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ow architect spouses cope with a crushing economy.

For architects these days. Hammered by a deep, long downturn, firm principals have less expensive office space, and deferred equipment upgrades—and often their own. Years after the housing collapse, the recovery seems less precarious, but maddening. Scraping courage together.

It's like to be in this business with your spouse. Couples who've tied the knot take risks. It can be dangerous to have the same source of income. When recession hits hard, as it has architecture, there's no safety net. And even the most successful firms are built on convenience rather than strategic and complementary capabilities. They must retrench when the pressure is on.

Family businesses have natural advantages. There's a built-in trust that comes from sharing information. But, it's hard to overrate autonomy. You can make important business decisions quickly. You can work late or clock out early to coach softball. If you're going to be working together, you might as well be doing it together.

How do you survive through a prolonged bad patch? "A good rule of thumb is you want to increase your exposure to the severity of the downturn," says Joseph Astrachan, executive director of the Center at Kennesaw State University (KSU) Coles College of Business, Kennesaw, Ga. He asks spouses around the country about how they're handling the recession and making

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Financial security is an obvious concern. "I'm seeing quite a few firms who've cut back or eliminated retirement contributions," Hochberg says. "If you're husband and wife, you both lose contributions. And as couples who own firms reach their 50s, how do they use it as a retirement vehicle without hamstringing the firm?"

Hochberg urges clients to flip the question: If you weren't married, would you be running a business together? If the answer is yes, he says, what are the things each of you do that bring value to the firm? How do you define your respective roles? Is one person the voice of authority on operational decisions? "If you make management decisions more likely to end up with a smaller firm, less than 25 employees, as opposed to a firm in which the roles are more defined. In the latter case, whether or not you're married," Hochberg says.

Why are you in practice together and how do you mitigate the obvious downsides of being married? The most successful couples, he says, work collaboratively in the same way as they would if they were married to each other.—c.w.

Architects generally weathered economic downturns such as the current one better than non-architects, Astrachan wrote on KSU's website. "Family businesses are focused on their long-term goals rather than quarterly returns, so they can sort of buckle down in a tough economy."

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tnership, he says, is the ability to adjust living expenses when business conditions , Arkin Tilt Architect's scrappy ethic—they're experts at using salvaged materials—their lives. "We try not to be super-exuberant when we're flush because we know other e," says Anni Tilt, AIA.

w expenses if we need to for a bit of time," agrees Tilt's husband, David Arkin, AIA, aring the office lease with a structural engineer, they bike to work, and their ank of bowling alley on a base of old plumbing parts. "We haven't borrowed money to in says. Throughout the recession, the pair was able to hang onto their six employees ial and client reserve.

only one partner contributes to a firm's billable structure. David Webber, AIA, runs ber + Studio with his partner, Ransom Baldasare, who oversees administration. "He n-tech sector, so we probably could be bringing in a better income if he was in a s. However, Baldasare's expertise in marketing, directing photo shoots, and ber to focus exclusively on billable hours.

nvested not to be determined to make this a success," Webber says. "If I found the person wouldn't have that sense of ownership."

many couples-run practices helps to even out economic swings. At Zack | de Vito sco, Lise de Vito, Assoc. AIA, acts as a pressure valve of sorts by drumming up /build firm needs billable work, and backing off to concentrate on marketing and iods. "When times are good, it's easy to generate an adequate income with one of us m Zack, AIA. "And by having Lise, we don't have to hire right away when things get

Curry Architects is set up differently than most firms, which may have contributed to rman, FAIA, and Margaret McCurry, FAIA, both had successful practices before d they've continued to work independently on different project types. "Up until now g the other through as the pendulum swings back and forth," Tigerman says.

at now. With enough billings to cover five employees and two years of work in the ntial—they're in enviable shape. Still, they've renegotiated the office rent and trimmed ined not to repeat past mistakes. "Thirty years ago, Stanley took out a loan against le who were loyal," McCurry says. "It took years to pay off, and when we paid it off And two years ago Tigerman gave up a percentage of ownership so the firm could ned business, a strategy they say has yet to pay off.

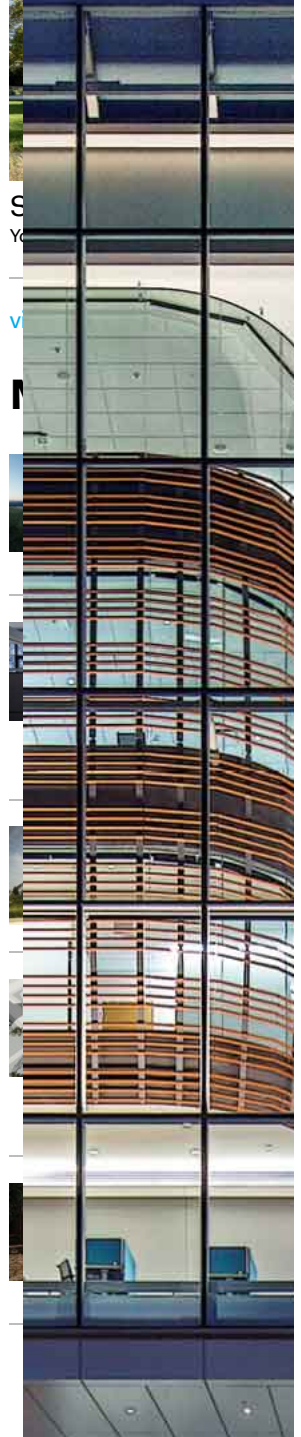
g sideways these days, couples included. With the family nest egg at stake, there's econdary income streams as commissions shrivel. One example is Stefanie Andrew Highsmith, a married couple who met as architecture students at the Rhode RISD) and launched Workstead in 2009, of all years. During slow times, the pair fixtures, which they assemble in their Brooklyn studio/storefront. That first year, more than 50 chandeliers at \$1,800 apiece.

alance gig, also designs furniture. Brechbuehler studied interior architecture and strategy while working at Michael Graves & Associates. "Michael Graves' practice riors, and products, and I always understood that interiors were very profitable, orofitable, and architecture was not," she says. "It was clear you had to combine mith: "It's been wonderful to have this balanced business model from the beginning. where we've had to rely solely on design billing."

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...e, Katherine Chia, AIA, and Arjun Desai also are looking harder at product design. The
...ai/Chia Architecture, New York City, spent a year and a half prototyping Recess Lav, a
...F New York. A second one, Surface Lav, is in the works. "To make it through this rocky
...e types of projects we're pursuing and making the product section more prominent
...s. "It's a challenging time in terms of figuring out how to be nimble, and our
...uid because we can talk about these things at home."

...rs creativity. Not long ago, Charlottesville, Va.-based architects Christopher Hays
...Christmas gifts for their friends: a boxed set of bookmarks crafted from architectural
...d during a family trip to Paris and the south of France. From that experiment they've
...sale business called BookofMarks.

...came up with this notion of a book of bookmarks with historical and cultural
...portrait or tell a story about a place," says Hays, AIA, LEED AP. Just before
...eloped bookmarks about Charlottesville and did a test run with local retailers. Now
...ations in the U.S. and Europe and looking into coordinating with art museum exhibits
...a catalog. "It's instant gratification compared to doing architecture," says Ewing, AIA,

...some, and not just as a recession strategy. Hansy L. Better Barraza, AIA, LEED AP,
...aching at RISD and practice at Studio Luz, the Boston firm she runs with her
...marini, AIA. "Creativity comes before profit for us—it's a hard thing to swallow,"
...we're privileged to have academia to support us."

...me. Phoenix architects Matthew and Maria Salenger, AIA, formed colab studio in
...est in merging architecture and art. But Maria kept her day job at [Jones Studio](#), a
...also once worked. "It seems like a bad decision in these economic times, particularly
...paying job," Matthew says. Aside from him, colab has one full-time employee, and
...and weekends.

...sy" arrangement, especially while raising a 4-year-old, Maria relishes the alternate
...-scale commissions with a firm that's been around for a long time. "It's an interesting
...ne very practical when you're developing concepts for big projects, to being way out
...on a more intricate scale," she says.

...the recession has forced many couples, especially those supporting children and
...tion: Is architecture a sustainable family business? The answer isn't always yes. "We
...sn't feasible to continue to try to have 100 percent of our income be dependent on
...ercy of individuals who might suddenly decide to drop the project," says Linda
...husband, Alan Koch, of Taalman Koch Architecture in Los Angeles.

...missions have been plentiful in the past few years. Yet she's double-booked to make
...full-time teaching position at Woodbury University pays for her own salary, since her
...is needed to support its three full-time employees. Now Koch is pursuing a new
...related to architecture, and Taalman hopes to devote more time to design.

...t we love doing architecture, but it's very difficult to make it work" together, Taalman
...oles I know have another source of income—maybe a trust fund or funds in the stock
...d often don't tell you. I think you have to be really open to change; nothing is

...ent of shock that caused many spouse-led firms, subsidized or not, to reflect on
...here they're going. It helps to take the long view, if you can. "We're both 41, and
...cycles are quicker than the motion of our career, so we're not in it for the immediate



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ziak, who runs Ogrydziak/Prillinger Architects in San Francisco with his partner, Zoë work situation, and it's exciting for our two children to witness architecture and that it is work. It's a horrible profession but also very rewarding."

re 69 and 81 years old, respectively. It takes their kind of experience to put the low ere's a friend there for a hug if something goes awry," McCurry says. "We're y ways—I love the outdoors; he's an indoor type. But not in the way we approach 're both strong-willed so things can get a little gritty, but others in the office know it's won't turn into a collapse."

an says. "Architecture is a field you have to love, because you do it day and night for at architect couples understand what the other is going through with a bad client or one to console you when things don't go well, and I think that's important."

Keywords:

SUBJECT:

Architects Business Economic Conditions

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Tigerman McCurry Architects Workstead Michael Graves & Associates
Desai/Chia Architecture AF New York BookofMarks Studio Luz coLab studio
Jones Studio Inc. Taalman Koch Architecture Ogrydziak/Prillinger Architects
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