

# Long Island Business NEWS

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## Blue shoots

*Architectural firm back in form as construction rebounds*

By DAVID WINZELBERG

Amityville's Art of Form Architecture has seen a 15 percent bump in business this year as the deep freeze of the Great Recession finally thaws. For partners Ray Caliendo and Mark Searage, that means more than 300 active projects on the boards, the most in the firm's 19-year history.

And, we should mention, none of that is related to Hurricane Sandy recovery efforts.

"People are willing to spend some money now," Searage said.

Art of Form's biggest boost has been Steel Equities' redevelopment of 1.2 million square feet of dilapidated industrial space on 95 acres of former Navy property in Bethpage. Among the projects there: designing more than 300,000 square feet of space for Gold Coast Studios, Eye Wear Designs, Banfi Wines, Penn Steel and PSI.

But Caliendo and Searage see signs of economic life well beyond the Bethpage work. Their company's diversified clientele, which includes retail, medical, industrial and office sectors, is finally moving forward with renovation and expansion projects they'd been sitting on for several years.

"For whatever reason, things have loosened up," Caliendo said. "They're starting to pull the trigger on construction."

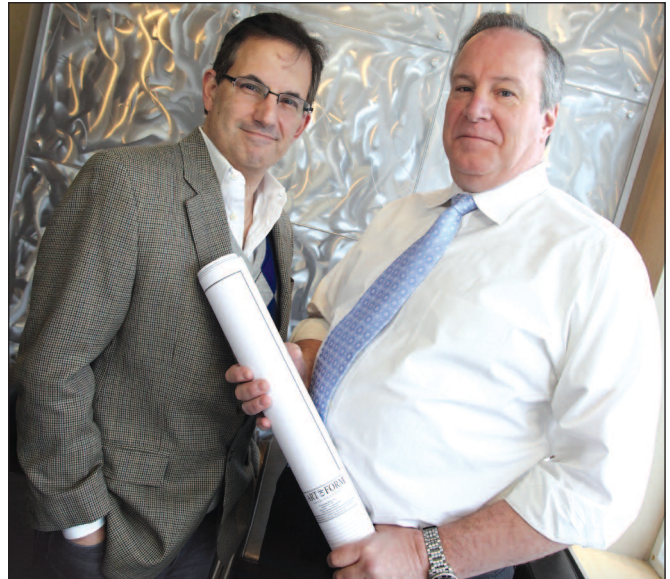
Increased retail sector activity has greased the architects' momentum. Art of Form recently designed three expansion stores for Dollar Tree in Carle Place, Lindenhurst and Shirley, and Caliendo and Searage are now busy with tenant relocations and store build-outs as part of the 72,000-square-foot expansion of the Walt Whitman mall in Huntington Station.

They're also working on a new Dairy Queen restaurant in Massapequa and will soon be designing more DQs, as the chain returns to Long Island after a nearly 30-year hiatus.

"The velocity of retail build-outs here is up at least 10 percent," Caliendo said.

While the partners credit their recent spate of business to an improved economy, they also note attrition in regional architectural ranks, which has allowed them to pick up more clients. Since 2009, many rival firms have downsized or merged, cutting staff and limiting production capabilities.

Art of Form has gone the other way, increasing from 15 to 20 employees in the last two years. And they may not be done growing yet: Indicators show the construction industry is indeed on the rise, with



**RAY CALIENDO (left) MARK SEARAGE: Art of Form is working on more than 300 active projects.**

the numbers of building permits and contracts climbing.

Contracts for all future construction in the New York metropolitan area jumped 66 percent in January, according to data from McGraw-Hill Construction. There was a total of nearly \$1.75 billion in future construction contracts in January, compared with about \$1.05 billion a year ago, though much of those gains involve residential and infrastructure projects resulting from damage caused by Hurricane Sandy.

The region's nonbuilding construction contracts, covering roads and infrastructure, rose to \$488.7 million in January, far outpacing the \$98.6 million in contracts recorded in January 2012.

Consulting engineer Harvey Bienstock of Holbrook, one of Art of Form's subcontractors, said he's also seen more work lately.

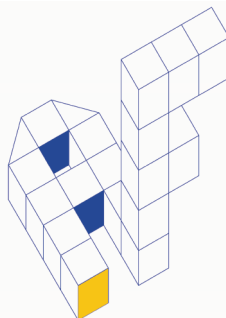
"We're up about 15 to 20 percent over last year," Bienstock said, and while much of that increase is from Sandy-related infrastructure projects, he also reports a gradual improvement in commercial construction sectors.

"It's a good sign," he said.

Between paid projects, Art of Form has been performing engineering evaluations and writing reports for free for dozens of South Shore homeowners seeking federal help for Sandy repairs. Caliendo's own four-bedroom ranch in Babylon was destroyed, along with two other residential properties he'd been renting out.

Whether a result of Sandy's brutality or a kinder economy, Caliendo and Searage said they expect the construction upswing to continue in the near future, especially as financing for new projects becomes more available.

"Our clients are doing better," Searage said. "Borrowing has become a little easier."



You can reach Art-Of-Form Architectural Services, PLLC at 631-264-8191 or visit us on the web at [www.artofform.com](http://www.artofform.com)