

Flying with Eagles:

An Interview with Joseph E. Brown, FASLA, President and CEO, EDAW

We buy and sell in the business of ideas, so you have to, no matter how big you get, have the next best idea. If you run out of ideas you're out of business. Growth means change. You have to be ready to grow and change and expand.

--- Joe Brown

EDAW is a San Francisco-based land planning and landscape architecture practice of more than 1100 people spread across 25 offices in 4 countries. The firm has grown since its formation in the 1940's to become one of the leaders in urban design and revitalization, landscape architecture, community planning, ecological and environmental sciences, resource management, and the economic, social science and information technology required for large-scale environmental planning.

From their contemporary offices located below Telegraph Hill, Joe Brown, FASLA oversees the firm's world-wide operations, as president and CEO. The firm is organized regionally in the US, and has offices in China, Australia and the UK.

Recently, SMPS Fellow and past-national president, Craig Park, met with Joe to discuss the firm's growth, leadership, and his perspectives on the market and marketing.

Craig Park: How did you come to EDAW, and what was your first role?

Joe Brown: I came to EDAW in 1974. I was in New York City working for the New York State Urban Development Corporation. I came to work as a junior Project Manager for EDAW in

Southern California. I had a degree in Architecture and Masters in Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning from Harvard. I worked in that office for 3 years, and then started an office for the firm in Washington, DC (Alexandria, VA). I helped grow that office, and most of my personal development happened while I was there. I started some other offices for the firm, and became president, and moved to San Francisco, in 1992.

CP: Where did you learn your marketing skills?

JB: A big part of it was fear. I think also it's being creatively skeptical of management. I don't think marketing instincts rise very well from management. Everybody talks about marketing. Very little of that talking is really about marketing. That's OK, I don't mean to sound too skeptical.

I was in working in Irvine, and I got a couple of projects in Washington DC. So I was flying back and forth a lot. My family wanted to see more of me, so I proposed to the firm that we open the Alexandria, VA office. This was in the 1975, and we were in the middle of a recession, and after much hemming and hawing they said no. I said I didn't ask the right question. I'm moving to

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Washington, would EDAW like to come. And after much more hemming and hawing they said OK. Unfortunately, by then enough time had passed that all the work I had developed in Washington was gone. We had done it all. So I was sitting in a new office with no work.

Being corporate and strategic, we know we can't let people sit there with no work for long, or we'd all go out of business. As a marketer, you need to know that feeling. When you do, you develop your business development instincts pretty quickly. It doesn't take more than a few of weeks. Especially if you are younger, you get those instincts and you don't get them mixed up with other thoughts.

My theory has always been that it's all about marketing, but not about marketing in a generic sense. It's about having some ideas, but being somewhat fearful that if you don't get them outside of the building you'll be out of business. So, if I got to Thursday and hadn't called some new client, I panicked, and spent Thursday and Friday making those calls. I'd make 50 calls and go see people. If you are not doing that regularly, I don't care how busy you are, you will be out of work, and that doesn't feel good. My advice is to be sensitive, be dramatic, be romantic, and be idealistic. Give them ideas, don't just call them.

CP: Do you still have a marketing discipline for yourself.

JB: I definitely do. Right now I'm working on the pursuit a project in Bahamas, and another for a major institutional relocation to Florida. I think that's a tremendous way to lead (by example), when you are calling 10 people right after the New Year for potential work for the firm.

CP: What significant changes you've seen at EDAW over the last 12 years?

JB: On the simplistic side, the firm was about 110 people then, and we have 1100 now. More significantly, we've gone from a typical

design/planning practice ambivalence about the issues to a greater focus and a proactive approach to issues of the environment.

CP: How much of that growth came from internal growth versus growth through acquisition?

JB: About a third of our locations came through strategic acquisition, but staffing has increased primarily because of firm-wide growth.

CP: What impact did that growth have on you management style?

JB: We have created what we call a "firm without walls." One of the lessons learned from the acquisitions is that the transition is more important than the acquisition, and building synergy is more important than the transition. So we have a team of different individuals who oversee the process at various stages, which is designed to help us through each of the steps of acclimating and inculcating new (acquired) people into EDAW.

CP: How does the firm manifest this "firm without walls?"

JB: Clients from around the world now identify our profession as the one to lead their projects. The challenge is to design and organization that serves their expectations. They are more sophisticated, and want us as collaborators. They have little use or time for branch offices or technical/functional divisions. So we've gotten rid of divisions and made EDAW an organization where we can pull specialists and staff from around the world as needed to deliver for a given client.

We communicate this internally through our Intranet. It provides "communities" for different aspects of our practice, and a wealth of information about administration, HR, and marketing. It is a repository for our marketing media. It helps us to see ourselves as one firm, where we can assemble the best team to take on a

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project based on individual skills, regardless of location.

CP: What do you read?

JB: I read in spurts. Sometimes I read a lot, sometimes I don't read much. I read some of the popular books, like *The Da Vinci Code*, but I don't read a lot of management or the new wave of vision leadership types of thinking. I read a few that stuck with me. I liked Max Dupree's book, *Leadership is an Art*, where he says, "Leadership is about two things. Defining reality and expressing appreciation." Very good stuff, very clever. I try to read for a break. I also read magazines. I try to read our own stuff. That's daunting in itself. I don't think many people read their own stuff, and they should.

CP: What do you do for personal professional development to develop and maintain skilled leadership?

JB: I'm active in a few organizations that give me real both peer and client stimuli. At ULI I serve on the Board of Trustees, and on the Executive Committee as Vice Chairman. It's a little like a fox in the hen house, but sometimes those chickens are bigger than the foxes. It's very stimulating.

CP: Have you found that volunteerism has helped build relationship skills?

JB: Yes, but it takes a few years to do it right. I was kind of an over-urgent warrior personality, and so I spent many years doing too many different things. As we get older, I believe we should tend to do more things, but with fewer organizations, where you can rise into a more respected position. Doing this you develop a profile as a leader as opposed to someone who just does tasks. And the volunteerism of just tasks will kill you if it's only that. You need to have a leadership profile that is evident when you're not in the room.

CP: How do you spend your time?

JB: I spend about half my time with clients, some in projects, much in marketing and relationship building.

CP: I'm surprised you can spend that much time on projects.

JB: More precisely, I said clients. I concentrate less on projects, usually the "weird" ones, but more often my time is focused on building and maintaining relationships with the larger clients. I'm currently involved with a large project for a developer who has rights to develop a new Las Vegas-style "Strip" for the island of Macau. On the other side of the spectrum, we have a very client funding a new university and town in Florida, who is very disciplined moral-based and hyper conservative. He is the complete opposite of our Las Vegas client. I find I now tend to spend most of my time with the clients who are much more extreme than the middle of the road.

CP: That still sounds like it takes a lot of time.

JB (laughing): Realistically, if you spend 50 percent of time with clients, 50 percent of your time managing the firm, and 50 percent of your time doing everything else, it works.

CP: How do you communicate your vision to the firm as a whole? How do they know to follow Joe Brown?

JB: I think time and success work wonders in that department. If you had to communicate constantly with 1100 people, you wouldn't be able to do it. I'm not very good at that. I actually think that if a person who spends too much time trying to communicate the vision, it can backfire. The vision has to be self-evident.

I try to do the things you should do. I go to the offices. I don't go to the offices just to go to the offices. If there is a client or marketing opportunity, I try to piggyback a trip with those. I think if you just show up to show up, it doesn't work. If you show up to self-demonstrate it works.

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If you have simple philosophies that are not so euphemistic or clichéd, or you have a character or style in presenting them, so that even if they are clichéd they don't appear to be clichéd, it goes a long way.

I still get criticism for not portraying the vision of the company sufficiently. We have some simple philosophies about ambition; that there is nothing wrong with an ambitious view of landscape and urban design and land and land and community consulting. We are not just leading EDAW, we are leading the industry, and we are changing how land and community is made.

People remember if you have an organizational ambition that is raising the bar on all that we are endeavoring to do. So that when you've left the room, they say, "He wants us to do more than normal. I get that. And, he's not going to happy if it's just so-so or matter-of-fact. I get that."

I see it as about the firm leading the people and the firm leading the industry. We believe we are equal to the architects and engineers, and are beyond them in many ways, without having a chip on our shoulders. So if you have a leadership philosophy that goes beyond just the financial or the bounds of the practice, it goes a long way to communicating the vision.

CP: Anything else?

JB: I also do a quarterly message. I email it directly, and it's posted on our Intranet. And then verbally when I'm in the office. And this kind of article helps a lot. When they read about me, what I'm doing, and what EDAW is doing through 3rd-party endorsement, it is fabulous internally for the firm, as well as externally.

CP: Do use videoconferencing or web conferencing as a communication tool?

JB: Yes, about half our offices have video conferencing. It's a great tool, and I like it. I find web conferencing much more awkward. One thing

that works is putting video and web conferencing together, using video on the big screen, and using the web on a small screen. We did that when we rolled out our new brochure, and it worked well.

CP: Have you invested in customer relationship management software to help track and share the history and knowledge base of the firm?

JB: We are implementing Deltek's Vision product right now. We have it in beta testing in 3 offices. So far, it's looking good.

CP: Did you have to change any work processes to accommodate the implementation?

JB: We did. It all comes down to people. We're committed to putting people on it sufficiently to do all the data entries, shift the information, training, and advocating the use and purpose and mission. We're in the middle of that. We don't know everything we know, and we need to be aggressive in technology as one dimension to implementing a system to allow for better and more integrated access to our knowledge.

CP: What are the challenges you see coming for EDAW? How far forward are you looking strategically in the organization?

JB: We try to look forward, to start with. It's very hard because everyone is looking backward. That's the nature when you feel very strongly about what you've just done. We don't look enormously forward. We are not 10 years out. We look 3 years out. We do a 3 year plan, then we do annual budgets and modifications, and then we keep updating the plan so it stays 3 years out.

What do we see coming? One of thing about EDAW is that we can't escape economic cycles, but we seem to.

CP: That's good.

JB: It is good, but you know there's a cautionary tale there, so we are on guard, and shifting our

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targets as we see appropriate. That's what the corporate group does a great deal of along with the best leaders in the regions of the firm.

CP: To the extent you can see trends, what can you share?

JB: The most significant thing going on in real estate, planning and community development today is that all of the innovative edge of sustainability, smart growth and restoration economy, which were pie-in-the-sky ideas a few years ago, are becoming mainstream. But not only mainstream, but mandatory mainstream. To the point where you see serious application articles, not just intellectuals speculating beautifully, you see mainstream writers and media, like USA Today, doing pieces on smart growth. And it's not just about smart growth as an ideal, but it how smart growth produces more growth.

There is research and there is anecdotal evidence. Everyone is looking for way to get those better ideas about the environment into their projects. This application of innovation has become mandatory. So through popular acceptance, whether through the press, or advertising, or political awareness, we see that people aren't going to put up with mediocrity. That's good for us. We rise with this tide. We've risen with this tide since the beginning of the environmental movement in 1970's.

CP: Have you seen an increase in the competitive pressure in the projects you pursue?

JB: Yes, that's very true. There is the whole issue of commoditizing in the industry, but I'm not a big believer in that syndrome. We have a little easier time, because we're so upstream to start with.

CP: How do you differentiate EDAW from other competitors?

JB: We're doing more competitions, we're not doing less, but we're trying to target the right ones.

We don't do every one that comes along. We budget in advance for a few good ones, and then really do them well.

The international work is competitive. We have 5 offices and 200 people in China, which is bigger than the firm was when I became president. So we're a little nervous about competition in China. It seems like you see everybody, and their brother-in-law showing up.

On the other hand, we are trying to restrain our growth. We don't just do everything that comes along. However, our offices there are very entrepreneurial and very aggressive.

CP: So they would if they could?

JB: Absolutely, they would be 500 people, and it would be chaos. They wouldn't do it well.

CP: Is there an emphasis in your growth model relative to quality of the work product?

JB: Yes, a primary emphasis. We believe in not growing faster than you can do great work. But that's not an excuse for not growing.

The competitive issues you raise are really important. For example, in Boston (on the Big Dig), we've been through a real ringer. It's what I call the smartest people in the world being the dumbest. The impact of that kind of political, cost competitive environment ends up producing less work. We're not doing the best work because we're being beaten up so badly before we even begin. We try to say to client, just let us do the job, but they don't seem to see the qualitative delta between our good, albeit expensive, service, and the lower cost of local competitors. In the long run, we hope that quality wins out.

CP: Is your international growth more than domestic growth?

JB: Both Europe and Asia are growing faster than the US. Our London office has had an enormous

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year, both in revenue and profit, which is a little ahead of Asia. That may be a little bit of an anomaly, but we'll see. However, there are two components to our international growth: the work being done internationally, and the work being done domestically in support of international projects. So overall, international growth helps our domestic needs as well.

CP: Do you have plans for organizational growth, through expanding or new offices?

JB: We've said we don't want more offices, but grow our staff or capabilities in the offices we have. But as soon as you say that is mandatory, or there's an acquisition you can't pass up. We've been stable on the number of offices and growing our staff for some time. The firm's revenues are up 100% over the last 4 years, and profits have grown 150%. That may plateau a little bit, but I don't see that stopping.

CP: Have you been able to increase profitability?

JB: We have. We're going to make 13% net on revenue, a 23% growth year-to-year. We're targeting 15% profit firm-wide. We have some offices doing better, some worse, so we're trying to notch up each year. We're looking for ways to reduce expenses, and we've done that here in the firm-wide group where we've reduced overhead from 13% to 9%.

CP: Does the firm encourage personal professional development?

JB: Absolutely. Everyone has personal goals for development. We have programs like "Summer Students" which is an intern program for masters-candidate level planning and design students. We have a Leadership Development Forum where we provide training for our future leaders.

CP: What is the potential for non-technical professionals to rise to level of principal in the firm?

JB: A good subject that is certainly much discussed. We've tended to allow that happen. We don't want to restrict anybody. EDAW is an edgy firm. There are lots of different things we do. It is sometimes fairly chaotic with lots of threads of opportunity around the edges that we are very interested in and that we see as very positive. So people have become principals who are not professional planners or designers, particularly in the corporate firm-wide group here in San Francisco. Does that happen in the other offices? It is going to happen. It is on its way.

CP: Do you have any advice for marketers?

JB: So many young marketers are so anxious to please and serve well that they don't listen. When a project response needs something specific, they need to learn to focus the response on this idea. Too often they just run off and get 30 project descriptions. So my advice is to stop being so formulaic, package-oriented, automatic pilot, and focus on the idea and think. Marketing is a brilliant and creative endeavor, it is not generic. It is not formulaic. It is not about packaging, though packaging is important. So, listen and focus.

CP: Do you have marketing advice for the technical leaders of a firm?

JB: Too often, they want marketing coordinators just to do packaging, and low and behold they get the problem I just described. So over-hire your marketing assistants and make them your marketing partners. I've always said that a person succeeds because they have an angel on each shoulder: a marketing angel on one shoulder, and a business angel on the other. My advice is to listen to them. Hire your marketing staff properly, don't under-hire, and do what they say. Don't over-manage them, or over-think them. Don't compete with them. Don't try to do their work. Don't make long lists. Just let them do their thing.



About the Interviewer

Craig Park, FSMPS, is president of Craig Park Consulting, a marketing, technology, management advisory practice, based in Los Angeles. He is the author of *Design. Market. Grow!: Building an Enduring Practice through Expertise, Excellence and Experience*, published by SMPS in 2003. Craig serves on the SMPS National Board of Directors, SMPS Foundation Board of Directors, and is past-president of the San Francisco/Bay Area Chapter. Craig can be reached by email craig@craigpark.com, or by phone at 310.570.7636.