



Architects Dan Withee and Dale Malcolm at their Torrance office. Photo by Tom Fitt.

Planning for life

Withee-Malcolm Architects have been shaping our home and work environs for three decades

by Tom Fitt

Thirty years ago, two young architects fresh out of California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo decided to build a few houses on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. Dan Withee and Dale Malcolm found a place to set up their office in an unused corner of an already existing retail shop in Malaga Cove Plaza. There was almost enough room for two desks, but that's all they needed. As with everything involved in real estate and the planning there-

of, the familiar mantra of "location, location, location" held true and Withee-Malcolm Architects, LLP, was born.

From that day forward, everything related to the ambitious pair has grown, with no end in sight. Houses on the Hill are bigger. The partners' projects list has seriously expanded, now including multi-family dwellings, mixed use, senior housing, commercial buildings, even a six-year multi-million dollar renovation of the venerable Palos Verdes Golf Club. And Withee-Malcolm isn't working out of a closet anymore.

"We started doing houses on the Hill," said Withee, who was born and raised in Palos Verdes, graduated from PV High, and still resides there. Malcolm is a San Fernando Valley guy who now lives in Manhattan Beach

"Over the years we've done 20-25 homes up there. The first year (1977) it was just the two of us, then we added one employee.

"It was a slow process when we started out, but it was fun. We didn't have any air conditioning, just two windows that opened up onto an alley. And every day there were trucks delivering to Moore's Market that would just sit in that alley and idle. Then we moved down to Hermosa Beach in '82. We outgrew that place, so we tried to find a bigger spot that would make it easier for us to deal with Manhattan Beach clients. Also, a lot of our clients had expanded down to Orange County, Brentwood and downtown L.A. This (Torrance) is the center of world for those places; it's a half hour away from all those areas."

Withee-Malcolm first moved to Torrance in

1990. They've been at their present location on 190th Street since 2005. Their present digs look to have been conceived by a very smart Hollywood set designer. The two-story facility is open and airy. On every square inch of every wall (there are few interior walls) are full-color drawings of projects large and small; past, present and future. Duct work is exposed and the furnishings are as proletarian as are the founders. In 2000, the company opened a satellite office in San Diego. "We've been doing a lot of work in San Diego," said Withee. "We were part of the whole giant urban development downtown."

The company is also involved in building projects in Hawaii, Arizona and the Bay Area up north.

The physical expansion of office space was naturally accompanied by several stages of staff growth. Today, the firm employs 50 in the two offices. Malcolm oversees most of the industrial/commercial work and Withee concentrates on the residential. "But the same core of our people work on all of our projects," said Malcolm.

With the housing market slump making front page news, is the firm still keeping busy?

"We are, though it's changed," said Withee. "We do 'in-fill' housing, which means we don't do tracts out in the nether lands. We do projects where there was something there before; they're surrounded by existing buildings where the context is really important... That's kinda what we specialize in - zone changes, entitle-

ments. We think we have a good reputation for doing that. A lot of our projects you see will be spaces that have had other uses. All the stuff done in San Diego was built on former parking lots that investors bought up."

A recent construction overseen by Withee-Malcolm of which many on the Hill are aware - especially the golfers - is the major remodel of the Palos Verdes Golf Club, completed earlier this year. "This was a big deal," said Withee. "We were involved with this for about six years. We were planning in phases for every part of the construction. Then, finally, they got a president in there that said, 'Hey, we've got to do the whole thing all at once or we're never going to get this done.'

"There were a lot of obstacles... and something always came up. They needed a new sprinkler system for the golf course, so the money went there. They could never get all the money together to do it, so they ended up putting an assessment on the club. There was a lot to do - it's one of the oldest buildings on the Hill (early 1920s)... And some of the original plans for the building were a little sketchy."

"I think some of the first work was probably done by the members, guys getting out there on the weekends and pouring concrete," laughed Malcolm.

"But, most everybody is happy now," said Withee. "It feels like a club."

That was the old. At the same time the firm was dealing with the aging golf club, Malcolm

was building an addition to the Honda campus in Torrance. The Acura Design Center is a modern structure that was awarded Gold Certification by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

"We went through many environmental tests to see if the structure was as energy efficient as it was supposed to be, said Malcolm. "It's all official now. Everything was completed this spring. All the plaques are on their walls. It was a big deal for them; everyone wanted it to be as green as possible.

"The 'green thing' has been around quite a while, mostly for commercial and office projects, but we're doing a good bit of industrial work and green is getting into that as well."

Withee agrees that environmental friendliness is now a major consideration for all of the projects undertaken by Withee-Malcolm: "We bring it up to every client, and most choose to do many things green - they're getting the point. Very soon, it's just going to be the norm. People won't even talk about it."

Malcolm said, "Much is already being mandated by municipalities; it probably will become part of the building code before too long."

Whatever lies in the future regarding codes, materials, architectural trends and designs, it appears the 30-year history of Withee-Malcolm Architects stands the talented duo in good stead. Who knows? Another office expansion may be called for. Or, perhaps, a satellite space in Hawaii? PEN