



Three years ago, Building spent an idyllic afternoon with a group of young architects, some barbequed sausages and a Frisbee. The fivesome were able to take time out of their schedules for the summer rendezvous because they had all made the risky decision to build their practices up from scratch, and so were their own bosses.

Back then they told stories of stressful start-ups, first mistakes, and gorging a pay phone with 10p pieces to make the calls needed to win the first project.

Fast forward to June 2009 and things are very different. All the practices have

operating phone systems for one thing, and the mood has dramatically shifted. Although the group (minus one half of Nick Cross Associates, who left to set up his own practice) is as upbeat as ever, summer games and the BBQ have been replaced with bleeping BlackBerries, diary co-ordination and scheduling meetings in the middle of the photoshoot.

And the hard work is clearly paying off as, despite some of the toughest market conditions the industry has ever seen, every one of these young firms is still up and running. In fact, all three are well positioned to grow through

the recession and come out healthy on the other side – a welcome antidote to the gloom shrouding the architecture sector.

Each of the practices has a story to tell about how they have kept their heads above water, from becoming world-renowned experts in bridge design to working on celebrity homes. But they all have one thing in common – they are living, profit-making proof that with the right planning and some seriously long working days, you can make a success of setting up your own practice, no matter what the economic conditions. Here are those stories ...

PASCALE SCHEURER AND HOLLY PORTER

DIRECTORS OF SURFACE TO AIR

Having set up their practice in 2004 with no start-up cash, Scheurer and Porter were determined to keep their overheads low. Three years ago they were working closely with a business mentor to keep up to date on financial and marketing advice and were making good contacts with clients and within the RIBA.

What they did next

Scheurer and Porter have made a number of key decisions in the past three years, not least to focus on the education sector. "We slid in the door at the very last minute and became well established before every architect and his dog went for that work," says Scheurer. Their other lucky break was joining forces with Pringle Brandon, the practice of Jack Pringle, the former RIBA president, who set up his own firm when he was 29. "We asked Jack to be our new business mentor two-and-a-half years ago. When he heard we wanted to focus on education, he said he wanted to get involved as he foresaw the rush for public work in the downturn," says Scheurer. "So we set up a joint venture called Wired with his firm." Surface to Air now operates out of a space in Pringle Brandon's offices.

Winning work

"We're definitely punching above our weight – advising on about £2bn worth of schools projects," says Scheurer. Surface to Air properly cracked the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) market in 2008 and is now working in all four major roles in the BSF programme: client design adviser to Camden and Hammersmith & Fulham, technical architect for Hounslow, design champion for major contractors, and architect for individual school projects. In addition, it has completed at least one project a year and its Rotunda Pupil Referral Unit was shortlisted for the BCSE Awards 2009 in the Best Extension or Refurbishment Category.

Running the business

Despite now winning good work, Scheurer and Porter keep costs as low as possible. Working out of a larger firm's office has been invaluable in keeping electricity, water and rent low. Scheurer says: "Later we'll look to diversify, maybe into the commercial sector. But for at least the next two years it's education all the way."

Personal challenges

The main change has been the birth of Scheurer's twin daughters. Both women admit that her being away from the office was tough, but Scheurer says it is doable with a good business partner, the right husband and an ability to multitask. "I learned how to bounce one baby, breastfeed the other and send an email all at the same time," she says. Porter adds she was more than prepared to work the extra hours to keep the business ticking over in her partner's absence. "It's like a marriage," she says. "You stick at things through thick and thin."

Advice

"You need to be prepared for a new business to be tough for the first seven years at least," says Porter. "And always use advisers. We still sit down with ours once every month or so." She adds that once you are established you should remember two things. The first is making sure you listen: "Young architects can be so desperate to be heard, but don't let that be at the expense of what the client is telling you or asking for." The second is to maintain good relationships: "You can lose a relationship with a client right up until the last day."

The future

Thanks to meticulous budgeting for the past five years, Scheurer and Porter say they will be in a position to expand once the market has recovered. Both see the recession as an opportunity. "A lot of big practices today were grown through the last recession," Porter says. "Good ideas can come out of being pushed right to the edge."

THEN AND NOW



Pascale

Age 34

Children None before. Now, one-year-old twin daughters, Carmen and Anais.

Car An old, trusty bicycle – no change there.

Phone Then I had an ugly but indestructible green-screen beast by Motorola. Now I have a baby-proof BlackBerry Pearl.

Typical Saturday night Three years ago these were spent hardcore clubbing. Now it's staying in, watching comedy and tucking the kids in.

Typical working week Back then I would say my working hours were about 25 a day, eight days a week. Now I do less, although curiously, it was easy to go back to full-time work after having the twins. I'm just more efficient now and tend not to work evenings or weekends.

Turnover We've doubled year on year and this looks set to continue for the foreseeable future.



Holly

Age 30

Car Then it was a VW Polo; now it's a Mini Cooper.

Phone Three years ago I had a battered flip-top Samsung that had been dropped, pummelled and scratched beyond recognition.

These days I have a BlackBerry that I wouldn't swap for anything –

except perhaps an iPhone.

Watch worn Then, a Gucci slimline silver watch; now I have one by Georg Jensen. I love the simplicity of his designs.

Typical Saturday night These used to revolve around champagne, Shoreditch and warehouse parties. Now, dinner overlooking the sea – either here in the UK or Palma, Majorca, where I go every eight weeks.

Typical working week I have always worked long hours – though they are more regular now than they were three years ago.



The way they were then ...

YOUNG, GIFTED AND BACK

Jacking in your job to set up a firm of your own is a dream shared by many architects, but few take the leap in their 20s. Back in 2006 we had a BBQ with some who did. Three years later, **Emily Wright** reunites them to find out what happened next ... Photography by **Tim Foster**