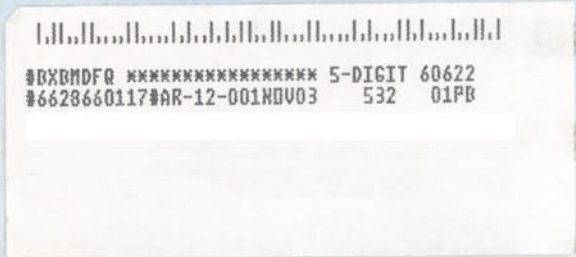


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MODERN MATTERS

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CASTING A WIDE 'NET

firm

Unlike websites for other kinds of businesses, those for architects can be remarkably nonfunctional. "An architect doesn't sell anything" in the retail sense, says Roberto de Alba, a principal at New York City's Spliteye Design, which has designed sites for the likes of Polshek Partnership and Philip Johnson. But even if an Internet presence doesn't yield a flood of calls, successful architectural sites are more than digital brochures.

◊ **Who is your audience?** De Alba finds most architects' sites serve three functions: showing work to prospective clients who know of the firm, announcing accomplishments to colleagues, and recruiting employees. A clear sense of audience is key. For example, Chicago-based architect Zoka Zola is launching her own site. "It's not specifically for the clients," she claims: She's aiming it at students and colleagues.

◊ **What's the basic structure?** The online journal *Entablature.com* runs an awards program for architecture sites. Founder and editor Kriss Pettersen emphasizes four areas good sites touch on: a design statement or staff description; a portfolio of past works; a section for current projects; and contact information. Customized navigation between these areas can express identity. "What makes a site more successful is the way things are organized and how that speaks to the way a firm approaches its work," Pettersen says. Venturi, Scott Brown's site, he points out, is whimsical in its organization; a large cor-

porate firm might prefer a more easy-to-follow site map.

◊ **What are the pros and cons of the technology?** Many of de Alba's clients don't have a full grasp of the animation, sound, and streaming-video options that the Web offers. Conversely, others come to him touting unrealistic examples that they hope to emulate. "Clients say, 'We've been looking at the Guggenheim site,'" says de Alba, but such high-end setups can cost millions of dollars. (Most clients settle for a custom-designed, partially maintained site in the \$40,000 range.)

Too many bells and whistles can distract viewers, adds Pettersen: "One thing architects try to portray is interactivity," but forcing a visitor to sit passively through a 5-minute Web film doesn't achieve that.

◊ **How do you pace the information?** De Alba suggests a layering approach, positing a "need-to-know" strategy to projects: Allow visitors to click through to deeper levels if their interest warrants it. Pettersen concurs: "Sites are unsuccessful if it is thrown at you all at once."

◊ **Last, be ready to do your homework.** "In the process of putting a website together, firms shake a lot of dust off the files," de Alba says. Tracking down and digging up old drawings and outdated storage media for a comprehensive website can mean an at-times frustrating walk down memory lane.

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