

Case Study:
SPG Architects



SPG ARCHITECTS: CHANGING LIVES

AND COMMUNITIES ONE PROJECT AT A TIME



When sustainability became part of SPG Architects' design dialog, which already included a focus on quality materials, accessibility, and light, something magical transpired that paved a path for an enviable body of work.

Founder Coty Sidnam, AIA, and Partner Eric A. Gartner, AIA, LEED AP+, have led SPG Architects to success for more than 20 years, gaining industry recognition along the way for strongly conceived and well-executed work.

"When I joined the firm, Coty's style of practice and design were compelling," Gartner recalls. "These attributes strengthened my own views that buildable design must fulfill a client's functional needs and provide satisfaction to the user."

Today, SPG is a mid-sized firm that embraces a diverse portfolio including homes and corporate interiors, interior renovations, and freestanding projects for retail and corporate clients including Polo Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Bill Blass New York, Coty beauty, Hartmann Luggage, and Time Warner.

"Our work can't be pigeon-holed, and that's important to us," says Sidnam. "Our work is technologically advanced and visually clean, but our strong sense of materiality and use of light renders our work viscerally accessible, as well."

Manipulating Light in Greenwich Village

SPG's vision is perfectly realized in the Greenwich Village Penthouse in New York City, for which the firm handled the architectural and interior design. SPG achieved a clean design throughout the apartment by using airy materials – both man-made and natural – and lightly colored floors, cabinetry, and walls.

For this project, which also features a 600-square-foot terrace, the client was a couple of empty nesters who were downsizing to a 1,200-square-foot, two-story, one-bedroom apartment. SPG creatively modified the home by tucking an extra bedroom under the stairs. While altering the loft-like space to accommodate the room, SPG maintained a sense of openness with translucent enclosures and a continuity of materials from one area to the next. To achieve the look, designers chose materials that interact with light in different ways – some transmitting light, others reflecting it with their bright surfaces, and some absorbing it to reveal their subtle beauty.

"The ability to use color in our Vectorworks® Architect drawings helped us represent our design intent," adds Gartner. "We also used the tool that lets you change an object's opacity, so we could represent translucent materials while still seeing objects in the distance beyond. Plus, having drawings that were really graphic in their representation helped us communicate more effectively with subcontractors."



SPG achieved a clean design throughout the Greenwich Village apartment by using airy materials, and lightly colored floors, cabinetry, and walls.



In the Asheville Leicester House, natural ventilation and large overhangs mitigate solar gain.

Sustainable Design in Asheville

SPG achieved similar success with the award-winning Leicester House. Sited in the sophisticated, small city of Asheville, North Carolina, the home incorporates sustainable and environmentally responsible attributes. At the space-planning and detail levels, the client was specific about how he wanted the 3,450-square-foot house to work, and he fully expected SPG's design capabilities would elevate the house's basic functionality to places he could not envision himself.

"Today, we have a happy client who recognizes how good design has elevated his life in ways he couldn't have imagined when he started the design process with SPG," Sidnam adds.



The rear glass walls of the Leicester House, which face west and south, open to rolling farmland below and the mountains beyond.

The project wasn't without its challenges, however. The 2008 economic crash occurred amid the design and pricing process, requiring a reassessment of the budget and the client's priorities. For example, an infinity-edge pool and some built-in cabinetry were eliminated, and materials were modified. Plus, Asheville was experiencing a historic drought, and the well drilled for the property needed to be 2.5 times deeper than anticipated. While an undesired cost, this event inspired SPG and its client to change the project and add sustainability features.

"A number of passive systems were already integrated into the design, including natural ventilation and large overhangs to mitigate solar gain," says Gartner. "Energy-efficient lighting, appliances, and equipment were also specified, but we added more after consulting with our client, even though they added to the budget." Adding sustainable features would cut long-term energy and water costs, and serve as a model for environmentally friendly design. Dual-flush toilets and a water collection system were added, as was a geothermal field that greatly reduced energy requirements and costs associated with heating and cooling the house.

During the schematic phase of the project, SPG used small, physical models to depict rudimentary massing, with very clearly and accurately drawn Vectorworks plans that described the ramifications of design decisions to the client. Adding color and detail to those drawings helped the client understand and get excited about the building's interiors and exteriors and their relationships to the landscape.

Sustainability Abroad

As shown in Asheville's Leicester House, SPG specializes in using design as a tool to provide programmatic, spatial, and sustainable solutions while providing ordered, well-proportioned, and even artful forms and environments. "We are well known for our residential work, but it's gratifying to expand our vision to a wider variety of building types," says Sidnam.

For example, the firm's interests in environmental, conservation, and health issues led it to take on international projects and sustainable design in Latin America and Africa. The partners didn't purposefully integrate such concerns into their architectural practice; rather, it happened organically. The firm's initial commissioned client along Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula was first and foremost pleased with SPG's collaborative and thoughtful approach to its projects. But the nature of the site and the environment made it clear to both SPG and its client that they should make his house as environmentally friendly as possible.

"The project started with the very important notion that an existing steel structure could be largely saved, re-used, and fully integrated into our vision for the architecture on the site," says Sidnam. "A small portion of the site had already been cleared, and it made no sense to rethink the location, which would cost additional money and unnecessarily degrade untouched acreage. The client's confidence



Located on a rain-forested mountainside in Costa Rica, the Casa Torcida house is 100% off the grid and is self-sufficient in its use of power and water.

in us to take what seemed to be an ungainly structure and turn it into something special was critical to us earning that project."

The resulting solution was a house that is 100% off the grid and is self-sufficient in its use of power and water. "We've assimilated the issues and solutions we explored there into subsequent projects," Sidnam adds. "As a result, our work is increasingly sophisticated in its integration of sustainable technologies with our overall design goals."



The Casa Torcida house's flexible building perimeter provides a seamless flow from inside to out.



Local materials such as brick, stucco, and corrugated metal roofs are the primary building components at Kageno. The complex provides villagers with a place to commune, cook, learn, work, and access health care.

Kageno's Hopeful Future

SPG's project in the Banda region of Rwanda, Africa is especially interesting in this regard. The construction techniques are simple and based on local building traditions, but the project is both environmentally responsible and socially sustainable. "This project approaches the ideal of architecture being an art that makes our lives better," says Gartner.

The client for this project, which incorporates master planning, sustainable design, and eco-tourism, is Kageno Worldwide, an organization that identifies communities suffering from impoverishment, AIDS, genocide, and limited access to health care, clean water, and education. It then works with local leaders to help villages build schools, health centers, pharmacies, and sanitation and clean water systems, as well as develop community centers and training programs to help them protect their fragile environments. SPG's project is located on property donated by the village of Banda, and the resulting modern collection of community buildings addresses villagers' concerns as conveyed to the relief organization. SPG is involved on a pro-bono effort. "We believe in Kageno's mission; everything else is derived from that," says Sidnam.

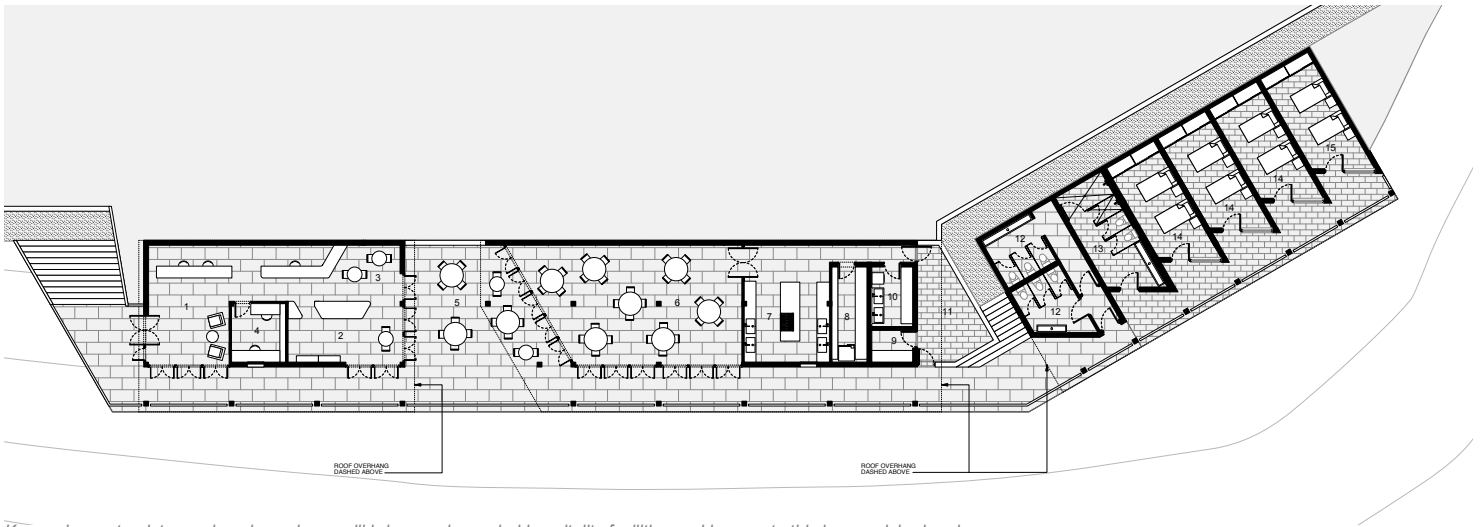
Given the site, the architecture needed to produce its own power and manage its own waste, but this project goes beyond architectural sustainability, incorporating social and cultural viability into its mission. A community center, library, office, and kitchen anchor the site, with two branches reaching in a "V" with a health center and pharmacy serving 1,000 people monthly, four classrooms serving 300 children, a visitor's center, and bungalows for visitors and permanent staff. Local materials such as brick, stucco, and corrugated metal roofs are the primary building components. The site planning and building forms are energized and modern, serving as a symbol of Kageno's message of a hopeful future.

The project's design began five years ago. Most buildings that provide social services are complete while projects related to improved farming, diet, and reforestation are ongoing. "We are also designing and building an eco-lodge for tourists that will be staffed by local community members," Sidnam says. "Income from this tourist facility will help support much of the village's educational, health, and social needs."

SPG has managed the entire project from New York. Therefore, it needed an efficient way to communicate internationally. "Although we've done this type of work before, we've never done it with a local team that we haven't met in person, so clarity and simplicity of drawings was key," says Gartner. "As a firm that often works with an advanced sense of materiality and construction techniques, we also had to adjust our thinking, so that the buildings were easily and affordably buildable by local laborers. At the same time, we endeavored to make the building forms inspirational in both function and in vision."

The original concept of creating a strong, memorable design has remained intact. The interplay between interior and exterior spaces is achieved through a strong site plan where covered, outdoor, interstitial spaces become gathering spaces for informal connections between children and adults, workers, and visitors. This program extension makes the complex particularly successful as a true community center. "We derive substantial satisfaction that our peers have recognized our work with awards, but our ultimate rewards come when clients embrace our work and take over the environments we created as their own, happily picking up where we leave off," says Gartner. "This project has changed the lives of the people of Banda."

Sidnam agrees with Gartner's sentiment, saying, "The photos we see of adults and children enjoying the buildings and benefitting from the provided services are sources of great satisfaction and joy, and prove that with some careful, planned action, and great software like Vectorworks, we can work anywhere."



Kageno's eco-tourist complex, drawn here, will bring much-needed hospitality facilities and income to this impoverished region.

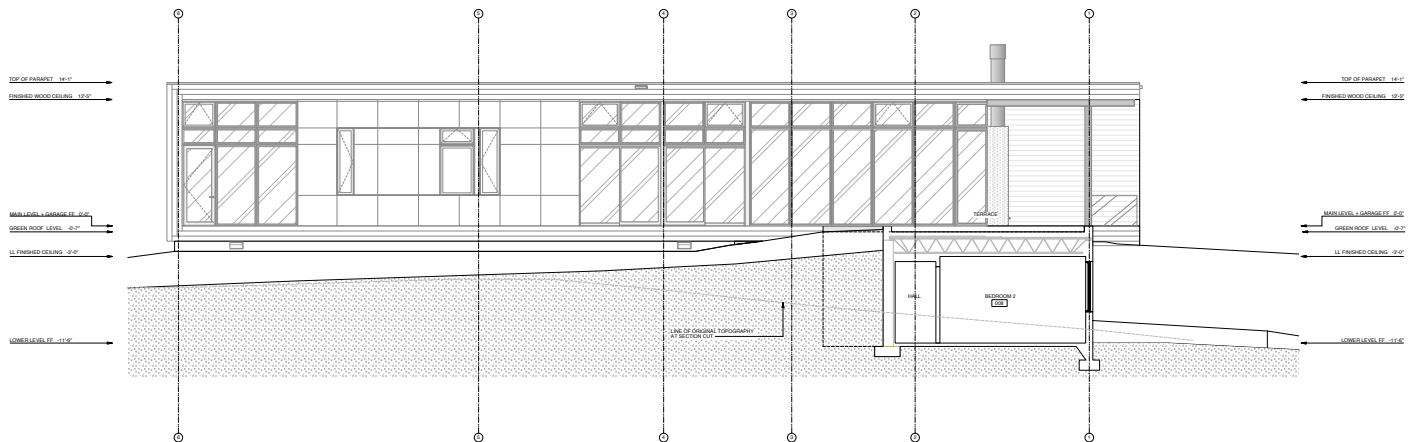
Vectorworks Proves Invaluable

Indeed, Vectorworks software is crucial to SPG's success. "We believe that if our drawings appear thoughtful, and clear — even beautiful — and represent the level of care and thought we put into our projects, that those building our projects will rise to the level of our efforts," says Gartner.

Three things make the software invaluable to SPG. First, "Vectorworks' basic premise allows us to draw in polygons, so we can envision projects from the earliest stages of schematic design without having to translate our thoughts into points and lines," says Gartner.

Second, the embedded graphics allow drawings to read as SPG wants them to, with clear hierarchical line weights and tones, so that documents are presented in a clear, visually pleasing manner. "The graphic consistency of our sets, even when various staff members work on a drawing, is made possible by the use of classes, which determine the line weights and tones we've established for each element within the drawing set," adds Gartner.

Finally, SPG's established design standards are easy to manage given that the program allows for multiple paths to a final graphic solution while making it easy for the firm to manipulate the organization of groups, classes, design layers, stories, sheet layers, saved views, resources, and references.



The Leicester House drawing shows the entry level, which serves as the primary living area, and a two-bedroom guest wing with a media room carved into the hilltop one level below.



Coty Sidnam, AIA



Eric A. Gartner, AIA, LEED AP+

“Clarity of intent and attention to detail are paramount in our ability to get our projects built — and built well,” says Gartner. “The graphics we employ are extremely important to our ability to convey the goals of our projects in drawing form. And when communicated to our consultants, the transmittal of our Vectorworks documents remains easy and well coordinated, and our drawing sets are clear to our staff, clients, consultants, and contractors who build the work.”

Sidnam and Gartner are great collaborators and enjoy the process. “Because our best projects merge indoor and outdoor environments and acknowledge that the occupancy of spaces is more relevant than empty abstract spaces, collaborations with landscape architects and interior designers can be mutually beneficial and enriching,” Sidnam says.

Indeed, the firm has been fortunate to work with some great collaborators while garnering industry recognition for its body of work. And with its personable approach to clients, coupled with the brilliant execution of their design visions into something that’s schematically excellent, intelligently devised, and beautifully rendered, SPG’s future is unlimited — just as Sidnam and Gartner intended.

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