

Architects build on community base

Pro bono work for local groups leads to paying projects for Magnusson

BY KERRY MURTHA

Ten years ago, when residents of the Melrose Park section of the South Bronx found out that the city wanted to raze and rebuild a swath of their neighborhood, they fought back with the help of an odd ally: a small architectural firm called Magnusson Architecture and Planning.

MAP helped them draft an alternative urban renewal plan that was much less disruptive for the area's 6,000 residents and 240 stores.

"They were able to take our vision and put it into a language understood by city planners and engineers," says Yolanda Garcia, executive director of We Stay/Nos Quedamos, a neighborhood group. Better yet, MAP provided its expertise for free, charging only when proposals were turned into hard architectural plans. Last year, those plans yielded 35 new three-family town houses and a seven-story apartment building. More housing units are now on the way, all designed by MAP.

Few firms nurture new clients as carefully, much less as long. In a sense, the firm's two founders, Magnus

and Petr Stand, have pioneered a different sort of business model. They grow their own projects by working with community groups, initially on a pro bono basis. The payoff can come months or even years later, when MAP gets the nod-at a premium price-to be the project designer.

Growth spurt

Now, as many architectural firms are laying off designers, MAP is growing, courtesy of its pipeline of business. In fact, in the last year it has doubled its staff to 20. Revenues last year hit \$3 million on a business that is now 90% based on work with community groups and nonprofit organizations. This year, revenues are expected to grow by more than 30%, based just on MAP's existing backlog of business.

The founders trace their success back to the late 1980s, when they saw an opportunity in all the government money that was beginning to flow into rebuilding the South Bronx. At that point, the two men began to study the needs of community groups looking to revive their neighborhoods. At the same time, Messrs. Magnusson and Stand began to work with city officials to learn how community members could gain control of vacant land, secure financing and begin development.

After a while, says Mr. Stand, "people began to notice that we



A MAGNUSSON PROJECT in the Bronx.

working with community groups in Brooklyn to redevelop the former Rheingold brewery site in Bushwick, and in Staten Island to build a senior housing complex.

MAP's excellent grassroots connections have also made the firm an attractive partner for developers. "Developers know that before they can build, there will need to be some community group participation," says Mr. Magnusson. He notes that active support from local groups can greatly speed up the development process.

weren't just another group of architects."

Rick Bell, executive director of the New York chapter of the Architectural Institute of America, notes that MAP's approach has helped it create its own niche. "They're not limiting themselves to the traditional architectural role," says Mr. Bell.

In fact, MAP's architects may spend one or even two years helping draw up proposals, doing zoning and feasibility studies, and even helping clients secure land.

"We're in on the ground floor," says Mr. Magnusson.

While MAP's predevelopment services are free, the firm makes up for that bread laid upon the water by charging a premium of around 20% once the proposal becomes effective. In addition to its projects in the Bronx, MAP is currently

In on ground level

"(MAP's) expertise on the ground-floor level stuff is very helpful to us," says Ron Moelis, a principal at L&M Equities in Larchmont, N.Y., a developer who has worked on a handful of projects with the architectural firm.

Ultimately, the success or failure of MAP's approach, though, rests on what it can deliver for communities like Melrose Park in the Bronx. There, Ms. Garcia gives a lot of credit to MAP for new housing and four acres of parkland nearby.

"Most architects and builders will create something and say, 'Live in it, like it or not,'" she says. "But Mr. Magnusson and Mr. Stand spent years figuring out how we wanted to live." ■

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reprinted from Crain's New York Business