RD

RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

FOR ARCHITECTS AND BUILDERS
OF DISTINCTIVE HOMES

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Quiet Time

Photo: Warren Jagger

Leveraging Your Residential Wisdom

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It's hard to put aside the pandemic's personal toll but, professionally, residential architects are thriving. It's in times of plenty, however, that it's especially important to remind ourselves that building trends are cyclical. Yes, we're currently benefiting from unexpected prosperity, but the streak won't last forever. I urge you to think ahead now about how to leverage what I call your "residential wisdom" to make your practice more expansive and your firm more resilient.

Don't get me wrong. You may be quite fulfilled in your current residential practice, and that's fine. But if you're curious about another path, you should know that you're already halfway there. Here's our firm's experience:

About 20 years ago, Eck MacNeely Architects decided to make a concerted effort to break out of the residential orbit and seek additional sources of work—in our case, mostly from the academic world. We were looking to grow our firm, diversify our project types, and hedge against the ups and downs of residential cycles. We had some small academic and commercial projects under our belts, but when it came to RFPs, RFQs, and actual interviews, it was hard to go up against the established firms, especially in a town like Boston, where tradition matters a lot. Nonetheless, we began to strategize about how we could crack open the door into larger academic commissions. We began to imagine how we could leverage what we already knew from our extensive residential portfolio.

Somewhat serendipitously, we discovered that a number of homeowners who had hired us also had various connections

Photo: Warren Jagger

Previous and this page: For this private school dormitory project, Eck MacNeely Architects applied knowledge gained as residential architects to problem solve. The firm rotated the building on the steeply sloped site, giving it access to the campus at high and low points and increasing its daylighting.

to academic institutions. They were influencial donors, on boards or facilities committees, or even just parents of students at prestigious schools. I'm generalizing here by using the term "temperament," but what we came to realize was that the same people with the temperaments to hire us for home design were likely to be associated with good schools. So with patience and goodwill, we began to cultivate those personal and professional bonds we already had with our existing clients and to build them with new residential clients who came to us. We nurtured them.

As a kind of odd but useful example, we had a decent client who hadn't paid us for some time. I wondered why, but remained patient. One day she called and, just as I was just about to say, "Why the hell haven't you paid us," she apologized for being in arrears. She was going through a divorce, but she would send us the money, and oh, by the way, she was on the board of a local college and they were looking for an architect for the renovation of their arts center. We won the project because of her influence on the board, and I learned an important lesson about nurturing the relationships you already have. The practice of architecture is a long game.

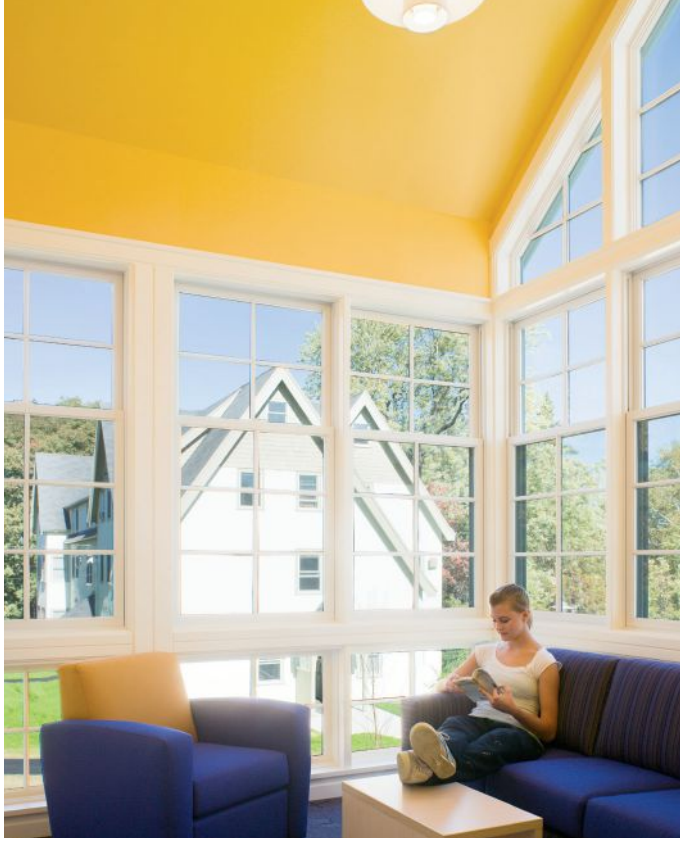
As we looked for other points of leverage, we also began to make connections between the spaces we were familiar with in our residential work and the spaces schools might want in their projects—especially campus housing. One advantage we had was our ability to understand intimate settings—a sense of coziness, if you will.

The next time we earned an interview for a small dormitory, I pushed the point hard by emphasizing our unique understanding of small spaces and how important it was to get that sense of scale right if the larger project was going to be a success. In effect, I argued that, yes, experience did matter, but it wasn't limited to the number of academic projects we had built. I gave them a short slide show of the small domestic spaces we had designed, and we won the project over larger firms.

The lesson was clear: The spaces we design as residential architects are relevant and important across a wide range of spaces in larger projects. In the dormitory example, it wasn't a big stretch for us as a firm, nor did it call for a big leap of faith by the selection committee.

The last point I'd like to make is that you should give yourself credit for how much you've already learned about design and construction complexity from your residential experience. With the exception of a highly technical project, is there anything more complex on a number of levels than residential work? You already understand the importance of siting, planning, detailing, and good communications to name just a few skills, so why not highlight these when applying for academic projects?

As an additional example, when we were invited to interview for another private school dormitory, I did my best to stress the importance of getting the siting just right. Understanding that it was preordained to be a double-loaded, long building, I advocated for simply rotating the building to achieve the most sun in all the rooms, and to shoehorn the structure into the adjacent steeply sloping site, giving them access to their upper campus as well.



Photos: Warren Jagger

For other campus projects, Eck MacNeely has injected the human scale and "coziness" skills it's mastered from residential work. This ability to infuse institutional commissions with welcome warmth has differentiated the firm from larger commercial design practices.

It probably will not surprise you to hear that many on the committee had not considered the position of the sun nor how to deal with the sloping site, two of the most fundamental issues in good house design. We won this commission, too, simply by applying our insight from successful residential projects.

But making your way into institutional or commercial work from residential is only half the battle. Understanding how your practice will change and what additional skills or knowledge you may need is the other half. Here are a few points to consider.

- You will have to learn to build a consensus with groups rather than couples or a family. If you work on schools, the administration, faculty, board of trustees, and facilities committees will all need to be aware and even part of your design and construction effort.
- The zoning, building, ADA, and energy codes are more complicated and encompassing for institutional or commercial projects. Find yourself a good code consultant; it's worth it.
- Apropos of the point above, expand your go-to consultant base dramatically, including structural, HVAC, civil, landscaping, interiors, lighting, acoustics, specifications, and other special consultants particular to larger project types.
- Look at how you form your office teams and whether it is important to recognize the expertise of certain individuals within the firm rather than hiring outside consultants.
- Increase your technical support including computer programs, server size, and backup capabilities. One day of work lost on a time-sensitive project can be a disaster.
- Have on file a good attorney knowledgeable in construction contracts and law and beef up your Errors and Omissions policy.
- And, of course, fees? I will not say in our case that academic projects are categorically more remunerative than our residential work. But the projects tend to be larger, take more time, and most people involved go home at 5 p.m. On the other hand, academic work can often involve the so-called "summer slammer," increasing your work pressure during those months to get a project ready for the school year. Overall, larger projects mean more predictability in workload and scheduling, and that can translate into more profitability.

The above list is partial and there are undoubtedly many other ways to leverage your residential wisdom for any number of project types, but my point is simple: If you want to expand your universe of work, don't be afraid to use what you already know about people, design, and construction. The rest just takes patience, expansive thinking, and some doggedness.

Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, is the founding principal of Eck MacNeely Architects in Boston, specializing in residential and academic work. He is also the author of three books on house design, a landscape painter, and a former lecturer in architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.