



Astudio shows how small practices with top-end kit can take on large, complex jobs

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By **David Littlefield**

Since leaving Aedas, Richard Hyams has been putting together his own technology-based, highly collaborative practice. David Littlefield met him

Richard Hyams — ex-Aedas, ex-Fosters and filled with missionary zeal about the role computer technology can play in the design of new architecture — is testing an interesting business model. The practice, four people soon to expand to 16, has designs on large commissions. But Hyams hopes that powerful technology and a carefully crafted network of consultants and strategic alliances will let it be ambitious without becoming large and unweildy.

“I’m a great believer in people rather than companies. If you need this person here, and that person there, all you’ve got to do is get them around the same table,” says Hyams. “Everybody now has a computer that’s more powerful than Nasa had when they landed on the Moon. Why can’t we sharpen up our working practices?”

Iain Godwin, Foster’s former IT director who set up his own consultancy last July, is one of the consultants with whom Hyams has struck up an alliance. Godwin agrees the business model is viable: “That is the nature of organisations these days — small guys can punch above their weight by working as a virtual team rather than as a single organisation.”

Astudio, Hyams’ new practice, is hardly a virtual team, but the point is that small practices with top-end kit (and access to top notch resources) can take on large, complex jobs. After working at two giant and well-resourced practices, Hyams wants to continue where he left off — designing for the big developers. As well as Godwin, who has a close association with the new practice without being a member of staff, Hyams has secured a very similar deal with environmental engineer Kate Millen, who is quitting her role as a partner at Hoare Lea in April. And then Hyams, ever the deal-maker, has struck up alliances with half a dozen other, more established, architectural practices to secure work and deliver imaginative design in six key sectors: health, education, residential, commercial, urban design and retail. The idea is that Astudio and these collaborative partners help each other, not with the usual concept-designer/executive-deliverer split but in a more creative sense. At present, Hyams is keeping these partners under his hat, but he does appear to have found some firms with real generosity of spirit: “One of these architects said ‘we’ll sit in front of you, next to you or behind you — wherever you want us to be.’ How amazing is that?” says Hyams.

Assuming this collaborative, networked business model works, Hyams will bring the full panoply of modelling tools and a range of slick analysis programs to bear on it. Computer modelling will be the method of choice (“3D sculpting is entry level stuff. If you don’t know it, learn it,” says Hyams) and the practice is embracing building information modelling (BIM).

Although Hyams believes “His point is that small practices with top end kit can take on large, complex jobs” that BIM is not living up to its promise, largely because of cultural problems within the construction industry, he is certain developers are waking up to the risk-reduction properties of sharing a single digital model. This is something Hyams wants to push — developing 3D models, and securing the input of engineers and contractors, early in the design process. If BIM is to really add value, he says, things as prosaic as budgets, scheduling and M&E servicing must be considered part of the digital model early on. It pains Hyams that advanced software is still used to conjure up forms that have to be rebuilt and reworked later on, when other consultants are admitted.

“We’re not M&E engineers but we do want a more coherent architecture. We want to get the most out of the technology,” says Hyams. “This practice is designed to hit the market in exactly the form I believe the market wants — imaginative design and environmental modelling with powerful technological backup.”

Astudio is configured as three overlapping disciplines: design, environment and technology. The hope is that the micro-disciplines that fall within or between these headings (such as scripting, wind studies and building performance) will be handled either within the practice or through the network of consultants and partner practices. It is a fluid business philosophy, lubricated by software. Hyams says an ideal project would be to design a set of schools as well as the borough-wide IT infrastructure that would service them: “That’s where it all fits together. It should all be the same thing.”

Practice profile

Astudio is soon to move from Arup’s Camden office to its own premises in Waterloo. The four-person team (Hyams, Aart Koning, Max Rengifo and Karsten Huneck) has powerful laptops and a Sun workstation. Microstation and 3D Studio Max are the software workhorses, supported by analysis tools IES and Ecotect. Hyams is teaching himself Rhino and embarking on more scripting exercises.