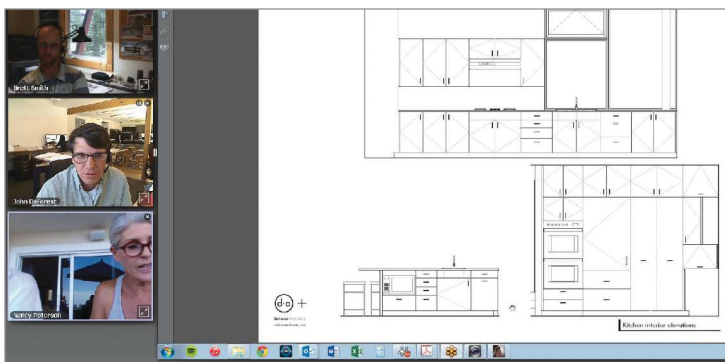


Great Projects Anywhere

DEFOREST ARCHITECTS
SEATTLE



Photos: Courtesy of DeForest Architects



Top: Seattle-based DeForest Architects and the cyber image of their remote employee. Above: Collaborating with staff and clients at a distance.

Large, nationally known architectural firms are accustomed to commissions from out-of-town clients. But, increasingly, smaller local firms are getting those phone calls, too. Powered by the boundless reach of the World Wide Web, residential design customers can find their project collaborators anywhere. Architect John DeForest, AIA, principal of Seattle-based DeForest Architects discusses the impact out-of-town work has had on his 12-person office.

RD: Where are you working right now?

JD: We have projects in Oregon, Montana, and Michigan, in addition to some that are an hour or more drive from Seattle.

RD: As a small firm residential firm how did you start finding out-of-area jobs?

JD: It happened organically for us as we began to get calls from a distance—largely because of web exposure—particularly Houzz and Pinterest. There isn't such a barrier anymore to not being local. We now have what we call a "GPA policy"—Great Projects Anywhere. We are open to working on great projects and with great people.

RD: What advantages do you see to working out of town?

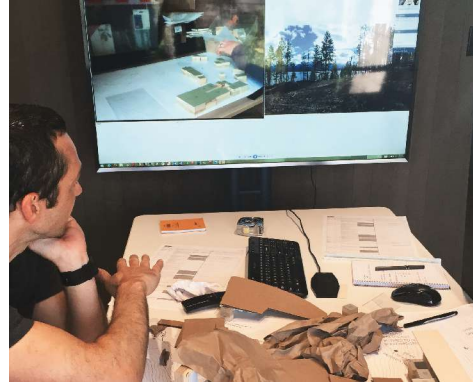
JD: Here in Seattle, we are in an architect-dense market. Some of the people who call from other places don't have those resources. But, basically, it's just fun for us, because we get to work in really beautiful, interesting places—a sand dune in Lake Michigan or in snow country. I personally really like learning, and getting to use different tools.

RD: Did you make an intentional effort to reach beyond your local borders?

JD: It has evolved from a reaction to a job inquiry to a more proactive effort to get the word out. We continue to get projects via the web. I would have thought that to be practicing as far away as Michigan, you'd have to be a "starchitect." It's not like people are discovering our coffee table book.



Rendering and photo: Courtesy of DeForest Architects



Far left: House in Bend, Ore., for interior designer Nancy Burfiend.
Left: A remote architect in Lake Tahoe, Nev., meets with Seattle staff about a project in Montana.

RD: You also have staff that works remotely in other parts of the country. How did that happen?

JD: In one case, a key member of the staff came to me and said, “I love the opportunity here, but my heart and family are in Tahoe.” I have another who lived about an hour away who had kids, making the commute much harder. And we have somebody now who’s senior who works from home one day a week.

RD: What impact has that had on the firm?

JD: The pluses are the ability to attract and retain top people, but the people in the office do end up bearing more of the front-line stress. And we do miss the kinds of spontaneous conversation that can happen when people are close by, now that we have to pick up the phone to talk.

RD: What steps have you taken to make it easier to communicate across distance with staff and clients?

JD: Any new workstation we buy is mobile. We got a wider angle camera for video conferences so everyone at the table can be seen. We added lamps for better light, and hooked up a camera focused on the desk—a “sketchcam.” We use voice over internet, so staff phone numbers are consistent. And we use ARCHICAD, which has a really good collaborative function and a way to send a link to download an easily navigable model. It makes us less dependent on viewing things in a physical space.

The next step, and we have a client who’s working on this, is virtual reality software where everyone has an avatar. Before I tried it out, I thought you couldn’t see social cues, but you can. It’s still a step down from face to face, but it’s a step up from remote.

RD: Are any analog processes still important?

JD: I came up with one foot in the analog world and one in the digital. And there are tasks that straddle both—like drawing while on camera. We still spend a lot of time walking the site, talking with building officials. At some point in the process, clients come to Seattle and spend three days in a quasi-charrette. We show them materials and mock-ups. We have more physical resources in the office—samples, for instance, and bigger screens. We’re hired by people who enjoy the process, and coming to see us is part of that process.

RD: How do you run the project at a distance?

JD: I’m not intimidated by working in different jurisdictions. Generally, we get a reciprocal license in the state, if it’s required. From a construction standpoint, you have to make sure you have a really good local contractor. So we go through an even more extensive process with the contractor. Builders in vacation spots might be used to just taking plans and building, but our work is too custom for that. We’ll pick and choose whether to go local for other consultants. For local, I’d say: structural engineer and soils and civil engineers. Site webcams help us keep track of the project, as does drone photography, in addition to digital photography, email, site visits, and phone calls. It’s actually a pet peeve of mine that people don’t pick up the phone and call more often.

RD: What percentage of your work is out of town now, and how does that fit with firm goals?

JD: We’re working on about 16 projects right now, and at least 25% are four or more hours—or a plane ride—away. That feels like the right amount—any more might be too much. It’s fun to have those projects. It’s good for quality of life and it keeps the learning curve higher. But that’s the trick as the firm’s arc continues, how do you make sure you stretch in the right ways? **RD**