



JJ FALK DESIGN INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE



Three years ago, JJ had just completed a 275,000SF packaging facility for Samsung in Dallas, TX, an 80,000SF in-bound call center in South Carolina, and a hotel in the heart of Manhattan. Along with her other projects for clients like JP Morgan Chase, AIG, and Ralph Lauren, JJFD had a backlog of work despite the recession that was already three years old. Having insulated her firm from the recession, however, she was able to tighten her grip on securing work from existing clients and forging ahead with a conservative strategy on

winning new assignments. “For the most part, we were able to maintain employee levels to a pre-2007 level, never rising or falling by more than a few people,” JJ says. “We were also very fortunate that our clients were active in the marketplace and continued to appreciate the value they receive from our efforts to help and support them.”

Still, JJ also knew that her firm needed to learn how to master the fledgling economy which not only meant smaller and fewer projects, but also more competition for assignments. Her firm did so by ascertain-

ing new and viable new markets. “We focused on who was spending money, who had money, and whether it was a sector we could be competitive in,” JJ recalls. As a traditional corporate interiors firm, JJFD’s practice is more general in nature. “We know a little bit about a lot of things. So, rather than trying to appeal to a client who’s looking to build say a “clean room” for which we have no real experience,” she continues, “We set our sights on safer, ‘more’ realistic areas to expand into.” One of those areas, and a natural extension to her corporate work, was the residential sector.

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Formerly featured for her firm’s outstanding work in our January 2011 issue of Top Women in Real Estate, JJ Falk was, at that time, on top of the design world with successes at Samsung, Ralph Lauren, and JP Morgan, as well as several other large NY institutions. Today, three years later, with the economy back on the rise, work levels are up, and fees are inching upwards. We therefore sat down with JJ to discuss her reflections on the last three years, changes she has made along the way, and her thoughts about the future.



(Top) Newport Office Center, The LeFrak Organization – Renovation of two lobbies after damaged by Hurricane Sandy in Newport.

(Left) Salvatore Ferragamo – Worked with local and abroad store design team, project management at JJFD executed comprehensive exterior/interior project.



Leonardo DaVinci is quoted as saying ‘simplicity is the ultimate sophistication,’ and, if there is a word that embraces JJ’s work, it is ‘simplicity.’ Her ability to create a vernacular that is free from needless clutter and ornamentation, is honest and pure, and sleek yet elegant, is remarkable. As an artist with canvas and paint, she appears to apply brushstrokes only as needed to bring forth her vision from the bare white cloth. Labeling it ‘humanistic design,’ a style that resonates well with her residential clientele, she says “I find that all of my clients are savvy, well-traveled, and very worldly. They’ve experienced sophisticated and elegant living in their own lives, and know what they want to achieve through my designs. It makes working with them very enjoyable since they know what I’m talking about, understand the reference because they’ve seen it or heard about it before, and are very decisive.” Prior to 2009 JJ says, “I don’t think we ever actually pursued a residential project. By the time we decided to pursue it in earnest, we had three. Now it seems

there is at least one or two residential projects on the boards all of the time.”

Another sector that JJFD marketed to was landlord and property manager work. In tough times, building owners are working hard to fill their buildings while competing against a growing sublease market, higher vacancies, and dwindling interest. Lobby improvements, amenities façade upgrades, pre-built suites, etc., are all projects that seem gain more prominence in slow economies. JJ credits organizations like AREW, WPO, PWC, CORNET/SIG and magazines like “Top Women in Real Estate” with providing her the platform to network with other successful women in the industry. “It’s a tight knit group,” she says, “And I always feel like there’s a genuine interest in advancing women in this field.” JJ has maintained many relationships through events sponsored by these organizations that ultimately put her in a seat across from many landlords, brokers, and property managers. “For the most part, I have found that landlords are receptive to working

(Top) Frej Residence – transformed a turn-of-the-century row house in Chicago into an eloquent contemporary residential.

(Right) Monshaw Residence – A complete renovation of an apartment in a landmarked building.





with boutique firms such as JJFD,” she continues. “They like the clean look of our designs, coupled with the organizational and technical skills that our team brings. And I guess the more competitive fees don’t hurt us either,” she adds.

Prior to 2009, JJ says that “I would definitely have categorized us as a tenant driven firm. Almost all of our work was end-user based. Now all of that has changed. We fought hard the last five years to carve a niche working with landlords and property managers.” “Today, with ongoing work for clients like the Lefrak Organization, Vornado, SL Green, Hines, Boston Properties, and other similarly-sized firms,” JJ

adds, “I think it’s fair to say we do almost as much landlord work as we do tenant work.”

As a result, JJFD is a much stronger architectural design firm than it was before. “Being able to enter and succeed in different markets allowed us to develop a more varied client base and, at least for us, they are all interwoven. For example, the tenant has a house which needs work, the general contractor who builds his house has his brother-in-law works for a real estate firm which is a property manager or leasing agent for a landlord...and so the whole circle of adding clients and building our business starts again.”

While this may sound easy, JJ admits that

(Top) Financial start-up Two Creeks Capital and Philanthropic Foundation – Contemporary design with classic lines makes space elegant and reflects high-level clientele.

(Right) Ralph Lauren, Women’s Dress Showroom – Each showroom is unique in style.



(Top) JP Morgan Chase – Creative renovation/refresh cafeteria

(Bottom) JJ Falk corporate office – JJ surrounded by senior staffs.



there's a lot more to it than that. "We are a different firm now from where we started. With the varied practice that we now have, we also needed to build a staff that was better prepared to meet the demands of our clients." JJ has therefore carefully molded her team to provide JJFD with the skills to take on these more challenging projects to now include more seasoned individuals with strong leadership skills to help her lead the firm. Along with Principal Walter Dwyer, JJ has added Keith Walker, Larry Lane, and Vince Picone as SPM's to fill those roles. "They all have stronger construction experience, solid interior portfolios and, at one point in time, each has been a captain of his own ship, JJ says. In addition to their primary responsibilities as architects, they also mentor the younger employees. "On-the-job training is tough in this field because of the pace, but I can't think of being young and impressionable and not wanting to learn the ropes from these guys," JJ Says.

Still, the design team takes its direction from JJ, since she says she 'always will be the guiding force behind the JJFD brand.' This is a passion that still burns brightly for her...a passion that started halfway around the world in Seoul, moved on through Colorado to New York, and which took her from Rockefeller Center down to Koreatown. As the master of her own ship, and with the skies clearing after thirty five long years, it is clear that she has set sail for calmer waters and a brighter future.