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TECHNOLOGY

South Florida firms show building designs in 3-D

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When Ralph Tapanes graduated from architecture school at the University of Miami a decade ago, he didn't take the conventional career route. Instead of designing buildings, he chose to make renderings and animations of them.

Around the same time, a similar idea was brewing in the minds of a trio of young architects working at Florida International University. During lunch breaks at Taco Bell, Eddie Leon, Kevin Smith and Johann Beckford conceived an architectural animation company of their own -- Spine3d.

It would be the calm before the boom.

Today, the 3-D movement spawned in Miami universities by risk-takers who learned to traffic in the spellbinding allure of the future has reshaped the way architecture and construction are marketed in South Florida.

Architecture professors say Spine3d and Tapanes's Realization Group recognized early on the potential of bringing a building to life before ground is broken.

The animations are a sort of window into the future, giving architects, builders and developers a powerful tool to sell their products to clients.

But they don't come cheap, costing up to \$200 a second to produce, or about \$12,000 a minute, sometimes more.

"It's an incredibly effective tool for communicating to clients," said Dennis Hector, associate dean at UM's School of



CANDACE WEST / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

The Realization Group is one of the pioneers in the 3d animation trend in architecture marketing that helped fuel the building boom in the last decade. They are a hometown Miami company, run by husband, Ralph, and wife, Cristina Tapanes.

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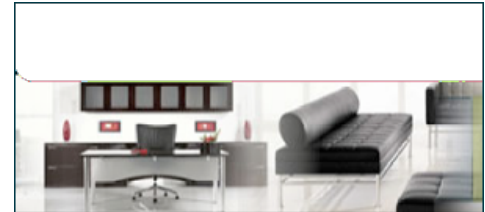
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Architecture. "Everybody is learning 3-D rendering techniques these days."

But a decade ago, with older technology and software, 3-D animations for architecture were much rarer.

Around that time, Tapanes graduated with a master's degree in architecture from the University of Miami and started working out of a bedroom in his parent's house in Miami, he said. His company's revenue the first year was less than \$10,000.

Spine3d, the biggest firm in town doing 3-D animation, has projects all over the world, capping off a fervent five-year growth period that saw them go from working out of a spare bedroom in a partner's home to a 10,000-square-foot office building with 40 employees.

"It's never easy to walk away from a stable, good-paying job," said Leon. "But we saw the writing on the wall. It was our opportunity to strike out and grow. Otherwise, we knew someone else would do it."

Leon, Smith and Spine Chief Operations Officer Beckford, met in the late 1990s at the Miami firm Spillis Candela, where all of them worked in the advanced technologies division, which produced animated renderings, Leon said.

WINNING APPROACH

"We found out we had a very good team method," said Spine3d Chairman Smith in a recent interview.

Spine3d President and CEO Leon was born in Cuba, but grew up in Miami. He received his bachelor's and master's degrees in architecture from FIU.

"We just naturally had a passion for it," he said. "Once I realized that you could do architecture all digitally, I knew that was it. In one of my design courses, I tried to do everything in 3-D, but my teacher refused to give me a grade until I did a physical model."

Smith had similar experiences: "I was told 'there is no place for this in architecture. You should be doing commercials for *Monday Night Football*.'"

FIU eventually offered Smith a job as an adjunct professor, teaching 3-D animation, and soon after Leon took a job to start the university's Interactive Studio for Digital Arts and be the school's webmaster.

"At FIU is where we really fostered our idea to build the company," Smith said.

Nathaniel Quincy Belcher, director of FIU's School of Architecture, said Leon and Smith had a knack for understanding the power of presentation and the associated technology. He said Spine3d's founders have played a role in contributing to the evolution of architecture. He said the school has made Smith an honorary faculty member. And Spine has contributed money to FIU architecture research projects.

"The technologies they use have created a world in which construction, design and engineering are converging together," Belcher said.

Smith said in the first few years of the millennium, he and Leon began to smell opportunity all around them. Doing research online, Smith also discovered a reliable company in China that they could outsource work to for an increase in volume.

"We had been talking and discussing how the market was in Miami," Leon said. "We thought we could rake it in."

GRADUAL EXPANSION

After freelancing for a couple of years, Leon quit his job at FIU, opened up an office in a spare bedroom of his home and started focusing full time on Spine. Within a few months, they had rented out office space near his home. And last year, they bought their offices near the corner of Le Jeune and Flagler Street.

Today, Spine3D is an animation powerhouse in South Florida.

"They surged to the forefront, at least in Miami, of providing this service, and for a while, everywhere I looked, I'd see their tagline," said Miami architect Max Strang, whose firm has worked with Spine3d. "When you look at the value of being able to convey to developers, to investors, to end users and to jurisdictional authorities what a project will look like, the value has become almost a necessity."

Tapanes took his Realization Group in a slightly different direction, offering physical models using 3-D printers, as well as animations, and staying relatively small. He has five employees, including his partner and wife, Cristina, and he does his animations in-house.

Tapanes also remains active in academia. He has taught architecture courses at the University of Miami and recently teamed up with a couple of UM architecture professors to design an exhibit for the Historical Museum of Southern Florida in downtown Miami, which is on display through January.

Realization's part of the project was to offer visitors a sense of what Interama -- a highly-touted but never built futuristic, permanent World's Fair -- would have looked like at its site by the bay in North Miami. From 1951 to 1975, Interama's promise to become a gateway to the Americas captured the imagination of local planners, famous architects and five U.S. presidents.

"I don't think we would have been able to give our visitors an actual sense of what that space would have looked like without Realization's 3-D animation," said Chief Museum Curator Joan Hypolite. "It was able to bring to life something that never existed."

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