

Diversity — by Design

Unique Niches Have Helped Dietz & Co. Draft a Blueprint for Success

By GEORGE O'BRIEN

Kerry Dietz likes to refer to her team of architects and support staff as “interpreters.” They listen to what clients tell them, she says, and translate their wants and needs into facilities that carefully blend form with function. These talents have enabled the Springfield-based company to enjoy steady growth through its 21 years of business, and flexibility that provides layers of protection against economic downturns.



Kerry Dietz, flanked by Lynne Wallace, vice president of operations, and Marc Sternick, vice president and senior project architect.

Kerry Dietz remembers the days, weeks, and months after 9/11.

It was a difficult time for all business owners, but it was particularly hard for those in construction-related ventures, such as the architecture firm, Dietz & Co., she started in 1985.

“It was like watching dominoes fall,” she recalled, referring to construction projects that were on the drawing board or in the planning stages before Sept. 11, and that went on the back burner, if not onto the scrap heap, soon after it. “September was bad, but October was worse; everything that was in the works simply dried up.”

Coping with what became a traumatic,

roughly year-long decline that led to everything from layoffs to salary cuts was one of many things Dietz has encountered in business that they didn’t teach her about in school. “They taught us architecture,” she said. “They didn’t teach us how to do the books, market ourselves, or predict when the economy was going to tank.”

She’s learned most of those things by doing — and doing them well, or at least well enough to survive several economic cycles, the vagaries of state and federal spending, and the totally unpredictable turmoil that resulted from 9/11. Many ingredients have gone into that success formula, but diversity, finding unique niches, and assembling a talented

team — the ‘& Co.’ part of the Springfield-based firm’s name — have played big roles.

Indeed, while looking over the company’s portfolio, Dietz referenced public housing projects, the first phase of the battered women’s shelter the firm designed for the YWCA, and a homeless shelter it is currently blueprinting for the city of Springfield, as examples of work that would definitely fall outside the realm of typical.

The full range of work includes components of the Churchill Park affordable housing project in Holyoke, renovations to buildings at Smith College in Northampton, the battered women’s shelter, renovations to Springfield’s Sumner

Avenue School, some of the housing components of the massive reuse initiative at the Northampton State Hospital complex, and interior design work at the Banknorth Center.

This mix of public and private work certainly doesn’t make the company recession-proof, said Dietz, adding quickly that no construction-related business can ever truly be that. But the flexibility does help smooth out some of the bumps in the economy.

And it has enabled Dietz to become one of the largest architecture firms in the region, now with 19 employees and seven licensed architects.

This team is now using some of the latest software on the market to turn client wants and needs into reality. The technology, coupled with more aggressive marketing efforts, and several highly visible projects, should position the company for continued growth.

This issue, *BusinessWest* looks at how this regional success story was drafted, and how many new developments are taking shape at the firm.

Space Exploration

As she talked about the battered women’s shelter, or the YWCA Campus of Hope, as it’s called, Dietz, who has been involved with the project for nearly a decade, said it is a facility that is “hard to build fiscally and physically.”

By that, she meant that raising funds for its various phases has certainly been challenging, because it’s not a cause that easily captures the attention of individuals or corporations, despite obvious need, and designing one is difficult because it is a structure that

very few architects and builders have in their portfolios.

"Everyone's done a bank, and everyone's done an office building, but not everyone's done one of *these*," she said, referring to the campus's first phase, a \$5.9 million, 60,000-square-foot building that houses administrative offices, meeting rooms, 12 rooms of on-site shelter, and two classrooms for women and their children who are fleeing domestic abuse.

Elaborating to the extent that she could, Dietz said the shelter's first phase involves many layers of security, and design features that have materialized only through a deep understanding of the individuals who will use the shelter — and the issues and emotions they will face.

"For one thing, they need a lot of room to put things," Dietz explained, "because in most cases they grabbed whatever they could and ran out the door."

There are also such matters as dignity and privacy, she said, but also providing staff members with the ability to keep a close eye on the women and their children.

"You want it to be comfortable and cozy," Dietz continued, referring to the overall feel of the facility, "but not too much, because they're not going to be there forever; this is not their home."

Putting these various components together is a good example of how Dietz & Co. has thrived by successfully gauging client needs, and then delivering a product that meets or exceeds them.

"We are interpreters ... we take a client's ideas about a particular space, apply our craft, and make something livable, usable, and memorable," said Dietz, adding that, while some firms have what she called a 'signature look,' hers does not. "We work to create a unique design solution for each client. We view ourselves as conduits of the design process."

Dietz and her steadily growing staff have been sharpening their interpreting skills for more than 20 years now. It was in 1985 — a

good time for the economy and the construction industry — when she decided to go into business for herself.

She made that leap after eight years of work with Architects Inc. in Northampton, the firm she joined after earning a degree in a subject she warmed to while taking in her parents' work to build a new home while she was growing up in Ohio.

"I liked biology and German in high school; it's a stretch to get to architecture from there," she said. "It's hard to get career counseling in this field ... people don't know how to talk to you."

Over the years, Dietz said she has managed to learn things about business she wasn't taught

in this area. But there are some challenges, including the often-lengthy period between when a venture is conceptualized and when it's actually funded.

The company has recently expanded its reach in the public housing realm, adding market-rate projects to the mix. It may sound like a minor difference, but the latter is actually a separate specialty, with its own host of competitors, she said.

The Shape of Things to Come

Dietz can't accurately predict when the market will soften, as much as she'd like to, but she does watch the building sector closely

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in college and, by assembling a talented team and achieving a high degree of diversity, she has managed to survive several downturns in the economy, including that prolonged recession of the early '90s that claimed many architecture firms.

While the company has always handled work across several sectors of the economy, including education, health care, retail, and government offices, the development of specialty niches has been a key to its success.

One such niche is public housing, especially affordable housing projects. The company has handled several in Western Mass., and was recently awarded a contract for an ambitious initiative in the Charter Oak section of Hartford.

Affordable housing work is fairly steady, said Dietz, and there is little competition for it among local firms, although some companies from Boston bid on proj-

ects in this area. But there are some challenges, including the often-lengthy period between when a venture is conceptualized and when it's actually funded.

When she noticed that a large number of area general contractors, including some large players, bid for a work on a bank branch, a relatively small project, she interpreted it as signal that some of those firms are struggling to find work. And that's usually a precursor to challenging times for her profession.

"The market will slow down," she said, adding quickly that, for now, her firm is busy. Make that "astonishingly busy."

"In my business, when you have a backlog of six months, that's great," she explained. "We have about a year's worth."

Projects in various stages of completion include the homeless shelter, to be built on Worthington Street; the home-ownership phase of the Hartford housing project known as Dutch Point; phase II of the Campus of Hope, which involves construction of transitional housing for women and

children coming out of the shelter facility (ground is due to be broken later this year); design of townhouses for phase II of the Northampton State Hospital project, known as the Village at Hospital Hill, among others.

To stay busy, the company is making many different kinds of investments. For example, it has hired its first marketing director, Debbie Whitney, who will be charged with building visibility for the firm through a variety of initiatives, and closely scanning the market looking for opportunities.

This is one of many duties that Dietz has performed over the years, and still handles to some extent. But in recent years she has effectively delegated, handing most office functions to Lynne Wallace, vice president of Operations, and many design responsibilities to Marc Sternick, vice president and senior project architect. Doing so enables her to focus on short- and long-term strategic planning for the company, and providing staff members with the tools, meaning training and resources, to carry out the objectives of those plans.

"We function as a team," said Dietz, "and the reason we function effectively is that everyone on the team is focused on the same thing — creating value for the client."

Providing that value was the primary motivation for a major investment in new technology, specifically new software known as Archicad 3D, which takes design work to a different dimension — literally, and new hardware needed to drive it.

Asked to describe it, Dietz struggled a little because she, like everyone else at the firm, is still learning it. In a nutshell, she said it is a cutting-edge product that effectively simulates the way a real building is constructed.

"It enables you to build the building as you're drawing it," she explained. "It's a new way of doing things; before you would

draw something and then figure out how to it later. Now, you're building as your drawing.

"It allows us to understand what we're doing a lot faster, and understand where we might have problems, with a roof, for example," she continued, using the battered women's shelter to illustrate her point. "The roof there was a very complex system to figure out, and it took building a physical model to figure out what was happening. If we had done it on Archicad, we would have figured it out much faster."

There are many benefits for the client, as well, she said, noting that with the new software, the company can let a client see, experience, and refine their building during the design stage.

The new homeless shelter has presented opportunities to show what the product can do.

"This is a very difficult building to explain to people," she



A rendering of housing units designed by Dietz & Co. for the first phase of the Village at Hospital Hill in Northampton.

said. "Using the 3-D software, we've been able to sit people down and walk them through the building; we can say, 'here you are at the reception desk,' 'here

you are in the day room,' 'here you are in the shelter itself,' 'this is what you'll see when you walk in the front door.' Before, you would have to use hand sketches

— lots of them, and they don't really tell the story."

Window of Opportunity

When asked if her company's work on the homeless shelter might lead to another specialty niche, Dietz spoke as a concerned citizen, not as a business owner.

"I really hope not," she told *BusinessWest*. "We don't want to be building more homeless shelters."

But there should be plenty of other kinds of work for this company that has its stamp, if not its name, on many of the region's landmarks and public housing facilities.

The depth and diversity of its portfolio have seen it through all kinds of business challenges — even those dark days after 9/11. ♦

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