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SMWM embraces big picture design, planning

San Francisco Business Times - by [Blanca Torres](#)

One afternoon in 1991 changed everything for **SMWM**. The San Francisco architecture firm had enjoyed success early with the San Francisco Main Library and other projects. Cathy Simon, co-founding principal and the “S” in the firm’s name, took a call from New York urban planner Karen Alschuler.

Simon reluctantly agreed to meet Alschuler. The two had an “amazing” discussion that led to Alschuler joining in 1992 to establish the firm’s urban design division.

Thanks to its combination of strengths in design and planning, SMWM is now one of the largest women-owned architecture firms in the country, raking in \$11.4 million last year with a lineup of high-profile projects that span the Bay Area, the nation and the world.

“We truly have a multi-disciplinary practice,” Simon said. “Our approach is different. Our planners look at the big picture while our architects look at building, but we bring them together.”

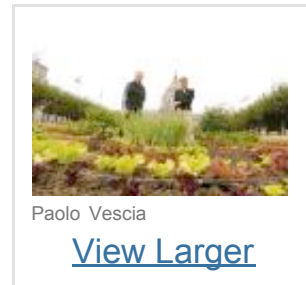
SMWM employs more than 50 people at its offices in San Francisco and New York. The latter opened in 2001.

The firm specializes in urban in-fill projects such as the \$67 million renovation of the Ferry Building in 2003, the \$80 million Metreon development and various elements of the redevelopment at Mission Bay. It also includes smaller projects, such as designing the “victory garden” at City Hall as part of the recent Slow Food Nation festival.

Current projects include the conversion of a former hospital into residential units in the Presidio by Forest City, redevelopment of the naval station on Treasure Island, a **Stanford University** extension office in Redwood City, redevelopment of the naval weapons station in Concord and reconfiguring of Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles.

SMWM also carved niches for itself in designing educational buildings for institutions including **Harvard University**, **University of Washington**, **Brown University** and **New York University**.

“They usually look to the larger dimension of things whether they are designing a single building or



a piece of a city,” said Jay Turnbull, president of San Francisco-based architecture firm **Page & Turnbull**, which has worked on various projects with SMWM. “They certainly stand out from the crowd.”

Simon said the firm starts with three core tenets of safety, utility and delight.

“We always ask ourselves, ‘How do you design a city or building that people are thrilled to be in?’” Simon said. “We have a real devotion to cities and the public realm where people can really come together.”

Simon runs the firm’s architectural design practice while Alschuler runs the urban planning component. The firm has two other principals, John Long, who heads the education division, and Linda Sobuta, who is also minority partner, and an associate principal, Prakash Pinto.

“The key aspect is in the fact that the two senior people represent good design and good planning and it’s mixed in the firm,” Turnbull said. “That doesn’t happen in all architecture firms.”

When beginning a new project, Alschuler gives everyone a seat and at the table and a voice.

“We don’t come in with an idea and expect people to accept it,” she said. “We try to incorporate thoughts and ideas and then come up with a design.”

The hard part is that, as Alschuler put it, “architectural design is not a group process,” but planning is.

Many clients seek the firm out for their ability to involve community members during the entitlement process. “SMWM has a very sophisticated community-based approach to land planning,” said Aidan Barry, Oakland-based vice president of **Catellus Development Group**, which hired SMWM for a \$33 million office, retail and resident development along Alameda’s waterfront. “They know how to address the community and accomplish what they community wants and communicates with them when their needs can’t be satisfied.”

The focus on collaboration stems from inside the firm, where Simon and Alschuler have worked to create an environment where the staff feels comfortable, but also inspired to work hard.

“Our values are embedded in what we do every day and every year of making that extra effort,” Alschuler said. “The progression of the firm comes from taking our original values and applying them to larger and larger projects.”

SMWM

HQ: San Francisco.

2007 revenue: \$11.4 million.

Employees: 50.

Women owners: Cathy Simon, Karen Alschuler, Linda Sobuta.

San Francisco projects: Ferry Building, Metreon, Treasure Island.

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