

Developing your own Niche Market

Architects are noted as among the world's best problem solvers. When the electronics industry exploded around the world, the people who created the best solutions did not usurp the title "engineer," "politician," or "doctor." They claimed to be "architects" of a software program, gaming system or computer design.

If architects want, they can engineer their own niche market with more surgical precision and political aplomb than almost any professional.

Using the same problem solving processes and techniques they use to design buildings, architects can carve themselves a niche market...if they are willing to put on a developers hat.

Chicago currently hosts many architect/developers. James Loewenberg, AIA, David Hovey, FAIA, George Pappageorge, FAIA, and Peter Langdon, FAIA, are just a few AIA Chicago members who have demonstrated success at establishing their own market niches, (See Focus Dec. 2005.)

But a consistent wave of new architects carve out market niches by becoming their own clients.

Robert Douglass, AIA, president of Lake Effect Architects, Lake Bluff, Illinois, says, "It goes back to the creative problem solving that is the foundation of our profession." If you want to specialize in a market, create one.

"Architects are in a position to improvise within a market in a way that responds to whatever the demand is," says Douglass. Lake Effect Architects recently converted a downtown Lake Bluff building into 5,000 square feet of office space. He then won the request for proposal to create an all-new 32,000 square retail/office building on an adjacent parcel.

"Large developers typically don't look at small-scale, in-fill commercial buildings like these. But local residents who don't need to commute into the city still want to leave their house and enjoy a high-end work space," Douglass says. Knowing the

market and that having offices near Lake Bluff's train station is a strong selling point that helped Douglass create his own niche.

In addition to providing strategic market support for other architects, Vertex Graphics also develops its own single-family homes. Firm principal, Alphonso Peluso, AIA, says, "Our ultimate goal is to spread the idea that architecture is important even in suburban areas where builders typically do not gain the benefit of high-quality design." Even in the land where McMansions are seen as acceptable, it is possible to make a statement – and establish a niche.

The company's contemporary homes have sold faster than their traditional neighbors, according to Peluso's partner, John Manaves, who teaches at University of Illinois Chicago graduate architecture program.

The firm is also creating a sub-niche. It's next home is on track to be the first Illinois single-family residence with a LEED for Homes Platinum rating. When home buyers see their homes have retained decades-old trees, have beautiful metal roofs with life expectancy of more than 50 years, include windows located for cross ventilation and other easily identifiable "green" features, they instinctively know the advantages of an architect-designed home. However, the company creates a sales sheet that spells out the cost saving benefits of their homes.

In fairness, Lake Effects' commercial projects have sustainable design elements to them also. Douglass says, "It is hard to make it on architecture alone. Diversifying and keeping a broad base puts you in a position to respond to any economic or market demands." And there are few better positions to be in than to be your own client with an environmentally – and economically – sustainable mission. ■

277 Pheasant Lane in Bloomingdale, Ill. by Vertex Graphics

Factors contributing to potential LEED for a home's Platinum Rating:

- Zero waste design
- 1700 gallon rain harvest system
- 1.5 kilo-watt solar photo-voltaic system
- Tankless water heaters
- Whole house radiant in floor heating system
- Energy Star lighting and appliances
- Drought tolerant landscape design
- Indoor atmosphere quality monitoring
- Education for homeowners



Image courtesy of Vertex Graphics