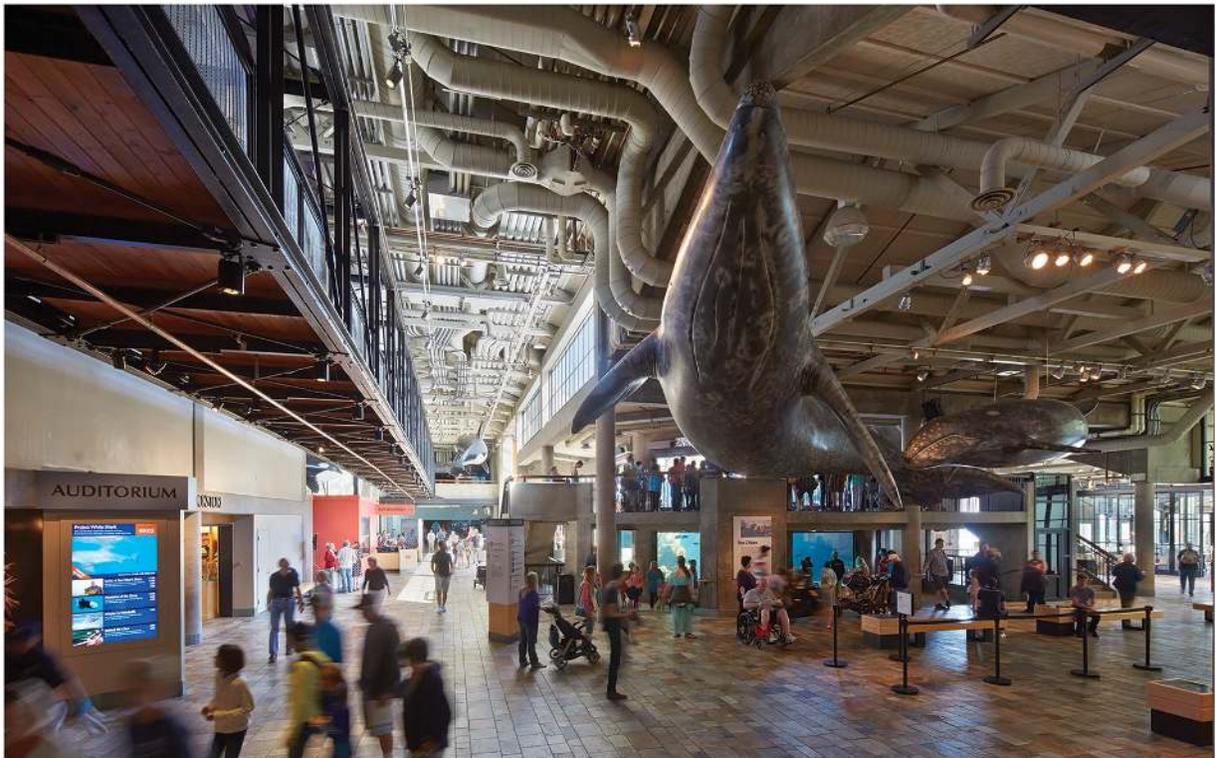
I visited the aquarium for the first time in 1984 soon after it opened. Today, almost twelve years later, I can describe the exact location where I stood shortly after I walked into the aquarium and saw a young girl, perhaps six or seven years old, with her nose pressed against the two-story acrylic panel of the otter tank, watching with delight and amazement as the otters zoomed past her. I stopped and watched for minutes. The girl's nose didn't leave the acrylic, my feet didn't leave the floor, and my eyes didn't leave her. The condensation of her breath on the acrylic took a minute to evaporate when she finally unglued her nose and ran over to her parents to share her discoveries.

My contribution to the aquarium and its otter tank was a small one, but it still felt fantastic to have participated in adding a measure of joy to that young girl's life. It may sound silly, but to this day, those few minutes standing in the lobby of the Monterey Bay Aquarium twelve years ago remain one of my most profound experiences as an architect.

After all, experiencing and touching the atoms of a building, and seeing others do so, is still the most compelling reward for those who participate in its design and construction - even the digital architect.

Almost forty years after my first visit, I remember exactly where I stood that day. I will never forget the moment. I have since enjoyed other memorable experiences at projects to which I contributed, such as Cirque Du Soleil acrobats performing at CityCenter in Las Vegas, Nevada; children exploring the interactive exhibits at California Science Center in Los Angeles, California; skiers warming up around stone fireplaces at Deer Valley Resort's Silver Lake Lodge in Park City, Utah; and families gathering in the

lobby of OHSU Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland, Oregon.



The Monterey Bay Aquarium. Its two-story otter habitat is center-right, below the gray whales. Photo Credit: Photo by Bruce Damonte.

In contrast to *The Digital Architect*, which focused on design technology, this book is focused on design leadership. Each explores a different dimension of practice, but both embrace the same intention: improving the lives of individuals, families, and communities through design. As a result, *Voices of Design Leadership* includes not only conversations with sixteen design leaders, but also forty projects that represent milestones of their professional journeys.

A few examples: the first US museum dedicated to the victims of racial terror lynching (The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, by MASS Design Group); a mass timber

high-rise (Canada's Earth Tower, by Perkins&Will); a residential campus for adults with autism (Sweetwater Spectrum Community, by Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects); a lifecycle assessment software application (Tally®, by KieranTimberlake); an autonomous robot prototype (Baby Groot™, by Walt Disney Imagineering); and extraterrestrial housing (Moon Village, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill).

Other projects include airports, office buildings, education campuses, health care facilities, multi-family housing, mixed-use developments, an exhibition center, a superhero campus, an inter-faith spiritual center, a transit station, a single-family home, and a Castle of Magical Dreams. On Earth, the project sites are located in twelve US states and nine other countries around the world: Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Kuwait, Rwanda, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and Venezuela. The built work totals over 22 million square feet (2 million square meters).

These are just a small sampling of projects by the firms whose leaders are profiled in this book and serve as wonderful examples of *why* we design and *why* we lead. Our shared purpose: to enhance the lives of those who live, work, play, learn, and heal in the environments we imagine, as well as the lives of the talented people who join together to make that happen.

The rewards of design leadership are many, but from my perspective, the ultimate measure of success how you leave the world a better place than you found it. Starting in [Chapter 3](#), you will hear from sixteen leaders who are working hard to do that every day.

Chapter 2

Patterns of Design Ecosystems

Each of the sixteen leaders profiled in this book represents a different model of design leadership and different model of design firm. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Having said that, healthy ecosystems of collaborative design talent share common characteristics. They are not rules or guidelines. They are not operational, technology, or marketing strategies. Instead, they are cultural *patterns* that grow and nourish thriving design ecosystems:

- The Power of Diversity
- Design + Business Synergy
- Client Experience Mindset
- T-shaped Professionals
- The Four R's
- Lifelong Learning

Readers are encouraged to reflect on each, add, subtract, prioritize, and develop a set of patterns that best represents the collaborative culture of your organization. Note that these are patterns of successful design *firms*. The values of successful design *leaders* are outlined in the closing chapter.

The Power of Diversity

Diversity is the one true thing we all have in common.
Celebrate it every day.

- *Winston Churchill*

For all the right reasons, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are booming in organizations across the globe. Intentional strategies of diversity not only help address lingering discrimination and social injustice, but also improve the overall health and resilience of talent ecosystems.

The evidence surrounds us. In nature, it is well understood that diverse and balanced ecosystems are the healthiest and most resilient. Biodiversity provides shared ecosystem services that benefit multiple species, including protection of water resources, formation and protection of soils, nutrient storage and recycling, breakdown and absorption of pollution, and recovery. The inverse effect can be seen in “managed” ecosystems. Wild salmon is generally healthier and less disease-prone than farmed salmon, and forest development programs that recognize the value of ecosystem diversity produce more disease-resistant trees compared to those that do not.

Researchers have also found that biological communities rich in species are substantially more productive than those lacking in diversity. Examples include deserts, forests, marine ecosystems, old-growth forests, rainforests, tundra, and coral reefs. While “survival of the fittest” exists within individual species, each depends on contributions from the others to ensure their own overall well-being. Mutual dependency is an essential characteristic.

The same is true of ecosystems of design talent. The greater the diversity and interdependency, the healthier and more resilient. Also important is equity: organizational processes and rewards that are impartial, fair and offer equal potential outcomes for everyone.

Art Gensler always encouraged leaders to “hire people smarter than you.” That is true. I would add to Art’s

insightful advice: seek out, hire, and learn from people who are *different* from you.

Biography Matters

My wife Regina - a first-generation immigrant from Brazil - has taught me many things, one of which is how culture and language are closely woven together. A simple word in Portuguese, for example, may have additional layers of emotion compared to American English. Brazilian culture also generally encourages more emotional expression; to be trusted in Brazil, you do wear your heart on your sleeve. That is one reason why the best language translation cannot be achieved through one-to-one vocabulary mapping. Sorry Google! To learn a language well is to learn a culture well, and vice versa.

As design leaders, we need to extend our thinking about diversity beyond the traits most often associated with employment discrimination: race, color, religion, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, age, or disability. Those are important markers. But diversity is also about life experience. About culture. About economic status. About family background. *Biography matters.*

In general, life experiences that introduce design leaders to different geographies, languages, and social contexts broaden their understanding of cultural preferences and helps them challenge conventional wisdom. Such experiences also help them recognize that the needs of diverse clients cannot be addressed in a homogenous manner, and that innovative design solutions are often discovered along unconventional paths.

In [Chapter 12](#), you will hear from Rafael Viñoly, a remarkable design leader who was born in Uruguay, built a successful design practice in Argentina, and immigrated with his family to the US after the 1976 military coup d'état

overthrew President Isabel Perón. As Rafael points out, “Immigration is probably the only university that can teach you how much you don’t know.”

For those who did not enjoy a particularly diverse life experience prior to beginning their professional career, it is never too late to start. First steps might include overseas graduate school or short-term exchange programs within or between firms. Enlightened organizations with global footprints offer cross-border opportunities to their talent for that very reason. The intention: enhancing the creative output of collaborative teams through diversity of biography and life experience.

Look Far and Wide

As you search for new design talent, make sure to look far and wide. You may be surprised what you find! Two stories illustrate this principle.

The first begins in April 2012. Readers may be familiar with Google Earth, a software application that allows users to navigate a 3D representation of our planet using satellite imagery. In 2012 (alas, no longer) users of the software could contribute their own 3D building models to the public version of Google Earth. While Gensler’s Shanghai Tower was under construction, I learned that someone had inserted into Google Earth an impressive 3D model of the building.

The model did not represent the completed design, but instead its current construction progress. At that point, the twisting steel and concrete frame had reached about two-thirds of its eventual 600-meter height, while curtain wall wrapped the lower one-third. The digital model was remarkably detailed and even included the four construction cranes extending above the top of the tower.



Shanghai Tower construction model as shown in Google Earth, April 2012. Image Credit: Duyi Han, © Google, © Maxar Technologies

Because of the model's accuracy and detail, it seemed likely that its author had access to the building's construction documents. Did the person work in Gensler's Shanghai office? I reached out to my colleagues there to find out. However, they had already made their own inquiries and no one working in the office had built it.

I turned to the Internet sleuths on Gensler's IT team to see what they could learn. After following multiple digital breadcrumb trails, they discovered an email address of the person believed to have built the model. The individual's name, roughly translated from Mandarin, appeared to be "Duee Haan." Their IP address indicated a location in the Shanghai vicinity.

I reached out via email with an invitation:

From: **Ken Sanders**

Date: Thu, May 3, 2012 at 12:06 a.m. Subject: Hello!

To: @gmail.com

Cc: Xiaomei Lee, Robert Plummer, Dorian Chau

Hello Duee Haan,

My name is Ken Sanders. I work at Gensler in San Francisco, and I am very impressed with your work! In particular, many of us at Gensler have enjoyed seeing your construction model of the Shanghai Tower published in the Google 3D Warehouse, as well as your photography in Panoramio...

If you are interested, I would like to invite you to visit our office in Shanghai. I have copied Xiaomei Lee on this e-mail - she is a Principal in our Shanghai office and would be a good person to talk to about visiting our office. Please let me know if you would like to do this!

Thank you!

Ken

Ken Sanders, FAIA

Principal/Managing Director

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San Francisco CA 94105

And the reply:

From: Duyi Han

Date: Thu, May 3, 2012 at 12:22 p.m.

Subject: Re: Hello!

To: Ken Sanders

Hello Ken Sanders,

Thank you for your appreciation! I will be very glad to visit your office. It's a great opportunity for me.

I will be free on this Sunday and the following weekends.

Duyi Han | No.2 High School Attached to ECNU' 13
Shanghai, China

As it turned out, the mystery builder of the Shanghai Tower model was Duyi Han, a seventeen-year-old high school student in Shanghai. Luckily, both Xiaomei Lee¹ and Michael Peng, a senior designer on the Shanghai Tower project team, were planning to be in the office the next Sunday, so Xiaomei invited Duyi to visit. They took him on a tour and showed him detailed models and renderings of the tower. We each received a gracious thank-you e-mail the following day.

My outreach to Duyi in 2012 marked the beginning of a special friendship that continues to this day. He joined Gensler's Shanghai office later that summer for a one-month paid internship. After graduating high school and completing a second Gensler internship in Shanghai the following summer, he moved to Houston, Texas, to attend Rice University.

I met Duyi in person for the first time in December 2014 when he visited San Francisco. I invited him to join a Gensler holiday party in the San Francisco office, where he

met my wife Regina and many of my Gensler friends and colleagues. He returned to San Francisco the following summer for his third Gensler internship. After transferring to Cornell University and taking a year off to work at Herzog & de Meuron in Basel, Switzerland, Duyi graduated with a five-year B. Arch. degree from Cornell in 2019 and started his own practice in Shanghai: Atelier Duyi Han.

Over the past year, Duyi has undertaken the interior design of a luxury apartment, designed a furniture collection for Adorno, and completed an exhibition design for an art museum in Nanjing. He has appeared in *Forbes*, *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *Vice*, *Adobe*, *Issues in Science and Technology* (American National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine), *Marie Claire*, *Vogue* (Spain), *Elle*, *MSN* (Brazil), *Architectural Digest*, *ArchDaily*, *Dezeen*, *Designboom*, *Bienal São Paulo*, *Art Tribune* (Italy), and many other global publications. In 2021, Duyi began his pursuit of a graduate degree in contextual design at the Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands.



Ken Sanders and Duyi Han, Gensler San Francisco, December 2014. Photo Credit: Ken Sanders.

I was fortunate to have played a small role in Duyi's early work experience and I value our friendship to this day. Both emerged from my curiosity to answer a simple question: "who built that?" It is a simple reminder that exceptional talent - and new friends - can be found in any place at any time.

Some design leaders prefer to recruit from selected universities or seek specific types of work experience or firms on candidate resumes. That is perfectly reasonable. At the same time, keep your eyes and ears wide open. Avoid shrinking your recruiting pools too tightly, which can lead to inbreeding of experience and perspective. Open closed doors. Look behind curtains. Be curious! Those are the ways in which you will find talented young professionals like Duyi Han.

The second story was told to me by the late Ed Friedrichs. Ed joined Gensler in 1969 and served as Gensler's President and CEO for eight years until his retirement in 2003. Where did Art Gensler accidentally meet Ed for the first time? In a bar.

A key recurring theme: diverse ecosystems of talent are the healthiest and most resilient. Always look far and wide to grow and nourish them.

Design + Business Synergy

You can only be a great design firm if you're a great business. You can focus only on design for a short period of time, but if you want long-term excellence, you have to also accomplish business excellence as well.

- Phil Harrison

During my tenure at ZGF during the 1990s, my Partner Bob Packard and I visited the University of Oregon School of Architecture annually to participate as guest speakers in a course on practice management. Together, we represented a "large" firm, while a different architect each year represented a "small" firm. And each year, the small-firm architect would say to the students something like: "Well, you already know you didn't choose architecture to make money. You have a higher calling."

Bob and I were always disheartened to hear this. We would politely offer the students an alternative perspective: it is definitely possible - although not guaranteed - to earn a good living and make the world a better place through design at the same time. The two aspirations are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, each strongly reinforces the other. But it begins with belief. If one believes it is not possible to make a good living as an

architect, then it is not possible. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To this day, many architecture and design students appear to be influenced by this false belief. Even among some experienced design leaders, a stubborn attitude exists that it is simply not possible, or too difficult, to be an exceptional design firm and a strong business at the same time. This attitude shows up in an old joke where one architect asks another: “What would you do if you won a million dollars in the lottery?” To which the other architect responds, “Well, I guess I would keep being an architect until it was all gone.”

Fortunately, every firm I worked for during my career have leaders who understand that good business reinforces good design, and vice versa. Together they create synergy: a whole greater than the sum of its parts. As a design leader, it is critically important that everyone in your firm understands this.

Is there day-to-day tension between the two? Within project teams? With clients? With consultants? Of course. And leadership decisions that resolve that tension require thoughtful judgment. But tension notwithstanding, design leaders must start with an attitude that achieving excellence in both is essential to long-term success.

Striking a Balance

Having said that, what is the right balance between business and design? One of the earliest frameworks to answer that question was proposed in the 1987 book *Success Strategies for Design Professionals*, authored by Weld Coxe, Nina Hartung, Hugh Hochberg, Brian Lewis, David Maister, Robert Mattox, and Peter Piven. Published by Krieger Publishing Company, the book introduced the

concept of “SuperPositioning” to architecture and engineering firms.

The authors’ SuperPositioning matrix offered a tool for firms to evaluate their Project Organizational Values (Idea, Service, or Delivery) on one axis, their Firm Organizational Values (Practice-Centered Businesses and Business-Centered Practices) on the other axis, and assess their positioning on the matrix relative to competitors.

Today, the competitive bar is much higher. Idea, Service, and Delivery are table stakes now. What still varies between successful firms is the balance between Practice and Business. In general, Practice-Centered Businesses are led by professionals who have a *qualitative* bottom line, based on the quality, impact, and recognition of their work. Business-Centered Practices, on the other hand, are led by professionals who have a *quantitative* bottom line and are more focused on financial rewards for the firm and themselves.

These are not binary choices but instead endpoints on a spectrum. As a conceptual framework, the spectrum between the two can inform a healthy dialogue about where your firm resides today, where it seeks to reside in the future, and the strategies required to move along the spectrum in one direction or the other.

There is no judgment here, by the way. Successful firms exist in a variety of locations along the practice-business spectrum. Firms such as AECOM or Jacobs, both publicly held corporations that have grown primarily through acquisition, are closer to Business-Centered Practices. A firm such as MASS Design Group, a non-profit dedicated to offering design services to the underserved, is closer to a Practice-Centered Business.