

Berger Rait Becomes BR Design

All through the recent economic and industry recession, we read in the financial press releases of the public companies that the business environment was "challenging," later circumstances even became "difficult." Plants were closed, valued employees and even personal friends were severed, and retained employees did twice as much work under five times as much pressure with half the resources. It was not much fun.

But, having seen this scenario from many perspectives, the pressure on senior corporate executives usually doesn't compare to that of the small-business owner/manager operating in similar circumstances. One case in point is **Michael Rait**, co-founder of the Manhattan design firm, Berger Rait, who just announced that the firm's name has been legally changed to **BR Design Associates, LLC**.

BR Design was founded in 1985 by Mr. Rait and Larry Berger, who is now with TPG Architecture (formerly, The Phillips Group). The antediluvian year (in a myopic sense) of 2000 was the firm's best year. Then came, for Mr. Rait: the recession, 9/11, a real estate crunch, the drying up of work, the departure of Mr. Berger, and all of their attendant problems. And, on the home front, it's never a good time to introduce one's children to the casual pitilessness of the marketplace.



But Mr. Rait stuck around to pick up the pieces. The firm is now ten, rather than 30, and the office space is smaller, but in the same building at 411 Fifth Avenue. "I probably should have acted faster," acknowledged Mr. Rait, but he is not alone in voicing this sentiment in retrospect, nor does hindsight make the decisions made any less valid when they were made.

That was then; this is now. And, as everyone knows, design business is back. "I want the community to know that BR Design is thriving," said Mr. Rait. "I'm very happy with a firm of ten. We can professionally handle jobs of up to, say, 150,000 sq. ft., and still provide the personal attention that we, as a small firm, have always prided ourselves on. Our long-term clients agree."



Michael Rait

Repeat business is a hallmark of success, and BR Design's current-client list heralds the continuity of the firm despite its recent rigors. Recent projects include:

- ▶debut of the finished interiors for the showroom of **Beauvals Carpets**, luxurious flooring collector and dealer
- ▶the new headquarters for **The Anti-Defamation League**
- ▶the New York headquarters of **Avenue A|Razorfish**, the on-line advertising giant
- ▶**Allianz Insurance**
- ▶**Prudential Douglas Elliman Real Estate** (at both the Madison Avenue and Broadway offices)
- ▶headquarters of **Street-Works LLC**, the real estate development consulting group

Other repeat clients include projects for **Conde Nast**, **Fisher-Price/Mattel** and the **Rohatyn Group**.

With 20 years of experience in running his own firm, and the infrastructure and way of doing business that have become part of the firm's culture, Mr. Rait is hardly starting from scratch. "When the firm was created in 1985," said Mr. Rait, "we had one core belief: There is nothing more important in the design process than listening carefully to our clients. And that goes far beyond hearing what they have to say. It means understanding, sometimes more than they do, what they are striving for or trying to say. That is the distinguishing characteristic of years of experience."

BR's new offices are sleeker with a more open feel, noted Mr. Rait. "We're not isolated from each other and the space doesn't limit the way we move around; so our communications are never cut off. "And, while we will retain our boutique intimacy, our experienced team has the ability to push the envelope. Design



(l-r) Cathy Scheele, Natalia Alvarez, Anthony McAndrew and Meredith Ward

Cont'd on page 16, BR Design . . .

.. BR Design *Cont'd from page 15*



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doesn't just happen on paper. It has to be functional. It's one thing to have out-of-the-box thinking, and another to be able to streamline it so that each company's needs and dreams are grounded in reality. At BR we have the ability to pay tremendous attention to the details."

The many changes resulting from the adaptation process over the past few years are symbolized in the firm's name change to BR Design Associates. "The message is that innovative and top performing team members may aspire to become, and become, associates in more than theory only, said Mr. Rait. "My longtime desire to encourage creativity in younger associates was the first step on the path to our new internal strategy. Our product – superior design services for blue-chip corporations and cutting-edge businesses – is no longer associated with one or two people's names. A brand identity, rather than two personal names, makes it easier for ambition to thrive. Our new name, BR, doesn't limit the way in which associates can put their mark on the client and within the company."

Looking back, Mr. Rait observes, "Despite the challenges of the past few years, this is a very optimistic time for everyone at BR. Every challenge has turned into triumph. "Business is great. We have a great team and a great core, and we will probably be adding a few more members to the team in the next year. ▲



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