

# Web-Site Design for Architecture Firms

Contributed by the AIA Knowledge Resources Staff

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## SUMMARY

Paul Petrunia founder of Archinect.com and owner of ExtraMedium Inc, presented his criteria for a great architecture Web site at the 2007 Full Spectrum Conference, sponsored by the AIA Custom Residential Architects Network (CRAN), in Chicago on October 20, 2007.

## WHY DO ARCHITECTS NEED WEB SITES?

Architects need Web sites to create and control their online brand identity. When people can research your firm through any Web browser, why not control the information they read? A Web site helps you tell people what *you* want them to know.

Many people fear that Web-site design will consume too much time, creativity, and billable hours. It does not need to be a huge project, however; the first step is simply to get online. Create a pageholder with a unique domain address if you do not already have one. Start with a one-page layout with an image of your work that conveys your design aesthetic and show your contact information—the most common reason people look up a Web site.

Before taking the next step—development—it is important to define the target audience, and these are the most common ones for an architecture firm:

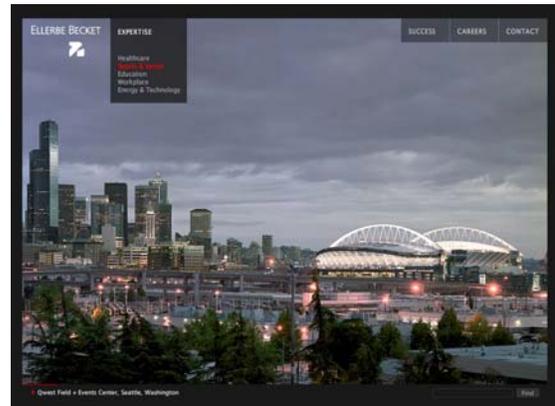
**Potential employees.** If you use your Web site as a recruitment tool, as many firms do, be sure to state your preferred format for application materials and to whom they should be sent.

**Potential clients.** Specify the type of industry you serve. Does your firm have any specialties or areas of concentration that set you apart?

**Press.** Write simply and succinctly, whether about the firm or a project, so the press can repurpose the information when needed.

## EIGHT STEPS TO CREATING A WEB SITE

Creating a Web site can be an enjoyable and educational experience for firm owners and employees. The process may take a week or a year—it all depends on firm feedback and the level



of collaboration between the Web designer and architecture firm. ExtraMedium designed the screenshot above for a redesigned Web site for international architecture firm Ellerbe Becket. This site represents a successful collaboration between firm and web designer.

1. **Define the goals of your Web site.** What do you want the site to say or do? Communicate how your firm is different.
2. **Hire an experienced Web designer.** It is not a good idea to develop a Web site in-house. Experienced designers know the current trends and the latest Web tools. Consider using a Web designer who has experience with architecture firm sites.
3. **Collaborate with the Web designer.** The length of time to create a Web site varies based on the client-designer relationship.
4. **Make your Web site accessible and consistent.** Make sure it is accessible across all platforms and browsers such as Firefox, Explorer, and Safari.
5. **Don't give away everything on your Web site.** The site should act as a teaser. After all, the principals can sell the firm's work better than any Web site can. Highlight the most recent and relevant projects, but don't show all of them. Represent projects through different levels of

presentation. Some can be viewed as case studies, some as project descriptions, or you can include a project list to show the amount of completed work.

6. **Don't let the design of the Web site overshadow the content.** It is an exciting process, but remember: People want information about the firm and don't want to look at a fancy, intricate Web site.
7. **Use technology appropriately.** Don't rely on a Flash-based Web site. Flash has great potential when used appropriately—on microsites or within HTML Web sites—but it is overused and often inappropriately used. The downside to Flash is that it does not create unique URLs, so it is difficult to direct someone to a specific location on your Web site through a link.
8. **Take advantage of presentation material that you already own.** High-quality photography is critical; better photos make for a better Web site. Use images from past competition entries or publications.

## BEYOND THE BASICS

Web-site development takes an average of about three to six months, but once the site goes live, the process has just begun. Keep the site active to see how people are using it, and evaluate what is successful and what is not. Change it based on usage. Think of it as an organic process. Create a sustainable simple site and keep it open for evolution and change as you grow.

To create a more robust or innovative site, use any or all of these dynamic Web tools:

- A content management system (CMS) to keep the Web site fresh with current content
- A blog that shows your expertise on a topic
- Really simple syndication (RSS) feeds
- A web-based video
- An online mailing list

More advanced tools can be used to complement your firm's identity. A firm that focuses on innovative material uses and leading technologies may want to develop a site with less conventional means to set themselves apart. Overall, it is important that a Web presence exist, even in a simple static page, and be sure the Web page or site is aligned with the firm's vision and values.

## About the Presenter

Paul Petrunia is the founder of Archinect.com and president and creative director of ExtraMedium Inc., a Los Angeles-based Web design and development studio. He studied architecture at the University of Oregon and SCI-Arc, where he expanded his knowledge of environmental design, graphic Web design and development, and experimental architecture. He can be reached at [paul@extramediuminc.com](mailto:paul@extramediuminc.com).

## RESOURCES

### More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 07.01.13 Marketing hat Sets Your Firm Apart
- 07.03.04 Public Relations for Residential Architects
- 07.01.03 Marketing Intelligence: Know Your Clients

### For More Information on This Topic

See also "Public Relations" by Susan Liane Kennedy, in *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 7, page 167, and "Marketing Design Services with the Internet" by Elena Marcheso Moreno, in *Update 2005* to the *Handbook*, page 27.

See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at [bookstore@aia.org](mailto:bookstore@aia.org).



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## Key Terms

- Practice
- Marketing
- Web site