

# Firms go fishing in unproven waters to find new work

## Practice Matters

By Elizabeth Harrison Kubany

At first glance, Colorado's Ocean Journey (COJ) does not seem so special. Located in Denver, it is one of many new aquariums built in this country during the past few years. What is interesting about COJ is that it was built at all. According to Rich von Lührte, FAIA, principal of Denver-based RNL Design, "In late 1992, when the client went out with the RFP for Colorado's Ocean Journey, there was no community support for this project. Nobody believed it was real."

But the clients presented themselves as an organization with considerable clout, making major presentations to the media and politicians to demonstrate their commitment to the project. The principals of RNL Design were intrigued. They teamed with another local firm, Anderson Mason Dale, to form an entity called Odyssea. Despite the fact that several large national firms had expressed interest, they won the project in February 1993, because, says von Lührte, of the client's desire to work with a local team.

### Be careful what you wish for

As von Lührte explains, "We didn't know what we had won until we won it. We realized shortly afterward that the client had no money, no staff, no organizational structure, and no real plan for getting this done." This laundry list of problems did not deter von Lührte and his partners. "We are a successful firm but we are not nationally known. Our attitude is that when somebody brings us an opportunity,

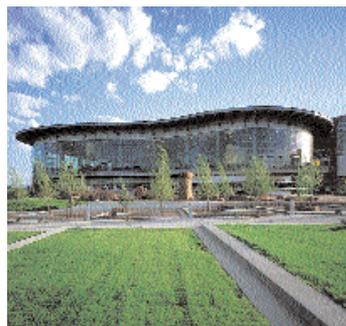
we have to grab it because another one like it might not come along again. We felt that we should try to help them light a fire and demonstrate the project's viability."

So Odyssea decided to proceed with the project. Between February 1993, when Odyssea was officially selected for the project, and February 1997, when a \$30 million municipal bond sale was approved, Odyssea worked for a fraction of a fee. Von Lührte says, "We structured the fee so we could help them develop the project quickly and for a minimal amount of money."

To start the process, Odyssea held workshops. Exhibit designers, curators, and aquarium owners were brought in to help the design team determine the project's shape. These workshops would typically last a week and would generate "a ton of material." The consultants were not hired in the traditional manner, but were paid for their time and expertise. By using this brainstorming approach, Odyssea was able to work through the schematic design phase very quickly for a reduced fee. Says von Lührte, "This was a very lean strategic group. On an ordinary project, this process would take close to a year and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. We did it in less than six months for a fraction of that."

Odyssea and the client also decided to treat COJ as a design-build project (which had rarely been done before on an aquarium because of the sophistication of the

systems necessary to this building type) and brought the contractor—Hensel Phelps Construction—on immediately, which was crucial to the realization of COJ. Among the advantages of using design-build was the ability to arrive at a guar-



**A joint-venture of two firms accepted business risks to get Colorado's Ocean Journey project built.**

anteed maximum price very early in the process so that the structured bond sale could be held.

Moreover, Hensel Phelps was willing to front some of the initial costs while corporate sponsors and other donors were being sought, paying for the site acquisition and architectural team's fee—albeit a nominal one—for its schematic design concept.

Still, Odyssea allowed deferred payments at several points in the design development and schematic design phases to allow contributions to catch up with expenditures. Once the bond sale was approved in February 1997, everyone was paid promptly and in full, in accordance with an AIA contract, and this practice continued throughout the remainder of the project.

Odyssea invested four years of nurturing into COJ without knowing if the project would happen or if they would be the architect. But the most immediate risk was that there would be no project at all.

Moreover, because the architectural team did not have a contract until the bond sale was approved, it was always possible that Odyssea would have gone through programming and design, yet not be chosen for the final contract. "In my opinion," says von Lührte, "there was never any question that we would be the architect. We had an agreement. Of course, agreements can be broken. But we gained the respect of the client with our hands-on support." The risk was also a calculated one. Von Lührte contends that "from the beginning, this project had the potential to be very high profile, and of national significance. We felt it was worthy of our time and money. We have grown because we have taken that attitude with other projects as well, including the Living Planet Aquarium in Salt Lake City, which had similar financial problems.

Clearly, this kind of high-risk exercise is not for everyone. Still, Von Lührte feels there is a lesson for the profession. "Architects can take a leadership role in projects. The architect can be the one to make a \$90 million project real." Odyssea has just been asked by COJ to do concept work for phase two of the project, because the aquarium significantly exceeded its expected attendance in its first year. ■