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Architect team prospers going 'public'

BY STEVEN E.F. BROWN

It's possible to tell architecture firm Noll & Tam's culture even before meeting its staff.

Outside its West Berkeley office, a bicycle typically rests in a rack by a fence overgrown with vines. The firm's neighbors are screenprinters, artists and a nursery. Inside the front door, sunshine showers down

through skylights, and on one desk a rolled up yoga mat waits in a musette bike bag from the Aspen cycling club.

Perhaps, the firm absorbed some of its purpose from its art enclave surroundings, or perhaps the personalities of principals Janet Tam and Christopher Noll —

Janet Tam

Titles: Principal

Company: Noll & Tam

Education: Master's, architecture, and B.A., environmental design, UC-Berkeley

Residence: Albany

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who do much of their design work for public clients like libraries — led it there. But the 10-year-old firm has continued to grow even in the downturn, reaching \$3 million in revenue last year, although that growth has left the office swollen to 24 people.

"I never thought we'd get past 10," said Tam. "We're very close to reaching our limits."

Tam and Noll met while they were students in UC-Berkeley's architecture school more than 20 years ago, and kept in touch when they moved to different firms and started their own independent practices.

"We sort of got our feet wet with our own practices," said Noll. "But we had thought about being partners even in school. Neither of us had much of a firm, but we had enough together to be credible."

"It's no fun doing things by yourself," said Tam.

Because they'd both done some work for public clients, they, as new business partners, bid first on an upgrade for the art history department's slide library at UC-Berkeley, and their success there led them toward more public work of that type.

"We kind of know libraries," said Noll.

"They're not just intellectual — they're community centers," said Tam.

Though they got that first job, and though Noll had some marketing experience from his work in a large firm, starting out in a business driven by word-of-mouth and reputation was tough. They didn't just do libraries, but did other public projects — campus modernizations at Cañada College, the visitor center at California State University, Monterey Bay and fire stations in Fremont and Soquel.

"It was really hard financially for the first three years, while we were trying to make a mark," Noll said. "We lived on credit cards



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Janet Tam and Christopher Noll met as students and are now in business together. Below: One of their most recent projects is the new Rohnert Park Library.



Libraries, schools, zoo

Noll & Tam specializes in public projects.

Among the architecture firm's work:

- Oakland Zoo's themed entrance and children's zoo
- Libraries at UC-Berkeley and in Oakland and Rohnert Park
- Cal State Monterey Bay visitor center
- Santa Clara community center

for a few years."

To find clients meant making many calls, said Tam. She knew some project managers from her past work, and just called all of them all the time, asking if there were any small projects she and Noll could bid on.

The pair learned that public customers, just like private ones, want as much as possible for their money. "The nature of the beast is that (a project) is overbudget from the beginning," said Noll. "The client has a wish list and a finite amount of money. Our problem is how are we going to bring it back on target."

To help with estimates and budgeting, the firm employs outside cost estimators, firms which specialize in guessing what a project will cost, and they often bring the estimators to their early meetings with clients.

Each successful project meant more of a reputation, and sometimes repeat business. "When you have a repeat client and they trust you, they'll give you the benefit of the doubt," said Tam.

One repeat customer is the Oakland Zoo, which hired Noll & Tam to work on its administration building and its front entrance before inviting them back to design the new children's zoo.

"I think they're great — they're an excellent combination of fair pricing and imagination," said Joel Parrott, the executive director of the zoo. "They're creative and maintain great aesthetics in the finished product. They're very receptive to client input."

Reputation and repeat business nourished Noll & Tam, but now the firm has outgrown its bucolic headquarters and will have to move. And so the two principals, who have already had to learn a lot about management and marketing while growing from three to 24 people, are scouting for real estate.

They thought of buying the building they now inhabit, but when that didn't work out, they went looking for new space. Noll said they will stay in Berkeley, but he doesn't yet know where. And he smiles wanly at the thought of the coming move.

"That's just part of our growing pains," he said.

Brown is a reporter for the San Francisco Business Times, an affiliated publication.

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