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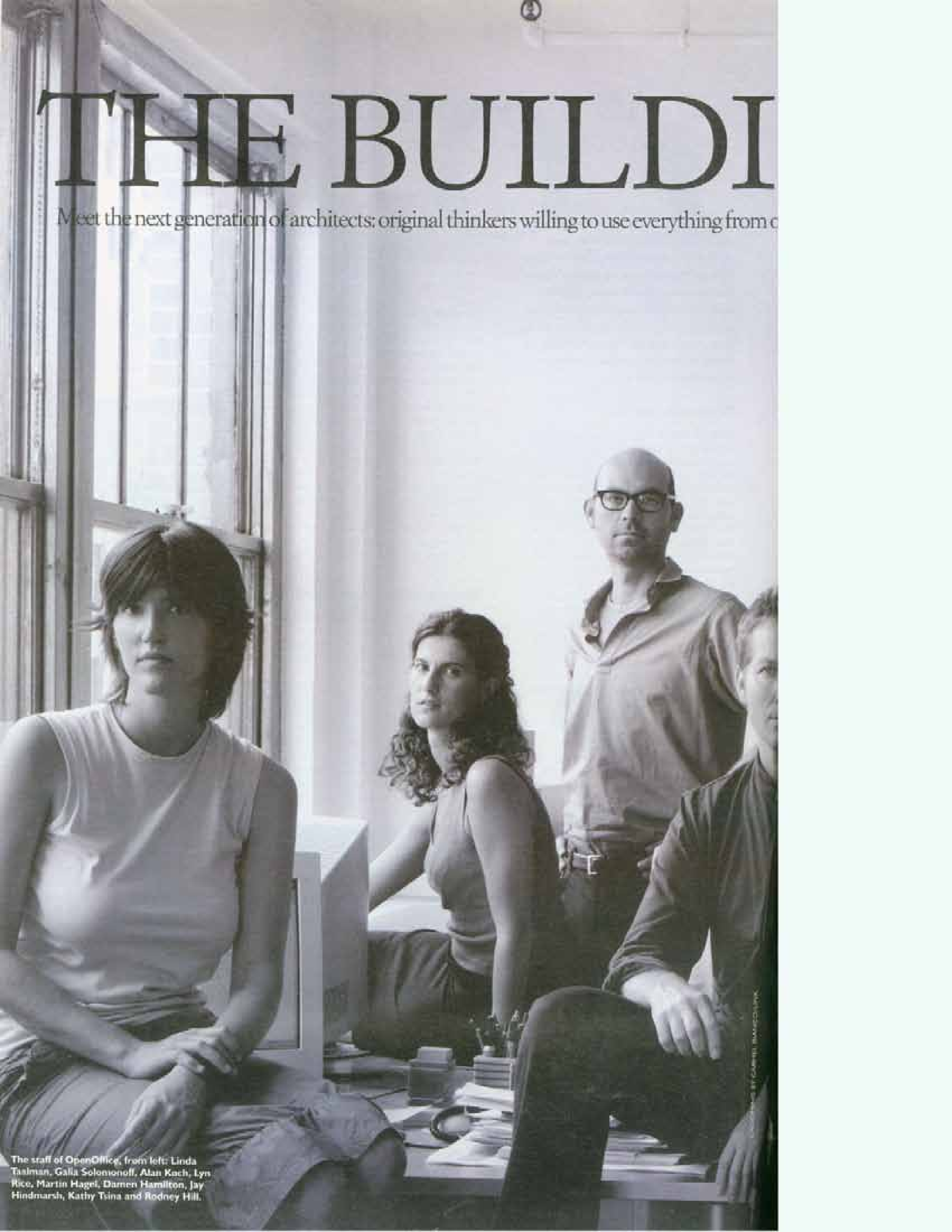
Meet the next generation of architects: original thinkers willing to use everything from c



The staff of OpenOffice, from left: Linda Taalman, Galia Solomonoff, Alan Koch, Lyn Rice, Martin Hagel, Damen Hamilton, Jay Hindmarsh, Kathy Tsina and Rodney Hill.

NG BLOCKS

frigerators to turkey feathers and ice-cube trays in their cutting-edge designs. **By Mayer Rus**

Whatever happened to architecture firms named in the tradition of McKim, Mead and White? New companies once labeled themselves simply and straightforwardly, using a lineup of founding partners that held the authoritative aura of the legal profession. Nowadays, however, young firms overwhelmingly favor more conceptual, enigmatic monikers—like LOT/EK or UT—that suggest a refusal to embrace old ideas about being an architect. Unwilling to labor in obscurity for decades under star superiors—spending months, say, detailing walk-in closets—this latest generation of New York upstarts is capitalizing on the current economic prosperity and exploring work outside the traditional.

In fact, the issue of firm names symbolizes the complex identity crises faced by young architects. "We had one week to come up with the name of our practice," says Stephen Cassell, a founding partner of Architecture Research Office (ARO). "We were doing a proposal to design the interior space of a computer game. We needed a name that was sufficiently technical so we could get the job, but we were also trying to express the collaborative nature and experimental impulses of our work."

PHOTOS BY TODD EBERLE

Adam Yarinsky, Cassell's partner, adds, "We wanted to move away from using our own names, because we're not interested in signature architecture that says more about the architects than the particular project."

The two heads of ARO became friends at the Princeton School of Architecture during what Yarinsky calls "the late Michael Graves era," the mid-1980s. They later reunited at the conceptually provocative firm Steven Holl. At 25, Cassell was named project architect for Holl's celebrated Hybrid Building in Seaside, Florida, and, soon after, recommended that Yarinsky be brought in to work on the Stretto House in Dallas. The intensive design experience they gained in Holl's office—as well as more mundane but essential functions such as bookkeeping and contract negotiation—gave the pair the confidence to start a progressive company of their own.

They wasted little time, founding ARO in the hostile, recessionary climate of 1993, when there wasn't much work at Holl's firm or, for that matter, anywhere. "The economy could only get better," Cassell recalls. "It certainly couldn't get any worse."

Nevertheless, the partners were determined to practice architecture, not just talk about it. Exhibition design provided a readily available outlet for their energies. "Exhibits are the only way for a small firm to do public projects," says Yarinsky, "and they get built very quickly." One of ARO's first jobs was the exhibit design for a show on Hopalong Cassidy at the American Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, Queens.

Bigger budgets and meatier challenges followed shortly. Their breakthrough project was the renovation of a 6,000-square-foot residential loft in Manhattan's Flatiron district that had served as a painting studio for Anselm Kiefer and Julian Schnabel. The space became ARO's three-dimensional calling card, a living embodiment of the architects' intuitive approach, which looks first to pragmatism, then to poetry. Some of its more intriguing features included a wall of translucent beeswax and a floor of leather tiles laid in a complex "isohedral monohedral" pattern. But even their most dramatic gestures were firmly rooted in logic.

"We're not idiosyncratic for the sake of idiosyncrasy," Cassell insists. "We find a formal language that's rigorous. It can be quite rich, but it's always specific to each project."

This philosophy has been eloquently expressed in the uncommon diversity of ARO's projects following the Flatiron loft: a 10,000-square-foot house in Telluride, Colorado; the renovation of an entire SoHo office building with a residential penthouse duplex for a prominent Manhattan investor; a headquarters for new-media darling Razorfish. Late last year, ARO was appointed the local architect-of-record for the enormous Prada store in SoHo designed by Rem Koolhaas (who, not so coincidentally, was Cassell's thesis adviser at Harvard's Graduate School of Design).

The project that perhaps best exemplifies ARO's ability to thrive in multiple cultures is the Armed Forces Recruiting Station perched on a tiny sliver of real estate at the crossroads of the world: Times Square. "We had three months to do all the design and drawings—three months and 40 meetings with representatives of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, the Pentagon and seven different city and state authorities," Yarinsky recalls. "An Air Force colonel told us, 'If this project goes over budget, one of the two of you will be shot.' That was their idea of a joke. It was a surreal project." ARO subsequently won a competition to design a memorial at Columbia University in honor of students who died in U.S. wars. A military recruiting station followed by a war memorial? Surreal indeed.

The site of OpenOffice's project for the Dia Center for the Arts: a former Nabisco box factory in Beacon, New York

"Architecture is a field that hasn't been fully exploited by American mass culture," asserts Giuseppe Lignano, one half of the architecture team LOT/EK. In fact, the Italian-born duo of Lignano and partner Ada Tolla, both 36, appears to have been waiting years for just such exploitation. "It took a while, but American culture is finally catching up with us," jokes Tolla.

The atmosphere at LOT/EK (which, despite the puzzling slash, is pronounced "low-tech") was not always so merry. After completing postgraduate studies at Columbia in 1991, the two architects spent several years waiting tables at night, like actors, so they could pursue their own work during the day. "Ada was an excellent waitress," Lignano remembers. "I was always being fired."

But Tolla says she and her partner decided not to follow the traditional path of working for established architects, because "we wanted to keep our minds free to think our own way." Which they did, developing a personal, eccentric approach that involves discarded industrial objects such as oil tankers, truck beds, concrete mixers and even abandoned appliances.

"This has nothing to do with conventional notions of recycling," Tolla says. "We try to capture the power and chaos and motion of the city."

Capture, not tame: Unlike many of today's avant-garde architects, Tolla and Lignano do not attempt to coerce elegance from raw industrial materials. Instead, what they're looking for is strength. "We don't care so much about prettiness," says Lignano. "We don't want to be designers in the sense of sitting down and drawing a beautiful curve." Instead, LOT/EK celebrates the diver-

"An Air Force colonel told us, 'If this project goes over budget, one of the two of you will be shot.'"

LOT/EK has used old oil tankers and trucks. "We try to capture the power and chaos and motion of the city."

sity of the modern metropolis and reinvests traditional shapes and materials with expressive power.

In the midtown Manhattan penthouse they designed for the photography team Guzman, Tolla and Lignano converted city detritus into fully functional architectural elements. They punctured one side of the penthouse with three old refrigerators, creating interior niches for books and audiovisual equipment. Old newspaper vending boxes became small picture windows. And the main body of a huge truck, stripped from its cab and wheels, was positioned to enclose the structure's upper level. "The truck is like a beached whale," explains Tolla. "We use ready-made objects as part of our design process. Sometimes we assemble; sometimes we disassemble. We interfere with objects."

The penthouse, completed in 1996, provided exposure for the young architects, but clients willing to invest in their radical approach remained elusive. Temporary installations blurring the boundary between Contemporary Art and architecture helped fill the void. Two years later, LOT/EK created *TVTANK* for a show at Deitch Projects in New York. For that installation, they carved a 35-foot-long aluminum oil tank into slices to create individual viewing stations lined with black rubber tubing and outfitted with small television monitors. "Television-watching is so much a part of everybody's life, but it's something that's almost always ignored in contemporary architecture," says Tolla.

Giuseppe Lignano and Ada Tolla. Below: Their LOT/EK office.

Oil tankers reappeared in the improbable forms of sleeping chambers and bathrooms in a trippy Manhattan apartment recently designed for computer consultant Joshua Morton. "Josh is an ideal client," Lignano says, "because he wanted us to push our ideas as far as possible. He had no reservations about being able to live happily in this crazy environment."

In addition to Morton, a growing clientele now is seeing the functional and aesthetic possibilities inherent in LOT/EK's take on the urban landscape. For photographer Steven Klein, the team is designing a rooftop garden retreat with a cabana fashioned out of a truck container. "The garden is above his studio," Lignano explains. "He wanted a quiet, relaxing space for him and his two Great Danes to escape the frantic, fabulous world downstairs."

Lignano and Tolla seem most excited about a leisure pavilion they've been commissioned to design on the campus of the University of Washington in Seattle. LOT/EK's first freestanding building, it represents a major step forward for the two architects. The structure incorporates a section of a Boeing 747 and is meant for temporary shows and performances. "It will require a foundation, which makes it a real building," Tolla announces triumphantly.

Heidar Sadeki and Clarissa Richardson are not the kind of architects who always knew they wanted to build. Intellectual curiosity—as opposed to an innate calling—eventually led both of them to architecture. Today, two years after they established a formal partnership, UT, Sadeki and Richardson still rely on that shared inquisitiveness to propel their practice and work beyond traditional avenues of exploration.

Born and raised in Iran, Sadeki, 34, had left home to study film at the State University of New York at Purchase but realized the academic rigor of architecture appealed to him. "In film school, you meet cool kids," he says. "In architecture school, you meet intellectuals."

Meanwhile, Richardson, a 28-year-old Australian native who grew up in Singapore, had set up her own catering business in New Zealand after attending school there. Her epiphany was somewhat less abstract: "Cooking and serving food for large groups of people wears thin pretty fast," she says.

Sadeki and Richardson first met at Princeton's graduate school of architecture in a studio class taught by Elizabeth Diller. "The program at Princeton was heavily conceptual—Clarissa was designing a motel for viewing UFOs in Area 51 near Roswell," Sadeki remembers fondly. "I was intrigued."

The two founded UT in 1998. The firm's name is a holdover from an earlier company Sadeki had set up with a friend from Iceland (while Richardson was

completing her work at Princeton). "UT is an Icelandic word for 'out.' Clarissa and I kept the name, because we didn't have a better one," he says. "We get tired of explaining it, so now I just say that it stands for 'urban tectonics.'"

Richardson, however, will have nothing to do with such pretensions: "I tell people it means 'utility truck.'"

Shortly after opening UT, they met Thierry Boue and Marcia Kilgore, the husband-and-wife team behind the wildly successful Bliss Spa (which has since been acquired by LVMH Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton). Boue and Kilgore proved to be the kinds of clients who can catapult a young firm immediately into the realm of high-profile, reputation-making jobs. Initially UT was hired to do limited renovations to the original Bliss Spa in SoHo, but since then the architects and clients have forged a fertile, ongoing collaboration. Bliss' corporate headquarters and warehouse in Brooklyn comprised their first major project. Next came the design of the Bliss Spa within the new LVMH Tower by Christian de Portzamparc on Manhattan's East 57th Street, followed by the commission to do Boue and Kilgore's own loft in Brooklyn.

"We have a bit of a wacko twist on spas, and UT's design sensibility suits us perfectly," says Kilgore. "Their work is modern and smart but never loses its sense of humor."

A signature "feather wall" at the spas expresses something of UT's quirky sensuality and witty luxe. The translucent wall is made of two sheets of glass sandwiching individually glued white turkey feathers. The effect is simultaneously gossamer and cheeky.

Richardson and Sadeki currently are chasing the beauty-and-spa juggernaut across the globe, fielding offers from would-be Blisses eager to capitalize on their talents. Also in the pipeline is an assignment to design interiors for the Sky Rover, a futuristic airplane that takes off and lands vertically and is scheduled to launch within five years. "Sky Rover is a hybrid of an airplane, a helicopter and a flying saucer," Sadeki says. "It has no wings. Essentially the body is the wing. It's meant to function in certain countries and areas that don't have the infrastructure to support elaborate airports."

The UT partners also are trying to expand the scope of services they offer to include other disciplines such as graphic and Web design. "We don't want to be limited by the traditional confines of architecture," says Sadeki.

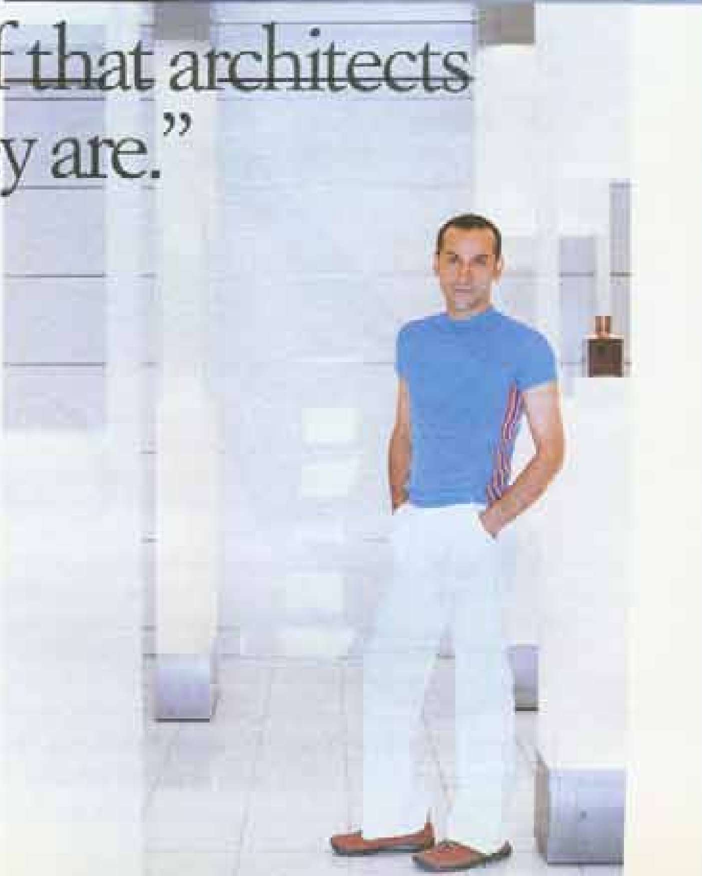
Bliss Spa, designed by UT; below: UT's Heidar Sadeki.

"It really pisses me off that architects are paid as little as they are."

Richardson is more blunt. "It really pisses me off that architects are paid as little as they are," she says. "One way to change that is for us to follow through with an entire range of brand-identity services that clients expect to pay real money for."

Like the founders of UT, partners Scott Specht, 36, and Louise Harpman, 34, first met in a grad-school design studio, in this case at the Yale School of Architecture. Specht had worked for the giant architecture firm Kohn Pedersen Fox in the mid-1980s, while Harpman had earned a master's degree in philosophy at Cambridge, then had assisted Tonne Goodman in the "tastemaker group" at Calvin Klein. "That experience was not totally irrelevant to architecture," she insists. "It taught me how to look."

Specht Harpman's breakout project was for Good Machine, the independent film company that produced *The Ice Storm* and *Happiness*. Writer Jean-Christophe Castelli, son of the late art dealer Leo Castelli, recommended the architects to Good Machine, and the ensuing relationship has proven most fruitful: Specht Harpman just finished its fourth office for the company and has



"Basically," Harpman says, "we're looking for clients willing to take risks."

also completed houses for *Ice Storm* director Ang Lee in Westchester County and for Good Machine's James Schamus in Columbia County.

Eschewing the theoretical jargon characteristic of many of their peers, Specht and Harpman—who married in 1995—have developed a reputation for their innovative use of inexpensive materials and their smart, straightforward solutions to the problems specific to each project. Their completed jobs include offices for the digital design and production company Funny Garbage, custom furniture for the Manhattan loft of J. Crew founder and chairman Emily Woods and the Chelsea offices of Inside.com.

For the offices of Hurd Studios, a high-tech digital-animation and medical-imaging firm, Specht Harpman developed an ultra-efficient metal framing system that integrates desks, walls, storage, lighting and ductwork. The system was manufactured by a local garment-rack fabricator. "We're extremely interested in bringing local talent into our projects, especially people who are not normally involved in architecture and design," Specht says. "For us, the idea of 'local' is something active, not nostalgic. It means utilizing craftspeople and materials that are readily available and often under-appreciated." Harpman adds, "There's an assumption that 'custom' means costly, but there are ways to make things that aren't expensive at all if you find the right people."

The partners believe that, as a rule, architects artificially limit the materials suitable for design work. In a proposal for an MTV retail space in Times Square, Specht Harpman moved well beyond the commercial acrylics and recycled particleboards that have become easy signifiers of ostensibly progressive design. The MTV project rejoices in found objects artfully deployed: a backlit wall of translucent blue ice-cube trays found at Kmart; a mobile storage system of plastic milk crates; display cases lined with pink pencil erasers, and a sexy, highly textured wall covered with blackboard erasers.

As for the future, Specht and Harpman are keeping all options open. "Basically we're looking for clients willing to take risks," Harpman says. "Our interest is in unique architectural expressions and comfort—not artificial ideas of taste."

Defying the architecture establishment is nothing new to John Keenen, who, at age 42, already has developed an impressive body of international work. Well before the current crop of recent graduates decided to rage against the architectural machine, Keenen knew that he wanted no part of a profession in which serious accomplishments are thought to be the

From left: Scott Specht and Louise Harpman; the Specht Harpman–designed Hurd Studio.

province of those over 50.

"I worked for other firms for just six months after I got out of school," he says. "I thought that I was completely unemployable because I hated spending all my time designing doorknob details for corporate bathrooms."

Even before he left Columbia's graduate school, Keenen had a taste of real building. During a year abroad, the precocious architect erected his first structure: a bamboo entry pavilion for a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand. By the time he returned to New York, the world of corporate architecture seemed altogether foreign.

In 1984, Keenen joined forces with Terence Riley, a friend from Columbia, to establish K/R. (Riley is currently the chief curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, and his involvement in the firm is strictly that of a consulting partner.) "In the beginning, we identified ourselves as street fighters, a term we borrowed from an essay on the cutthroat world of New York architecture," Keenen recalls. "Today the firm has more stability and accomplishment, but I still relate to the mentality of fighting to get good work built."

Like many young firms, K/R depended heavily on apartment renovations during its first years. An award-winning addition to a house in Lambertville, New Jersey, which was published in both the popular and trade press, provided

"I thought that I was completely unemployable because I hated spending all my time designing doorknob details."

much-needed exposure for the practice, introducing K/R's work to an entirely new audience. Keenen, who had studied art history at Georgetown, soon found a fertile niche in the art world, designing renovations at Sotheby's, as well as Matthew Marks' first two galleries. Following the migration of the New York art world from SoHo, K/R established itself as an important force in the burgeoning Chelsea art scene by designing two of the area's pioneer galleries: Morris Healy and Pat Hearn.

More recently, Keenen built a country house amid the rolling fields of western New Jersey for his friend Linda Wells, the editor of *Allure*, her husband Charlie Thompson, an investment banker, and their two young sons. Sheathed in white stucco and vertical cedar siding stained to match the color of nearby wheat fields, the house is a marvel of restraint, coherence and masterful siting, with every room opening onto a different view of the landscape. The house solidified Keenen's reputation for comfortable, unpretentious modern design.

The assignment to design an art-filled Park Avenue penthouse for Jane Lauder, the concepts marketing director at Clinique, gave Keenen "the opportunity to decorate with a capital D," he says contentedly. "When I was a student, there was this enforced idea that decoration is contrary to architectural tradition and that it is also not a pursuit suitable for men. That way of thinking is completely ludicrous. Decoration is critical to reinforcing the spatial aspects of architecture. I want to be involved with anything that has to do with the client's comfort."

In the commercial arena, Keenen has designed a large office for Cisneros Television Group in Miami. K/R has enjoyed an ongoing relationship with Gustavo Cisneros, ceo of the Cisneros Group of Companies, and his wife, Patricia, as well as other family members. Earlier this year, Keenen completed a Florida residence for Carlos Cisneros, Gustavo's nephew and ceo of CTG; one local K/R competitor described it grudgingly as "the most beautiful house in Miami."

If K/R has proven adept at both residential and commercial work, an aviary

John Keenen of K/R. Above: A private foundation's New York offices, designed by Keenen.

in the Dominican Republic presented Keenen with an entirely different challenge: designing an environment attuned to the lives of the birds that would inhabit the structure. The ethereal design attests to Keenen's aesthetic sensibility; the fact that it remained standing after a hurricane brought down buildings all around it testifies to his skill as a builder.

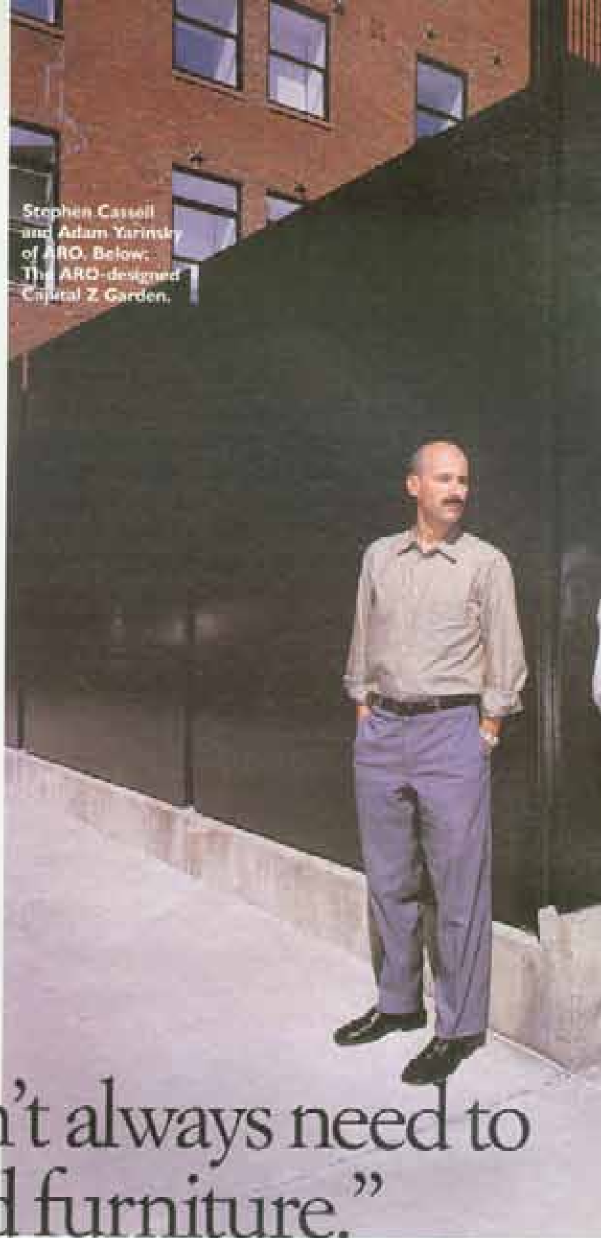
One K/R project currently in progress involves the renovation of a Connecticut house designed by artist Tony Smith in 1952. The project is a natural for Keenen, who served as the architecture curator for the Tony Smith retrospective at MoMA in 1998. (He is quick to point out that the curatorial gig resulted not from art-world insider trading but from the years he spent cataloging Smith's archive.)

"It's an important part of our practice to maintain a foothold in academia," asserts Keenen, who has taught at Harvard, the University of Texas, Syracuse and Parsons. "Teaching students creates a balance between the work I'm doing in the office and the more conceptual realm of ideas."

Perhaps no firm better exemplifies the new breed of architecture in the 21st century than OpenOffice. The firm's two founding members, Alan Koch, 36, and Linda Taalman, 26, established the practice in 1997 "as a platform for art and architecture projects that merge aspects of both disciplines," according to its mission statement.

They gave it the name OpenOffice to signal their vision of a structure that would allow independent architects, artists and other specialists to collaborate. These project teams would form, disband and re-form as the work required. OpenOffice did not print business cards.

And then came Dia. In the spring of 1999, Koch and Taalman were invited to interview for the job of turning a mammoth Nabisco box factory in Beacon, New York, into a fully operational museum for the Dia Center for the Arts.



Stephen Cassell and Adam Yarinsky of ARO. Below: The ARO-designed Capital Z Garden.

"Every project doesn't always need to have walls, floors and furniture."

Grasping the complexity and scale of the potential project, the OpenOffice partners invited two other architects, Lyn Rice, 39, and Galia Solomonoff, 32, to join them as members of the project team. The structure of this team, as the firm name indicates, was meant to be open, which is to say that no formal business contract would be necessary.

Alas, the world doesn't operate that way. From a legal standpoint, the alliance would have to be formalized as a true business partnership. The four architects decided to take the plunge. Real business cards followed in short order. If the formal structure of OpenOffice does not exactly correspond to the original vision, the firm's goals remain essentially the same. Proof of the viability of OpenOffice's mandate is evident in the very fact that the firm ultimately won the meaty Dia commission.

"We got this job by promising the direct, hands-on involvement of all four principals. There wouldn't be any additional layer of management," ex[illegible] Taalman, who first came to the attention of key Dia artists by way of an e[illegible]mental project called "Houses X Artists" that she and Koch had been wo[illegible] on for several years.

"We had to interview with Robert Irwin, because the Dia board is deferential to the artists with whom they work," adds Koch. "Irwin wa[illegible] coming off [Richard Meier's] Getty project and was not enthusiastic a[illegible] collaborating with a super-established architect with a well-known trajec[illegible] We were probably a welcome alternative."

Rice and Solomonoff were critical in closing the Dia commission[illegible] brought with him extensive experience in artists' housing and art installa[illegible] and had worked at other avant-garde practices such as Diller + Sco[illegible] Solomonoff, an alumna of Koolhaas' Office for Metropolitan Archite[illegible] and Bernard Tschumi's practice, contributed broad experience in the [illegible]ning and development of large-scale urban projects.

"We love building culture, but we're not locked into just making b[illegible]ings," says Rice. "Every project doesn't always need to have walls, fl[illegible] and furniture."

Indeed, even in the event that their formal partnership doesn't extend [illegible] the completion of Dia, the architects of OpenOffice will still have acc[illegible]plished something extraordinary.

"All we know is that we don't want to have a traditional architecture [illegible]tice," says Taalman. "Beyond that, who knows?" ■