

## Comments from Recent Startups

Contributed by the AIA Knowledge Resources staff

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### SUMMARY

With no firm start-up checklist to follow, advice from peers who have gone before may be the best way to gain the knowledge needed to start your own firm. In this Best Practice, the AIA Knowledge Resources staff has compiled the thoughts of three architects who recently started their own firms to share with AIA members considering taking this momentous step. The comments below have been synthesized in the Best Practice “Considering Your Own Firm?”, found [here](#).

### LEFTARC

Leslie Fitzpatrick Tyrone, AIA, LEED AP, started her multidisciplinary firm, LeftArc, weeks after her 30th birthday. She was determined to become the type of architect she had always envisioned she would be, even if that meant taking a leap of faith.

*AIA: When did you start your firm?*

Leslie Tyrone: Spring 2005.

*AIA: How many years of experience did you have when you branched out on your own?*

Tyrone: After graduate school, I worked for five years before going out on my own—four years with large firms, one year with a small firm.

*AIA: Was there a defining moment that led you to leave your old practice? If so, what was it?*

Tyrone: The decision to start my own firm was really a two- or three-step process. After graduate school, the day-to-day realities of working at a large firm changed my focus. I did not really understand—beyond licensure—what my goals should be. Did I want to be a project manager? Did I want to work part-time like other women in the firm so I could spend time with a family? Did I think that one day I would be a principal at a large firm? More importantly, did the principals at this firm think I would make a good leader? I was really enjoying my work at the firm, and I had a wonderful relationship with my mentor there. However, the landscape had shifted so much from school to practice that my original ideas about what it meant to be an

architect—and what kind of architect I wanted to be—had changed dramatically.

One spring, over the course of a few months, I realized I had abandoned some of my original career aspirations. I found that despite enjoying my work and my work environment, I was profoundly disappointed. I took it upon myself to reevaluate my 10-year plan and to figure out how to achieve it. I knew I wanted more control over my practice. I wanted to teach, write, and design and to have my own firm. Around the same time, an architect whose work I admired asked me to join her in practice. I thought, “Aha, the missing link, small firm experience.” After working with her, the goal of having my own firm seemed more attainable.

After a year, the owner of the small firm downsized, leaving me a pretty stark choice: Start my own practice (immediately) or return to the large firm I had left the previous spring. The timing was not perfect. Ideally, I would have wanted more small-firm experience and more total years experience before starting my own firm, but I felt I owed it to myself to give it a try.

*AIA: Are there some aspects of ownership you did not expect/plan for?*

Tyrone: There are many aspects of ownership I did not plan for. “You don’t know what you don’t know,” they say. And there was plenty I didn’t know about running an architecture practice.

I think the hardest thing at first was feeling disconnected from other architects. Being a sole practitioner is a potentially isolating experience. To combat this, I seek out volunteer opportunities in the community that seem related to my talents and participate in AIA events relevant to a small practice. I also started an online list-serve for small practitioners in my area.

The other main thing about ownership I did not expect was how much of my time would be spent running the business of the firm. Bookkeeping, filing, meetings, marketing—all of these tasks take up an extraordinary amount of time.

*AIA: If you could recommend three things a potential start-up owner needs to have in place before making the leap, what would they be?*

1. A project. You really just need one, and the motivation to find others.
2. A backup plan. You should know before starting your firm what your monthly bottom line is going to be, both professionally and personally. Make sure you can pay your power bill, your health insurance, and your student loans before hiring employees and taking out loans for software and equipment.
3. Tools to succeed. Give yourself a chance to make it. Know the minimum tools you will need to be productive, and what they cost. In some cases, you only need a computer and a CAD package. In others, an office, employees, a receptionist, a 3D package, several CAD packages, and a good large-format printer. Give yourself the opportunity to succeed by having those tools in place in the first few months, even if you must make sacrifices to acquire them.

*AIA: If you could offer one piece of advice to those considering starting their own firm what would it be?*

Know yourself. If you are risk-averse, this might not be the best use of your professional energies. Owning your own company has many benefits, but they come with great responsibility. Some people prefer structure; others can handle a little chaos. This basic understanding of what you can (and more importantly, cannot) handle will give you the courage to continue when you encounter obstacles.

Once you have made the leap, try very hard not to second-guess yourself. Staying at a firm has its benefits: Your days are somewhat predictable, you get benefits and a paycheck, projects come to you, you get the 4<sup>th</sup> of July off, and your insurance is paid for. Owning your own firm also has benefits, though: You can make your own schedule; investigate whatever you are interested in; strive for the top in the absence of a salary ceiling; and define your own practice in a way that includes anything you can think of, including teaching, entering competitions, writing, designing, animation, and building. For me, these benefits were more desirable than anything a full-time position could offer.

### **OPA DESIGN STUDIO**

Stephen Oliver, AIA, LEED AP, president-elect of AIA Austin, very recently ventured out on his own to start his practice, OPA Design Studio. Two months into the process, he can see a different future for

himself as an employer and can offer advice to those curious about firm ownership, with a keen eye on the early stages of the process.

*AIA: When did you start your firm?*

Steve Oliver: January 1, 2008, was officially the first day of business for my new practice. However, I was preparing myself in various ways during the previous 12 months. I really needed a good two to three weeks of time to reflect, brainstorm, and organize my thoughts before finally setting the wheels in motion. December 2007 became that time, and it certainly made for a memorable holiday season.

*AIA: How many years of experience did you have when you branched out on your own?*

Oliver: I had worked for three very different firms over the last nine years, since graduating from the University of Texas. Being exposed to a range of business environments, management styles, and company visions helped shape my thoughts of what I wanted to create in a business with respect to firm culture, mission, projects and service.

*AIA: Was there a defining moment that led you to leave your old practice? If so, what was it?*

Oliver: There was no true defining moment that I can recall. I do know that when you believe in yourself and you love what you do, it really becomes a natural decision to want to create an opportunity that reflects your values, goals, and effort. The shape the opportunity would take had gradually shifted for me over the last few years as I gained experience and explored potential avenues for my own growth.

I considered waiting to start a company until I found a complementary partner, but ultimately decided I wouldn't let that drive the decision. I was willing to do it on my own and build from there. As the vision for my firm came into focus, it was important to me not to stray from my own goals while respecting the vision of my previous firm. I understood that my goals shouldn't push my former partners to attempt to reshape their practice outside their comfort zone. Once I reached that internal threshold, of knowing what I wanted to do and whether it could work in the previous firm, the mental dominoes started to fall, pointing the way for the timing of my decision to go out on my own.

*AIA: Are there some aspects of ownership you did not expect/plan for?*

Oliver: I received plenty of advice from friends that couldn't have been more accurate. They all told me that my whole day would be taken up with marketing myself, administrative tasks, basically running the

business, and at the end of the day there wouldn't be one billable hour. That's when the kids go to bed, and you squeeze in the next eight-hour day. Granted not every day is like that, but it happens more than I wish. At least for now, as a one-person firm, this is part of the evolution and the sweat that goes into building a business. I've never had banker's hours so the picture looks familiar, but the risks and rewards are all the more apparent and certainly more personal.

*AIA: If you could recommend three things a potential start-up owner needs to have in place before making the leap, what would they be?*

Oliver: It's critical to understand what you want, where you want to go, and how you think you're going to get there. Nonetheless, some significant factors have helped get me going successfully, even in these very early steps of my practice:

1. A close circle of friends, family, and peers for support. Whether it was conscious or not, I have been fortunate to have a core group of friends who have given me everything from great advice and legal services to marketing help. Most importantly, they have opened doors to help me generate new business. Without these people, I'm sure that although I believe in the steps I've taken, there would have been a few more stumbles along the way.
2. Startup capital. I'm sure there is a wide range of advice about the amount you should have in the bank before making the leap, and rarely is it enough. However, the amount available will dictate a good portion of your start-up strategy. Stick to your plan, and try not to overextend yourself as everything starts to look like a golden opportunity or something you must have. If you're starting with some projects already in hand, there is less pressure to have investment capital, but it sure helps.
3. Identify a place you can build a working routine around. Having a smaller home and a family with two kids, I didn't feel I had the luxury of working out of my house to keep the initial overhead expenses down. I made the decision early in my organizing efforts to find a small space I could sublease with a short-term contract from an industry peer, not necessarily an architect. It gives me a place to hang my sign and create the image of the business while focusing on work. It also gave me the opportunity for a synergistic relationship with the land planner I'm leasing from, who allows me to

use his printing equipment, saving me that initial investment.

*AIA: If you could offer one piece of advice to those considering starting their own firm, what would it be?*

Oliver: On my first day as OPA Design Studio, I turned down my first project, long before any sizable projects were in hand. Not all work takes you closer to what you're trying to achieve; some projects push your goals further over the horizon. The temptation to take on any project when you get going is hard to ignore because most likely your cash flow is tight. However, I know that because I was willing to say no to some early prospective clients, I am now able to invest my time in work that will grow the company toward my goals. If I hadn't refused that early job, I would have had to turn down work that better meets my goals or hire staff earlier than I had planned.

Once you've identified your plan for growth, don't bury it under drawings. Keep it close and revisit it often.

#### **LINDA REEDER, LLC**

Linda Reeder, AIA, LEED AP, started her sole proprietorship, Linda Reeder Architecture, LLC, in 2005. She specializes in residential renovations and additions and serves as a consultant to architecture firms that focus on educational and institutional work.

*AIA: When did you start your firm?*

Linda Reeder: January 2005.

*AIA: How many years of experience did you have when you branched out on your own?*

Reeder: Eight years.

*AIA: Was there a defining moment that led you to leave your old practice? If so, what was it?*

Reeder: I started my own firm more out of a desire to make a change—and not just to a different employer—than a desire to have my own practice.

*AIA: Are there some aspects of ownership you did not expect/plan for?*

Reeder: I am much happier than I expected; the independence more than makes up for any financial uncertainties.

*AIA: If you could recommend three things a potential start-up owner needs to have in place before making the leap, what would they be?*

Reeder: (1) For sole practitioners, self-discipline and an ability to work alone effectively; (2) a supportive

spouse or significant other; and (3) a plan for finding work.

*AIA: If you could offer one piece of advice to those considering starting their own firm what would it be?*

Reeder: Listen to your gut about whether this is the right choice and the right time. If you are hesitating because you are concerned about failing, evaluate your chances of failure and what impact that failure would have on your career and personal life. Weigh that possibility against the option of never taking the risk or deferring it for another time, recognizing that that time might not come.

## RESOURCES

### More Best Practices

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

- 04.01.01 Starting a Firm: Essential Resources
- 04.01.02 Starting a Firm: Lessons from Failure
- 04.01.03 Seven Tips for Emerging Firms

### For More Information on This Topic

See “Starting an Architecture Firm” by Elena Marcheso Moreno in the 14th edition of *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, Chapter 4, page 82. See also “Starting Out: New Design Firms That Succeed” by Elena Marcheso Moreno in the 2006 Update to the *AHPP*, page 19.



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
- Business planning
- Firm start-up