

Architect 'Dennie' Smith Draws Success in Commercial Real Estate

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BY ANDREA SIEDSMA

Architect Cheryl "Dennie" Smith has quite a few qualities that client Charlie Abdi says make her a real go-getter — she's incredible with business development and relationship-building, and she's a redhead.

"Her claim to fame is not just being a great architect; she's an incredible planner," said Abdi, president and chief executive officer of San Diego-based Finest City Realty Advisors. "The real creativity for architects is how they design their features. She's good at doing site planning and has a multitude of different designers, so her buildings don't all look alike. She's highly regarded in the industry."

Smith, president of Smith Consulting Architects, or SCA, in San Diego and Palm Desert, has designed 10 projects for Abdi, including the Carlsbad Spectrum, which includes a 325,000-square-foot office building and 75,000-square-foot research and development center.

"The buyer came in and changed the color," Abdi said. "It looked great before and it looked great after. It wasn't because of the color; it was because the architecture stands the test of time. Smith and her firm designed a modern building with an art deco component. It represents the past, present and future."

Collaborative Projects

For Thomas Smith, president and CEO of San Diego Real Estate Investment Corp. in Rancho Santa Fe, hiring Smith and her firm was a wise choice.

SCA has designed three projects for Thomas Smith and his Biltmore Holdings Partners, including an 87,500-square-foot industrial/condo project in Otay Mesa called Biltmore at Ocean View Hills.

"It's a superior design for its type of project," he said. "The lines, the paint scheme, the landscape plan, the interior design components and color choices are superior. They took a fundamental industrial project and made it into an institutional grade asset because of the quality of the design.

"They gave us low-cost materials that created a high-end finished look on the interiors, which allowed us to offer significantly more value to our buyers," he added. "The quality of that design should help us achieve a higher price per square foot for the project."

SCA is also designing a 12-building, 106,000-square-foot office park in Bressi Ranch in Carlsbad called Biltmore at Bressi Ranch.

Thomas Smith said the project will be distinctive from other Carlsbad developments with its campuslike site plan, which is designed to create a welcoming environment for future owners and their employees to come to work.

The Bressi Ranch project will connect via internal paths and courtyards and will be accented with subtle fountains, and outside seating and dining areas placed throughout the campus.

The buildings will have dry-stacked ledge stone on the exterior walls and will be further accented with bronze aluminum on the towers. The buildings will also include extensive placements of bronze glass.

The development, scheduled for completion this year, will also include more than 150 separate species of trees, plants and shrubs.

"Smith and her team listened very well, so they could understand the vision of what we are trying to create," Thomas Smith said.

Other projects SCA has designed for Thomas Smith and his partners include Biltmore on Palomar, a 95,000-square-foot office building, which will house a 24 Hour Fitness and health club. SCA is also designing a 163,000-square-foot industrial park in North Las Vegas for Ken Satterlee, principal of St. Croix Capital real estate investment firm, with whom Thomas Smith will partner in the venture.

"Dennie has an impeccable reputation with the brokerage community, the development community and with the construction and contracting community," Thomas Smith said. "She built her firm with a clear vision and tons of hard work. To my knowledge, she is the first woman in San Diego to start an architectural firm on her own initiative through her ability to build long-term professional and personal relationships.

"She was willing to enter a male-dominated industry and carve a strong niche for herself based on her talent and ability to deliver with a substance and a strong sense of urgency."

Starting On Her Own

Smith launched her firm in 1988 because she couldn't find a job after moving to San Diego from Newport Beach.

"It wasn't easy for a few years," she said. "I got lucky with some clients and contacts and people who helped me."

Smith's first project was from a client of hers in Newport Beach called Bay Development Corp. She designed the Bay Technology Center in Carlsbad for the firm, which ended up not building the project. However, Smith went through the planning and permitting process with the city of Carlsbad, which gave her an "in" with the city.

Smith also began building a rapport with local real estate brokers.

"In terms of my strategy, I target brokers," Smith said. "They see the project first. I thought if I could team with a broker and do some free site planning and show them that I knew what I was doing, they would work with me. It's very much a relationship business."

Smith's second project was designing a 180,000-square-foot building for Science Applications International Corp. The job that really catapulted her career was designing a 200,000-square-foot building in Carlsbad in 1991, which enticed Callaway Golf Co. to move its headquarters to that city.

Busy Staff

The privately held SCA, now known as one of the most progressive architectural firms in the region, has a staff of 35 that constantly stays busy. One recent project for the firm was San Diego-based Gen-Probe Inc.'s new \$44 million, 291,000-square-foot Genetic Center Drive office and laboratory facility. The energy-efficient building will include amenities such as on-site tennis and basketball courts, and a fully equipped fitness center.

Smith said such amenities are necessary for large companies to recruit and retain quality workers.

"Over the years companies have become more employee-conscious," she said. "Companies now want you to design basketball courts and cafeterias and a lot of exterior amenities."

Smith said developers, city building departments and the general public have also become savvy with building designs, boosting their expectations.

"Not only does a building need to be marketable but it also needs to have curb appeal, and also be within the budget," she said. "People don't want a straight box. They want articulation. A lot of new properties are going next to residential neighborhoods so they need to complement the area. We're challenged with coming up with more innovative solutions than 10 to 15 years ago."

Smith and her team have overcome that challenge.

"We've been fortunate at keeping clients happy and providing the right amount of customer service," she said. "Problems always come up. It's how you handle the situation that keeps you and a project successful."

While Smith has established firm roots in San Diego, the reality is there's only so much more room for development in the region, she said. To remain competitive in the industry, Smith has branched out her firm to different areas, such as Palm Desert and Texas.

"It's not easy to start business in other locations, so it will take a fair amount of work to be in different markets," Smith said. "It's easy to do the work; it's more difficult to really know the people and have them trust you, especially if you're from out of town. It has taken awhile to prove that we are committed to those areas."

Smith, who received her bachelor's degree in architecture from Arizona State University, began her career as a draftsman for Haver, Nunn and Collamer in Phoenix. Smith, named one of "Southern California's 50 Most Powerful Women in Commercial Real Estate" by Real Estate Southern California Magazine, has served as a designer for Schwenn and Associates architecture firm in Phoenix and director of Strock Architects in Newport Beach.

During her 25 years in the architecture and design field, Smith, who hails from Birmingham, Mich., said to be successful in this industry, you need to dedicate your life to it.

"You have to really enjoy what you do," said Smith, who even takes the time to make breakfast for her entire staff twice a year. "It's not an 8-to-5 job. It's pretty much a constant deal. You have to be able to be out and meet people in the evenings and promote your business. You need to be there in the morning when people need things. It's a tough business. "Construction moves quickly and you're talking about big amounts of money changing hands. You have to be quick, motivated and always on the go. A lot of people look at quality of life rather than success. People want success but they don't want to put the time in."

Smith has certainly paid her dues.

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