

## A DECADE OF DESIGN



*Ten years speed past in the blink of an eye. The years are measured in deadlines and construction schedules. Time is marked by the hour on timesheets and, in the busyness of day-to-day tasks, it is easy to let milestones and achievements pass unnoticed and uncelebrated.*

*2019 marks PTD's tenth anniversary. A decade in design. A decade of projects. A decade of successes and setbacks. A decade of growth and development. On this occasion, it is important to look both backward and forward. To reflect upon the firm's history while also establishing the trajectory for the next decade. On this momentous occasion, Patrick Thompson took a break from the daily responsibilities of running a design firm to discuss PTD's past successes and future aspirations.*

### **What was your motivation for starting your own design firm? At the time, what were your ambitions for the firm?**

*For about five years, I worked for a design firm in Chicago, and I really enjoyed it, but I wasn't getting enough of my ideas and concepts built. I always had the idea that I would someday be a creative director of a design firm, but I never really thought it would be at my own design firm.*

*In 2006, I decided to move back to Detroit in part because I was reading about all the great stuff happening here. It wasn't a great time to get a job, but I gathered experience through a stint of different types of sales jobs and some contract jobs with design firms. In 2009, I was laid off from Design Within Reach. I didn't really have a choice, so I started my own company. I decided to go for it full force.*

*I did everything I could to legitimize my business before I even really had any business; the whole, "fake it till you make it" approach. I just became super committed. I joined IIDA, and I got on the board and started meeting people. I committed to taking the NCIDQ because I had the hours and the background to test. I bartered with someone to design the first PTD logo and bartered design services to build a website. I borrowed furniture on loan from a few different furniture vendors to stage my parents' basement and bartered with a friend to have it professionally photographed. I took a spare bedroom in my house, and I hung my shingle. I designed a little sign that hung on the door of the bedroom. I put my drafting table and computer in there. I had all my inspiration pinned on the walls and treated this space as if it were like my own office where I was going to work every day. The only thing that was missing was clients.*

*I had done a few stints of things like color consultation for people; anything I could do to start to legitimize my business while gaining experience. I had a friend that worked at Design Within Reach, and a man walked in and asked if they had a recommendation for someone to design their kitchen. They gave him my business card, he called me, and we hit it off. He had a Craftsman bungalow in Ann Arbor. Because I had a carpentry*

background, I decided I could act as a designer and general contractor. I arranged all the trades and got the project done. I think I was paid a total of \$6,000 to design and build it out and that's when I realized that I could do this and make a living out of it.



**What were some of your struggles and successes with that first project? What was your biggest takeaway from that experience?**

*When you do what we do, and you're in a service-based industry, you want to do something that reflects your design aesthetic. However, I think it's more important that the client's identity and personality comes out in the design. I learned that on my first project because the client in Ann Arbor had a very big personality and had a very strong vision for the stuff that he liked. Trying to get him out of his box was a bit challenging, and I did talk him into some things. It wasn't really a challenge per se, but it was the first time that I was directly interfacing with the client.*

*When I was working at someone else's firm, I felt as though I was shielded from that interaction. I thought that it was just the people in my office that were shooting my ideas down, but when it's the client shooting down your ideas, you get a little defensive. Then you realize that's not going to go anywhere. You're not going to be successful that way. The client is always right, but a good designer can explain to a client why the designer's ideas or vision might make more sense. So that was a big learning curve right out of the gate. My very first client turned out to be the perfect client for me to understand that it really is a true collaboration.*

*Acting as a general contractor was more challenging than I thought because you become dependent on a lot of other subcontractors and it's the same reoccurring theme that continues to be very true in what we do here ten years later. It's hard to make recommendations and referrals to clients because you want to hold other professionals to the same standards that we hold ourselves, but you can't control other people. I learned right away that I was not going to be a general contractor.*

**What would you say took the firm to the next level?**

*There was a design-oriented co-working space opening in Detroit called the DC3, the Detroit Creative Corridor Center, inside the Taubman building in New Center. It was very inexpensive to join, about seventy-five bucks a month, and you got a desk and a mailbox within the space. I was on a path where I was trying to legitimize my business even prior to having any business. I did believe that I could go out there and convince people that I'm the right person for the job. I felt that there's a certain amount of basic professional assets that were necessary: the business card, the address, the phone number, the voicemail, the website. The last piece of the puzzle was the office space. Even though my office was in a co-working space, it made PTD a Detroit-based company. Part of DC3's mission was bringing in these like-minded and creative businesses and partnering them with agencies and companies in the city that need creative talent.*

*Goodby, Silverstein & Partners had just moved to Detroit to land work with Chevy and they moved into three floors of The Palms Building. That project and Skidmore Studio, a graphic design and branding agency, launched at the same time. Those two projects were the ones that made me realize that doing design in Detroit was a viable business. That was 2011 or 2012, and during that same time, I landed Kresge Court, which was probably the true breakout. It got a lot of press and a lot of publicity; it was an honor to work in such an amazing space.*

*I remember I got a phone call as I was driving and had to pull over to the side of the road to take the call because I was just so excited. That was my first RFP, and I didn't even know what an RFP was when I submitted for Kresge Court. I wrote a vision statement and did some loose sketches and had this grand idea and it got us the project.*



Kresge Court at the Detroit Institute of Arts

***Do you remember loosely what imagery you showed or what your pitch was?***

*Oh yeah, I remember, I remember the whole thing exactly.*

*The inspiration was based on an English garden: a series of boxwood hedges that would meander throughout the space and create an interior English garden. Kresge Court is inside the main courtyard of the DIA. At one time, it was open-air and in 1961 Yamasaki designed a glass roof to go over the top of it. The real beauty of Kresge Court is that each of the four walls represents a different architectural period: the brickwork, the window work, the sculptures, the artwork, and the crest on each wall are from a different period. Our design needed to complement that and not take away from the architecture of the space.*

*The DIA came to us and said they wanted to, figuratively, break down the marble walls and make it open to the public. Our statement was that it was going to be the grandest living room in Detroit. We came up with a design in which every seat in the Kresge Court is the best seat.*

***What are the markers of a successful project? Has that definition changed as PTD has grown larger and taken on different types of projects?***

*I would say the true sign of success is if the client's happy with what you did for them.*

*One of the big things that has changed is that early on, I thought that every project was about me and whether I liked it. I realized over the years that it's not about us. It's about the public, the client, and the end-user. Their satisfaction is the mark of success. Obviously, things like meeting deadlines within budget are huge achievements that are always goals, but I do think that the functionality of a space for the user is the most important. The goal should always be creating a beautiful space where people want to be, where they want to live, work, and play. Kresge Court was voted the best place to propose, the best place for freelancers, the best place for happy hour, best place for a first date, best place for wedding or photos engagement. What could be more rewarding than that?*

*To see some of the spaces we've done and hear the way people talk about it and understand how much they enjoy it is just so special. To me, that is the sign of a successful project; if people really enjoy and use the space.*

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