

Prominent SD Architectural Firm Relishes a ‘Challenge’

ARCHITECTURE: AVR Studio Sprang from Humble Beginning

■ By RAY HUARD

One of San Diego’s most prominent architectural firms – **AVRP Studios** – got its start in 1976 when founder **Doug Austin** decided to start his own firm working out of a Solana Beach condominium.

“It got to the point where I had too many people working in the condo,” Austin said. “My girlfriend at the time said ‘either they leave or I do,’ so we set up an office in Solana Beach.”

Headquartered in East Village with offices in Canada, the architectural firm that Austin founded has worked on more than 1,000 projects worth over \$3 billion, went through name changes and expanded to a staff of 44 – and added **Chris Veum** and **Randy Robbins** as principals with Austin.



Chris Veum
Principal
AVRP Studios

Veum, AVR’s president, joined the firm in 1992 and leads the firm’s workplace and healthcare projects and is its chief strategist, overseeing its growth, direction and development.

Robbins joined the firm in 1983 and is the design lead for AVR’s campus and community projects.

As the senior member of the firm, Austin directs AVR’s urban projects.

“I wanted the firm to be able to do everything from a complete community to doing a remodel of a house,” Austin said.

Picking up nearly 150 design awards, the



The Wedge building in Canada is among the newest projects designed by AVR Studios. Photo courtesy of AVR Studios

firm’s San Diego projects include designing the **USS Midway Museum**, the **USS Midway Café 41**, a new campus for the San Diego marketing firm **Red Door Interactive**, the **Ray & Joan Kroc Salvation Army Community Center**, a new theater and classroom building at **Hoover High School**, the **Sharp Rees-Stealy Downtown Medical** building, and the 6,500-square-foot **Congregation Beth Israel** campus.



Doug Austin
Founder and Principal
AVRP Studios

“We did a pivot after the 2008 recession to do more government projects, thinking they’d be more sustainable in a recession,” Austin said.

Although it’s not in San Diego, one of the firm’s most striking projects is a 15-story mixed used project in Victoria, British Columbia called **The Wedge**.

As its name suggests, the Wedge was designed to look like a giant wedge pointing toward the

ground, wider at the top than at the bottom, leaning toward the east from its footprint. The building incorporates a historic mid-century chapel.

“That became an opportunity for us to build a really cool building,” Austin said.

The building hovers over its foundation and the 1960s-era chapel.

The Salvation Army Community is another project that stands out.

“That has a little bit of everything – a performing arts center that doubles as a chapel, art classes, a library, a family center, ball fields, a gym complex, an aquatic center, and ice-skating

➔ *Challenge page 48*



Randy Robbins
Principal
AVRP Studio

AVRP Studios

avrp
STUDIOS | architecture
urban design
interiors
planning

FOUNDED: 1976

FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN: Douglas Austin, FAIA

HEADQUARTERS: East Village

BUSINESS: Architects and Interior Designers

EMPLOYEES: 44

WEBSITE: www.avrstudios.com

CONTACT: San Diego office, 619-704-2700; Canada office, T: 604-662-4479

NOTABLE: AVR Studios has designed more than \$3 billion worth of construction projects and was awarded patents for a new methodology involving prefabricating modules to construct concrete buildings up to 75 stories tall.

Challenge

➔ *from page 8*

rink,” Veum said. “Everyone here loves a challenging project, if every project was exactly the same, we’d be doing a cookie cutter over and over again and we wouldn’t have the employees that have been here for 25 years.”

School projects have become a staple for AVR. Robbins said school projects are especially challenging partly because they often have to be built on tight budgets while classes are going on.

“We’re spending taxpayers’ money. You have to be really careful about budgets. You have to find really good ways to do interesting spaces,” Robbins said.

Part of that is getting the community and school staff involved, according to Robbins.

A former member of the **San Diego Planning Commission**, Austin is a strong advocate of affordable housing.

“We got involved with affordable housing before the public knew there was a housing crisis. The housing crisis started in the 1970’s,” Austin said. “What happened over the years was ‘oh yeah, we’re all for housing, just not

here.”

To help ease the housing crunch, Austin said that AVR has received patents on modular housing design that would make affordable housing projects less expensive to build.

Using modular designs could reduce construction costs by up to \$100 per square foot, Austin said.

Austin said the next step is to put the concepts into practice with a demonstration project.

“We’ve got a site in downtown San Diego that we’re looking at for an eight-story, proof of concept,” Austin said.

A key part of AVR’s philosophy involves giving back to the community. “That’s something we believe in very strongly,” Austin said.

In addition to serving for eight years on the Planning Commission, Austin was chairman of **Centre City Development Corp.** from 2002 to 2006, chairman of the **San Diego Ballpark Design and Construction Task Force** from 2002 to 2004, is an elder with the **Village Church Rancho Santa Fe**, and is chairman of the advisory board of **YIGBY** (Yes In God’s Backyard), an organization whose mission is using property owned by faith-based groups for construction of multi-family housing. ■