

SUBEN | DOUGHERTY

...A Partnership of Architecture + Design

Suben | Dougherty

...A PARTNERSHIP OF ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN

By Jan Wilson

When clients initially engage some architectural firms, they can be impressed by the attention lavished on them by the firm's partners. Unfortunately, that attention often wanes all too quickly after the contracts are signed. Suben/Dougherty Partnership does things quite differently.

"Everyone sells principal involvement," says Jack Suben, AIA. "The difference is that we actually deliver it." Adds Susan Dougherty, "We both continue to do quite a bit of hands-on work, which is a real bonus for all of our clients. Doing the job adequately just isn't enough for us; doing it extraordinarily well is. We always strive to give clients more than they have asked for."

Sustainable Growth

The firm, which was founded in 1983 by Suben and Dougherty, former classmates at Cornell University, now has 20 employees and plans to increase staff by 30 percent over the next three to five years. Moderate growth has been a conscious strategy, says Dougherty. "We've had a policy for 20 years that we don't hire a lot of new staff just because we get a piece of business – we stay lean. We've got a reputation as a firm that doesn't just hire and fire. So we get good people who want to stay with the team." Suben adds, "We've found extraordinary people who are very much like ourselves. They have the commitment, great ideas, loyalty to our clients and they are multi-talented perfectionists. We have no 'B' or 'C' team here."

Michael Azarian, AIA, a principal with the firm, says that it is this strategy that has enabled the firm to succeed even during recessions. "Our model has always been successful. Even in a downturn this firm has continued to grow while other firms are contracting." The firm's expanding client roster includes healthcare and academic institutions as well as corporations. "We don't specialize in a certain sector," says Azarian. "Being in multiple markets fuels our growth."

Innovative Approaches

Suben/Dougherty also distinguishes itself by developing customized solutions that fit the clients' needs. "We've worked very hard against the commoditization in our field," Suben says. "We aspire to a quality-oriented, well-designed model by synthesizing our ideas and the clients' needs into a unique solution, while taking out the ego factor." Adds Dougherty, "You'll never walk into a client's office and recognize our work immediately. Our solutions are handcrafted for each client and each project has our client's signature on it. We won't impose a look on them that doesn't meld with their brand."

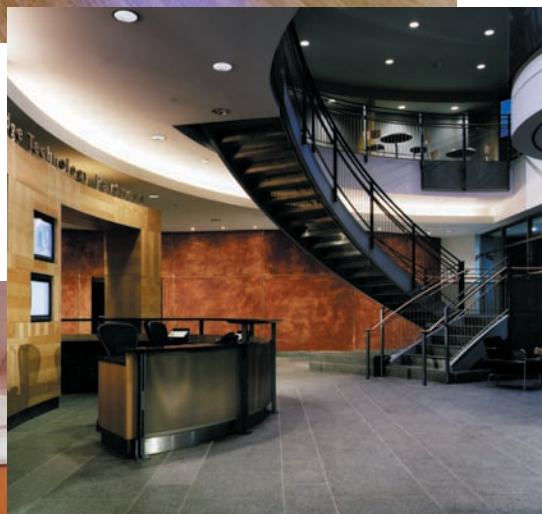


Seong Kwon

Top: Staircase at the NYU Robert E. Wagner Graduate School

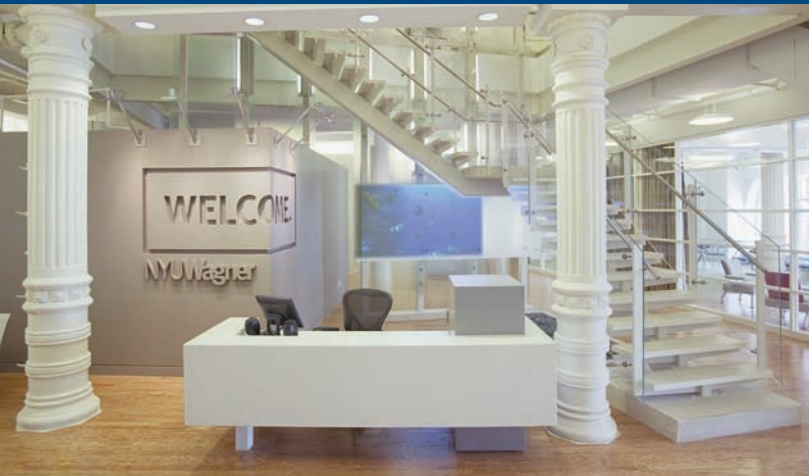
Right: The Lobby at Cambridge Technology Partners

Lower Left: Communicating Staircase, Cambridge Technology Partners



Edward Jacoby





Seong Kwon

Left to Right: NYU Robert F. Wagner
Graduate School of Public Service:
The Reception Area; The Office of the Dean

Suben/Dougherty, which gets most of its business from client referrals and repeat clients, also is very proactive about going after new assignments. "Every person in this firm is a business developer," says Dougherty. "Our project managers have a very close relationships with their clients and that can lead to more business in the long term. Our business is all about long-term relationships."

The firm's website, which Suben calls "a brochure on steroids" has also been responsible for bringing the firm to the attention of new clients and prospective employees. "The website has been tremendously helpful for us because it makes us easily accessible to people who aren't familiar with our work. It's been very helpful in establishing new relationships and demonstrating our portfolio of work while giving prospective clients an idea of the quality of our design and technical skills through the array of digital renderings displayed on the site."

Listening Comes First

Asked to describe the firm's design philosophy, Suben says "We have big ears. We listen. What comes from that is a design solution that best fits the client. We feel that the elements and components of an environment should be visible without a lot of decoration and ornamentation." Dougherty adds that although clients sometimes want to jump into looking at the finishes and colors, the firm brings rigor to the process and makes sure that the design has been thoroughly studied. "It is imperative that there's a solid plan in place. Without that, the finishes mean nothing."

NYU Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service

The firm's planning process is clearly evident in the \$6 million project it recently completed for New York University's Robert F. Wagner

Graduate School of Public Service. A gut renovation of two contiguous floors of the landmark Puck Building in New York, the design created an efficient use of space despite a very inefficient floor plate. "It was a wonderful building to work with," says Dougherty. "This space was raw. It was like the 1880s were still with us because the building had a wonderful 'bone' structure. We could plug our clean line interiors into classical design."

The firm conducted a planning session (or 'charrette' in architectural parlance) including students, faculty, administrators and alumni in order to program the space. "Community was a word that was used a lot in that meeting. The inspiration for the great staircase we built going between the second and third floors emerged from that session," Dougherty says.

The Dean of the school, Ellen Schall, is a fan of the Suben/Dougherty approach. "They were terrific to work with and one of the things that distinguishes them is that they stick with you until the end. I've worked with architects that disappear in the middle or close to the end of projects. Suben/Dougherty has been committed to seeing this project through and getting all of the details realized. They did a great job on the charrette, where we had a lot of stakeholders involved. The firm was very imaginative about how to get input about what the community wanted. It was a real collective effort, and we couldn't be more thrilled with our space because it captures who we are and is used in ways that we couldn't have even imagined."

Rodale Inc.

Designing the 160,000 SF New York offices of Rodale Inc., presented a different challenge. Housed in a 1960s era skyscraper, the firm was commissioned to "do something quite fantastic, and create an open, loft-like feeling," says Dougherty, while making it a "green" space that would serve as a model for a healthy urban work environment. The company also didn't want this part of its operations to lose sight of its roots in rural

Pennsylvania. "In this space we created five contiguous floors with 'communicating stairs.' The office design also includes a two-story yoga studio and media walls that beam in images of the Pennsylvania countryside in 'real time,'" Dougherty says.

Particularly exciting to the firm was making the space 'green' by using sustainable and recyclable materials, as well as solving density issues through the use of custom-designed modular furniture and smaller office sizes. "We used demountable partitions as well as state-of-the-art furniture systems which create more usable space, and are more flexible and visually interesting than a standard drywall office environment," Dougherty says.

Eugene Bard, PE, President, Bard, Rao + Athenas Engineers, the mechanical/electrical engineering consultant on the project, praises Suben/Dougherty's creativity. "The team that they have assembled is very good and on top of the client's needs. They are doing some interesting and unique things. They are not a cookie-cutter firm."

Cambridge Technology Partners

For Cambridge Technology Partners, Suben/Dougherty created a 155,000 SF headquarters in Cambridge, MA that inspired staff collaboration, team work and flexibility. "We designed that space before the building was built and had many meetings with the base architect," says Suben. "We helped the client realize that the building was too small and so more floors were added. Inside, we changed their method of how their executives interacted with the other employees. We didn't create the typical 'executive row'...we created an 'executive column' so that their executives could be adjacent to their groups. We also installed communicating stairs right outside of their offices, to promote communication...and exercise." Suben/Dougherty also wove unique features into the workplace to bolster the firm's culture. The space boasted a game room/coffee bar on each floor, a fully



*Top: Anatomical Travelogue
Bottom: Doll e3 Toy Museum of NYC
(Renderings by Suben/Dougherty)*

Left to Right: Visiting Nurse Regional Healthcare System Reception and Conference Room.

©Peter Robertson Photography

equipped gym and 'quiet rooms' for peaceful contemplation.

The Doll and Toy Museum of NYC

Founded in 1999, the Museum opened in a small, borrowed space in a Brooklyn elementary school. The Museum has quickly outgrown the space and seeks to build a facility that allows more time and space for more people to experience their expanded collection. Suben/Dougherty is planning and designing that new facility, which will allow the museum to open during school days, evenings and weekends, and in the summer, when children have more free time to enjoy such cultural assets. With these criteria met, the number of children who can access the Education Program will increase fivefold. This will allow for adults to comfortably and conveniently explore the exhibit as well.

Anatomical Travelogue

A 10,000 SF loft in TriBeCa is the new home for Anatomical Travelogue's studios and animation lab---an award-winning producer of health and wellness-related television programming. As their client's work exposes the internal structure and workings of the human body, it was their desire to reveal and accentuate the structural 'bones' of their pre-war manufacturing loft space. The company had quadrupled in size in the year prior to the move, so it was essential that the design incorporated their desired look and addressed their future expansion needs. Suben/Dougherty's design

achieved their aesthetic goals and incorporated extraordinarily efficient and ergonomic workstations that yielded a high level of staff density yet offered built-in flexibility to meet the client's rapidly changing needs.

Visiting Nurse Regional Healthcare System

The program that Suben/Dougherty implemented for the Visiting Nurse Regional Healthcare System in Brooklyn, "brought that organization from the 19th century into the 21st century," according to Suben. With the home healthcare agency moving from a building that had been custom built for it in the 1890s (it's name is etched into the stone above the entrance), into a Brooklyn Heights building with panoramic views, Suben/Dougherty's plans took full advantage of the location and created a space that the bulk of the organization's highly mobile staff visits regularly.

Jane Gould, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Visiting Nurse Regional Healthcare System, states: "I think the best way to describe Suben/Dougherty's approach is that they understood the vision of our organization, its mission and its purpose. The design reflects that in terms of its high quality. They understood the business nature of what we do and the efficiencies that we wanted to have built into our design. They also knew that as a non-profit we didn't have extraordinary amounts of money to spend. And within the budget they came up with a very beautiful headquarters. The kind of work our staff does is very stressful and the fact that the space is so appealing makes a difference in how they feel coming into work

every day and how they do their job. I think Suben/Dougherty is great---I wouldn't use anyone else."

Thinking Green

The firm is very conscious of the role that architects can play in preserving the environment. "People often think of the damage to our environment that SUVs cause, but architects can unintentionally be just as detrimental," says Suben. To that end, the firm seeks to "practice architecture with a conscience" and studies everything from the most appropriate use of space, best materials, and siting of the building/windows to the ideal combination of natural and artificial lighting. "LEED standards for interiors are just coming on line, but we are already incorporating them into our designs. We find that sustainability is increasingly important to our clients and we are starting to apply these standards everyday on our projects," says Dougherty.

The Path Ahead

In the future, Suben sees the firm working on more ground-up projects and "doing monumental work that touches even more people." However, it will not stray from the belief that a design solution that works for the client in every way---aesthetically, functionally, economically, environmentally---is paramount. "In design, there should be no stone left unturned. There should always be a consistent eye looking at the project, to ensure that every piece is exactly as it should be," Suben says, "for our clients shouldn't settle for anything other than the best." ■

Project List

- **Ascent Media**
- **The Burden Center for the Aging**
MEP Engineer: WB Engineers;
Office Furniture:
Meadows Office Furniture
- **Cambridge Technology Partners**
- **Cardiology Associates**
General Contractor:
Ball Construction
- **Chelsea Piers**
- **Computer Associates**
General Contractor:
Ball Construction;
A/V Consultant:
JVN Systems, Inc.
- **DASNY**
MEP Engineer: WB Engineers
- **Deloitte Consulting**
- **Girl Scouts of the USA**
- **Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society**
- **JPMorgan Chase**
- **New York Presbyterian Hospital**
- **NYS Office of Mental Health**
MEP Engineer: WB Engineers
- **NYU Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service**
General Contractor:
Plaza Construction
- **NYU Ruth Horowitz Center for Teacher Education**
General Contractor:
Tri-Line Contracting Corp.
- **NYU Pless Building**
MEP Engineer: WB Engineers
- **Parkmed Eastern**
- **Rodale, Inc.**
General Contractor:
Sweet Construction;
Office Furniture:
Dancker Sellow & Douglas;
A/V Consultant: JVN Systems, Inc.
- **Rothfeld Residence**
General Contractor:
Tri-Line Contracting Corp.
- **Rutgers University**
- **Svenska Handelsbanken**
Office Furniture:
Dancker Sellow & Douglas
- **Talbots**
- **Visiting Nurse Regional Health System**
MEP Engineer:
WB Engineers
- **Other Key Contractor**
IBEX Construction

Michael Azarian, AIA; Susan Aline Dougherty; and Jack Michael Suben, AIA

