



JAMES ROBBINS

Savvy architect leads RJC through down cycles

By **MICHAEL CHUNG KLAM**, Special to the Daily Transcript

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James Robbins, president and director of design for **Robbins Jorgensen Christopher Architects Inc.**, knows firsthand the importance of saving for a rainy day.

"Bankers lend you umbrellas when the sun is shining and take them back when it starts to rain, so you can't wait for a recession to begin planning for hard times," said the Princeton University graduate.

Established during the recession of 1991, Robbins Jorgensen Christopher (RJC) Architects learned early on the cyclical nature of architecture, design and construction.

"Our business has always financed expansion through operational profits, and we have zero debt. We know how valuable cash is in a recession," he said.

And by diversifying its client base to include public agencies, educational institutions, private developers and major corporations, RJC has been able to not only weather the storm but to keep ahead.

"To a certain degree, the capital facilities expansions of public and private sector clients are countercyclical, and sometimes public investment in infrastructure is increased in economic down cycles to offset declines in private investment," Robbins said.

2008 projects included the new San Diego County Operations Center, the third phase of the U.S. Marine Corps Intelligence Operations Center, the headquarters and academic instruction buildings for the U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Center, and a new parking structure at Cal State San Marcos.

RJC astutely extended its design practice to include interior design, landscape architecture entitlement work and planning.

"In economic downturns, there are always value investors that are interested in acquiring troubled developments and repositioning themselves in the marketplace," Robbins said.

As corporations and public agencies began to defer new building plans, and interior renovation and rehabilitation requests increased, RJC was ready to heed the call.

"Because our backlog of work has actually expanded significantly over the past year, the current economic climate is almost ideal for us," Robbins said.

RJC is based on talent, he explained, and the best time to grow and attract key players is during a recession.

"Recessions can be very good to well-managed service firms, because they will survive and prosper when their competitors are dying off," he said.

"Everyone can make money in boom times," he said, "so it's easier to evaluate how well managed firms are in downturns."

RJC won several regional and national awards in 2008, including three Community Impact Awards for sustainable design in public projects from the Los Angeles Business Council, Best of 2008 by *California Construction* magazine for The Anteater Recreation Center at UC Irvine, and a 2008 Best in the Nation Build America Award from the Association of General Contractors for the firm's design/build work on the historic Del Monte Hotel at the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey.

RJC works with some of the top builders in the country, including **Lowe Enterprises** and the **Ryan Group**, both named by the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties (NAIOP) as Developer of the Year in successive years.

Robbins attributes RJC's success to long-term relationships in-house and with clients.

He has worked with his business partner, Janene Christopher, for 22 years. The partners' first two customers were the city of San Diego and the U.S. Navy, both still on board to this day.

"When we get a new client, our goal is to keep that client forever," Robbins said.

The same goes for new associates. "Today our office has the brightest, most dedicated group of young design professionals I've been around in over 30 years of practice, and it's a real honor to be able to work with them," he said.

Chung Klam is a San Diego-based freelance writer.