

Written by Written by David M. Brown

Why would 15 leading residential architects unite to form a Valley professional group?



During a recession, when few clients are building custom homes here and those who are sit atop a buyers' market, where architect vies with architect, architect with designer and designer with designer?

"We wanted to educate the public on the importance of using a professional registered architect," says Nick Tsontakis, AIA, a founding member of Arizona Residential Architects and principal of Scottsdale-based Tsontakis Architecture.

"We hope the exposure will promote this concept and also provide a united resource for the top builders, designers, landscape architects and vendors in the Arizona design community," adds Tsontakis, a native of Crete who has been practicing architecture in Montreal and Arizona since 1981 and 1996, respectively.

He began contacting a short list of top-tier architects in August 2010 to begin the group and to create a semi-annual publication to promote the ARA (Arizona Residential Architects).

"The idea was to bring together the top players in the design community into a large networking group that could support the publication and benefit from meeting and getting to know each other better," he explains.

Last October, Tsontakis met with each of the other respected Valley architects to found the group specializing in custom home design. The organization is meant to supplement, not supplant, organizations such as the highly respected American Institute of Architects, Lee Hutchison, AIA, emphasizes.

The ARA consists of Valley architects Brissette Architects (Ron Brissette, RA., and Jeff Kamtz); Mark Candelaria, AIA; Andrew Carson III/Jon Poetzl; Dale Gardon, AIA; James Hann, AIA; Mike Higgins, RA; Lee Hutchison, AIA; Brent Kendle, AIA; Clint Miller, AIA; Gordon Rogers, AIA; Mark Sever, AIA; Swaback Partners (Vernon D. Swaback, FAIA, John E. Sather, AIA, Jon C. Bernhard, AIA); Nick Tsontakis, AIA; Christy Wareing, AIA; and Craig Wickersham, AIA.

"We're promoting the advantages of hiring registered, licensed architects versus using builders or draftsman to conceive home plans," says Miller, a California native who moved to Arizona in 1968.

"This new group of licensed architects is known for its residential experience and design contributions, which makes each architect unique. The design process and professionalism may be similar for all of us, while the concepts and 'home' essence are different."

Of course, the recession stimulated its founding. "The current state of the economy is probably the biggest reason we've gotten together now," says Hann, a Valley resident for about 45 years and practicing custom home design for 30 in six states. "Construction has been hit particularly hard, and one way to help the situation is to unite as a group."

Strength is numbers, he adds. "One thing we've all found is that we share many of the same challenges," he says. "As a group, we can discuss these challenges and collectively come up with solutions."

One of the most significant of these challenges for the ARA: The public doesn't understand what a registered architect — a person licensed by a state or states to practice architecture — does, and the difference between an architectural firm and a drafting service, Hann explains.

He believes that this type of group should probably have been put together 10 –15 years ago, when most architects did commercial work with an occasional residential project in the expanding Valley luxury home market. Since then, residential architecture has evolved its own demands and styles as well as levels of quality in design and building.

"The ARA helps identify those architects specializing in custom residential design — and helps to give us our own identity," Hann says. "Like medicine, there are many areas of practice; ours is custom residential design."

By creating the ARA, comprising residential architects, the members can help the public understand the unique demands of this type of architecture, giving potential clients an easy means of identifying which architect would be best for their project.

"Previously, potential clients would only have our individual Web sites as reference elements, and many could be overlooked," Hann explains. "As a group, they can look at and experience many different aspects of design in one place and ultimately (hopefully) be able to

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decide what would be best for them." As a result, the organization will benefit both architects and clients.

The extended recession and a lack of consumer knowledge have created a market in which qualified clients, who think they are well positioned, are not. "My first thought, when I first heard from Nick about the group, was 'How could pulling a lot of the significant residential architects together benefit all of us?,' Hutchison recalls.

Hutchison, a graduate of Arizona State University's School of Architecture and principal of Scottsdale-based Urban Design Associates, reconsidered. "Because people are looking at cost more closely nowadays, they're tending toward unqualified architects without experience — and they need more information going in to their projects to understand what their options might be at the onset," he says.

Hutchison still would rather see a potential client contract with a qualified architect than with one who is not, lacking the knowledge or experience to do a professional job.

"With ARA, we're offering the custom home-building public 15 names of qualified architects," says Hutchison, who opened his firm approximately 30 years ago and has designed custom homes for two decades. "They all have different styles and they are all eminently qualified to create custom homes at the highest level," he adds.

The ARA also produced its first publication in January, with biographies of each of the architects and high-quality images of some of their designed homes as well as ads from interior designers, landscape architects, builders and vendors to the homebuilding industry. Each of the members contacted assigned sponsors to purchase advertising in the book, whose next issue is due approximately Sept. 15.

The 30,000-circulation magazine has been mailed to 24,000 homes with appraised values of \$600,000 plus and to approximately 5,000 owners of residential lots with an appraised value of \$150,000 plus. Approximately 1,000 copies are distributed to the ARA sponsors, with some distributed in hotels and golf clubhouses.

Hutchison notes that the group plans to add editorial in the next issue helpful to the owners, members and sponsors such as information on the members and their work, narratives on how the design process might work, information on architectural styles and updated construction methods.

The group schedules regular networking events, hosted by its sponsors every six to eight weeks. The inaugural event was at Hinkley's Lighting Factory in Scottsdale Feb. 10, and the next will be at Cyber Sound, also in Scottsdale, Wednesday, April 6. In addition, the member architects gather to discuss ARA business every six to eight weeks in between networking events.

The networking events, posted at www.ArizonaResidentialArchitects.com, are open to ARA sponsors. "We're looking for builders, designers, landscape architects and vendors that have a great reputation and offer exceptional service to their clients," Tsontakis says.

The events provide camaraderie as well as a better understanding of what other industry members can provide, he explains. "It's so much easier if we already know a future collaborator than meeting them on a job site for the first time. And, we all want to be acquainted with the best in the business so that we can feel secure in our recommendations to clients."

Tsontakis has already seen some referrals through the book, and other members have also received overtures from potential clients who have seen the publication or heard about the group. Miller, for instance, just sealed a new home design contract after he showed the owner the ARA publication.

"The association of ARA architects has raised my confidence in my ability to create lasting projects," he says, "and when my new client saw my representation in the ARA magazine, it added to his opinion of my work — and possibly helped in securing the new work."

For information on the ARA or becoming a sponsor, contact Tsontakis, 480.874.2288, or e-mail him at nickt@tsontakisarchitecture.com. The new ARA Web site is www.ArizonaResidentialArchitects.com.