



Local architects thriving despite slowing economy

By JILL ESTERBROOKS, Special to the Daily Transcript

Thursday, September 11, 2008

Waning construction and a sluggish economy have not prevented many prominent local architects from forging ahead with ambitious projects. Indeed, many San Diego-based firms are finding this economic slowdown to be a prime time for expanding their professional staffs and capitalizing on business opportunities.

While the principals of several top architectural design firms acknowledge that with the housing bust there has been an overall decrease in the total amount of available work, most say they are still keeping plenty busy, and a few are even hiring.

"I don't want to paint a completely rosy picture, but we're busy," said James Robbins of **RJC Architects**. "We have a dozen projects under way, with an aggregate construction value of over \$600 million, which is substantially higher than in previous years."

To handle the heavy workload -- which ranges from a \$531 million San Diego County Operations Center in Kearny Mesa and a \$54 million Marine Corps Special Operations Command Center to a \$21 million parking structure at Cal State San Marcos -- RJC Architects has increased its staff from 21 to 25 in the last year, and Robbins reports he's currently hiring.

"Architects are essentially talent agencies that hire talent by the year and sell it by the hour, living on the markup," he said. "Obviously, the worst time to find great talent is during a boom, and the best time is during a recession, so this is a good time to grow a firm."

According to Robbins, recessions also allow well-managed and well-capitalized architectural firms to take advantage of rare opportunities.

When he started his firm in 1992 in the face of the last recession, opportunities were everywhere, "but we didn't have two nickels to rub together."

"I promised myself that if we ever got another chance, we'd have sufficient cash reserves to take advantage of the extraordinary opportunities that a recession presents," he said. "The current economic climate has given us that golden opportunity, and we will continue to grow stronger, with more talent, deeper bench and better technology in 2009."

For RJC Architects, the strategy has been "staying on the right side of history and letting the trends be our friends."

"We saw early on that more and more clients were going to adopt design/build strategies to minimize development risk, for example, and when that really began to take off in the late '90s, we were ready," he explained.

More recently, because traditional municipal financing is so stressed and public infrastructure needs are so pressing, RJC Architects saw that public-private partnerships were going to become the main development approach for large-scale public projects like the new San Diego County Operations Center.

"We have a lot of strategic alliances with the best builders in the region, so we can develop projects faster and

more cost effectively, and that makes us especially attractive to clients in economic downturns," Robbins said.

Esterbrooks is a San Diego-based freelance writer.