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GRACE LA: From Harvard University's Graduate School of design. This is talking practice, a series asking renowned designers to provide an inside glimpse into what they do, why, and how they do it, exposing the ways in which their design imagination is articulated through practice. I'm Grace La, professor of architecture and chair of the Practice Platform. Thank you for listening.

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Joining our podcast series is a special roundtable episode entitled Practice in an Uncertain World. This informal event was recorded over Zoom on an early Saturday morning in May of 2020, after the Harvard GSD evacuated its campus due to the COVID pandemic.

Unlike our intimate one-on-one conversations, this occasion included 13 prominent architectural practitioners petitioners who gathered to communicate candid thoughts on the complexion of practice at this unprecedented moment.

The guests represent different ages, geographic regions, and architectural practice type, sharing in common the ways and means that they survived the challenges of a recession. Speaking from the philosophical to the specific, we're grateful to hear their unique stories, advice, and reflections. Thanks for listening.

GRACE LA: So you might be asking why we are gathering this morning. Economists observe that since World War II there have been four global recessions, all of them lasting a year. The IMF reports, however, that the coronavirus recession is really like no other and is arguably the steepest downturn since the Great Depression.

While there is incredible uncertainty in this unprecedented moment, the practice forum thought it would be incredibly useful to share a reflection on the situation. It's impossible for any one of us to have definitive, let's say, answers.

So the point of this roundtable is not necessarily to suggest that we do, but rather to share our individual thinking experiences and the questions that we're asking ourselves. Many of us have faced these issues before, and the profession has absorbed changes and new directions.

We have also held on to value systems that deeply inform our work, but perhaps modified the ways in which we went about it. So the format for this conversation will be really quite simple.

After some very brief introductions, I will ask each of our guests to speak for a few minutes, answering one of the following questions or both. How did you survive a recession, any recession? And what do you see on your specific horizon?

So today, we have with us Jeffry Burchard, principal and partner of Machado Silvetti, Jeffry would you wave? firm co-founded by Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti in 1989. Jeffry is also assistant professor in practice. Elizabeth Christoforetti, principal of Supernormal in Boston.

Elizabeth is also assistant professor in practice. Scott Cohen, co-founder of Preston Scott Cohen Inc. in Boston, professor of architecture, and former chair of the Department of Architecture. Jeanne Gang has also joined us. Jeanne is co-founder of Studio Gang in Chicago, New York, with offices in New York, San Francisco, and Paris, and is professor in practice at the GSD.

Eric Howeler, principal of Howeler Yoon in Boston, co-founded with his partner Meejin. And Erik is associate professor of architecture and area head of the MDes Group Energy and Environment. We have Mark Lee, who joins us from Los Angeles, principal and co-founder with Sharon Johnson of Johnson Mark Lee and chair of the Department of Architecture.

Rahul Mehrotra, principal of RMA Architects in Mumbai and Boston, two time chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design, and is currently our dean designate. Toshiko Mori, founder of Toshiko Mori Architect in New York, 1981, former chair of the Department of Architecture and professor in practice.

Paul Nakazawa, associate professor in practice of architecture and chairman of Snohetta's Advisory Board, director of MASS Design Group, Boston, and he was a founding member of AMO, the research and development arm of OMA. Lyndon Neri, principal and co-founder with Rosana Hu of Neri & Hu, Shanghai.

He was also the Portland design critic at the GSD this past fall. It seems like ages ago. Jacob Rydell, senior director at WeWork, co-founder and editor of CLOG and assistant professor in practice.

Mack Scogin, principal and co-founder with Merrill Elam of Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects in Atlanta, with its beginnings in 1984. Mack was also former chair of the Department of Architecture and is professor in practice.

So this is just a wonderful group of colleagues and friends to the GSD alums. I'm so grateful for all of you to participate this morning. Mack, if you would kick us off, can you tell us about a past experience? How did you survive a recession, and what do you see on your specific horizon?

MACK SCOGIN: Well, it's kind of interesting you asked me to start this off, because I'm reflecting on how I got into architecture. It reminded me, first of all, that I met my partner in school, Merrill Elam. We were not partners then, but we became partners later.

And I also entered the practice in architecture in the middle '60s, '66 to '70s, when we were in a deep, deep depression here recession. In the US, architects had developed a reputation of being not so responsible for clients' needs and whatnot.

And what happened just happened to go to work for a firm here in Atlanta who founder had developed a new kind of practice where it very much against the American Institute of Architects principles, where he was guaranteeing the time and cost control of projects.

In other words, he would write all the contracts for all the contractors on that actually built the building as well as all the subcontractors. They had a very unique way of approaching architecture. And so in the '70s, when literally architects had no work whatsoever, we were flourishing.

We did work all over the world, including New York City, when absolutely nothing was being built there. And so we Merrill ended up at that firm as well. I ended up being the president of the firm and in charge of design. And Merrill was a principal in the firm. We left there in 1984.

And the reason I'm mentioning this is not just because we were doing this different kind of practice, but the diversity of project types that we experienced under that kind of practice was amazing. It was absolutely amazing. From hospitals to University work to all kinds of work in the private realm and public realm.

And so I made a list. It's 30 different project types. And I think that diversity of project type and experience has really served us well through many recessions and has kept us afloat because we could always find a type somewhere across the country, and we were used to doing work out of the city.

We did very, very little, almost no work in Atlanta and still do almost no work here in Atlanta. Again, because of these early experiences, has always been spread out.

To bring you up to date, it's interesting in the times that we're going through now, because it does reflect back on those times. And we just to give you an idea of what we're doing now, we just finished up an 1,800 unit apartment complex in Queens, a master plan for a complex in Philadelphia for the same developer.

We've only worked for one developer in our entire life. We've never been able to penetrate that market very much, but we just happen to have one of the best in the world that we're working for.

We're doing a condo at a condo unit, a very large condo unit at Columbus Circle in New York City, which has been interesting over the last few months. It stops and starts. They can only allow certain trades on the site at certain times. So that's been quite interesting project for us.

Here in Atlanta we're doing-- which again, we don't do that much work here, but here in Atlanta, we're doing a small museum that is a really, really interesting museum. They support young artists and local artists of all types and backgrounds and done been a huge success over many years.

We're working on a federal courthouse in Des Moines, Iowa. That's a recession proof project that it's nice to be able to do work for the federal government. This is our second courthouse. Interesting process to be able to get not only on the list, but to get chosen for a project like that. So we enjoy that kind of project mix.

And then, lastly, again, one thing that's characterized us is we actually own our own building that we bought about 20 years ago in Downtown Atlanta when it was really tough, very, very tough place, tough neighborhood. And what's interesting, over the last years, Georgia State University has bought up all the buildings and moved in them.

And so we're presently in the process of developing our own site with a developer, local developer that was part of the Tishman Speyer for a number of years. And so we've become entrepreneurs. And we'll see because we're anxious about how the present times that we're facing right now how that might affect that development.

It's about a 700-bed building, so it's a tall building. So it could be a major project for us, and in fact, could be something that kind of pays off in terms of investment.

GRACE LA: Mack, thank you so much. That's a lot of work actually. Everyone apply to Mack Scogin I'm going to turn the same question now actually to Jeanne Gang. Jeanne, your thoughts on this question?

JEANNE GANG: Thank you, Grace. And Mack, it's great to hear your story of so many amazing projects. For me, I wanted to get started on my own since I started studying architecture. And I really wanted to practice my own way and just follow the things that were interesting to me.

So I kind of always knew I was going to start the practice. And when I did do that, it was in a way, it was just a very strong feeling and not very planned out. I just knew I had to do it. And I had one tiny, tiny project which was a renovation of a loft interior.

And that was it. I just did it. And really with it was very naive, I guess, in retrospect, but I just felt it so strongly I had to get started on my own. And so I learned a lot about setting up a practice and everything.

First, I was joined by a few of my students from IIT, and then later, another partner and Mark, my current partner, joined me eventually, after a couple of years where I had, enough work.

But what I did learn from doing that was just how to do accounting in the books, how to be set up my own tech, my network, which was really funny for a while because when we were about nine people, I would be in a meeting with a client, and suddenly I would get a call from someone at the office that the computers are down. So I'd have to fix the computers.

But anyway, just learn everything about getting what needs to be done. And that ended up paying off later on when I could finally hire people to do specifically those things like computers and financial stuff and payroll and all that. So I think that helped me a lot in terms of being a resilient business.

Like Mack, we had so many weird variety of projects in the recession in 2008, and so some of them just kept going and other ones didn't. And we were able to just survive by making less money and just really cutting down on any expenses.

And what the good thing was about that period was just that I used that to strategize about how to grow the business and grow bigger. Because we were so non-hierarchical-- what I mean it was just totally flat organization. But then if you're going to start doing larger projects and more work, what are the ways that one can organize one's practice?

And therefore, I didn't just do that by myself. I had some advice, some business advice, but everything that they told me about growing the practice it just didn't fit. So we started internally at just all of us architects.

Thinking about it, at that point, we were probably about 30 people. And we have this great collection of different diagrams that everyone came up with about what the organization could be like.

So we did that. And then we also invested in more technology, which was, like learning certain programs. At the time, it was like switching over to BIM. So it was a good time to do these longer term things that you just don't have time to do when you're so busy with your projects.

GRACE LA: That's a great segue, because it's almost as if we're talking about other things that we could also be doing simultaneously like self-education. So I think that's terrific. Paul Nakazawa, can I turn to you next, and again, to talk about this question of how did you survive a recession?

PAUL NAKAZAWA: OK. I'm going to tell you a story of failure and success. So early in my career, not long after the GSD, I was one of the senior members of a 400-person firm based in Charlotte, North Carolina, with offices along the East Coast and in the United Kingdom.

So this is in the '80s. And it was at a time we had just gone public actually on the London Stock Exchange. So this is one of the early experiments in public ownership of a firm.

So at our largest, we were 400 people. And in the course of three years we went bankrupt, and 400 people lost their jobs. So this was a scarring event for me because I was one of the parties in a responsible position with the firm.

And so since my career has been more as a managing principles, which is keeping firms in business and attending to a lot of the mundane things, I've always had to have an eye on what do you tell your staff.

How do you manage a collective when you that things are bad, and how do you grow as a consequence, not only personally as a firm, but also how do you continue to coach individuals who you know may not be with the firm to continue to be viable in times of hardship.

And so these are hard lessons that I've had to learn over many kind of cycles. And I can probably boil it down to three things. So the first thing is that all of you have everything you need to survive. You may or may not realize it, but all of you are intelligent. You're talented. You're thinking people.

And the thing that you probably don't have are the reflexes for survival in certain contexts that have changed. So the GSD has made you fit to be students. You're super students. You're really fit to do the work of being in an educational context.

And now you need new muscles. You need to go back to the gym and work out new muscles in order to figure out how to acquire a new repertory of fitness in a different context.

So fitness at the GSD is not fitness in the outside world. Fitness requires you to exercise different muscles than you did at the GSD. It's not giving up muscles, it's acquiring new ones, discovering muscles you didn't know you had.

And remember, anytime you go to the gym after not working out, you feel like hell the first time you did it. So being sore and feeling like beat up is a consequence of learning that you're going to have an additional repertory that you didn't have before.

But since you have native intelligence, you have talent and everything like that, you have stuff to build on that many other people do not. So that's one. Second thing is don't do don't do it alone. [LAUGHS]

I think all of us who have made any success of ourselves in practice or in any other aspect of life had other people around us who could actually correct things that we were doing that were harebrained, or if we were in panic or whatever, were steadying influences in our life.

And everyone will have different people around them. Some will have family. Some will have friends. Some will have professional colleagues. So the context of how you do things not alone is a big thing. So if you have no work, get into a discussion.

A lot of work comes out of not looking for a job but discussion with different people. And out of that grows new businesses, new thoughts, new things. And my last job was as managing principal of Moshe Safdie.

But at the end of a depression, there wasn't much left to manage at one point. I mean, Safdie's practice is doing great right now, but at one point we were at the low ebb, and I said, Moshe, I got nothing to manage anymore. So I got to go out and do something else. He said, well, yeah, you're right.

But that at that moment I needed to re-establish my career. And then I no longer was a managing principal. I became a consultant, but it was only after joining with other people who had different skill sets.

I spent 10 years with two other women, one of whom worked for me in New York developing a separate business. It would be a 10-year kind of growth period, which developed a different level of competencies and other things.

So that's the second thing. Don't do things alone. Find people and find areas to get involved, even if it's not a direct job hunt. And the third thing is you've got to control your emotions. So you have to learn how to listen to yourself, and you have to be able to face your fears in ways that you're not controlled by a negative narrative.

It's easy to get caught up in a negative narrative at this point, but you're only as good as you can listen to yourself and understand what you need. That is essential. And what you can do to face the fears that you've got.

GRACE LA: Well, those are fantastic, this kind of triad of suggestion. We're definitely going to come back.

PAUL NAKAZAWA: If you can do all three, it doesn't matter what hole you're in, you'll get out of it. [LAUGHS]

GRACE LA: That's actually--

PAUL NAKAZAWA: Every one of you has a different specific situation. But if you can do all three of those things, you'll be fine.

GRACE LA: That's actually very good advice at any time in life.

PAUL NAKAZAWA: Anytime

GRACE LA: Lyndon, I'd like to turn to you because you actually have a very specific situation, having also been in China during the SARS epidemic. Tell us your thoughts.

LYNDON NERI: It was interesting because I left the GSD in 1992, and that was a Great Recession. So I worked for five different practices in New York because I was so idealistic.

I remember getting an offer from Gensler. And I found out that a colleague and a very good friend of mine was paid $2,000 more per year, so I decided over my weathered decomposed body will I work because I thought I was a better designer.

Well, I turned that down, and then end up struggling to find real work. So for two years, I worked for five firms, and finally landed at Michael Graves. Thank goodness because I was going to Princeton at that time.

At a certain point, coming out of the GSD didn't really want to work for Michael Graves, but actually that was the best experience I could possibly have because in 1999, the Asian crisis hit, and we lost 17 Asian projects. I still remember that.

And being the person in charge of those projects, I had to scramble and convince some of those Asian clients to bring those money to New York. And that's the reason why Michael Graves, at that time, entered into the New York market with all the towers. I think he did four at the end.

And you're right, Grace. In 2003, I was here working for Michael Graves when SARS hit, and I was stuck. It was originally supposed to be six weeks. It extended to six months, and then I was stuck for a year. And that was when I saw many different possibilities. I went to all the factories, and that's when I realized it's design is more than just architecture.

I was doing interior projects, even though I didn't really have much experience at that time. And I also managed to see how people do furnitures, accessories, objects, all these different things.

Now, Michael Graves, that was very important, but this was pushed to its limit. And so it was end of that year when I was allowed to go back to the office. I worked for another three, four months, and then I resigned. And that's where we started our practice. That's when I saw the opportunity.

So I think in 2008 there was another global-- I mean, we were three years into our practice, hardly have any architectural projects, but the products interiors allowed us to keep us afloat, but not as prolific as Mack with all the different architectural typology.

But at least it allowed us as a practice to be multidisciplinary and in that process understand different facets of design. And I think this actually helped us tremendously.

GRACE LA: That's so helpful, Lyndon. Thank you so much. I'd like to now turn to Rahul who is also practicing overseas. Rahul, could you share your thoughts, please?

RAHUL MEHROTRA: Thanks, Grace, and great to be part of this discussion. So I started my practice in India in 1990. And I was living and practicing there continue to do that, but I began to teach in 2003 or 2004.

And one of the reasons I began to start teaching, which wasn't part of my trajectory, was because I couldn't deal with a booming economy, because I'd set up my practice in a complete flat economy, in a recession when I went back from the GSD after graduating.

And I think what we ended up doing, which was interesting in reflection, was a real diversity of projects. I mean, we did anything we got because the economy was so flat. So we did interiors. We did historic preservation.

We began to get involved with issues of the city, with documentation. And I think, as Paul pointed out, that put us in the middle of conversations and discussions that led to projects. We began to realize the potential of self-initiated projects IN that kind of economy.

We began to develop what I call instruments for advocacy because we began to partner with NGOs. It was a bizarre, schizophrenic, extreme diversity of the kinds of projects. I mean, one would start the day just with consultants and end the day with community groups. It was complete schizophrenia.

But it kept us busy. It in reflection made me realize two or three things. It made me realize how important diversity was, and constructing that diverse ecology actually made us very resilient as a practice in an economy that was going south continuously.

It also allowed us to identify and connect. And the way I described is it allowed us to create a really productive intersection between what I call our spheres of concern and our spheres of influence. We all have great spheres of concern over a drink to discuss climate change till the cows come home when we get up in the morning and we are back to a working drawing or trying to figure out an interior detail. And so our influence gets completely minimized.

But by this kind of expansion out of default we felt that our concerns and our influence were beginning to follow the same trajectory, and that was very uplifting. And again, in reflection, I think, it's really if I had to talk to graduating students today, I would say the two key things would define purpose.

As Gandhi said, you find purpose and the means will follow. Because I think the clarity of purpose and identifying what your concerns would be, given the kind of crisis that the pandemic is going to throw up, is critical.

And the other half of that approach would be being very mindful of your networks and the community and the collaborations and the new configurations by which you relate to people occur simultaneously, again resonating what Paul said, because the connection between your purpose and its clarity and the networks that you can place yourself in, I think, open up many possibilities.

And so what does one see in the horizon? I think the best brand ambassador that climate change could get was the virus. And it's amazing how this planet, as we can see, is beginning to heal.

And I think for architects, and this addresses the question of purpose, we've got to move from foreground architecture to background architecture. We've got to seriously grapple with questions of repair, of restoration. And I don't mean historic preservation at all.

I mean, I think the larger rhythms of what this is thrown up is a process of healing for the planning. As society, questions of inequity-- I mean, extreme problems. If I tell you what's happening in India, it's mind boggling.

And it's bringing to the fore the urgency for architects to change these narratives to get involved more with what we otherwise just consider background, and we come in to play out the foreground. I think we might have to reverse the way we perceive the world and our agency in the world.

GRACE LA: Those are very wise thoughts. Next, I'd like to invite Toshiko to share thoughts.

TOSHIKO MORI: Hi. When I graduate my Alma mater, Cooper Union, that was the year when New York City went bankrupt. And then to try to get a job, I got a job at Edward Larrabee Barnes office where Paul also worked, the GSD graduate.

And when those kind of extreme recession happens, what we discover is they actually fired very high paid people and left young people who's able, has lots of energy, willing to work kept alive.

So it turns out to be me and another young kid we became in charge of IBM Towers on Madison Avenue. And just saying because this is amazing opportunity. Keep an eye out. Observe what's going on. If you get that opportunity, jump on it because I really learned how to do a high rise.

And because of it, I think it's a boring technology. I don't have tower envy anymore, but I know how to build a high rise. It was an amazing time. And then after five years, I went on my own just because, like Jeanne said, I just wanted to practice.

Another thing, practical, I actually got real estate license. I went to NYU Real Estate School. And if you know the developers, everybody has to take this real estate exam. So Donald Trump was the next classroom taking this class. And you get incredible case studies. And I think you also get future clients in this way.

I got licensed and with me another friend, who is a GSD graduate, Kim Wang, and now he's a Hong Kong developer. We actually developed a building in Tribeca. Like Mack, we thought we had to have another skill other than architecture to get through this. And it turns out it was the first condo in Tribeca we developed.

After that, I said, I'm not a developer. I can't do this. I'm a designer. So you go through this, but the knowledge and skill I acquired at that time is still useful. I can read all the leases. I can review all the real estate legal instruments for clients.

Of course, lawyers have to do it, but I think that was really good to know how to get those things built financially, legally, and so forth. So in my small practice, uncertainty is the cause of a day. My practice is small. It's between six to 20 people, somewhere in the middle.

And we always have to be very nimble. What Paul said. We have to be fit all the time. We have absolutely no fat in our firm. Everybody is working to the limit. And because I went through this New York City bankrupt bankruptcy and my office in my home has been Tribeca.

So 9 9/11 was very tough because it was very local, very regional, and we couldn't work. We had to get out for three to six months. But everybody else was flourishing. I think that was really tough. Toughest thing. Financial crisis came, but throughout we learned to diversify, as Rahul says.

And I think we do exhibition design, product design, consulting with our clients, historic preservation, commercial work, institutional work, and residential work. And they actually work in cycles.

So in a way, I really advise against specialization because I think instead you want to be more adaptable, adaptable and flexible. And at this time, we are doing a lot of institutional projects and New York City. We are an epicenter, but we are allowed to do essential construction. We just got a permit to go ahead with our project in Brooklyn public library.

So we are really essential workers now. They issued about 6,000 permits in last couple of days in New York. Of course, construction workers have to be distanced. We have to practice the protection and everything, but we are going.

And so our office is legally entitled to work at the moment. So that's amazing. Yeah, kind of amazing situation. But in any way, I think my advice is to be flexible, adaptable, diversify. And then architects work it's always uncertain. You never what comes next, what competition will win or lose. This is normal for us, so don't panic. Just as Paul says be fit and work with others and confront your emotions, which is always being an optimist.

GRACE LA: That's wonderful thinking. Eric Howeler, could you share with us also your thoughts?

ERIC HOWELER: Sure. I'm delighted to know Toshiko knows how to do a high rise building. When I graduated, I wanted to work for Liz Diller, but there was no work at Diller Scofidio. So I went to go work for KPF which was the only firm that was hiring at the time. And then I worked on maybe 20 high rise buildings in Asia.

That was my first introduction to architecture was working on high rise overseas. I eventually went to work for Liz when she had the ICA project here in Boston, and I got to work on cultural buildings. I left Diller Scofidio. I came to Boston because my wife, Meejin Yoon, was starting a practice and threatened to start without me.

So I sort of got myself up to Boston, connected with Toshiko, connected with Scott, and started teaching at the GSD. In 2008, we had one employee. And actually I was on a PGA awards jury with Jeanne Gang the day after Lehman Brothers went down.

So we were sort of sitting there thinking like, oh, my God, what's happening? It was a crazy time, but there was nothing to do. We sat here in this space with three people, and we wrote a grant foundation grant. We started writing grants. And we looked out the window, and we saw the Greenway starting up, and we said, what is this big dig about, and how did that happen? And what is its history, and what is its untapped potential?

So we wrote a book called *Unsolicited Small Projects for the Big Dig.* No one asked us to do it. They were unsolicited, but we said, this is interesting. This is research in our backyard. How did the big dig happen?

What was the central artery? Why are these parks so lame? And so we designed new interventions for the parks, and we thought about infrastructure, and we published this book. And then a couple of years later, Audi was looking for a firm to do a competition on mobility. And I showed them the book, and I said, hey, I've thought about infrastructure and culture and technology. I would like to compete.

So we competed in this ideas competition 2012. We won the competition 100,000 euros. We invested in our shop. We bought a CNC mill, and we started making stuff. A couple years later, Audi had a workshop with Frank Barkow and Grafton Architects and Urban Think Tank to think about the future of their campus in Ingolstadt.

And I joined that workshop because I had worked with Audi before, and we won that competition, and we designed a master plan for Audi. So in 2008, when there was nothing to do, we wrote grant applications. We wrote books. We did research.

And we leveraged that research to do projects, to do ideas, competitions, but ultimately to build projects for companies. And right now we've got 25 people. We're working all over the world. We've got 20 projects in China. And China is busy. Things are slow here, but they're busy there.

GRACE LA: That's fascinating. We're learning. I'm actually taking a lot of notes here. This is fantastic. Mack, could I turn it over to you? Please share your past experience on a recession.

MACK SCOGIN: Thanks, Grace, and thanks for organizing this. I remember in 2008 right around the time of the recession, I was watching a comedian on TV. He asked the audience, are you afraid of recession? He said, oh, I'm not because I grew up poor.

So if I go poor again, I'll just feel young again. I thought, that's a nice silver lining to the whole thing. But it was a tough time. I mean, I think we lost 80% or 90% of the work that we had, or things were frozen, things were put on pause.

And there was a time when one day you hear Gensler 500 people. Next day, Gehry laid off 150. Just from hearsay you learned that there are 500 unemployed architects walking the streets. So at that time, we had about 12 people.

So we basically called everyone in the room. We closed the door. We had a day-long meeting. And we basically opened up the books, and we just said, this is what we have left. This is what we've lost. This is how much it costs to run the office. What do we do?

And we were small enough at that time that we could all open up and share our needs. And then we just decided at the end, no one gets laid off. Everyone takes a cut from Sharon and myself to someone who joined us for less than a year.

And we said, we'll go in this direction for three quarters, and if we go back into the black, then everyone goes back to their regular salary. And I think that at the end, in retrospect, there was a solidifying experience for us because everybody gave 120%. I think everyone realized that it was a collective problem and how can we dig us out of the hole.

And I think in many ways going through the crisis, we became who we were as a team, and certainly, took some time before some projects that were put on hold came back. There were unexpected projects. We never really did retail back then, but a lot of online retail people who have cash realized that they could get prime real estate for much less money than before.

So they would have these roll up brick and mortar stores. I was talking to Michael Maltzan, who said early in his career he won like five or six museums, and he thought his whole career was set.

And then when the recession hit, all the institutional projects were frozen. And then he had to go into find ways to work in for Skid Row housing and low-income housing. And so I think there's always a silver lining in that.

GRACE LA: That's so helpful to hear and to learn about a kind of intensive consolidation within the office as a team. Very interesting and unusual. Scott, could I turn it to you next?

PRESTON SCOTT COHEN: Yes. Well, so many things have come to mind in looking back at past crises. We're all being biographical, and I have to say that when I was in school, we were finishing. Well, no, it was dead in the middle of the 1980s, early '80s recession, a really big one. Really the biggest one before the '08.

And this is an incredible time intellectually, though. I mean, it was a time when the postmodern was emerging, the period that right now a lot of students are so preoccupied with a kind of dispute about whether to revisit commitments to the modern, to the European modern project. And to, let's say, contest the market-driven postmodern in America.

And it was a difficult and interesting debate period. And so I'm thankful, by the way, that was happening. And I think it was a lot of that was owing to the fact that we were in that period of paper architecture. People were not building. They were thinking, speculating.

So I was at school in that moment of speculation, and I'm thrilled that I had that opportunity. I mean, in a way, it was the right thing. And then I remember I was asked to remember this recently by Grace when she held the conference on first projects recently.

I had to do something. Reminds me of what Paul was talking about. I wanted to build something. And I asked my father who was very much a go it alone kind of businessman, small businessman. He couldn't. The client was going to have to be his wife. And we had to persuade her.

She was a formidable businesswoman herself, and she was very skeptical of my kind of architecture, because it wasn't the American market value driven looking kind of stuff. I wanted to do a European-looking house and a really banal area in Austin, Texas.

So I had to persuade her. And the way I did it, it's very much in the mindset of my father, a businessman. I said, let's find a lot that's cheap in this recession time, and let's try to add value to it the way we build on it. And I managed to persuade. We got a very inexpensive lot that had the prospect.

I proved to her that it will eventually be a very highly valued lot, which it did become later. It really did. This mindset, building this quirky house by means of finding the lot that had value added and that I could persuade somebody to invest in, well, now this continued.

I mean, this is the mentality that I think speculative thinking on architecture combined with how to overcome odds this is the whole basis for my entire experience. I mean, in Tel Aviv I'm asked to do this big museum in a competition, but we had no means. I had no experience, never had done a big building.

We were going to lose it to somebody who they thought if I won, they'd get the job. Other people on the jury were ready like sharks. They knew I would never do the project. Many people win competitions and don't build those projects. I was going to lose it.

But what I did is something very strange. I found an individual local architect. I mean, he didn't have a big practice, but what I persuaded the client we could do is do this for a very low fee, comparatively. Because I didn't have the big overhead of a big office, I knew this one man with me we could do it.

With people at the GSD, so brilliant that they are, we would just have a small team and do this giant project with no experience. So it always had to do with overcoming odds. And I can tell many, many stories. Even to this day, I still look for value adding to lots in poor places that you think you shouldn't build something.

The mentality of dealing with the struggle against economic odds combined with your desire for architectural speculation, to bring those two together that you have gained that from the GSD, this is it. I'm telling you. You're going to be driven to do great work by this crisis.

GRACE LA: So who would have known that Scott Cohen is scrappy?

[CHUCKLES]

PRESTON SCOTT COHEN: Yeah.

GRACE LA: I'm going to turn it over--

PRESTON SCOTT COHEN: It may have come my father. And I tell you Paul is right. It's a conversation-- well, it's learning a sensibility obviously too, but yes, it's part of my bloodstream.

GRACE LA: [LAUGHS]

PRESTON SCOTT COHEN: My father's attitude. But yes.

GRACE LA: That's fantastic. I'm going to now actually ask Jeffry Burchard, could you give us your thoughts?

JEFFRY BURCHARD: Yeah, great. Two quick things. The first thing when I was a student at the University of Idaho, the most radical professor there said that the most important thing I could learn was Microsoft Excel. And that sort of bothered me at the time.

When I graduated from Harvard in 2008, it was the spring of 2008, of course, so the crash hadn't really happened yet, actually, and I was able to get a job at Machado Silvetti, presumably to work on a very large cultural project in the Middle East with massive fees that was basically expanding that office to about 60 people.

But when I started, I ended up working at a project for NYU in Manhattan instead. And what was quite interesting was that during '06, '07 at the GSD, we were very into fabrication and making things and parametrics and panelization and robot arms.

And this building at NYU, for some reason, necessitated a deep dive in fabrication. And I had those skills. I had developed them. I was super interested in them at the school, and this project gave me a way to excel in the office because of my unique command over that subject matter and my interest in it.

And I was able to have conversations with the client, with consultants, with fabricators that someone two months or three months out of school maybe doesn't typically have. Shortly after that, we did a competition for a master plan in Kuala Lumpur. 21,000,000 square foot, 30,000 parking spots, 47 buildings. It's the tallest building in Kuala Lumpur now that has been built on this master plan.

And through my knowledge of Excel, frankly, I was able to grab a place on that team of real importance and in the office, meaning that we would fly to Kuala Lumpur, and there would be 60 people sitting around the table all of which were at least twice my age.

But I had the data. And I knew the data, and I commanded the data, and they needed to make any decision about where a building moved or how to deal with a sub developer. They needed the data, and I had that. It was quite compelling.

Now, our office took a hit about three years after 2008 because again, we had good projects in the Middle East, and they were a little bit behind the 2008 recession. But what happened is something that Toshiko mentioned was that the office lost work. It shrunk.

People at the top or in the middle underneath Jorge and Rodolfo were unwilling to basically work at the salaries that were available to them. They left opening big holes in then office management. And I said, well, that's an opportunity. I'm taking that. So I knew data. I knew how to talk to clients, knew how to talk to consultants, and stepped into a management role, and shortly after was made partner.

I think the last note is that this recession looming is very frustrating because when I started again, we were around 60 people. A few years ago, we were as low as six people, and we're back to 16. And I feel like our office is doing well again and climbing upward. And I'm devastated by this unfortunate crisis that comes.

But one thing that we've done, I think, is going to help us, which is that we've been very interested in working hard on establishing relationships with other architecture offices, so that I would say 80% of our work now is with another architecture office, whether we're the architect of record or they're the architect of record.

We did a museum in Denver that's about to open with Fentress. We did a museum in California that's about to open with Gensler. We're doing two projects in Texas with HKS and Corgan. We're doing projects in Vietnam with local architects. And this kind of collaboration has allowed us actually to keep our office quite small but have a pretty big impact on important projects around the world.

And I like that because it's spread the risk of the project but also allowed us to, I think, have a stronger commitment to our staff that if a project goes south, it's not 10 people's salaries we're dealing with. It's two people's salaries we're dealing with, and that's something that we can spread more evenly or easily across the firm.

GRACE LA: That's very illuminating and helpful to hear. I'm next going to turn it over to our two panelists who actually graduated in the peak of the recession, Elizabeth and Jacob. So, Elizabeth, could you share your thoughts?

ELIZABETH: Sure thing. Yeah, thanks. This is so fascinating. Thank you so much, Grace, for organizing this. Yeah, so I did graduate right into the middle of the last recession. I was a 2009 graduate from the GSD. And Michelle Chang and Jennifer Bonner were also in my class.

I think this is right. There was one person who had a job with a capital J, and I believe, if I remember correctly, he was going back to serve his time with the Korean military. So it was sort of an unusual condition for sure.

And in the years that followed, really the two years that followed, I did a huge range of work frankly to pay the bills. Our student loans are in forbearance. And so there was just an incredible amount of sampling across disciplines and scales, and that really formed the nature of my practice today which is occasionally maybe always agnostic to the boundaries of our field.

So I mean, the work was-- I mean, it was great, actually. We were doing everything from designing a truck stop in Iraq for the US military during the rollback to exhibition design with Dan Borelli and Claude Cormier and Jane Hutton.

I spent a bunch of time analyzing parking structures in Long Island, and I had kind of managed also to wrangle my first teaching gig, which was great and that came with some writing and editorial work.

So I got lucky, I think, about 18 months in-- these little less-- I was about to move back to Pittsburgh. I grew up in Pittsburgh. And I had this idea that I liked very much about going back and being active in that community doing some of the things I'd been thinking about in my thesis around housing design.

And right at the last moment as we were about to pull away and pick up and move, I had been offered a job by a firm here locally. And that firm actually had been thriving, interestingly, because they had taken on a range of projects that were across the public and private field. So they had bridged from architecture right up into urbanism.

And so they had really been taking on a lot of public work, and they had enough to bring me on and fund me. And I suppose, I've sort of intuitively absorbed that very pragmatic decision to move across these different public and private scales. And it's really something that I've carried with me into supernormal, which is a relatively young firm.

So, yeah, I mean, what's on the horizon? We have this really interesting balancing act that we're trying to do right now. I think we've gotten past the immediate triage. We are constantly trying to balance these sort of little special or rituals and special sequences with their implications at a systems level.

And it's just so crazy and ambitious, and it yields these projects that on one hand are like the future of housing with the city of Boston. And that scope is expanding because the need with COVID-19 has been expanding so rapidly.

On the other hand, we have two projects that were under construction, and those have been paused. And then we had locked some funding for our project without a client. It was this housing project. We were going to be doing it on our own. The development actually continues to happen.

We were leveraging some of our data and software related work to create a spin out. And we just lost $500,000 a couple of weeks ago. So that's huge. That's a huge thing. And I'm really disappointed about it.

But at the same time, I don't know-- I mean, I'm an eternal optimist. I think there's a lot there. This is a time, obviously, and we're going to have a huge amount of ups and downs, but there's an incredible amount of invention that lies in these triggering conditions.

And they seem to amplify latent things that we haven't been seeing so clearly for the good and the bad. And there's no question that in my mind these are opportunities for design. So that's kind of what I got.

GRACE LA: That's fascinating, Elizabeth. Also to talk about how the nature of the products of architecture have been altered because of the time period within which you've been graduating. So last, I would love to hear from Jacob who also graduated in this intense period. And if you would Jacob, share your thoughts with us?

JACOB: Sure, sure, Grace. I guess I'm last. So this is such inspiring stories. I'm just going to take it down a level and actually just real talk about what my experience was. And again, I'm speaking from my experience.

You all are in different situations. So maybe just to set the ground level set. Like, I came out of school actually in 2008, but things were starting to get bad where I was going. I had made a decision to go to New York, primarily because I had an offer and very strong interest in a firm, REX.

And just to be really honest, I had, let's see, around $60,000 in student debt between undergrad and grad, so more than some less than others. But just so you know what my situation was. And actually importantly, I did not have significant family responsibilities. So I didn't have to support parents. I did not have support children.

And I think it's important for me to just put that out there when we talk about this because everyone is coming into the situation and has a very different experience. So just you know that's where I was coming from.

I think what my first thought when I was making that move, deciding to go to New York, is I wanted to-- I knew things were going to be rough, and I wanted to reduce my personal overhead as much as possible.

And the biggest thing that I knew I was going to be spending money on was rent. So basically, I just was determined to find a place that I knew I could pay if I were on unemployment, essentially. So the critical factor in my first few years of work was that I found a rent stabilized apartment in the final landing approach to LaGuardia.

It was actually an awesome apartment in Jackson Heights, except the TV would freeze when the airplanes would come down to a certain height. But that said, it was like it was a game changer for me because basically it gave me the freedom to do what I wanted to do at that time.

And that was a personal decision I made. Remarkably, my roommate friend is still in that apartment, so if anyone needs a hook up, I'll call Lewis and see if he's still got that room available. But it was like a ridiculous price.

And those things-- and I'm just saying that both anecdotally, but also these decisions really make a difference, I think, in informing the decisions you make both as designers, as professionals, and in the projects you do.

So just to again tell you a little bit about what my experience was, I started at REX about a couple of days after one of their major projects in the office had died, and they had literally gone from, I think, around 35 to 40 people a few days before I started to 15. And I show up, so everyone's like, who the hell are you?

It was a very interesting first few weeks. Over time, though, it did become an incredible experience. And a lot of it actually came from the instability of the time. Now I'm just going to-- I know were short on time.

I just want to say the three things that really, I think, the answer to the question how I and a lot of my colleagues survived this period to use an overly maybe a bit of an overly dramatic term.

But I think the number one thing was really friends. And I really want to emphasize that to everybody on this call right now. By friends, I mean the wider network of colleagues. Everyone on this call right now your classmates, your friends, lean into that network.

When I was in my first jobs, we actually my three years at REX, we came in second in a lot of incredible competitions. We consistently came in second. So what we do is we would call round, and when we would need people, I would call my friends who needed work.

When we would have to then reduce sizes when we came in second, we would call around to other friends and offices, and that's really how we all kept each other employed. And frankly, a lot of side projects and incredible things came out of that years later. So really, really lean into that. Don't take that for granted.

And a lot of that will both keep you nourished, but also will keep you sane and will lead to incredible things. This is the best network you could ever have right now. The other thing I'd say is just it's an overused term, but stay nimble. Don't worry about following what you might have a sense of what types of work you're supposed to do in a sequence.

You're supposed to do CDs first, and then you're going to learn all that stuff. I would say, don't worry about it. You will get that experience over time. In my personal experience, I ended up actually getting all of my office management hours in my first couple of years, which was bizarre.

And I actually didn't get to touch CDs for probably like until I was three years into my career. That was just how things worked out for me, but that went in a different direction. But at the end of the day, it does add up. And I think being willing to be open to those kind of potentially winding paths will really help you.

Also, frankly, being able to do things in addition to design will really be valuable in practice and in offices. And then, I guess, what good came out of this? From a personal standpoint, again, I think that as a result of all this churn and the kind of network that was built, projects like CLOG actually came directly out of this period.

Frankly, we all met through REX and then dispersed all over the world. But there's always one of us who was underemployed. So we could always shift the workload around. I think that other projects and competitions office US. Other things came out of the networks that were built through actually instability and the turn of that period.

And I'd say that was actually really valuable. I ended up with a network around the world that we were still working together today as a result of the period where really there was so much movement. And I think that'll sum it up. I think that just if I were going to say a few, like to summarize, one, I think what matters, friends matter, place really matters.

I think that that's something to really keep in mind, what city you go to there it's related to friends in your networks, but just there's no right or wrong answer. Just be intentional about that, and that leads to being intentional. I think just know that the decisions you make.

In many cases, there isn't a right or wrong answer, just as long as you why you're doing it. I think that is-- just don't take that for granted. And then also, I think flexibility and being nimble is just essential.

As far as what's on the horizon, I'll admit, I don't know. I don't think anyone really knows what is going to happen now. This is actually a really obviously an unprecedented situation.

What I do suspect is that trends that we've been seeing up until now where you've seen architects, that kind of notion of what it means to practice architecture, different players entering the space of not just traditional practices, but other players such as coming from tech like you're going to continue to see that happening.

But what I do want to emphasize is-- I just know this from my personal experience, my time at WeWork, and when other kind of related companies that aren't traditional architecture practices is the core competencies and skill sets that architects have are absolutely valued and essential in those rooms.

And the moment you're in a room as someone with that background surrounded by other people who don't have that background, that is valued. And I think you can use that skill both in what I would call traditional architecture practice, but in a host of other ways of engaging in the world and frankly shaping the built environment, the world we're in today.

GRACE LA: So thank you so much, Jacob. That's really helpful to hear your voices. It's amazing the number of things that have been coming out of this conversation. Fitness, flexibility, scrappy language of business.

Excel. Own the data. Gandhi. Opportunism. Books. Grants. Mentorship. Self-education. Consolidate your team within and without external collaboration. Control your emotions. Diversify. Diverse ecology. Self-initiated projects. Inventions. Small decisions add up. And by God, have friends.

All right. So we have a lot of questions from our students who have joined us, and John Wang is collecting them. And I would ask all the panelists, maybe it's a little bit difficult because you have to unmute yourself, I want you to speak spontaneously if you have a thought on answering some of these questions.

One of the first questions that have come in from our students-- and again, students, please chat towards John Wang who is consolidating these questions for us. So one of the first questions that has come in from the students, what is the skill or muscle that you keep referring to that you would encourage us to develop during this time? They want to know specifically, do you have some ideas on the skill and muscles that you would encourage?

PRESENTER 2: Well, they vary from person to person because everyone's background is different, so everyone will have different things that you need to develop. But I think I'd go back to things that everyone has said, which is there's certain people are less flexible in terms of their thinking about what was supposed to happen.

And I go back to Jacob's thing is that you have to really be flexible in this. So you have to develop a level of facility of not following a script and actually listening very carefully to what the ecosystem is telling you and knowing what an opportunity is versus just something that keeps you busy. And that's where controlling your emotions comes in.

It's not you can't be the drowning person reaching for a log. You have to keep true to what Toshiko says is and what Rahul is like. You have to have intentionality about what your belief systems are, and you can't betray yourself during this period.

You have to have a steady view of your ideals of what's important and what your interests are, and navigate around all of-- you're in the asteroid belt. So you have to be like flexible. You have to be agile. So agility, flexibility.

GRACE LA: Those terms are interesting because it links to another question that a student-- by the way, guys, as panelists, you should know there are a lot of questions, so let's try to be as brief as possible and just jump right in on top of each other as necessary too, because there are a lot of questions coming in.

With regard to things like flexibility, nimbleness, and whatnot, how did you make the first step, specifically starting one of those discussions that allowed you to find work, in particular some of the panelists who self-initiated work, how did you make that happen?

PRESENTER 3: Can I just say, I think, that being a designer is an incredibly courageous thing to do. We're always creating something new, and there's an amazing amount of bravery that's required for this.

And I think it is finding that strength in you, and recognizing that there's fear, but also an incredible amount of strength to pursue the things that you're interested in, and that, as Paul says are kind of driven by your value system.

So to me, it's like courage, like an incredible amount of courage and not being afraid to take a chance and to even talk in a different language. Yes, I think that's absolutely right. And I think it takes a lot of courage to initiate a new project. So anyone have some thoughts on specifically the question is, how did you make that discussion? Yeah, Toshiko, please.

TOSHIKO MORI: I actually took my thesis to a potential client. My thesis was a place of interaction to have a prototype built, and that's how I started my practice. And I think every student think of how to build your thesis, and then present it.

I think that Elizabeth said I was fearless. I was a little ignorant, but ignorant in youth is a blessing. So I think this is a situation in which all these new ideas people welcome. And I think this is a great opportunity.

When I presented my thesis idea was 1980. So that was really trying to look for new typology, new paradigm. And I think this is a great opportunity for you to present your project to potential client. Just leapfrog it.

PRESENTER 4: Well, I just wanted to mention-- it's an odd story, but when actually started our firm, the first project we got was a museum, which was odd, because we had never designed any museum.

But the reason we got it is that we had done about 10 years of pro bono work at the High Museum here in Atlanta doing children's exhibits. And so when they wanted to build a satellite museum downtown, the museum director that we had been doing all this work for hired us. That was our first project.

GRACE LA: So in terms of let's say that typology of museum, I'm just curious if there are project types that you feel are more resilient during this economic crisis or others that you have seen typologies or work efforts, either you, Mack or any of the others, have you found that there's, again, a type that seems to be a little bit more recession proof?

PRESENTER 4: Usually the institutional projects are the ones that seem to have start up during these kinds of recessions. It seems odd, but they're the ones that actually people are actually managing their money in ways where they actually giving money during those periods to institutions. That is absolutely what has sustained us through every single recession is institutional work.

GRACE LA: Oh, that's interesting because you would have thought that institutional work, given its philanthropic nature might have actually made people more restricted in this time period, but you're finding that typology is steadfast. Rahul?

RAHUL MEHROTRA: Grace, can I just jump in?

GRACE LA: Please, Rahul.

RAHUL MEHROTRA: I mean, another way to look at it does not pose the question through type, but through the forms of patronage and that sort of spectrum. So patronage, I mean, I think, institutional patrons, foundations, private developers who are much more sensitive to what I call the impatience of capital but also communities.

And when we talk about self-initiated projects, I think that's another constituency. So, I mean, another way to look at the landscape is through forms of patronage.

GRACE LA: Yes, that's an excellent thought.

PRESENTER 5: I'll just add one thing to that. I think that in a way that the projects that you want to do are already right in front of you. It's the things that you're interested in, and those are the discussions that you will be having with people if it's around environment or around community and housing.

You will be involved in those things in a non-project way, perhaps, but that is exactly where the projects that you want to do are going to come from. It's your interests and being involved in those interests that are connecting you to people who are not just only other architects, but people in those fields.

PRESENTER 6: I just want to add really quickly on the question of like type. I think that obviously something important also to acknowledge is that your day job let's just say doesn't necessarily constitute your entire body of work.

And frankly like it's not exactly everything in many ways. So I think that it's important to take into account is that in times of disruption, certain typologies do press on like you'll see health, incredibly 15-year long projects will continue. That may or may not be your gem.

But just because you may be working somewhere that is doing projects like that, doesn't mean you can't also be doing things on the side with that are actually really to Paul's point really are rooted in your north star or your longer term project.

And I think that that's totally out there, and you're out all at an age where it will never be easier to do. It'll never get easier to do that. And frankly, now you have more energy than you ever will. And like, if you have interest, if you have passions, if you have certain problems you want to address, regardless of where you are working and what's bringing in the money, find ways to continue pushing that.

And I'll just add, going back to the question of friends, and I'm using that as a catch all, it can be very difficult to sustain that on your own outside of an office if you have your office. And it's why it's really if you're working in a practice to push another agenda, if you can have collaborators, kind of working outside of that practice is that your parallel practice it will be easier.

And assembling that group of people who are ideally better at the things you're good at, the things you're not good at, will really help you pushing an agenda that might exist in parallel or outside of what's actually paying the bills.

GRACE LA: That's very helpful.

PRESENTER 7: So I just want to pick up something that I want to acknowledge. I think this is it's tough, and we want to say be positive. But I can imagine how people really worrying right now.

And I want to just listen. I feel like I mean, I'm upset right now about things happening in the office. So I sometimes think it's a good idea to just say, I'm getting slammed. You got to just--

PRESENTER 1: We can't deny that.

PRESENTER 7: And I'm with you with the agony of concern about it. The one thing I would say is give yourself a little bit of a break. I mean, the pressure to do and achieve. We all are going to do it.

One of the things that's interesting is to take a step aside, do stuff you really want to do in your own work also while this is happening and think, as Grace characterizes it, in a scrappy way, which is how I think Paul is, if I may say, also like that.

And know that two years down or so it's going to-- this stuff this is going to break. So, you're going to do something ingenious. And you also can spend some time doing things you really want to. But I'm not trying to paint a rosy picture. I'm not a rosy picture painting kind of person. I don't think it's useful to do that anyway. I think go ahead and confront the toughness you're in. Everybody's in it together. Anyway, I just wanted to--

GRACE LA: Yeah, I know that-- I think that's a very important reminder.

JEFFRY BURCHARD: Can I add one thing? Sorry.

GRACE LA: Yeah. Please quickly because we have seven other questions.

JEFFRY BURCHARD: But I feel-- I mean, this conversation is so incredible. I just want to put also on the other side of Jacob's comment and agree with Scott about the take some time or the focus.

The first three years that I was at Machado Silvetti, I did, I think, 14 competitions on the side. And it wasn't until I fully dedicated myself to the work in the office that I truly made a difference in the office and began to grow and have opportunity there.

And I think it was because my time and my energy was split, and I found actually that-- and I think it's true now, even more so-- that firms are clamoring for talented thinking, articulate, young architects. They want you.

And you all have an incredible kind of opportunity, actually, to find a place in an office and actually push an office that has the means and the resources to guarantee a certain kind of, let's say, security.

PRESENTER 8: Jeffry, was it good that you had your own separate moonlighting going on in your mind or you were actually kind of moonlighting?

JEFFRY BURCHARD: I think it was good in a one way until I realized that it wasn't. I think my moonlighting was not letting me see the opportunities at hand. And I then took the extra hours that I was putting in work, and I developed new skills, and I pushed certain aspects of the office further than they could have gone otherwise. And I think it paid off.

GRACE LA: That's very interesting this idea of being extremely mindful and focused even on, let's say, the smallest of the tasks or what even might seem banal at the moment. That is very key thing in life as well.

Could you describe how it is different before and after a recession and be very specific? And please don't couch it in just terms of your personal stories. Can you be very specific about how you changed, or how your practice might have changed its process before and after the recession? The students are asking you to be quite precise here without your huge personal stories, if you can.

PRESENTER 9: I mean, I would just a quick thing to share. I think our scope of services have expanded because before the recession, we were basically architects for hire. But I think when the recession happened, what we did was we did a lot of pro bono work like when Mack talked about doing work for the museum.

We started doing work that was we do feasibility studies. We do entitlement. Work that are not about design, but it was about relationship building. Like Rahul said, how do you expand your network? And we were also expanding our networks beyond friends but also potential clients.

So over this time, we have developed relationships with that. And then afterwards, I think, our scope of practice has expanded, and we sometimes come in to do the entire package for the client.

PRESENTER 10: And I think this issue of looking, I mean, Rahul brought this up, but looking to the client type also and being very strategic about diversifying by client type and pinpointing public clients in particular, because in times like this when there's public need, we're specifically seeing an incredible amount of funding start to boil up in philanthropic and public sectors because there's just there's frankly just so much need there.

So taking the skills and in a way, funneling them and channeling them such that you can start to capture that and contribute in that way also feels productive.

GRACE LA: Yeah, thank you. I have a very specific question to Eric Howeler from the students. What is the change in mentality required of you as you moved from one type of office to another and then from one project type to another having gone from a KPF world to a DSR world to your own office? Can you be specific about the change in mentality because those are very different kinds of practices?

ERIC HOWELER: Sure. I mean, KPF you learn how to work with a team. You learn how to guide a large team. It doesn't develop you as a designer necessarily, a broad designer, because there's someone helping you write contracts, and there's someone sending invoices.

Diller Scofidio is a smaller firm. You're doing everything. You're hiring contractors. You're talking to the client. So I think going to a place where you can have the most responsibility is super important, a place that really challenges you, where you're destabilized. You're uncomfortable.

Diller Scofidio is particularly uncomfortable, but you learn incredible skills there-- resiliency. When I started my own firm, I had a better sense of how to run a firm, and I knew exactly what kind of firm I didn't want to have. So you can design your firm.

I was going to say something about the last question is like know what your skills are, because you have skills you may not know you have. And a quick example is with this COVID thing everyone's worried about what can we do, and we can't seem to do anything.

On the other hand, have skills that are useful. And so in the background there's a swing that we did a few years ago. We worked with plastics fabricators, and then all these doctors are looking for these plastic insulation hoods for patients.

And we said, let's make some. So we talked to people that we knew in the plastics fabrication industry, a company called Polyfab that made our swings. And we started designing these patient isolation hoods that are in desperate need right now.

And so just to think about what's needed now and how we can contribute, it's an incredibly helpless feeling that we can't do anything. On the other hand, we can because we have skills. We know material. We know fabricators. And if we can connect to the right people, we can actually make a difference.

So I think that's a kind of positive thing to think about what can we do now and what skills do we have now. And it's pro bono work, but it feels like we can contribute something meaningful with the material and fabrication knowledge that we have.

GRACE LA: Thank you. I think there's an incredibly interesting general question. Are any of you hiring? There are like 50 people asking that question. I'm going to let you guys answer that, but I think that's an important one that people want to know is there work, especially in different parts of the world, because you're probably not only you have projects in different parts of the world. So could you talk about that? Where is work coming from geographically, and if you are hiring, please say so?

ERIC HOWELER: I think hiring is like investing. You need to hire all the time when the market is good and when the market's bad. So even in a low market, I think we still need to hire.

And so I'm not sure if we're hiring specifically, but I'd like the idea of hiring continuously, sort of building the team continuously, not just hiring when the market's good. But there's incredible talent, and so we like to build teams all the time.

GRACE LA: Lyndon, can you share something with us from your neck of the woods in Shanghai?

LYNDON NERI: Actually, it's interesting that you guys should be talking about hiring, because during this pandemic period, we were really ready to lay off people for the first time in our 14 year practice. And that was very difficult for me and Rosanna. So we actually had a list of people that we thought, unfortunately, we had to let go.

But to our surprise, obviously China started this whole pandemic started earlier, a lot earlier. And to our surprise, many people started planning when they were in quarantine lockdown. They couldn't go anywhere. Projects couldn't move forward. All of a sudden, our requests for qualification went up 40%

So we were shocked. We were ready to. We had this plan B to let people go, but then all of a sudden, we are swamped with we lost projects as well. Don't get me wrong, we lost three projects, some international and two local and one international project, but we just signed on for new projects last week.

And there are a lot more granting. They're smaller projects, they're not as large, so we can't be as selective now. We are actually as people were saying, I was just writing to my managing director saying we might have to change the fee structure that we had proposed yesterday, because we were quite tough about making sure that we want to maintain a number.

I just text him just now saying, maybe we want to change that because I'm listening to everyone here, but we are hiring. Actually, we are hiring. But the problem is, how do you get here. That's the challenge. I think China is closed to all foreigners now.

So it's very difficult for people to come. We actually have made commitments to four interns, actually 4 from the GSD and one from Yale. But the problem is they can't come for the summer, or at least not for the closed borders are a critical issue.

So we're trying to figure out a creative way, Grace to have them work over the summer. I don't know how that's going to work, because especially for internship, it's critical to be in the office.

GRACE LA: John Wang, is there a particular last question that's coming in that either you want to interface with me on or?

JOHN WANG: Yeah, I think one other question that some people have asked is, if there are thoughts or of particular inspirations that really kind of carried the speakers through the various recessions that they have experienced in the past. And as a closing word, we make that with everyone.

PRESENTER 11: Maybe I'll jump in on that, John. I think when I was thinking about what Paul was talking about, I think, the muscle of humility. I think whether it be positive or negative we don't want to paint a rosy picture.

But I think it's important for us as architects, especially graduating from the GSD, where you think you're on the top of the world, and you think you're the best, have the perspective, have a sense of humility going to the work field. And by doing this, you will allow many different opportunities to come to you, to speak to you.

And so you don't have this predetermined attitude of what a GSD architect should be. By doing this, I think you'll actually find yourself in the process. I know it's a little abstract, but I think all of you will find this to be helpful if you have that spirit of humility.

PRESENTER 12: I definitely second that. We are servants of society. We're not masters of the universe at this point. We need to understand how to serve our communities and society at this particular point.

RAHUL MEHROTRA: I could add to that. Of course, just building on it, but also, I think the idea of generosity, of what we can give. I mean, I think this is a moment of not asking what we can get, and of course, one has to make a balance to survive. But I think being generous is a way that you'll gain back from it at some point.

GRACE LA: Those are beautiful thoughts. Humility and generosity two sides of the same coin. Wow. It's been incredible to have you all here, and I echo everyone's thoughts about how wonderful it is to see your faces. There's a lot to talk about.

I can almost imagine this being a series where we just are able to talk in this very informal way. It's incredibly useful. It brings down to Earth so many very important questions that I think our shared experiences are giving us an opportunity to see a breadth across many different types of practices and geographic locations and emphases.

And I'm just grateful to all our participants today to have shared such a wealth of knowledge. Students, you are in this incredibly interesting moment. Please do reach out to us. We are here for you. We are excited, very excited to hear your questions and to engage you in these kinds of conversations.

These are important questions to have, and you do have a network. Please remember that you have a network both all of us here close at hand, but also out there alums of our school that are really interested and eager to help you navigate this unprecedented moment.

Thank you all so much for joining us and please stay in touch. Please be well. Please stay safe. And let's do this again soon. I have this brewing in my head for another round two. Thank you. And thank you faculty so much. Thank you. I really appreciate you spending the morning with us.

GRACE LA: I'm Grace La, and you've been listening to Talking Practice from the Practice Forum of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was recorded over Zoom and edited by Maggie Janik. Research, support, and organization for this special roundtable event was provided by John Wang. To hear other episodes in this series, and to find out more about programs and events at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, visit us online at gsd.havard.edu. Thanks for listening.