

Reaching higher in a recession

Young architectural firm lands major projects, expands staff

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In just five years, Matt Rinka has built his firm, Rinka Chung Architecture Inc., into one of the hottest architectural firms in the area.

The Milwaukee firm is working on two major downtown projects — the Moderne apartment high-rise in the former Park East freeway corridor and Washington Square, which could be the first new downtown Milwaukee office building in years if it moves according to plan.

The firm has grown from a half-dozen people in its first three years to 17 and growing this year, increasing revenue by 50 percent or more each year at a time when the real estate industry in general has slowed to a crawl.

Rinka said the growth has come by developing strong relationships with active developers. The firm rarely responds to requests for proposals, he said.

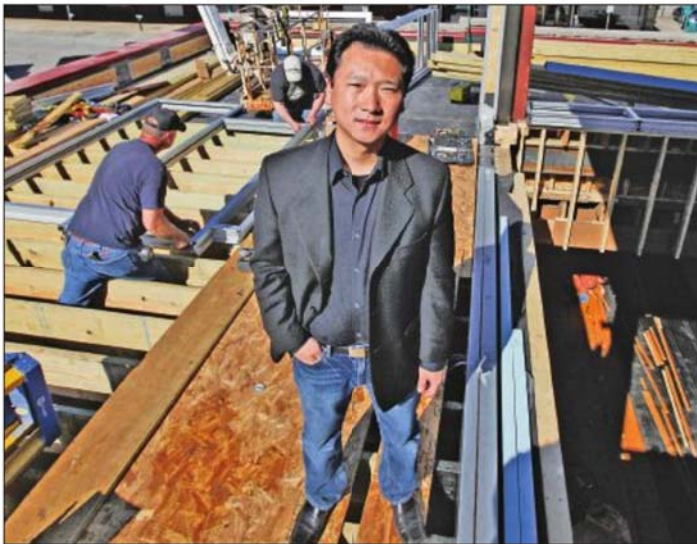
"We really just do work for a handful of clients, but they keep coming back to us," Rinka said.

Rinka previously worked for Kahler Slater Inc., a Milwaukee architectural and design firm. He'd always thought about having his own firm someday and was encouraged to go for it by prominent Milwaukee developer Joel Lee.

"I saw a very capable, talented young guy who had some good business sense and thought he was capable of growing his own firm," Lee said.

At the time, Lee was starting to plan Washington Square, a 24-story office building proposed for North Jefferson and East Mason streets. Knowing Lee might hire him to design Washington Square helped convince Rinka to strike out on his own, he said.

But Lee didn't hire Rinka right off the bat. He had Rinka compete against two other architects and brought the preliminary designs to a prospective tenant. The tenant, which is no longer attached to the project, chose



SCOTT PAULUS

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Rinka's design, Lee said.

The recession has delayed the Washington Square project, but it now appears to be moving forward with the recent announcements of Godfrey & Kahn SC and Baker Tilly Virchow Krause LLP as likely anchor tenants.

Meanwhile, Rinka Chung was tapped to work on the Moderne, a 30-story residential project on Juneau Avenue and Old World Third Street that broke ground in February under developer Rick Barrett.

Barrett said it was important to him to hire a Milwaukee architect and he was impressed by Rinka's drive.

"What really inspired me about Matt was the fact that he had a grand vision of Milwaukee as a great city and a city in its embryonic stage of growth," Barrett said.

The firm also is the architect and engineer on call for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. It has worked on several Milwaukee restaurants, including Blackthorn Pub &

Grill, Horny Goat Hideaway and Cafe Benelux, the forthcoming restaurant from The Lowlands Group in the 3rd Ward.

ADDING STAFF

Rinka Chung embraced the vision for Horny Goat Hideaway, the Walker's Point brewpub owned by Horny Goat Brewing Co., said Jim Sorenson, co-owner and chief executive officer. The company wanted the site to be an entertainment destination, and Rinka accomplished that with the design for the outdoor bar, patio and volleyball courts.

"He really wrapped his arms around our project," Sorenson said. "He took our ideas and put them on a map for us to follow."

Horny Goat will continue to work with Rinka Chung as it builds on the facility, Sorenson said.

Rinka Chung's growth has allowed it to hire some of the best young talent available, Rinka said. It already has hired three new

LESSONS
LEARNED
BY MATT RINKA

WHAT WAS THE REASON FOR STARTING YOUR BUSINESS? "As an immigrant to this country, this business is my attempt to fully experience the American dream as well as to show people the power of great architecture and design."

WHAT IS YOUR BUSINESS PHILOSOPHY? "We focus on providing thoughtful architecture and designs by understanding our clients and fostering long-term relationships. All the business stuff comes second."

WHAT IS YOUR YARDSTICK OF SUCCESS? "We like designing spaces that are 'well used' — at its core, architecture is about the engagement of people to their built environment. When it's done well, it can be a great source of enjoyment in many ways as well as the difference between success and failure for our clients' businesses."

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON YOU'VE LEARNED? "Stay humble — we don't take ourselves too seriously, just our work."

employees this year and is working on hiring two more after growing revenue by about 80 percent in 2010. Rinka declined to reveal exact revenue figures.

The office has a young, energetic vibe, said Chad Griswold, a project manager with the firm.

"You're thrown into the mix of things right away," he said. "The sky's the limit for opportunities."

That energy has made Rinka Chung a go-to firm for big Milwaukee projects, Barrett said. "(Rinka) is very passionate about what he does, and his set of skills architecturally are phenomenal," Barrett said. "That to me points to what I would consider to be a rising star."