

Staying connected

Smith & Co. Architects' founder Terry Smith says his varied experience helps him understand what clients are thinking and gives his firm an edge over the competition

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by [Casey Wooten](#)

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Craig H. Hartley/HBJ

Terry D. Smith, president of Smith & Co. Architects: Relationship-focused.

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Terry Smith knows something about beating the odds -- and so does his architecture firm.

In an industry with few minority-owned firms, Smith & Co. Architects has used its wealth of experience and a close relationship with the community to increase its workload.

From its first project renovating an elementary school in Tampa, Fla., the company has grown to where it is working with numerous public and private institutions spanning three cities.

And in a Houston neighborhood where older buildings frequently are torn down to make way for modern townhomes, Smith & Co. is helping a historic Fourth Ward schoolhouse beat the odds as well.

Led by Smith, the firm is designing renovations for Gregory Elementary School, located at 1300 Victor St., turning it into a library and archival center dedicated to collecting and preserving the history of African-Americans in Houston. The school, built in 1929, was the first African-American elementary school in the city.

As well as renovating the nationally-recognized historic site, the architecture firm will design a 10,000-square-foot, black-box theater adjacent to the building. The theater will stage productions relevant to the history of the Fourth Ward.

Getting selected for the job wasn't an easy task, especially since the project had some problems getting off the ground. But Smith & Co. used that to its advantage by including in its initial pitch to the City of Houston an analysis of the obstacles to getting the project going.

"What we tried to do was to understand the history of the project and why it had not been successful up to that point," Smith says. "We presented those ideas, as well as some ideas of our understanding of the history of the Fourth Ward. We did our homework."

But what finally won the job for Smith & Co. was its experience with upgrading and renovating buildings, and Smith's personal ties to the school. He has family who lived in the Fourth Ward and his aunt attended Gregory Elementary as a child.

"I've never had a project that I've felt so personally attached to," Smith says.

Issa Dadoush, director of the City of Houston's building services department, says that prior to the project the building had been unused for 20 years and had fallen into serious disrepair. He estimates the total cost of the project at between \$11 million and \$13 million, and expects construction to begin in the winter.

Dadoush, who helped select an architecture firm for the project, says it was Smith's connection to the community and expertise that helped him win the project.

"One of the things I have noticed is the passion the company has for providing excellent service, and the passion for recognizing the African-American history of the Fourth Ward area," he says. "This is a company that is very much in tune and connected to the community."

Smith was working as principal of a major architecture firm's office in Tampa when he decided it was time to launch his own firm.

"I had always wanted my own architectural firm since I declared my major in architecture," he says.

Smith says the biggest obstacle to founding his firm wasn't funding. Architecture firms generally need little start-up capital, he says. Building a healthy portfolio of clients was a greater challenge, he says.

Smith got his first break when he landed the renovation of the Miles and Morgan Woods Elementary School in Tampa. No longer working with his former Tampa employer, Smith says he worked on the project from his home and used the revenue from the project to set up Smith & Co.

The firm went on to complete a number of projects throughout the Tampa area, including an apartment modernization and an expansion to Tampa International Airport's service building.

Then, in 2001, while maintaining the Tampa office, Smith moved the firm's headquarters home to Houston. Its first major project in the area was a \$1 million renovation of the president's suite at Texas Southern University.

Following the TSU project, Smith was offered a full-time position as vice president of architecture, engineering and construction services at the university for a two-year period. He accepted the position but continued to run Smith & Co. on evenings and weekends.

The relationship with the TSU system generated a wealth of experience in dealing with both the service and client sides of the industry. Smith says his experience on the other side of the fence at TSU helps him understand what his clients are thinking, which helps him create more personal relationships with them and gives him an edge over the competition.

His company's clients are generally public institutions, and Smith's experience at TSU has helped his firm learn how to attract that type of business.

"(Working with TSU) has helped us gain other clients, institutional clients -- City of Houston, University of Houston," Smith says. "And we're using the same model with those agencies. We're getting personal relationships with the directors and the vice chancellors or vice presidents."

Big-name clients

Since moving to Houston, Smith & Co. Architects has begun to land other big-name clients.

The firm has undertaken renovations to multiple campuses in the Port Arthur Independent School District and Houston Community College's educational development center. It currently is renovating the Fred Parks Wine Room at the University of Houston's Hilton College of Hotel Management as well as the Board of Regents' suite in the Roy G. Cullen building. The company also has undertaken projects for Rice University as well as for Frito Lay's southwest Houston distribution center.

Smith & Co. recently expanded with the addition of a Dallas office. According to Smith, the reasoning behind the expansion was that, "Most clients tend to want to hire based on staff size rather than staff capabilities. Many times we are competing with much larger firms for projects."

As to the future, "Our goal right now is to expand our Dallas presence, extend our business development and marketing efforts to get more business in Dallas. It's more advantageous for us to diversify in both cities," he says.

Smith & Co. Architects

Business: Architecture firm

Founded: 1999

Top executive: Terry D. Smith, president and principal

Employees: 7

2004 revenue: \$1.1 million

2005 revenue: 2005: \$1.6 million

Web site: <http://sc-arch.com/>

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