

### SHARING THE FLEXIBILITY

When Beth T. Clark and Sheila M. Condon launched their firm in 1985, other Houston landscape architects didn't take them seriously. Now, when Clark Condon & Associates wins projects like the 500-acre headquarters expansion for Compaq Computers, "We hear, 'God, they did it again,'" says Condon.

From a two-person office to today's 12-member firm with nearly \$1 million in annual billings, Clark Condon has prospered. They aver that being a women-owned firm has boosted their business—and their careers.

The firm's women-owned status helped win public projects like transit centers for the Houston Metropolitan Transit Authority. At first they were consultants; now they're lead designers winning the work on merit alone.

Condon, a Connecticut native trained at Rutgers, met Clark, a Texan schooled at Texas A&M, at Fred Buxton and Associates of Houston. Clark's skills as designer/technician complemented Condon's strengths in marketing and project management.

A shared yearning for "a sense of ownership" put them in business, says Condon. The flexibility of self-employment was also a plus. "If I take the morning off to take my kid swimming, I make up the work at night," says Clark.

They began in 600 square feet. They vowed to stay in for keeps, eschewing salaries to plow profits into the firm. The public work, along with new clients such as the Friendswood Development Company (an Exxon subsidiary) and Texas A&M (a contact from the Buxton days), finally added up to a solid practice. Today the firm occupies 2,000 square feet in the downtown Galleria area.

Is their office different from a male-run practice? "This is a stereotype," says Clark, "but I think women are more sensitive to people's feelings. If someone's got a personal problem, you say, 'Go home and take care of this, and when you've got it worked out come back. Because you're not going to get any work done anyway.'"

"We try to share the flexibility," says Condon. To wit, Clark Condon offers bonuses for overtime. As both partners are working mothers, they select only close-to-home projects. Yet they don't allow children, even their own, in the office: "It's distracting to the staff," says Condon. "We try to keep family and business totally separate."

Motherhood sometimes holds them to a different standard. "Clients look at us a little more harshly," she adds. "They say, 'Do you really think you can do this job and keep your family happy?' That's a little extra pressure."

The bottom line? Condon now realizes that "at major firms, very few of the principals are women. In hindsight, [starting our own firm] was a good idea."—M.L.



Beth Clark and Sheila Condon

*"Having fewer people under one roof is the trend. All offices are having to deal with economies of scale, and the smaller offices are competing very well."*



**EDAW's 300-acre Mission Bay project in San Francisco includes restored wetlands and shoreline among shops, offices, parks and 8,500 homes.**

tell a client that his job is going to absorb 50 percent of your staff, that will be scary to the client. But an office of 20 to 30 people is very effective to deal with a regional market."

Platt defines the challenge for landscape architects as adapting to new demands. "Even though we're a large company, we have always worked as a group of small companies," he says. "With fax machines, it's remarkable what you can do with a small group. Small is more changeable, more adaptable, more flexible—which is what you have to be today." ■

Vernon Mays is editor of *Inform*, a regional magazine of architecture and design published by the Virginia Society of the American Institute of Architects.