

2011 ARCHITECT 50

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Number 5: Ann Beha Architects

By: Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson



Research is at the heart of everything that Ann Beha Architects (ABA) does. The Boston-based firm has helmed major historic restoration and expansion projects for clients in the arts, education, and civic realms since it was founded in the 1980s. Today, ABA is a 35-person team respected for its sensitivity to the past and its progressive vision of the future. The firm is known for dusting off forgotten buildings and marshalling them into the present day through a process rooted in understanding the structure's past, its relationship to the community, and the specific needs of the client.

Founder and principal Ann Beha, FAIA, has a background in historic preservation, as do longtime principals Pamela Hawkes, FAIA, and Thomas Hotaling, AIA. "Our job is finding a contemporary voice within a historic center," Beha says.

The architects achieve this goal through intensive study of the site and the structure. Take the design for the University of Pennsylvania's Music Building led by the newest ABA principal, Philip Chen, AIA. Constructed in 1892, the building is on

Philadelphia's Register of Historic Places, but it was poorly suited for a contemporary music program. Chen and his team carefully restored the original building while doubling the space available to programming through a contemporary addition that bolsters the original structure.

It became Penn's first LEED Gold project. But it is the program, according to Chen, that makes it particularly sustainable. "One of our approaches when dealing with an existing structure is to infuse it with a vital program that makes it well used. That prolongs the life of any building," he says.

The firm has earned AIA Honor Awards from the New York and New Jersey chapters as well as recognition for their significant contributions to historic preservation from the Boston Society of Architects and the Andover Architectural Society. (They also earned a nod in ARCHITECT's Annual Design Review for their transformation of the Cambridge Public Library.)

This work isn't always easy, and it often requires the firm to act as advocates as well as architects. "In the U.S., people have felt that to do an addition or a renovation of a historic building, you had to defer to the historic building," says Hawkes. "We see our work as part of a continuum of this history and we feel strongly that the way to honor our historic resources best is not to mimic them, but to work in a conversation where each era is robustly reflected."

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The ARCHITECT 50

Our third-annual ranking of American architecture firms judges them on three factors: profitability, sustainable ethos, and design quality. By looking at the whole picture, we're able to honor not the biggest, but the best.

By: Amanda Kolson Hurley, Research by Karlin Associates



Credit: Joe Pugliese

So, is it getting any better? In the third year of the ARCHITECT 50 ranking, signs of a rebound glimmer on the horizon. March was the fifth consecutive month in which the Architecture Billings Index showed positive (albeit very modest) growth, and inquiries to firms regarding new projects are strong. If most U.S. architecture firms are not thriving, at least some of them—25 percent, the AIA estimates—have gotten a boost through projects stemming from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

The 2011 ARCHITECT 50—based on a composite assessment of a firm's profitability, sustainable ethos, and design ability—shows that A and A/E firms, large and small, *can* do well in this economy. By our calculations, the most profitable firms in 2010 include heavyweights such as Fentress Architects, NBBJ, and Gensler, but also Princeton, N.J.'s smaller Ikon.5 Architects. If you still need proof that smart business strategy and careful financial management can make or break any design enterprise, look no further.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this year's ranking is how many of the top firms are focused on the higher-education market. Aren't we always hearing about colleges and universities feeling the pinch? Yes, says management consultant Ray Kogan, AIA, but there are other factors at work. Higher-education institutions "are in their own competitive market as they try hard to attract more students to make up for their other revenue shortfalls."

Ever-tighter public budgets, healthcare reform, and continued sluggishness in commercial construction leave much unclear about the future, so it's difficult to say which markets might be on the rise. Then again, that means the field is wide open for our 2012 ranking. Wherever you are based, and whatever kind of work you do, why not enter next year?

Architect 50: 1-10 : Architect Magazine

RANK	FIRM
	Perkins+Will • Chicago • Employees: 900 or more
1	From second place last year, Perkins+Will climbed to the top spot thanks to strong revenue, true-green commitment, and a bumper crop of awards in 2010 (five bestowed by AIA Miami alone). SCORING: Net revenue per employee: 1194; Sustainable practices: 1731; Awards: 2115
	Smithgroup • Detroit • Employees: 500–899
2	SmithGroup has weathered the recession in great form by staying focused on core markets—and upping the ante design-wise, winning a slew of AIA state and ASLA honors. Net revenue per employee: 1158; Sustainable practices: 938; Awards: 2732
	William Rawn Associates • Boston • Employees: 10–49
3	The New England practice that William Rawn, FAIA, built is back in our top five, after its number-one showing in 2009. Having a 100-percent LEED accreditation rate among its staff certainly helped. Net revenue per employee: 1785; Sustainable practices: 1997; Awards: 977
	Skidmore, Owings & Merrill • New York • Employees: 900 or more
4	Last year's number-one firm remains high in the ranking, a reflection of profitability and the design prowess for which it has long been renowned. Net revenue per employee: 1534; Sustainable practices: 1149; Awards: 1287
	Ann Beha Architects • Boston • Employees: 10–49
5	On its first ARCHITECT 50 outing, this Boston firm cracked the top five. Its 2010 Music Building renovation and expansion at the University of Pennsylvania was the first LEED Gold project on that campus. Net revenue per employee: 1539; Sustainable practices: 1681; Awards: 644
	Sasaki Associates • Watertown, Mass. • Employees: 200–499
6	Interdisciplinary Sasaki is a force to be reckoned with in urban design and master planning. Its buildings aren't bad, either, as an AIA San Francisco design award and an AIA Technology in Architectural Practice BIM award attest. Net revenue per employee: 1186; Sustainable practices: 1415; Awards: 1256
	Ikon.5 Architects • Princeton, N.J. • Employees: 10–49
7	The exceptionally strong financials of ARCHITECT 50 first-timers Ikon.5 prove that small and mid-sized firms don't necessarily have to struggle to pay their bills. Net revenue per employee: 2450; Sustainable practices: 888; Awards: 351
	DLR Group • Omaha, Neb. • Employees: 500–899
8	Ranked third last year, K–12 and justice-facility powerhouse DLR merged last year with WWCOT, hinting at interesting developments to come. Net revenue per employee: 1536; Sustainable practices: 1043; Awards: 1076
	ZGF Architects • Portland, Ore. • Employees: 200–499
9	ZGF continues to push the envelope of sustainable design, as its much-praised John E. Jaqua Academic Center attests. Net revenue per employee: 1234; Sustainable practices: 1360; Awards: 1040
	FXFowle • New York • Employees: 100–199
10	With a clutch of LEED Gold and Platinum buildings to its name, Fxowle is now designing the Housatonic River Museum, expected to be the first net-zero institution in the Northeast. Net revenue per employee: 1280; Sustainable practices: 1887; Awards: 464