

PATHWAYS TO THE FUTURE

The driving forces at four on-the-rise design firms share their strategies for forging ongoing growth in today's highly competitive market.

BY MATTHEW HALL

CARL ROSS

Design Group Carl Ross, El Segundo, Calif.



A veteran of several high-profile design firms, including Victor Huff & Associates and Wilson Associates, Ross and his wife, Dolly, started their own business 18 years ago. "Complacency scares the hell out of me," says Ross. "I am constantly pushing our team to keep finding new ways to do things."

ON THE EVOLUTION OF HIS FIRM'S ROLE:

"We aren't just designers anymore, we are communicators. I tell our clients that, basically, we get paid to hallucinate. And because we're really good at doing that, in a year or two or five, we all will collectively walk into that hallucination and call it reality. Being able to accurately communicate a design years before it comes to fruition, and then manage all the literally hundreds of personalities, tradesmen, artisans and consultants—and do that with integrity—is a remarkable achievement, but it's also what's expected these days."

IMPORTANT SKILL SETS HE SEEKS WHEN HIRING DESIGNERS:

"They need to see space in 3-D, specify the appropriate FF&E and be an effective project manager—all at the same time. I guess you'd call that a Renaissance-style designer. A hotel guest doesn't experience a space as separate disciplines of interior architecture or FF&E, so why structure a design company like that? I think a more holistic approach is more effective, more empowering and ultimately richer."

SEEKING NEW WAYS TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE DESIGN TALENT THAT'S OUT THERE:

"I'm working to establish a referral system for newer designers with a good track record. I think that there's more work out there than any one firm can take on, and by providing introductions to vetted young designers, we can continue to elevate the quality of design in our industry and help to provide great options to clients. It's a total win-win."



Design Group Carl Ross' recent projects include overseeing a major renovation at the Elara – a Hilton Grand Vacations Hotel in Las Vegas.