

One company, three scenarios – a fable as a forward by Allan Partridge.

No change

Waiting for the perfect pitch...

Now...

Alistair Buchanan was poised along with two other architects; David Ferguson and John Stevenson to take over a respected local firm from its retiring partners. Alistair joked (although David & John knew his ego was legendary) that the firm should be changed to “Me, Me and Me” with him as the lead designer in the firm. Although Alistair was a Gen Y he thought and acted like many Baby Boomers - suspicious of change and could not stop thinking that this whole BIM movement was just a passing phase and repeatedly argued this point. He strongly believed that the architects’ role is defined not by what he should do for his clients, but what they should do for him. This in his opinion would be evidenced by awards and accolades and by how often he could get published in Architectural Review.

Alistair was dismissive of anything related to BIM and he use a set of catch phrases that emoted his disdain for BIM and the problems he convinced himself it will bring. “I won’t share a damn thing with my client and you expect me to give over a BIM Model??” When he wasn’t BIMBashing (as he called it) he countered John’s arguments to take the firm in another direction and played upon the cautiousness of his other (soon to be) partner David Ferguson. Pitting one against the other made sure that BIM would not get a foothold in the office and be a drain on his creativity and bottom line as he often stated. In time, if the need was there and the software would do everything he wanted he might look at it, but not now, he won’t change. He was happy to direct a team as the star quarterback where his ability to change a design at the 11th hour was not only legend but was ironically a drain on the bottom line and a pain in construction administration. This, Bryan, a talented architect, would relay to Justin (a emerging great tech) about patching up the contract docs they never really finished due to Alistair’s 11th hour ruminations. “I can’t take this much more – he should be out on site taking the crap I get” Bryan said to Justin who felt much the same way. Sitting just within earshot was a young recent tech grad called Christa. Having trained in BIM she was struggling to use CAD and equally wondered, not about taking much more, but if she had made a right decision to join “Me, Me & Me”. Chuckling to herself she minimized the Sketchup file on her screen and caught up with her friends on Facebook.

A year later...

First year as a new partnership was a living hell. Murmurings, grumblings and general dissent abounded at the direction Alistair was taking the firm. David was content enough, work was coming in, but more and more clients were asking David and John what they were going to do about their firm and the fact that everyone else was going to BIM. John knew that without David’s support (and vote) the firm was going to be entrenched in a model of practice that had not changed since Sir John Soane separated architect from contractor and client in the 18th century. Later that year, after only being in partnership for less than ten months John decided he was going to move on and set up his own firm. David was saddened, Alistair was silently joyous – “now it’s Me & Me” he mused.

A few years later...

It was a year since David moved to the east coast to take a job at the Government Infrastructure Office – it was an easy sell, David and his wife wanted a simpler way of life and the constant problems with staff that no longer wanted to work on outdated CAD systems in a traditional practice was just too much for him. Alistair and the few people he had left found it increasingly hard to win projects as more and more complex buildings were demanding more analysis and increased integration. Still there were a handful of good clients and the odd house here and there – “you never know when the next break will come and we have an award winner” he thought. He brushed off any concern as his cell buzzed - it was Alistair’s favorite client. Unknown to Alistair was that this client was about to tell him the job he was working on was going to be handed over to John’s firm.

Wanting change
Trying to steal second with a foot on first....

Now...

David Ferguson always prided himself in being able to make architecture a solid business proposition, his marketing and management skills were without equal. Despite surviving a recession he managed to take a few calculated risks that moved him to one of the top 3 firms locally where he enjoyed working with Alistair Buchanan and John Stevenson his soon to be partners when the remaining two partners retired at the end of the year. David felt that he was the glue for Alistair's creativity and John's ability to see where the industry was heading. "We will be one hell of an architectural firm" he thought as he crossed the studio to his office and took in the sight of the over 20 people that make up the firm – he was a proud man.

What David disliked was being at what he called the "bleeding edge" of things and BIM was no exception. He would listen more to Alistair who had a lot of information on how bad BIM was but he always tried to listen to John and the rest of the office that change was needed. That's why as soon as the partnership was formed he established himself as the voice of caution – the firm will get into BIM *but* it will not give up the other tools that they have used for years – CAD and more recently Sketchup which Alistair assured him was a "type of BIM software". John sensing that there was no point arguing to the contrary felt at least he could work with Justin, Bryan and the new tech Christa to form the basis of a solid BIM group at the firm. David felt buoyant and excited that the new partnership was off to a great start and that Alistair and John were eager to get their sleeves rolled up and put the new partnership on the right course to better work and more profit.

A year later...

Alistair just could not settle and trying to do some projects in BIM and others in CAD was trying his patience. The staff that were on BIM found it not only difficult to revert back to CAD, but find they are not getting their BIM skills up to where some of their peers are. On top of that, a recent 2D shop drawing issue on a hybridized CAD and BIM project cost the firm. Even though they caught the error before it went into fabrication the delay was not appreciated by the client and contractor. Something had to give, Alistair, David and John had to find ways to keep the QA/QC up on hybridized projects but at a cost of more time spent on each project by Justin and Bryan. This simply led to the creation of two firms inside the same company - silos.

A few years later...

John struggles to move the BIM agenda forward, Alistair is happy with his work, but David is even more cautious now in his opinion BIM has internally fractured the partnership into silos that are harder to manage and slot team members from John's projects to the teams on Alistair's projects. Despite this the three of them do some solid work in both arenas – CAD and BIM. While most other firms have moved to 100% BIM the firm just can't seem to move much past the "M" in BIM (John always feels that it is the "I" that holds a potential Rosetta stone for the industry) they are always a few steps behind everyone and they are not always first in getting work when integrated approaches are a factor. Other firms are transforming themselves faster than three of them are and there is a very real risk of falling further behind despite being good at BIM. David as the managing partner (and still the glue) is not as happy as the bottom line is barely keeping them afloat. Alistair can ace a CAD project even though his design error change orders are still at the same level of pre-BIM. John just cannot get the firm beyond simply being good at BIM, which David, bless him, markets in very creative ways.

In time they pick up some of the lost ground when David's cautiousness recedes, but they are rarely ahead. They enjoy being a steady firm and despite Justin, Bryan and Christa moving on they have a great training plan in place for the new hires David manages to find. David wonders if he should listen to John and that young staff member Colleen who pointed out a new trend in BIM enabled technologies ..."Possibly, but we don't want to be at the bleeding edge" he reminds himself.

Sea change

Stealing second, third and then home...

Now...

John Stevenson could see the writing on the wall and he shared his concerns with his two other future partners – Alistair Buchanan and David Ferguson. The firm could not weather the transformation the AEC industry was facing around BIM. He knew that an open door would soon shut. Alistair was against any BIM transition and David simply remained cautious but all three agreed that they needed to do something. What they agreed on was that they wanted to be part of something more exciting and engaging.

A year later...

Alistair (not necessarily against the change, but quite negative) agrees that he needs to be convinced that design can be better. Meanwhile, David takes on a closer management role to allow John to move the firm forward. John rolls out to his colleagues (never liked calling them staff) a way in which teams can work together where the sum is truly greater than the parts. “Let me get this straight John.” (Asks Henry an intern) “You will work for me at some point in the process?” “Correct” John replies. “So who is the project leader?” Henry enquires “Well Justin and Bryan are on the team but Bryan and I feel that given this project, the client and location, Justin is the best one to lead it and Justin agrees” John explains. “But he’s a tech!!” Henry says sounding confused. “That’s right and Justin could be working for Bryan, Alistair or me and visa versa, as could you” John adds. “In fact, Alistair has Justin and Christa on his latest project so he can focus on the design but really embrace some of the new BIM enabled design tools they have.” (John outlines) “Wow, we never thought Alistair would move out of his comfort zone and try to use these tools in this way”. Henry adds

Some years later...

The unique business model engenders a genuine sense of ownership and entitlement at the firm, creating an egalitarian working environment with a united sense of purpose and commitment. Alistair still uses Sketchup occasionally (where it is applicable), but he recently found that using the newer generative components software along with BIM for its parametric value appealed to his design sensibility and now the firm is taking a very exciting design direction. Justin comments to John and David that Alistair is much more focused and arrives at a solid design parti much quicker than he did years ago. It is as if Alistair is a young intern again full of excitement and enthusiasm.

David relishes the role as the managing partner; although he is not actively engaged in BIM file he never stands in the way or lets his caution get the better of him or others. In fact, he believes the project team solving problems first before escalating them to management has decreased risk and increased productivity. This has been seen in the firm’s bottom line which took a couple of years to turn around.

John was onto the next wave. They needed to keep ahead of the industry, not too far but far enough to anticipate what was coming next. The industry transition resulted in fewer smaller firms, many larger firms, and firms like his that was at the size that would allow them to move fast if needed. An example was to successfully secure a number of the new whole life cost procurement process with construction firms that were like minded. When it comes to construction and virtual design/build they were able to transition to the new methodology while other firms continued to struggle with BIM.

John looked out over the studio, Alistair was in an animated discussion on the smart board about a conceptual design issue and David was showing some new potential overseas client around the office. John smiled to himself and recalled how it was all so different just a few years earlier and how they could have gone different ways if they had not been open minded and resisted change. He was distracted as the phone rang. Unknown to him was that the chair of the Global Centre for Architectural Practice announcing Alistair, David and John’s firm would receive the Firm of the Year Award, the highest award given to a firm to combine design and emergent technologies.