BUSINESS OF HOME

A Butler Armsden project in Stinson Beach seamlessly bridges the California home's interior with a peaceful lagoon Joe Fletcher

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These principals figured out how to hand off their firm. Should you?

By Jennifer Fernandez

A solid succession plan is the first step to building a generation-spanning design firm. Whether you're elevating existing employees or hiring additional help, here's how to carve out a company culture for the long haul.

In 2022, Beverly Hills–based architect Tim Barber did something unfathomable to most principals with their name on the door: He hopped on a plane and flew across the world for a yearlong sabbatical, leaving his award-winning practice without him at the helm. "Obviously, I wouldn't have done it if I didn't trust my team," says Barber, who was leaving to pursue a master's degree in historical and sustainable architecture from NYU London. "I had a few awkward conversations with clients, but they quickly gained trust in the people I already trusted."

What few outside—and perhaps even inside—the company appreciated at the time were Barber's years of exploratory conversations with peers and employees he hoped to elevate to partners; behind-the-scenes planning with financial consultants; and careful calibrations within the firm that went into making that moment possible. The sabbatical effectively served as a stress test for the company, giving him a clear understanding of what his firm might look like once he stepped out of the picture. To his great comfort, the future looked bright.

Thinking about your own obsolescence is a scary prospect for most of us; mapping it out, even more so. But for logistical, financial—and, yes, emotional—reasons, it's a reality that many architects and designers who have built their firms from the ground up must face, ideally sooner rather than later. "You don't start a firm thinking about how you're going to retire," says Thomas A. Kligerman of New York's Kligerman Architecture & Design. "But you need to think about it way before you think you do."

If ruminating is the first step to implementing a succession plan, then figuring out your objective is the next. Selling your company is certainly an option. But for legacy design firms that have built reputations around a single principal who would like to see their company (and company culture) endure—as well as empower the team members who have contributed to the firm's success over its lifetime—a partnership plan allows them to transition to retirement, usually over a period of 10 to 15 years, and assign vesting stock options to members who will eventually take ownership of the business. It's the model that some of the industry's leading architecture firms have adopted with considerable success, and the one that Barber ultimately chose.

The plan began during Covid, when much of the world was working from home and many had time to entertain all kinds of previously unexamined thoughts. "I like to start every project with a why," recalls Barber, musing about what drove him to commence the legal and financial maneuvering to create a succession plan instead of just signing over the firm to a buyer. "In this case, I had some options," he says. "I had a good offer for the firm. I could have easily wound down about seven of our projects and just closed the doors and paid people with the reserves. But we had momentum—and ambitions. We had about 30 years, some of the staff had been here for at least 10 of those years, and the momentum was largely due to them, not me. It seemed a shame to walk away from something they had built without giving them a chance to take it over if they wanted to. And they were in."

He identified ideal succession candidates—Kelly Becker and David Stone, to start—in 2020, then initiated probing conversations to see if they might be interested in being partners. When they indicated that they were, he purposely started sitting in second chair, offering advice but largely letting them run meetings, both inside the firm and with clients. He elevated both to principal architect in early 2024. The intentionally long runway enabled him to nurture the leadership traits he feels are necessary to running a business—namely, a collaborative we-not-me spirit; an effective communication strategy; a commitment to excellence; and a desire to go above and beyond what's immediately required, for the ultimate benefit of the firm. Barber held office hours while he was in London, but Becker and Stone essentially ran the business while he was away. In late 2025, the company gained two more new partners when he promoted Ari Engelman and Katie Peterson-Hesketh to principal.

A diagonal wood banister inspired by French architect Henry Jacques Le Même takes the spotlight in this entry by Kligerman Architecture & Design and Peace Design

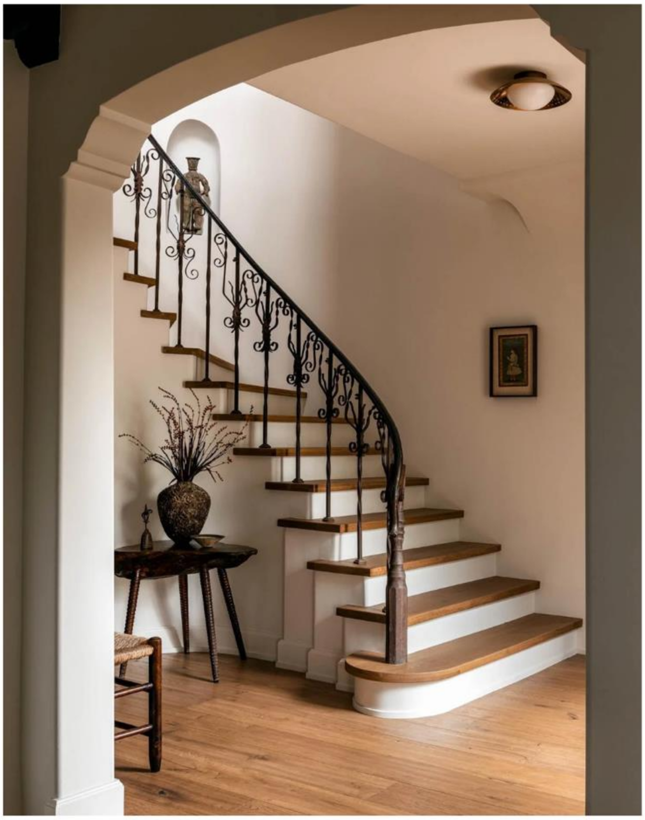
Richard Powers

In order to allow yourself ample time to mold your successors into the kind of leaders you want them to become, identifying which employees will step up to take over your firm should be an early step in the succession-planning process. An observation period also helps a founder figure out who can go the distance—and in what capacity. "Being a partner is a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week job," says Kligerman, who admits that there can be a steep learning curve when elevating employees to the partner level, and that design talent doesn't necessarily translate to a good leadership fit. "It's a different way of thinking, and not everyone wants it," he explains. After all, it's one thing to be an exceptional designer; it is quite another to negotiate employment contracts, navigate liability insurance on an office space, and oversee the company's yearly holiday card. There's also the indefinable element of chemistry. "It's a little self-selecting in some ways: Some people are better at the business part, some people are more creative, and others do more of the rainmaking," he adds. "Everyone doesn't have to do the same thing, but they all have to work hard, and they all have to work together to produce the highest quality for the firm."

Another benefit of having the luxury of time in the succession process is visibility: You allow clients to get on board with new partners before you fully hand over the reins of your firm. Seven years before Kelly Zerbini became managing partner and design director at Dunnam Zerbini Design in 2024, she was promoted to junior partner at Arthur Dunnam for Jed Johnson Studio—and was with Jed Johnson Associates for seven years before that. "This was a very intentional, slow process and not reactionary," says Zerbini. "For the clients, this has been years in the making. They saw it more as a formality, because we had the time for me to earn these relationships and gain their trust." The firm's new name underscores that sense of natural progression by paying respect to the legacy of its precursor businesses. (Notably, Dunnam had firsthand experience with creating and carrying out a succession plan at a much different pace: When the firm's founder, Jed Johnson, tragically passed away in the TWA 800 crash of 1996, he and Jed's twin brother, Jay, had to iron out the details in real time.)

Though it's a significant factor, there's more to visibility than just client acclimatization. Some of the earliest conversations Kligerman and Barber say they had with prospective partners centered on the idea of building a reputation for themselves within the industry, whether that meant attending more events, writing articles, going to talks or appearing on panels. The upside is twofold: Rising principals get their names circulating among peers, and they start to mingle in the circles that will continue to bring business to the firm long after its founding members have departed.

Not every firm has time on its side, so early succession planning can be a useful tool for mitigating the fallout from future surprises. Sole proprietors in particular may benefit from even a basic examination of the practical and financial implications. When Lewis W. Butler of Butler Armsden Architects was diagnosed with esophageal cancer in 2020, there was no succession plan in place for the San Francisco firm he co-founded with his wife, Catherine Armsden, who no longer worked for the business. In the six months before he passed away, he took stock of his team and drew up the paperwork to transfer ownership of Butler Armsden to three longtime employees he trusted to carry on the ethos of the company. Despite their 16-year history with the firm, the trio—Chandra Campbell, Federico Engel and Glenda Flaim—had to fast-track learning that often takes a decade or more, and spend years in reaction mode building a foundational corporate structure that would establish systems, codify responsibilities and create a mentorship framework for their 27-person team. "That experience shaped so much of what we've done, so we're always in the mindset of developing the next leaders of the firm," says Campbell, who served as chief financial officer before becoming CEO. "Ideally, you're planning for retirement, but you don't know if you're planning for disability or sudden death or something else. Even if you don't intend to transfer ownership of the firm for 10 years or more, you need to have a plan in place."



A detailed railing adds character and charm to this 1930s Spanish home that features architecture by Tim Barber
Haris Kenjar

Their story emphasizes the clarifying effect succession planning can have on a business, whether that's being more strategic about hiring, streamlining processes to better serve your purpose, or identifying the future direction for a brand—the latter being the case for siblings Max Konig and Alice Deen, who both held director-level roles at the London-based textiles, furniture, tablewares and accessories company founded by their mother, celebrated interior designer Nina Campbell. After a major showroom upgrade and several years of significant profitability, Konig approached a financial consulting firm with the goal of buttoning up the family business. The audit process forced them not only to examine how the company and their roles in it might evolve when their mother, now 80, steps away from her eponymous business, but also to initiate the difficult conversations they needed to have in order to create an action plan.

"In a way, it was very freeing to have those conversations, because we have such a clear path now," says Deen, who also notes that a sense of humor goes a long way. "A surprising thing is that it forces you to have difficult conversations with *yourself*," adds Konig. "It's almost easier to have an awkward conversation with somebody else."

Many firms that have been through the succession planning process have said that soliciting the advice of people outside their companies, both financial consultants and like-minded peers, imparted a sense of confidence, because it allowed them to peek under the hoods of similar businesses. "It educated us on how other firms are doing things and gave us a reasonable standard of expectation," says Butler Armsden's Chandra Campbell. Konig felt the same: "It almost rubber-stamps your decisions, because you have the confidence that [the consultants] have done it before," he adds.

Perhaps just as important as a road map of executable business tasks like strategic planning and incentivized compensation, the revelations of those conversations also help leaders establish a set of core values that reverberate through the company's culture and dealings for years to come. A combination of executive-level mentorship and a firm-wide focus on professional development create an atmosphere that encourages the cultivation of relationships and leads to a shared sense of responsibility.

"There's an element of understanding and respect and trust between [members of] the new leadership, but also between the rest of the firm to them, and to each individual," says Flaim. "That is what everyone lives in on a daily basis."

Hidden beneath the surface of all this purposeful planning and future forecasting is the very humbling reality of someone's professional journey coming to an end. Logistically, that translates to shares eventually feathering out, fewer client hours, and perhaps even hourly consulting gigs. For example, Barber structured his deal so that while his percentage of the partners' profit share slowly declines, the partners continue to pay him a salary; when he ultimately leaves the firm, his partners will absorb the remaining profit in their varying vesting percentages. Kligerman's partners will gradually purchase shares from him over a nine-year period.

Those conversations also bring a bigger picture into focus. Succeeding partners often express this layer of meaning as a desire to do right by the founder of their firm. "Above all, I want to respect the legacy of what Jed built and what Arthur built and carried on," says Zerbini, who acquired 20 percent of the company as junior partner and is now an equal partner with the firm's recent rebrand.

The founders have their own moments of clarity. "Of course, I want my partners to be able to pay their rent, but what drives me is doing something significant, something that bends the arc of architectural history in some small way," says Kligerman. "I want people to pull out a book and say, 'Wow, they did that in 2005?!' I always want the firm to be doing something to bring clients on this bold, daring voyage of discovery."

Barber, too, is invested in realizing the grander purpose of architecture through his firm, even after he has stepped away from its corporate structure. "If you believe that places make people better, if you're trying to get people invested in making places that make people feel inspired, generous, curious, vital, optimistic, that's the goal," he says. "You never really let that go. You just find other ways to express it."

Though his workload hasn't lessened in the way he expected—in part a result of the urgent construction demands following the California wildfires—the partner model has allowed Barber to slowly pivot into other avenues that might be beneficial to the firm that currently bears his name. "I'm finding things to do that will be rewarding for me personally but will also build bridges that my teammates will be able to leverage as they expand the business," he says of his teaching roles at NYU and the Institute of Classical Architecture and Art, and an upcoming personal move to Berkeley—where he will be exploring sustainable build practices on his own home in order to better understand how to keep developing the types of solutions the firm proposes to clients. "Maybe I shouldn't be so invested in what people think of us, but I am. For as long as I live, I want to be the champion of this firm."