

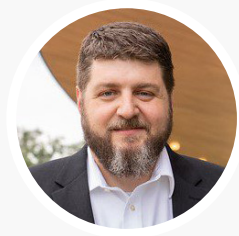
HEADS UP. EYES OUT.
MINDS OPEN.



PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q2: CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS





Heads Up. Eyes Out. Minds Open.

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How OPN is transforming their firm through contextual awareness, strategic planning and an action focus.

Forty-one years is one heck of a run. As one of the Midwest's most successful firms over a four-decade span, things were pretty good at OPN. We had done great work, been profitable and developed countless wonderful colleague, partner and client relationships over that time. So why change?

For starters, we wondered if we had put the right structure in place to support a legacy firm for future generations. We questioned whether we could continue to fill the pipeline by generating the same number of business development wins. But it was hard to argue with success.

In 2019, for the first time in our history, our then 41-year-old firm decided to embark on the creation of a strategic plan. We were immediately confronted with COVID-19. A pause seemed in order. Soon, we renewed our focus on finding an experienced partner to team with us in the strategic planning effort. DesignIntelligence was chosen from a handful of candidates, and we began.

Context: Values-Based Vision

Our journey began with a series of interviews. What were our values as a firm? What made us who we were, as individuals and a collective. In times of trouble, we returned to the values and

people we held dearly and gave us our “why.” Through a series of facilitated sessions, we used a values-based approach to add external focus. Sure, things were fine within the firm, but what about external factors outside our control? The more we looked into the future, we learned to listen to what it was telling us. Competition and encroachment were increasing. Our clients were changing; what had constituted value to them was changing as well. As we looked to and beyond the horizon to develop our response to the future, we saw a dramatically changing landscape, one filled with environmental, economic, social and human crises that need our attention. A bold new vision resulted:

“We embrace our responsibility to care for each other and our planet through extraordinary design and a boundary-free practice.”

The broad reach of this vision was not only inspiring, it also activated the potential to think and practice in more connected ways. The responsibility for caring for people and the planet and doing so in heretofore unthinkable and integrated ways (e.g., boundary-free) was liberating. Going forward, having learned lessons around remote work during the pandemic, what would constitute an office? In one bold stroke we built on a prior strength – our Midwestern, Iowa-based heritage – while reframing it to focus on a forward-looking approach. We could now work anywhere and with anyone. Why not? We could recruit and attract talent from anywhere. But could we?



Images courtesy OPN



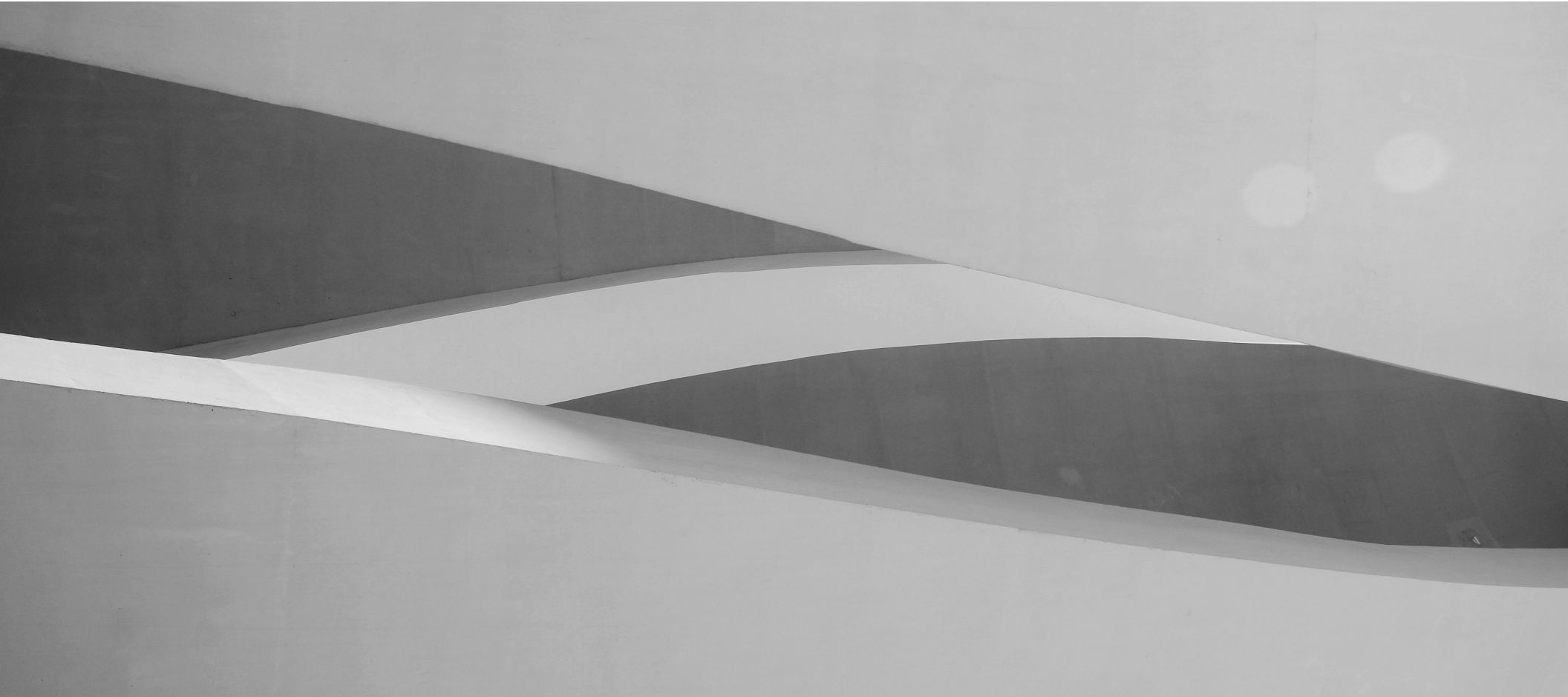
Implementing the Vision

As a firm that “gets things done,” we have always prided ourselves on our action focus. In response, and as a result of our new vision and strategic plan, 20 strategic initiatives were identified, prioritized, phased and implemented in four waves.

To share an understanding of some of these initiatives, here are just a few major areas in which OPN is using heightened contextual awareness and our new strategic plan to achieve greater results:

Vision Messaging

As soon as it was completed, we began a dedicated campaign to share our new vision with all firm members in all locations. Through a series of interactive conversations, breakout discussions, town hall meetings, firm retreats and road shows, we successfully shared the story and generated consensus to help colleagues understand and buy in to our new direction. Each was given a chance to ask questions and develop a sense of where they fit in the firm’s future. Returning to large group formats after active engagement, a renewed firmwide vigor was the byproduct.



Talent & Recruiting

Another immediate action of our new strategic plan was to triple our recruiting team from a handful of key people to more than 20. We saw the clear need to grow and develop relationships with a broader set of talent pools, universities and geographic regions. As a result, we:

- Expanded from visiting four to 16 schools.
- Hired 13 summer interns, with more pending.
- Added 16 new full-time hires representing 11 different universities.
- Added diversity while attracting new teammates who add to our culture with diverse new perspectives and thinking modes.
- Deployed updated video, branding and firm information tools in our recruiting process.

Beyond the above actions, we added significantly more structure and information to our recruiting process, including training every person involved. By bringing clarity to our candidate evaluation criteria, we increased the diversity of candidates interviewing. We also added meaningful candidate tour experiences in our studio locations that enlisted even MORE people in our studios to participate. Tours include OPN designed buildings and downtown city tours, as well as peer-to-peer panels in our studios where candidates were able to sit with four or five recent graduates on their own to have open, honest conversations about their experiences starting their careers at OPN, onboarding, living in our communities and more. Last, by sharing relevant and specific information on our communities, housing options and other local tips, we helped candidates be better informed as they contemplated their career, firm choice and relocation decisions.



Looking outward changed our world. Imagine what it could do for yours. It begins by looking, listening and knowing who you are. It succeeds through values, leadership and strong culture.



Design Excellence

In line with our new vision, we are developing an updated process for creating and ensuring design excellence through use of client-specific engagement, community context and an integration of design and performance for all projects. As a result of doubling down on our existing design excellence program we have added more reviews, grown our team and are expanding our impact. We've also begun benchmarking other outstanding firms and continue to build on our already established processes of peer reviews and inviting nationally known speakers to our yearly retreats (our track record of selecting AIA Gold Medalists the year before they're awarded still holds!). We're building on these relationships nationally and are participating in more awards juries while broadening our own base of design awards and publications, including recent national coverage.

Technology, Innovation & Digital Practice

Our innovation efforts can be categorized into several key practice aspects: BIM/production, operations, design excellence, fabrication/construction and building performance/sustainability, with the following implementation areas:

- Our strategic plan is guiding us in consolidating our existing IT and BIM teams into a digital practice group by seamlessly integrating our burgeoning innovation team.
- Staff across all studios are finding their passion and charting their future careers with new self-created, technology-focused career paths.
- Select summer interns are purposefully hired to be dedicated to innovation and focus on special project goals.
- Per the vision, we have enabled boundary-free teams with technology, collaboration and engagement platforms and a

renewed focus on building a culture of innovation. Highlights include learning and exploration through recurring training, an innovation workshop series, a digital fabrication design competition and design discussion groups in each studio.

- We are looking forward to our first annual hack-a-thon and are building strategic partnerships with digital fabrication vendors, innovative peers through Design Futures Council connections and academic program partners.
- We have advanced our hardware and software explorations in 3D capture, XR visualization, mobile/on-site surveys, scripting and process improvements, generative design and high-performance analysis design tools.

In all, OPN is investing in the future with a budget to fail forward and contribute to the global digitization of the AEC industry.

Organizational Structure

A direct outgrowth of the strategic plan was our rapid development of a simple organizational structure, a tool that replaced our prior, intentionally flat structure. We take great pride in the collegial nature of the partnership and conscious lack of corporate bureaucracy. Our motivation for doing this was simple: We realigned decision-making with a renewed clarity of roles and skill sets that heightened the efficacy of our business processes and established clearer, more transparent pathways for growth within the company. Never again would we have to engage in a meeting of 10-plus partners to resolve the issue of whether to buy a new copy machine for the office!

By themselves, each of these initiatives is already making significant differences in the firm's culture, practice and impact. Together, they are the beginning of nothing less than the transformation of our firm. The momentum we generated by creating

a new strategic plan has provided us with a framework – an organizational tool – to ensure we can be intentional in our actions, not reactive. Seen as a strength by potential job candidates as well by the entire firm membership, our consistent, persistent rolling out of one major initiative each quarter has helped us achieve deep, meaningful, lasting change in lieu of a greater number of shallower actions.

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Take a look at the bigger picture, you might like what you see.

Ferris Bueller said it best:

“Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.”



The more we looked into the future,
we learned to listen to what it was
telling us.



Danielle Hermann, AIA, ’s promotion as OPN Architects’ first female principal in 2015 was not by chance. Her career has been dedicated to shaping experiences, not just through the built environment, but through the very practice of architecture itself, particularly for women. She and three other women architects founded Iowa Women in Architecture (iaWia), a not-for-profit organization focusing on educating, empowering and advancing women in design. She is also the founder of AIA Iowa’s Diversity Committee. She has been recognized for her commitment to the profession with a Design Achievement Award from Iowa State University (2013), the AIA Iowa Young Architect Award (2016) and the AIA Young Architect Award (2017).

Justin Bishop, AIA, is a principal at OPN Architects. He founded OPN’s Iowa City studio in 2016. With degrees in architecture (B.A., Iowa State University) and business (MBA, University of Iowa), Justin embraces that creation is an exchange. He is inspired by the space in which technology and architecture collide. Justin’s dedication to design, his company, community and the field of architecture is evident in the many leadership roles he has held in the AIA and the community at large.