

## More Mergers Coming in the Design Realm?

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SAN DIEGO—The merger of architecture and design studios AVRP and Skyport brings together long-time colleagues for urbanization projects and offers the industry something the megafirms can't, the firms' principals tell GlobeSt.com **EXCLUSIVELY**.



*Doug Austin (left) and Frank Wolden of the newly formed AVRP Skyport Studios.*

SAN DIEGO—The merger of **architecture and design** studios **AVRP Studios** and **Skyport Studio** brings together long-time colleagues for urbanization projects and offers the industry something the megafirms can't, the firms' principals tell GlobeSt.com. The joint firm will operate at its combined space in San Diego as **AVRP Skyport Studios**.

The merger was formalized when the two regional firms joined forces for **Seaport San Diego**, a major urban waterfront project in Downtown San Diego. The new firm leverages the team's 40 years of design excellence and a strong **infrastructure**, with Skyport's high creativity focused on urban projects. AVRP Skyport Studios brings together four principals: **Douglas Austin**, who originated AVRP Studios in 1976; **Frank Wolden**, founder of Skyport Studio; **Randy Robbins**, who has more than 40 years of experience in architecture and interior design; and **Christopher Veum**, who has served as president of AVRP.

We spoke exclusively with Austin and Wolden about what the merger means for their respective firms and how it will impact the real estate industry.

***GlobeSt.com: What does the merger mean for your two firms?***

**Austin:** To me, it gives us a lot more depth in the area of urban design, especially urban planning. Frank has a real reputation for understanding cities and how public and private realm relate. This will give us just a leg up on everything we're trying to accomplish. We're trying to do architecture that has meaning and makes a significant contribution to the place we're designing. I've known Frank for two decades, and to get together is real coup for us, I believe. We all want to make the world a better place, so this will help us do a better job of that.

**Wolden:** My studio was a smaller boutique design studio, and I come from a place where I've worked on large visionary projects, and they take a larger infrastructure to implement. The idea of this merger was to create an association with a more full-service capability and to combine our resources. It's also important to have creative chemistry in terms of the way we work together and the projects we'll pursue—that's the most important thing to me. We'll have a larger, more full-service environment to work with, and we have great chemistry, complementary capabilities and common goals.

***GlobeSt.com: How will the merger impact the real estate industry that you both serve?***

**Austin:** The area where Frank will have the most impact will be the area of urban infill and urban planning. That is clearly a part of places like Downtown San Diego, but also a whole lot of areas in CA and in the US and beyond. We're all trying to do a better job of urbanizing, creating walkable communities that work better and don't spread housing and transportation out to a point where it's unsustainable. This merger will give the real estate industry the advantage of having two individuals that have pretty much unparalleled experience. Between Frank and me, I can't think of two other individuals with more experience in design over the last two decades. Frank comes at it from an academic standpoint, too, as a professor and philosopher. He is trained as an artist, so he has an art and architecture standpoint. I was trained traditionally as an architect, but I've always had the human-factor interest in sociology and psychology. And the director of research from Frank's organization, **Hannah Hobbs**, specializes in architecture and the brain.

**Wolden:** One of the things we want to do that Skyport has always done—and Doug and I with the other principals have done—is design that's done for our clients based on the creative knowledge of what's going on in the industry. Research becomes a really important thing—being updated on the latest information that drives the creative process for workplace and urban mixed-use. It's important to put our heads together and use our resources in terms of research that serves clients. We're always trying to become much more creatively educated and create more content for design. It's a fast-changing marketplace where you have to be on top of the latest trends and have innovative capability. Together, we're going to do both.

Also, between us, Doug and I have won several competitions. We have an understanding collectively of what a city is looking for, what a developer wants to do and what cities are looking for. This area of real estate **development** is challenging: how to connect with communities that are extremely skeptical of development. We have the creative knowledge of urban design and community goals, together with a strong history of what works in the marketplace. We have the skills of how to combine these. We can help people with our knowledge of how buildings and spaces connect to create experiences for people. We're very focused on trying to tell the story; having the creative ideas and graphic capability to visualize and communicate to people what you're composing. Storytelling is very important component.

**GlobeSt.com: Do you anticipate seeing more mergers of this type in the architecture and design realm?**

**Austin:** I don't know. There have been mergers over the past decade among some of the big firms, like AECOM, which gobbled up firms, and IDI out of Canada, but those are mostly AE firms—megafirms with thousands of employees. We're not a megafirm. For San Diego, we're considered a medium to larger firm, but in terms of the industry, we're still small business, so we are still on an intimate scale. The principals involved are hands on in the design process; we're not just administrators. Basically, with us you're getting the direct involvement of the principals, whereas the other mergers are giant mergers where you wouldn't even know who the principals are. This is a creative collaboration versus the bigger ones that are purely **financial**.

**Wolden:** I do think we'll see more of these mergers because I have seen a lot of searching to put talent together. One of the things in the industry that's changing: we haven't by nature been a collaborative industry, but we see much more of a world where the value of collaboration or the concept of value-added is seen. That's what we tried to do, and it will drive thinking in the future. I don't know for sure if there will be mergers, but I feel that's a change.

A lot of the very large mergers within big companies try to create a one-stop shop where they control big segments of the marketplace and can offer clients all services, but if you try to do everything in-house, you're not necessarily getting the best in each area that you're looking for. Firms like us will bring in the best one for the job, and there's something to be said for focus on the level we're doing it—not just to provide a full range of services, but to do the best and most creative job and bring the best to any circumstance.

**GlobeSt.com: What else should our readers know about this merger?**

**Austin:** There's a concept we're introducing called the ideation lab. We're trying to come up with great ideas, trying to expand our horizons and stretch ourselves so when we look at a project we can come up with something really special—not just another cookie-cutter project. We will have brainstorming sessions where we'll invite the team directly responsible for a project and also folks who are not directly involved but might have good ideas because they're coming at it with a new perspective. Having outsiders come in creates a better project.

One of our current projects is Seaport San Diego, where we're bringing in the people from Seaport Village, the fishermen and the Port of San Diego, as well as others who have a vested interest in this project. This project wasn't the glitziest of those submitted for proposal, but it responded best on to how to make the waterfront work for visitors and residents of San Diego. It's an exciting project, but it's not just about that—it's about getting the connections right: pedestrian, vehicular, bicycles.

**Wolden:** The ideation lab began out of this belief that there's power to ideas. We don't necessarily deal in terms of leveraging ideas as much as we should. To get back to our earlier discussion, so often we just go straight to the problem solving instead of looking for ideas. I spent most of my career trying to glue buildings together with good urban ideas. This concept of idea-driven design and the power of ideas is why we call it the ideation lab. It's more than something that just comes out of an individual's brain when they sit down and design a building. It's the collaborative process, and that's how ideas are applied to design. Architecture has been about itself for many years, not so much about how to apply a creative process. We're trying to think of it beyond the building, in an equally creative way, to come up with ideas between the building and the people who use it to drive the creative process. Regarding the Seaport project, my view is that this is an example of an evolved process of looking at an area of a city not as a project but as a district with multiple components. Seaport is all about a district, a piece of the city.