



RIGHT  
SIZED

## FOUR FIRMS TALK ABOUT HOW THEY DECIDE HOW MUCH STAFF IS TOO MUCH (OR TOO LITTLE).

BY JENNIFER REUT

**D**esign firms come in all sizes—though a large design firm of, say, 400 people is peanuts in many other businesses. At any rate, the size of a firm is not incidental. It tends to reflect the principal's business philosophy. Many principals wish to stay tiny for a reason, to keep projects and relationships intimate and keep their own stamp on everything possible. Among those who grow to juggle multiple major projects at a time, a magic number often comes up—35 employees, or 40. It may be a matter of available space in the office. More often, a target number is seen as a threshold of quality, the point beyond which an office focused on design might shift focus to its management culture, which can take on a life of its own. We interviewed four principals at firms of various sizes to find out why they choose to be the size they are.

**ABOVE**  
dwg. founder Daniel Woodroffe, ASLA, (right) and Jacob Walker in dwg.'s Austin, Texas, studio.

**DWG.**  
AUSTIN, TEXAS  
ESTABLISHED: 2010  
CURRENT SIZE: 18  
**DANIEL WOODROFFE, ASLA,**  
PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER

**What's the largest the firm has been?**  
WOODROFFE: Eighteen. We've had about a 10 percent growth each year, year on year. It's been very stable and controlled but in large part based on our careful methodology of hiring and being very selective on the individuals, and the individual skill set, that we've been looking for

each time. We're probably going to be hiring another couple of people this year.

**The smallest?**  
Me and a dining room table with a half-time employee.

**What have you found to be the ideal size of your firm?**  
When dwg. was started in 2010, my strategic vision for five–seven years was to be about 10–12 people. We've always had a very careful methodology of reviewing and assessing project types and prospective new projects with clients. I have



**"I SOMETIMES FEEL LIKE WE HAVE A TEAM OF 40."**

—DANIEL WOODROFFE, ASLA

seen consistent year-on growth, but within that, 18 to 25 was always the perceived sweet spot of the personality, team camaraderie, and unique large small firm that is able to keep a level of individuality but at the same time tackle very large projects with very aggressive schedules when necessary.

**How does your preferred office size affect your willingness to take on new work or to let something go?**

We work on urban architectural landscapes—not that we work exclusively in the downtown areas, but much more urban design where architecture, infrastructure, and landscape converge. We don't do master planning or single-family develop-

ments in the suburbs of Houston, for example. That's allowed us to naturally have a very precise selection process. We've worked really hard over the past few years with our strategic planning to have a checklist for projects to assess new clients, new project types, to have the entire office actually weigh in on the level of interest, excitement, alignment to our core values of sustainable infrastructure and urban design, and design aesthetic as well. When you get a group that really works well together, you can be really devastatingly efficient.

**What would have to happen for you to change your ideal number of an 18- to 25-person firm? What would really shift your thinking?**

Oh my goodness—I think we've experienced one of those shifts already in our short history, and that's a moment when Michael Van Valkenburgh called me on my cell phone and said, "Would you like to be our local landscape architect for Waller Creek?" It has very much been a strategic turning point.

Let's just say we have three clients all bringing perfect projects to the table and each one of them passing with flying colors, as long as they're not asking for everything on exactly the same day at every single phase. Then there's a necessity to weigh—do we have the capacity to find the right people? We're still a small firm. Right now we have limited space and limited bandwidth to hire multiple people at any one time. There's a natural throttling process that allows us to be careful and methodical.

I will say that [given] six years of the little black book of names and hiring, what I truly believe in are people who are wickedly smarter than I am and who are incredibly talented. I sometimes feel like we have a team of 40, because of the communication and work flow that can be put out if you really put your mind to it and communicate well as a group. It's pretty impressive.

**ABOVE**

Intern Taylor Allen works with dwg. landscape designer Ethan Primm.

**COLWELL SHELOR**

PHOENIX  
ESTABLISHED: 2009  
CURRENT SIZE: 6

**ALLISON COLWELL, ASLA,  
AND MICHELE SHELOR, ASLA,**  
PRINCIPALS

**What's the largest the firm has been?**

SHELOR: Six.

**The smallest?**

SHELOR: When we were just two.

**What have you found to be the ideal size for your firm?**

COLWELL: Well, in my mind, it's always been around eight. It's been kind of funny because when it's just the two of you, you know what's going on with the projects a little bit more than when you start getting larger. We always think maybe that we want to get bigger, and we have enough work to get bigger. But the biggest challenge is maintaining design excellence. The bigger we get, it's more and more difficult.

SHELOR: You lose control.

**Have your feelings about the size of your firm changed over time?**

COLWELL: For a boutique firm that seems to be a good number. From what I understand, with the size of projects, you get enough variety in your staff to really handle the large variety of projects. I don't think I have ever thought about going a lot bigger.

**How does your preferred firm size affect your willingness to take on new work or not take new work?**

SHELOR: Well, the funny thing is, we get the projects and we go higher, which hasn't necessarily been very successful for us, I think. The fact is that it's been hard to find the right people to fit into some of the projects that we've kind of chased or had land in our lap.

COLWELL: I also think that one challenge for wanting to go bigger is we really don't want to take every job that comes around, right? We've tried to be a little more selective about what we'll say yes to. I think

one other thing that's really affected our growth is that we are in a space that is a little too small for us. But in a month we're moving into a bigger space. It's actually more than twice the size, and there's already stations set up for additional people. It will be interesting to see how that affects us.

**What would have to happen for you to have that kind of ideal number or size change?**

SHELOR: We need some larger or higher-fee projects. Phoenix is growing. We're in the Sunbelt that's actually growing and busy. But when you listen to the news and the economy and the oil crises and all these kinds of things going on, it just takes more than it used to to say we're going to grow, we're going to take someone else on. It takes getting work, being understaffed for a while, and then having no choice but to go ahead and add that other person. And I think the one thing that Allison and I've been is very conservative from day one. We'll work extra hard, or harder, when we really need more people. We're always nervous about hiring more people because that cuts into our salary.

**What would have to change for you to grow the firm?**

COLWELL: It would be just more confidence in the global economy, because even though our economy's strong, you still kind of feel like it may only last a couple years. You know, we care a lot about our staff, and we don't want to grow and let go. We're just not that kind of a firm. We really want to be sure that we're making the right decisions. We got into this because we loved the design part. That's another reason we choose to stay smaller.

**ABOVE**  
Colwell Shelor is planning to move into a larger office in the next year.



COLWELL SHELOR



**ABOVE**  
The main studio at PWP Landscape Architecture.

**BELOW**  
Peter Walker, FASLA, and Cornelia Roppel.



**PWP LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE**

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA  
ESTABLISHED: 1983  
CURRENT SIZE: 35  
**CHRIS DIMOND, FASLA, PARTNER**

**What's the largest the firm has been?**  
It's probably gotten up in the mid-40s at one point. I don't know.

**The smallest?**  
I imagine when Pete [Walker] started this version of the many firms that he started in his career...probably just a handful of people at that time.

**What have you found to be the ideal size for this firm?**  
Thirty-five. That is our ideal, and we work very, very hard to not go above that or below that.

**How have your feelings about this changed over time?**  
I think when Pete started this particular firm he was coming off teaching at Harvard and being the chairman of the SWA Group, which he also started. That was quite big, and I think he was looking at coming back from Harvard, really finding an opportunity where he could work in a sort of

smaller studio, and not necessarily the size that SWA was at that time. He really wanted to focus his time and his partners' time on designing great projects, and a little less so on some of the corporate demands—once a company gets big enough, a lot of things start to play into your time, and things you have to worry about, and so forth. I don't know that he had the ideal size in mind at that time, but over the past 30 years, 35 has become our comfort zone.

When it gets a little bit bigger than that it gets to be a little uncomfortable. When it gets a little smaller than that it can be a little uncomfortable. I don't know when 35 was realized as the right number, but it's been that way for quite a while.

**How does that preferred size affect your willingness to take on certain kinds of projects or maybe let other kinds of projects go?**  
It is difficult, because at times it may be very easy to take on a bunch of new work and then not have enough people to do it, or have to staff up and then it starts to get squirrely. Conversely maintaining a level of work that keeps 35 people busy.

That's the challenge when you pick a number and you ideally don't want to vary from that unless you have to. You have to be somewhat picky and selective on the work that you'll accept in the good times. When times are tough the same thing is true, but it's a little bit harder to find the work I guess when the economy goes south. We are not a firm that wants to grow.

**What would have to happen for your ideal number to change?**  
We all have to die and go away. [Laughs] I don't know.

I can't imagine anything changing that at this point in time based on the current situation and the current partners that are here. I guess if the whole makeup of the firm changed, maybe there would be a different set of leaders that might be interested in doing things differently, but my sense is that that won't happen anytime in the short term for sure.

I think every company has a number of people and it feels right or it doesn't feel right. From my experience working elsewhere and consulting with a lot of other firms, everybody has their comfort zone, and sometimes they get to a certain level, and then they start growing, and they get uncomfortable, and then they reach another plateau, and it's like, "Oh, it feels right again." They still want to grow, they keep going, and they go through that same cycle. It feels uncomfortable, but then they get to the right level where things are balanced out.

For us right now it's 35, and that's as big as we ever want to get. That's just one office. We don't want multiple offices. We're just very comfortable the way things are right now.

**JANICE PARKER  
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS**

GREENWICH, CONNECTICUT

ESTABLISHED: 1984

CURRENT SIZE: 7

**JANICE PARKER, ASLA**, FOUNDER

**What's the largest the firm has been?**

PARKER: The largest it's ever been has been 9.

**The smallest?**

The smallest was two.

I have the developed seasoned professionals that I have, and it's easier to bring in people and train them to be sure that we keep the culture that's so important. That's really the reason I get up in the morning and come to work.

For me, and for the firm, and for our culture, it's the pursuit of quality. That's very different from trying to pursue perfection, which I think is a fear-based goal. Perfectionism is simply fear in a pair of Jimmy Choos, if you know what I'm saying. So we're after quality, and quality doesn't happen, for me, by bringing people in and out. I would rather adjust the clients and the jobs I take than adjust my staff, because I have a strong business model and understanding of where my revenue comes from and how my pricing structure has to work to make sure I have revenue and a profit.

**How does your preferred firm size affect your willingness to take on new work or not?**

I've really worked hard to understand business and entrepreneurship, which is something you don't get trained in. I've had a lot of business help and business coaching. And so you really need reserves to cover you for the 2008s. You don't want to put your best people out on the street, because when you need them again they'll be gone.

And your firm is only your people; that's all it is. And we have a very close team, like family culture. It's really important to me. It's as important if not more important than whether or not I'm making a huge profit. I want people to live well, to be compensated well, to get good benefits, and to love coming to work every day. That's what makes our work good.

So, I watch all those numbers and I project out and, you know, I mean, I run all the numbers. I run all the analytics. So I know where I am. But it's very important to ignore bad clients and bad projects. You just don't want to do that to your people or to your firm.

**What would have to happen for you to change that ideal?**

If I got a giant project and I needed twice the staff, I have long-term relationships with people in the industry, which is what's so important to me about ASLA, and about the conventions, and about the quality of relationship and fellowship between landscape architects. I've learned more and had more moral and business and basic hard skill support from them than from anyone else in my life. So, we have vendors and subcontractors to pull in for additional services. I have a civil engineer who will work for me exclusively if I ask him to. If you have a conservation biology or wildlife conservation issue, I'll go outside to other people for that. I would rather do that than say, "Oh, I need to put on a staff of 10 for two years."

And people are coming to me to have me involved, and I don't want to come to work if I'm not involved, because this is really sort of a passion. If we're good enough at our jobs and I do my job as the CEO and CFO of my company, then I have handled my fees and my contracts well enough to be able to run the firm at that size and stagger, or just simply, if it's a very large job, simply say, "No, it's too big for me." And if it's a job I'm just taking because it's gonna tide me over, say, "No, it's a bad job for me." That's my responsibility as the firm principal. That's my job. I have to be accountable to those decisions, as far as I'm concerned. ●



**ABOVE**  
Janice Parker, ASLA, (center) consults with Ann Schmitt, ASLA, and Thomas Downes.

**What have you found to kind of be the ideal size?**

I would say 6 to 7, for me, plus obviously a financial bookkeeper.

**Have your feelings about that changed over time since you first opened?**

As the firm has developed and gained expertise and knowledge, the size of our projects has changed and the type of client we have has changed. You know, a lot of the projects are two to five years long and I'm able to stagger the work well. But at the same time, I need fully developed, very strong professionals in the office who have the expertise and the ability to do that. So I've found that it's very difficult to hire a mid- or a senior-level landscape architect. So