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From Conception to Completion

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LOS ANGELES - The economy may be down, but savvy developers know it's the right time to start laying groundwork for future building. And land use specialists at the six-attorney Armbruster, Goldsmith & Delvac are there to make it happen.

"The last four months have been the best four months in the firm's history," said managing partner Dale J. Goldsmith, who left Greenberg Glusker five years ago to launch the new firm with Mark S. Armbruster.



William F. Delvac, who came over in April from market leader Latham & Watkins, likened it to "jumping from a battleship to a speedboat."

Like many small firms, Armbruster Goldsmith prides itself on being able to offer quality service at a fraction of what big firms charge.

Another reason for the firm's activity has to do with the unique nature of land use practice itself.

"Back 25 to 30 years ago, there wasn't such a thing as a land use lawyer," said Armbruster, 60, who brings three decades of experience working with elected officials, their staffs and departmental heads on major commercial, industrial, retail and residential projects.

"There were real estate lawyers, but as with everything else in this world, development has become more complex," he said. "Layers of regulation are piled upon layers of regulation. Today, for any major project, or even not so major ones, it is critical to have a land use lawyer among other members of the entitlement team to get the project from Plan A to the end."

Clients who come to Armbruster Goldsmith know getting all the entitlements, from environmental reports to zoning permits and sundry other approvals, can take years. They also know the lawyers are expert at clearing the political hurdles so building can begin.

"Timing is everything," said Goldsmith, 49, who has represented major corporations and developers in numerous high-profile projects over his career. They include the expansion of Fox Studios and the renovation of Dodger Stadium.

"If you started on a project today, it would take two to three years to get the entitlements, another year for the building permit, another year to meet other requirements," he said.

By then, the economy hopefully will have recovered and financing will be available. Clients who had the luck and foresight to begin the process now will be ahead of everyone else. If they miss the opportunity, they will get left behind.

Two of the firm's clients that caught the last wave are Gatehouse Capital Corp. and Legacy Partners, developers of the transit-oriented mixed-use development at the iconic corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street.

The legendary intersection, which includes The Hollywood Walk of Fame with its bronzed stars of celebrity names embedded in the sidewalk, first became famous in the 1920s for its concentration of radio and movie-related businesses. A number of high-profile projects recently have been attempting to restore the area's lost luster.

Goldsmith started work on Hollywood and Vine in 2003, while still at Greenberg Glusker Fields Claman & Machtinger, describing it as "a saga longer than 'War and Peace' and with more plot twists." Set to open in January, it exemplifies the firm's interest in balancing historic preservation with urban renewal.

Built around and above a city Metro Rail station, it incorporates the 12-story, 1923 Taft Building, known at the time as the area's first high-rise, into a design that includes a 305-room W Hotel, condominiums, apartments, affordable housing and 60,000 square feet of ground-floor retail, bars, clubs and an outdoor W Ciné with its huge screen for events and red-carpet receptions.

"I am a preservationist, but I'm also about building the future of our city," said Delvac, 54, who has done both.

At Latham, he helped developers obtain a variety of government approvals for construction of the 27-acre L.A. Live complex next to the downtown Convention Center. Earlier in his career, he represented community preservationists suing the City of Beverly Hills to stop demolition of the La Cienega Water Treatment Plant. The 1927 Spanish-colonial revival building was then renovated as a film library for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, another of Delvac's clients.

"We better be building buildings today that are going to be historic in 50 or 100 years or we're choking the life of the city," he said.

The three partners met more than 20 years ago. They were representing various interests in a city redevelopment project that ended up getting shelved in the last economic downturn. At the time, Delvac was chair of Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton's legal committee. Armbruster had his own land use firm. Goldsmith was at what then was Alschuler Grossman & Pines, with former city attorney Burt Pines.

Fast forward to 2004.

Goldsmith had been thinking of leaving Greenberg Glusker for a smaller venue, someplace where he was freer to exercise his entrepreneurial skills and cut his own deals without having to endure endless committee approvals. He called Armbruster. The two met for breakfast at the Bel Air Luxe Hotel.

"And before I finished my bagel, we decided to join together," Goldsmith said.

Five years later, Delvac found himself thinking along similar lines. He happened to run into Goldsmith at a planning commission hearing. Goldsmith began telling him how great things were going at his new firm. Delvac said he jokingly asked if Goldsmith had an extra office. His colleague replied that, as a matter of fact, he did.

Like Goldsmith, Delvac brought a large percentage of business with him. Included is his longtime Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences client, for whom he now is paving the way to build a motion picture museum in the heart of Hollywood.

The partners, all native Angelenos, share a mutual interest in preserving and improving their hometown. Moreover, their expertise in historic preservation laws, the California Environmental Quality Act and

government and politics complements one another.

"We have a synergy among us," Armbruster said. "Bill is a preeminent preservation lawyer, and I think Dale is known as the premier CEQA lawyer, which is key to any real estate development project we do these days in terms of entitlement. Then, I have a crossover, with some of that [preservation and environmental work] but a lot of the political relationships, as well.

"You put all those together and hopefully it's an attractive package for clients who have real estate entitlement projects and who have some degree of difficulty."

Some of the firm's larger projects in the works include 40,000 feet of retail and residential development near Hollywood, a 400-unit waterside apartment complex in Marina del Rey and the massive NBC Universal Vision land expansion project, encompassing 2,900 homes. The firm is working with Latham & Watkins on the NBC Universal project. Latham represents Universal. Armbruster Goldsmith represents real estate developer Thomas Properties Group Inc.

The firm also represents Next Century Associates, owner of the Century Plaza Hotel, which is slated for demolition and replacement with a mixed-use residential and retail upgrade. The announcement drew opposition from celebrity activists, who see the 1966 curved hotel as an architectural and historic landmark. It has housed presidents from Lyndon Johnson to Bill Clinton, along with movie stars and sports figures. Ronald Reagan kept an office there.

But the lawyers, who said they embrace preservation where appropriate, say that although the hotel was once the centerpiece of Century City, it now looks out of place among the newer, futuristic designs.

"Century City is not the historic district," Goldsmith said. "It's a place of new office buildings and new residential buildings."

Besides its entitlement work, which is vast and varied, the firm also does land use litigation.

It is defending the Simon Wiesenthal Center on behalf of its efforts to expand the Museum of Tolerance. Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker represented the center in getting the entitlements, but turned to Armbruster Goldsmith when community activists challenged the approvals, contending the expansion would bring more traffic to an already congested neighborhood.

As with many specialty boutiques, the lawyers get much of their new big business through lawyer referrals, because they don't pose a threat of stealing away a client. "We do land use law and land use litigation," Armbruster said. "That's all we do."

While no job, so far, has been too big for them to take on - they don't come much bigger than NBC Universal, the partners note - the firm also handles smaller projects. It recently signed up 71 local Walgreens stores that need to get the appropriate licenses to sell wine and beer.

The firm also will refuse certain clients or projects. Some developers have bad reputations, they say, leaving it at that. They also have other reasons. The partners won't represent Wal-Mart, for example, because they don't believe in what they term its corporate Orwellian philosophy.

"My kids used to ask me when they were young, 'What kind of law do you do, dad?'" Delvac said. "I said I get the government to do things faster than they would have done it otherwise. Unfortunately, even that isn't very fast.

"These are huge, long-term projects with private nonprofit cultural dollars."