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“Shān wài yǒu shān”

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In 1932, 60-something Frank Lloyd Wright was out of work, but not out of ideas. No stranger to crisis, the architect set about creating a concept of a perfect four-square-mile American suburban development that he brought forth in a series of drawings and photographs, a 12-foot-square model, a book entitled *The Disappearing City*, and a string of speaking engagements.

According to Neil Levine's *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*, Wright's *Broadacre City* was “a kind of private WPA [Works Progress Administration] program to provide work for the Taliesin Fellows during the Depression.” Levine speculates “whether Wright would have undertaken a project such as *Broadacre City*, had he had more work at the time.”

Nonetheless, this activity kept the firm and its apprentices busy for months. More to the point, Wright's many appearances and coverage of his utopian, controversial plan kept his name front-of-mind as an architectural visionary and social activist.

And then, just as the economy and Taliesin began to recover, businessman Edgar J. Kaufmann Sr. approached Wright to design *Fallingwater*. The rest is architectural history.

Given what's going on in today's economy, it's a fair question to ask: *What would you do if your firm hit a snag?* In fact, I did ask

this question of a range of people in the design and construction industry, adding that I understood they would first do whatever needed to be done to stabilize their offices. Some of the best answers follow.

- **Tom Brauer**, Chicago-based partner in 4240 Architecture (www.4240architecture.com), would launch into two projects. He would write the history of the modern architecture of his home town. He would also have his 4240 team create a design for an unrealized project for a real client. Since his clients range from boutique urban hotels to new communities and charitable foundations, that list should be readily available.
- Texan **Nancy Usrey, FSMPS**, senior consultant of Partners Usrey, recalls reading about a company that, instead of cutting back, turned Fridays into a day to volunteer in the community—repairing houses, delivering meals, and cleaning up landscapes, for example. Nancy herself would contribute her marketing and business management experience to a local charitable organization.
- Manhattan architect **Peter Pennoyer** is founder of a firm known for its practice of classical design “with a twist” for institutional, commercial, and, mostly, residential buildings (www.pappc.com). He is also the author of authoritative books on architectural masters [“We don't practice architecture by the book; we know the book.”]. Pennoyer admits that, faced with a downturn, he would write yet another book, most likely about Evelyn Waugh's “extravagantly comic,” fictitious Lady Metro-land, a heroine of the late '20s, and Early Modernism in Britain.

- Attorney **James E. Frankel**, “a strong advocate of the architectural and engineering professions,” is a partner in the Construction Group in Arent Fox LLP’s New York office (www.arentfox.com). Jamie would take a good hard look at existing and prospective clients and come up with a value-creation program (VCP). Assuming that a “fair share” of a shrinking pie would not be enough, he would train his team in this revolutionary VCP approach—that is, find opportunities for growth in the downward economic cycle and then set fees upward against refusal [not downward towards acceptance]. What’s different is what he’d do with it: Teach the methodology to clients and prospects.

Finding these answers fascinating, I asked my husband, **David Helpern**, who founded Helpern Architects (www.helpern.com) forever ago, what would he do if his business—the clients are largely institutions and developers—had to weather a fourth economic downturn. His answer: Get into public service as a volunteer, “which would be especially needed;” that is, join a New York City community board or become a commissioner. Actually, he’s already got his game plan organized, which brings me to my concluding points.

Are most of these activities of provable worth? Perhaps not immediately. But what they have in common is their intense focus and their optimism. Each project entails connecting with new people in new and generous ways. Ultimately, each person and firm will emerge refreshed, with a broader network, new knowledge, improved skills, and income—and significant achievements, informed by professionalism.

Ironically, I observed that what is keeping these respondents from achieving their dreams, from helping the planet and their local community, is...adversity! What’s wrong with that picture? If the benefits are so great...when the gain from an outward, rather

than inward focus, is so considerable...when money cannot be an object...what possible reason could keep them from doing it **now**? *Now, not in some grim future scenario.*

Although it’s doubtful you need additional inspiration to follow your own inclination, you could pin one of these quotes on your mirror or the edge of your computer screen.

- In 1688, the Samurai doctor and poet Masahide had a terrible fire that caused him to write this famous haiku: “Now that my storehouse has burned down, I have a better view of the moon.”
- Shakespeare commented that “Sweet are the uses of adversity.” Who hasn’t learned the entire stanza from *As You Like It*?
- “You’ve got to bumble forward into the unknown,” stated Frank Gehry in a notably Seinfeldian observation.
- “Shan wai you shan.” “Beyond this mountain, there is always another” asserts the Chinese saying that I used as the attention-getting headline to this column.

I have to wonder why I’ve collected so many quotes about misfortune. Perhaps writers abhor feeling discouraged. In truth, economic situations shift all the time. But why get on the see-saw? You can provide a counterweight, make the time, eliminate obstacles, and go make some history of your own.

About the Author



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