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Dallas' D2 Architecture adapts to demand for smaller-scale senior projects

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Less than a year ago, architect David Dillard watched his 120-person company fall apart.

After layoffs and salary cuts, still burdened by debt, 62-year-old CSD Architecture – one of the largest architecture companies in Baltimore – closed its doors in October.

The fast growth it counted on to pay loans and keep up cash flow vanished with the recession.



ROBERT W. HART/Special Contributor
Architect David Dillard shows off the site of the Stayton, a \$78 million luxury senior apartment tower in downtown Fort Worth. His firm, D2 Architecture, started off as the Dallas-based office of Baltimore's CSD Architecture.

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FILE 2007/Special Contributor
The Tuscan-inspired design for the Edgemere in Highland Park won David Dillard national acclaim. Such plush projects are mostly on the back burner these days, but some elements can be adapted to less-expensive settings, Dillard says.

"We played every card in our hand," Dillard said.

"It was analogous to the Titanic that had hit the iceberg," explained former chief financial officer Mark Debinski.

Dillard, Debinski and the board of directors considered their options: selling the company, declaring bankruptcy, splitting into different firms. In the end, most of the remaining 45 employees left for other companies

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REX C. CURRY/Special Contributor
Chris Muder and Esther Walker work on plans for an assisted living center at D2 Architecture, whose projects include renovations to two local facilities.

and took ongoing projects with them. The board of directors shut down the company and paid off as much debt as it could.

The Dallas-based office began again – this time under a new name, as a firm of eight people. D2 Architecture, which designs senior-related buildings, has since grown to 12 people and has weathered the tough economy by shifting focus to renovations and smaller-scale projects.

Architecture firms' payrolls have shrunk substantially in the past few years, according to the U.S. [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). In June 2008, a little fewer than 219,000 employees were on architecture firms' payrolls. This June, it was 166,000.

"You'd be hard-pressed to find any firms that didn't make some pretty serious adjustments during this period," said [Kermit Baker](#), chief economist at the [American Institute of Architects](#).

To avoid any chance of debt, Dillard and a co-worker put up \$60,000 of startup capital. D2 employees went without pay for several weeks until they could be paid retroactively.

"These guys were willing to take a wink and a promise," Dillard said, looking out the glass screen of his office at the company's employees.

Changing demand

As Dillard showed off the construction site of the Stayton, a \$78 million luxury senior apartment tower in downtown Fort Worth, he was clearly enthusiastic. He pointed to the views that residents will have from a rooftop dining room. He navigated through the jungle of steel beams that will eventually house a state-of-the-art rehabilitation wing.

Luxury senior buildings jump-started his career: He received national recognition for the Edgemere, a Tuscan-themed complex in Highland Park. With rustic-looking Italian paintings hung on walls, a manicurist on staff and a formal dining room, the Edge- mere is a sharp departure from retirement communities of years past.

But the plush style of the Edgemere and the Stayton is mostly on the back burner, as senior communities favor improving their existing property or building less expensive units.

"Large and luxury are not two words that are playing well in this economy," said Baker, the AIA economist. "It's small and affordable. It's about retrofits and renovations."

He expects that architects will have to actively seek out new projects. "It's more about marketing and networking and generally looking for more opportunities," he said. "There are not those projects that will keep your firm busy for six, nine, 12 months."

D2 was just named the architect for a Sulphur Springs, Texas, project geared toward intimate and affordable senior living – a modest \$2.5 million project of two 12-bedroom houses. The design will mimic the look and comfort of home.

Arvis Tantum, owner and administrator of Carriage House Manor in Sulphur Springs, found D2 on the Internet when researching. He said he was impressed by Dillard's strong background in senior design and his excitement for the project.

"The whole industry is moving towards culture change," Tantum said.

"Culture change has highlighted the need for less institutionalism and more resident choice."

D2 is also renovating two local senior living communities that have aged and become outdated, adding greenery and a café with glass screens overlooking the landscaping.

The mission remains

For the next five to 10 years, Dillard expects that these small-scale, affordability-minded projects will become the company's bread and butter. The firm will juggle more projects at a time and charge a higher percentage of the construction cost to fill the gap.

"We'll be cooking hamburgers in a steakhouse for a couple of years," Dillard joked.

Tight budgets still can include features that suit an older population, Dillard said.

Architects adapt elements of expensive projects to less-expensive communities –for example, building windows lower to the ground so wheelchair users can see outdoors. They can add more space between the toilet and the wall, allowing caretakers to help seniors in skilled nursing.

They also could use cove lights, which keep light bulbs hidden, to ease the vision of people with macular degeneration.

Dillard's commitment to improving the quality of life for seniors is embodied in the Sleepover Project. He recommended – and soon will require – that all of his employees sleep overnight in a senior community.

To better understand the medical challenges of some seniors, they tape fingers together, roll around in wheelchairs, wear bottle-thick glasses, and ask employees to treat them just like any other resident.

"No matter what our business, our calling is so high to take good care, really good care of people," Dillard said, referring to his years as a Boy Scout. "That mission stays, no matter what the [unemployment](#) figure is or what the stock market does."