



Dallas World Aquarium

HPD celebrates five years



L-R: HPD's three principles: Laura Davis, Larry Paschall and Holly Hall.

Five years ago, around the same time the economy was crashing down around everyone, three Dallas-area architects made the decision to join their creative forces and strike out on their own. Holly Hall, AIA, president; Laura Davis, AIA, vice president and director of marketing; and Larry Paschall, AIA, vice president, formed HPD Architecture in 2008 when Hall brought the group together. "It was my want and need, after being in architecture for 28 years, to have my own firm. I'd always wanted my own firm," said Hall, who had been a principle in a firm with roughly 25 employees. "I realized that I was never going to really be an owner in that firm - never really call

the shots." Once she was ready to take the plunge, Hall reached out to Davis and Paschall, extending to each an invitation to join her in her endeavor. "They both said yes, so we jumped," said Hall. "The economy went flat right about the same time." While the trio had not worked together in the past, Davis and Paschall each had a past working relationship with Hall. "It actually took me a while to transition from being seen as boss and intern - to seeing us as colleagues, as partners, and co-owners in a firm," said Davis,

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whose first boss after obtaining her degree in architecture was Hall. "It's been an interesting transition."

While the trio were by no means newcomers in the industry with around 50 years combined experience, the firm itself was relatively unknown.

"We knew people in the industry, but people didn't know us as a firm," said Paschall. "So we had to get our name out there, because the traditional marketing is referrals ... by other clients."

It was tough being a new company trying to get a foothold in the business, which was only exacerbated by a sluggish economy forcing even the much larger, well-known firms to pursue smaller jobs.

"All the commercial projects seemed to die off, and the market got very tight for anything but residential," said Paschall, who attributes their survival as a firm to renovations and additions, though in the past couple of years, HPD has been able to break into small commercial projects.

Rather than depend on traditional marketing techniques in an attempt to make a name for themselves, HPD ventured into unfamiliar territory, turning towards social media in an attempt to lessen their dependence on referrals.

"It was our first year in business ... I had just come back to the office from maternity leave ... and things had really slowed down at that point," said Davis. "... Holly and Larry said 'I don't think we have enough work to put you on a project right now, so we've got to figure out this marketing thing. Since you're not really engaged in a project, why don't you figure out marketing?' So all of a sudden, I became director of marketing not really knowing what that was."

While her partners were initially skeptical about the direction of their new marketing director was taking them, within a few years of opening their doors, the three-man operation went from not even having a website to an incredibly wide and active web presence that now includes Twitter, LinkedIn, Meetup, Facebook, Pinterest, Google+, a blog and popular podcast that have all helped raise the firm's visibility to a national level.

One of their more well-known and successful marketing ideas came about from what amounted to a misunderstanding. Originally looking for a way to drum up business, Davis was attempting to network with party planners in the area.

"I was networking with a guy and told him I would love to be introduced to party planners, with the thought that the ... people who throw these parties ... we could do work on their homes. Those are the kinds of homes we work on," said Davis. "Thought he would be a great referral, but he referred me to an individual who set up happy hours for companies and non-profits. It was not exactly what I was looking for."

Out of that meeting, it was suggested HPD throw their own happy hour. Already two years into business with virtually no network to speak of, Davis was unsure if anyone would even show up. Her fears were assuaged when more than 100 people showed up for the inaugural event. So in February 2010, Architecture Happy Hour was born. The monthly group now boasts more than 1300 members and continues to grow.

"I couldn't shut this down if I tried,"

said Davis.

These days, HPD is recognized for the innovative ways they have been able to build their business and their brand, explained Davis. Davis and Paschall now even participate in speaking engagements around the county, addressing groups and organizations about their unique marketing strategy.

The three principles remain the firm's sole employees, but that is just the way they like it, explained Hall. "We prefer the business model we've developed ... working with architects on an as-needed basis," she said. "We have all these people that we can call on and get different viewpoints and expertise as needed. This way, we end up with people who have lots of experience for whatever project type we happen to be doing."

"We didn't want to be in the position of constantly upsizing and downsizing. We've seen firms do that," said Paschall, who worked for a firm whose staff went from 60 to 120 in a year's time, then back down to 45. "We didn't want to be in a position of constantly ... yo-yoing. It's not beneficial for the people that work for us, and it's not beneficial for the company."

In the future, Hall sees her firm entering into more partnerships with others in order to compete for projects that might otherwise be too big for them to handle on their own. Collaborations with construction companies to perform design build projects with are also at the top of the list of goals.

"For a while we had another architecture firm share a space with us. We collaborated with them [on] a project in Waco for one of the colleges out there where we redeveloped a neighborhood of 500 houses that had been built in the 40s or 50s as student housing," she said. "It was a project we could have never done on our own, but teaming with another firm, it was a great project and we enjoyed doing it."

Three might not seem like a very big operation, but each of the co-owners brings something unique to the table. Davis has a masters in historic preservation and a knack for working with existing structures; Paschall enjoys working with home owners and commercial projects; while Hall's interests lie in sustainability, complex residential work, and she is even a certified aging and life specialist.

"Having my mother go through Alzheimer's decline ... we had to modify my parents' house so that it could be livable for them," said Hall, whose mother eventually died from the disease. "My father wanted to keep her at home ... so I got very interested in modifications for people with disabilities. I've gotten very interested in universal design and making sure that spaces everyone [uses] are adaptable for anybody of any ability level."

To take advantage of such varying knowledge and experience, HPD hopes to eventually develop into multiple studios in one office; each studio catering to a specific industry, explained Davis.

"It's a business model shared by other firms," she said. "It's not unusual, but it's a nice way to manage a team, because we are definitely team oriented."

It is because of their diversity the trio feel they have been successful, explained Hall. "We work very well together because of [our] diverse interests and strengths."-bt