

For and about the emerging architect

archrecord2

DEPARTMENTS

Two maverick Los Angeles firms with an emphasis on construction grace our pages this month. Techentin Buckingham Architecture focuses on process and technique, while LeanArch builds for a future of electric cars and zero energy. In Work, Chicago firm Demonica Del Muro sets an example as a young practice teaming up with larger firms to gain opportunity and clout. **ONLINE:** How important is it for young firms to serve as general contractors? Reply at construction.com/community/forums.aspx.

Design

Techentin Buckingham Architecture: Keeping it real-world



Techentin Buckingham will pass on paper architecture. The Los Angeles studio, founded by college friends Warren Techentin, AIA, and Henry Buckingham, AIA, has focused its six years so precisely on real-world building that the partners only recently decided to enter one competition annually—if only to keep staff spirits high and creative juices flowing.

By emphasizing construction, Techentin and Buckingham have engaged all kinds of clients and their associated sets of limitations. “We end up with a kind of straightforward Dutch model in which client interaction, big ambitions, and minimal means develop the program,” Techentin says. Some clever solutions surface along the way, too. For the clothing manufacturer Elwood, for example, the architects developed a cabinet design that could be lined with textiles of the company’s making. And when a Pasadena couple recently revealed that the husband’s father runs a shipping business in South Dakota, the team decided to fabricate their new home there and ship the parts to the site to reduce local construction costs.

Even projects seemingly unfettered by parameters can get creative. When Techentin remodeled his own home in nearby Los Feliz, he also served as general contractor, putting him in closer contact with different trades. After learning that one 81-year-old subcontractor specialized in Venetian terrazzo, Techentin made a point of experimenting with the material. Today, his kitchen countertop features the terrazzo polka-dotted with large circular stones.

By designing responses to the exigencies and surprise opportunities of each project, Techentin and Buckingham are moving only gradually toward a signature. The architects stand at a self-admitted crossroads, wondering whether Dutch-style pragmatism or a looser, folded language will become their M.O. Regardless, several unifying characteristics shine through the oeuvre, such as urban interaction. For the Casa Santa Ana parochial school in Los Angeles, the Archdiocese originally requested a simple set of additional

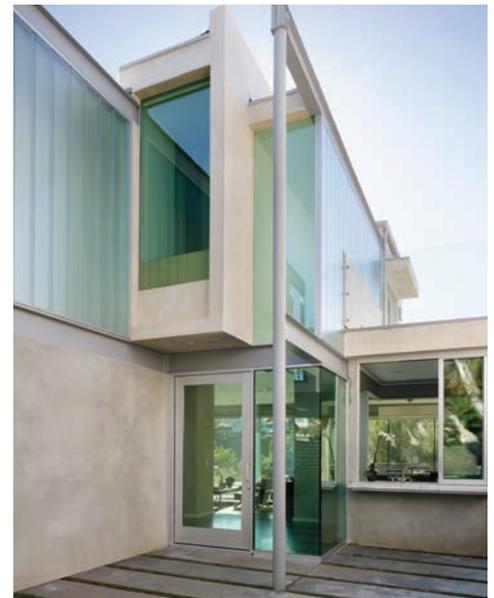


Nativity Primary School, Los Angeles, 2007

An addition to a school provides a strong edge to the street and a more porous, open edge to the playground the nearby residential areas.

Glassell Park Housing, Glassell Park, Calif., 2009

A mixed-use, 114-unit complex incorporates a variety of unit designs and open, outdoor space.



Pacific Palisades Residence, Pacific Palisades, Calif., 2006

For this addition of a kitchen, living space, and office, the architects rotated the axis of the house 90 degrees to flood the spaces with light while maintaining privacy.



IMAGES: COURTESY TECHENTIN BUCKINGHAM ARCHITECTURE



Breville Airstream, Los Angeles, 2008 *An exercise in environmental and product design, the project functions as a working kitchen to showcase appliances.*

kindergarten classrooms. But instead of tacking volumes onto the existing complex, Techentin Buckingham nestled the expansion into it; this courtyard-in-courtyard scheme allows the youngest students to see their role models in everyday situations. In a similar vein, residential projects like the Los Feliz house and a beach house in Ventura feature openings aligned to the neighborhood to encourage engagement between occupants and community landmarks beyond. These careful considerations reflect the partners' longstanding interests. After graduating from Berkeley, the native Californians earned their M.Arch. degrees at Harvard and Columbia, respectively, with Techentin picking up an extra degree in urban planning. Both then worked in New York, at ARO, Resolution: 4 Architecture, and Selldorf Architects.

Although their firm's formal stamp is undetermined, the architects agree that their everyday urbanism seems destined to stick around. Indeed, they're working on three condominium projects, and each makes an attempt to contribute to their neighborhoods' critical mass of activity with courtyards, mixed uses, and variously sized units that promote a wider profile of ownership. "We've taken the longer route through building," Techentin says. Then again, that longer route has also yielded tangible places that are making greater Los Angeles a friendlier place to live. *David Sokol*

For more about Techentin Buckingham, visit architecturalrecord.com/archrecord2/.

Design

LeanArch: Adding whimsy to sophisticated design



He doesn't wear a cape, but architect James Meyer, AIA, principal of Los Angeles firm LeanArch, has a superhero thing going on nonetheless. Having started his solo practice in 2000 with small projects like bathroom remodels and room additions, Meyer says he began his fledgling firm with a passionate concept. "There was a lot of building going on in L.A., and I knew that if we kept to the idea that we were a firm that could be counted on to do reliable, fair, ethical service and good design, we would grow," he says. "I told my office, 'This is the hall of justice, and we're the superfriends battling bad design. Everyone has their own superpower to bring to the mix.'" Now with a team of 11 and a full roster of residential and commercial projects completed and on the boards, Meyer's nontraditional approach is just one facet of a serious business with sophisticated design leanings.

For Meyer, who grew up in Los Angeles's beach communities and has found his way back there after world travel and stints working for SOM in New York City, as well as Johnson Fain Partners and Lubowicki Lanier Architects in Los Angeles, a whimsical approach to serious architecture keeps the work interesting. Whimsy doesn't get in the way of the practical, however. Meyer sought from the onset to establish solid relationships with contractors to make sure projects were properly completed. He enjoys the hands-on approach so much he decided to establish a building division at LeanArch in 2006 and got his general contractor's license. He runs that division as a separate part of the business, at times even bidding on design work LeanArch already has in hand. "The construction side has helped us breathe a lot of vitality into the work," Meyer says. It's also helped him get back to the sustainable techniques he learned in college, at California Polytechnic San Luis Obispo. "While at SOM, I learned a lot about working at a huge firm on really big projects, where everything was so machined and refined," he says. "But with LeanArch, I wanted to get back to the sustainable techniques Cal Poly really pushed—rammed earth and hay-bale construction and such. Part of me shied away from that type of building at the time as too California.



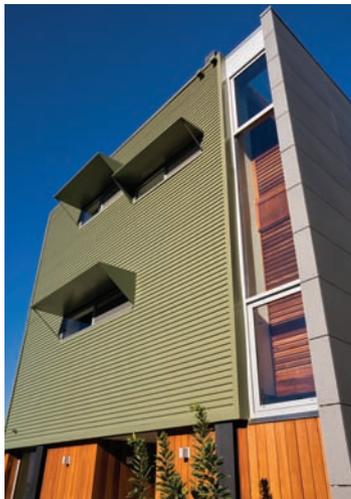
Park Oak Drive, Los Angeles, 2005

Developed in partnership with Robot & Sons, this 3,610-square-foot home mixes a varied spatial experience, including outdoor areas, with an organic palette.

Canyon Oak Drive, Los Angeles, unbuilt
A bridge that connects a 1940s residence with a proposed multilevel office/artist's studio, the project's form reflects the winding street.



IMAGES: COURTESY TECHENTIN BUCKINGHAM ARCHITECTURE (TOP); LEANARCH (BOTTOM FOUR)



Kuhlhaus 01,
Manhattan Beach, Calif., 2007
In partnership with Kuhlhaus Development Company, this 1,800-square-foot home incorporates flexible spaces and solar panels.



Experience with the opposite of all that has really made me see its value.” Meyer has a three-tiered approach to sustainability. First come the smart design techniques that don’t cost the client any money—orientation, wind and sun exposure, and such. Next, he tries to be responsible with the finishes and materials he uses. Then, he tries to incorporate alternative energy sources for his projects, including flash furnaces and solar panels. He also tries to make sure the projects he designs won’t become obsolete in years to come, going so far as to put in accessible hookups for electric vehicles in some of them. Do his clients have electric cars? “Not yet, but we figure they will one day,” he says. “We want to be sure the provisions are there.”

Meyer says his colleagues in New York used to make fun of his easygoing So Cal ways. He doesn’t mind. The architect, who is also a guitarist (his current band is called Bride Primer), says he started LeanArch in college as a fictitious firm that would have “approachable, rock ‘n’ roll architects.” His now very real firm has that, but it also has a principal who starts his day at 4:30 A.M. and often works past dark. “I’m fortunate,” says Meyer. “It’s never a chore.” *Ingrid Spencer*

For more LeanArch projects, go to architecturalrecord.com/archrecord2/.

Work

Teaming with larger firms serves opportunities



When Arthur Del Muro, AIA, and Dominick Demonica, AIA, colleagues of 16 years at a Chicago firm, decided to start their own practice, they thought it would take a while to garner projects and grow their firm. To their surprise, in less than a year they have added five more architects to their team to handle the commissions that keep coming their way. What has fueled such an impressive growth are collaborations with older, more established practices.

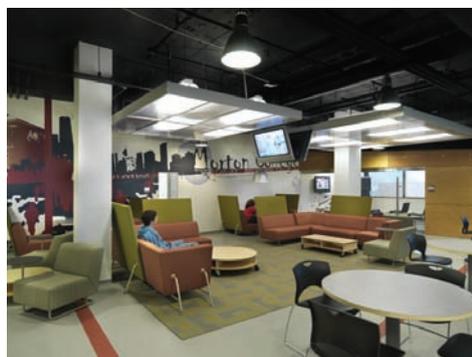
The young firm, Demonica Del Muro Associates (DDA), has been able to get a piece of various municipal projects by pitching their niche knowledge. During their last years at Chicago-based Legat Architects, Del Muro and Demonica helped build and lead the firm’s business in higher education, Del Muro says. Armed with that specialty, they scored one of their first significant municipal projects—a new structure on the Greencastle, Indiana, satellite campus of the statewide community college system—by teaming up with Indianapolis firm InterDesign. This more-established, locally rooted practice serves as the firm of record, while DDA acts as the design architect. “We bring a certain level of expertise,” says Del Muro. “The combination of our portfolios really makes a strong team.”

Andrew Costlow of InterDesign, who is working with DDA on the project, says despite the youth of the practice, it has a lot of experience—experience that contributes to the two firms’ synergy.

DDA’s success in winning projects by collaboration—all obtained by word-of-mouth rather than hard-sell marketing—shows that young architects who choose to strike out on their own can do so without having to completely fly solo. This type of project sharing can be at once promising and rewarding. “I think there is a lot of possibility out there,” says Doug Garofalo, AIA. Garofalo is a professor at the University of Illinois School of Architecture and principal of Garofalo Architects. “The upside is that you get to work on a project that—I hate to say this—you



For the Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana’s New Center for Workforce and Economic Development (left), DDA—as design architect—partnered with Indianapolis firm InterDesign.



For Morton College’s Student Success Center in Cicero, Illinois, Del Muro and Demonica teamed with former employer Legat Architects of Chicago.

are guaranteed not to get on your own. You gain some valuable experience. If it’s a true collaboration, you’ll learn quite a bit.”

Garofalo cautions that young firms should not be afraid to walk out if they feel that they’re being exploited. An escape clause is important for protection.

DDA’s Del Muro, meanwhile, can’t wait for his and Demonica’s noncompete contracts with their previous employer to expire this March so that they can actively solicit from former clients they had back at Legat. During the wait, they’ve joined forces with other firms, including Saavedra Gehlhausen Architects in Rockford, Illinois, and Tang & Associates in Chicago, as well as Legat. Despite the good luck working with others, Del Muro still hopes that before long his firm can be strong enough to go solo. “We want to get to the point that we don’t have to team up and still have enough horsepower to survive on our own,” he says. *Violet Law*

For additional information on Demonica Del Muro Associates, go to architecturalrecord.com/archrecord2/.