

Architects: Jobs on the Drawing Boards

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It is an occasionally fortunate fact of economic life in New Orleans: Business trends here sometimes run counter to those elsewhere in the country. At times like the present, that can be a good thing.

Corporations and builders nationwide have hit the brakes recently as credit has grown tighter than it has been in decades. With uncertainty looming over near-term growth prospects, many businesses have called time-out on capital expenditures and developers have put major construction projects on hold.

Certainly, local businesses also feel the pinch of a contracting economy. And many residents continue to find the pace of the city's Hurricane Katrina recovery painfully slow. But sizable construction projects are beginning to move forward nonetheless. Among those who are enjoying the benefits are local architects.

The evidence is clear in the downtown New Orleans offices of Mathes Brierre Architects, one of the city's largest architectural firms. Company President Creed Brierre says the firm has more than recovered from a Katrina-induced downturn.

The firm's staff declined from 42 to 35 as work slowed and some employees left the city after the storm. "But we've added 30 people since then," Brierre says.

The work that's propelling the firm's growth is coming from various sources. Some projects are recovery-related, while others are developments that were planned before Katrina and temporarily put on hold after the flood. Still other projects were conceived in just the last year or so.

A major development on Mathes Brierre's drawing boards is the ongoing expansion of the National World War II Museum in the Warehouse District. Encompassing two square blocks adjacent to the original museum, the \$90 million expansion eventually will include six new buildings covering 5.7 acres. The work will quadruple the size of the original museum. Mathes Brierre is the architect of record for the project, which was designed by Voorsanger Architects of New York.

Mathes Brierre also landed the design work for one of the few local condominium projects to proceed to the construction phase in the last few years. The 1201 Canal Condominiums are opening on the site of the former Krauss Department Store. The \$70 million conversion, undertaken by developer Elie Khoury of the KFK Group, is creating some 200 stylish residential units on a historic corner of lower Canal Street.

A major project that promises to keep a host of architecture, engineering and construction firms busy for some time is the massive Federal City development slowly unfolding on the West Bank. Mathes Brierre is currently designing the first phase of the project in a joint venture with Carl E. Woodward, a local design-and-build firm. HRI Properties is developing the project, which will transform the Naval Support Activity in Algiers into a governmental and commercial campus that will accommodate a wide range of activity and help to retain the substantial presence of the U.S. military in New Orleans. The state has pledged \$150 million to the project, with proceeds to be raised through bond sales. A \$25 million bond sale was completed for the project in the fall.

In addition to such massive projects, Mathes Brierre and many other local firms are benefiting from the ongoing demand for repair and renovation work stemming from Katrina. Federal money is just beginning to flow into long-needed work on many public buildings. Several months ago some 60 contracts were awarded to a few dozen local firms that will do preliminary planning and engineering for projects including the repair of large governmental office buildings and the "hurricane-proofing" of local pumping stations.

Creed Brierre says that in staffing up to handle the burgeoning workload, his firm has turned frequently to the campus of Tulane University. Mathes Brierre recently has plucked several newly minted professionals from the Tulane School of Architecture. Brierre says the young architects struck gold, in a sense. "They're getting to work on some pretty substantial projects."

Kenneth Schwartz, dean of the Tulane School of Architecture, agrees. "My sense is that most [architecture] firms in town are hiring right now," he says. "The economy is not strong in other parts of the country, but it seems like investment is beginning to flow here. That bodes well for our graduates."

Schwartz, who recently came to Tulane from the University of Virginia, has a lengthy history in preservation, urban design and community planning. In his view, contemporary New Orleans presents significant opportunities to Tulane architecture students because of the university's deep ties with the city.

"New Orleans has been in the country's consciousness since Katrina in ways that it wasn't before," he says. Tulane's commitment to community service by all undergraduates has helped create an architecture program that has "relevant connections to the city," he adds.

Schwartz notes that the students who are entering Tulane's program are anxious not only to learn the field of architecture but also to engage with the community as they do so. "Very few schools are set up as proactively as Tulane to support that," he says.

The five-year architecture program at Tulane includes a "fundamental design studio" in the second year that puts students directly in touch with projects under way in the local area. In recent years, Tulane students have focused on issues such as homelessness and how best to house persons in the city who find themselves without shelter.

Schwartz believes that the ongoing needs of New Orleans for creative solutions to such problems may help the city hold on to some of the young talent that might otherwise be tempted to relocate.

"Tulane's undergraduate population is mostly coming from someplace else," he says. "In the current economy, it's entirely possible that a greater percentage of graduates will be staying here because of the opportunity they will see."