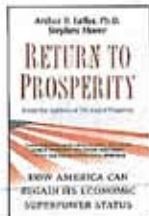


**TOOLBOX**

**BOOKS**



**Return to Prosperity: How America Can Regain Its Economic Superpower Status**  
 By Arthur Laffer and Stephen Moore

When you title your bestselling book "The End of Prosperity," it may move copies, but it's still a downer.

Now Arthur Laffer, coauthor of "The End of Prosperity" and new author Stephen Moore are back with a sequel to the economics book many say predicted the recession.

"Return to Prosperity" lays out their view that lowering taxes, putting government on a "low-fat" diet, emphasizing debt reduction and retirement, and bringing back the investor class in America will propel the country to its former economic glory.

Laffer is founder of Nashville-based consulting firm Laffer Associates and former member of President Reagan's economic policy advisory group during its supply-side, tax-slashing heyday — and was the keynote speaker at the Growth Summit earlier this month as part of the Houston Business Journal's Celebrate Enterprise event. Moore is a

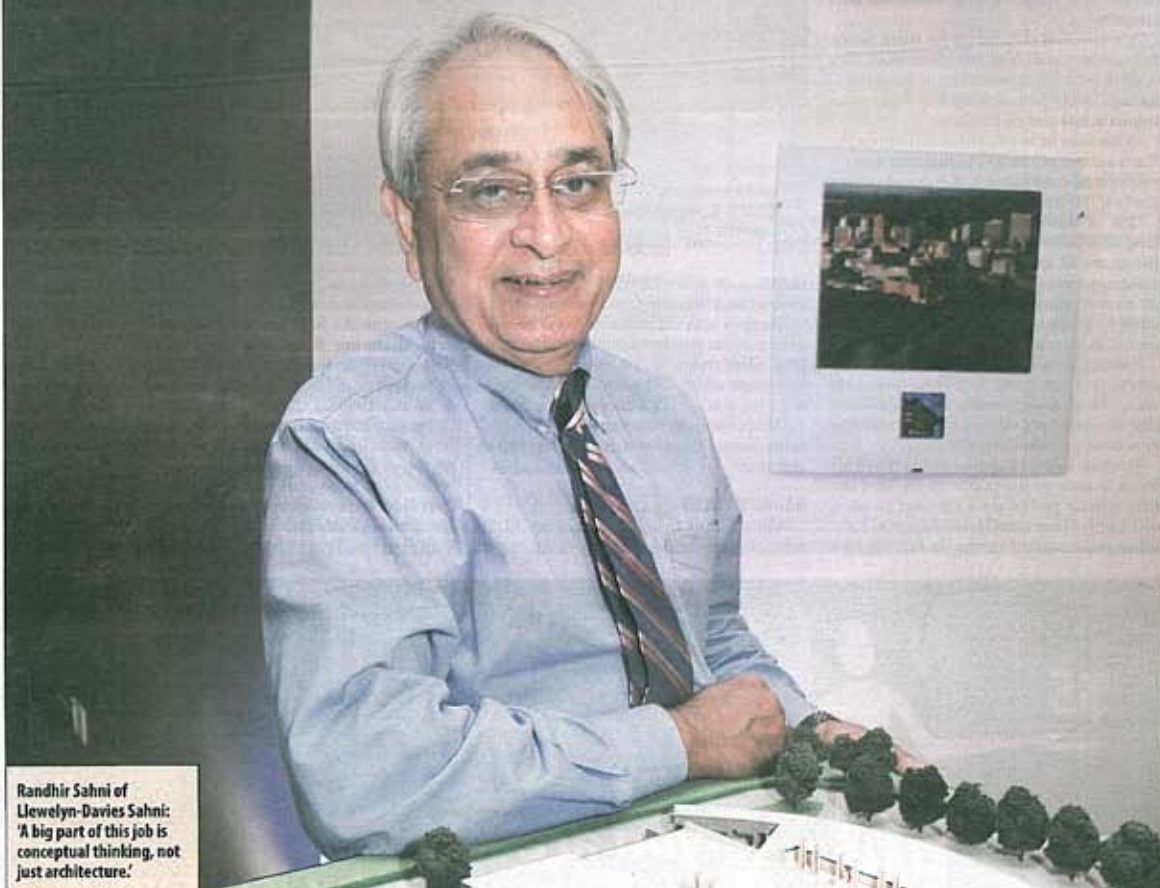
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SWIM WITH THE SHARKS	18A

# Designs on a firm foundation

Diverse approach helps Llewellyn-Davies Sahni build architectural success



**Randhir Sahni of Llewellyn-Davies Sahni:** 'A big part of this job is conceptual thinking, not just architecture.'

BY TANYA RUTLEDGE  
 SPECIAL TO HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

When Randhir Sahni drives through Houston, he can't help but marvel at some of the landmarks his architecture, urban planning and design firm has had a hand in creating.

Always striving for perfection, he also can't resist imagining how he could have improved the final product.

Llewellyn-Davies Sahni, which recently celebrated its 30th anniversary, has played a part in the development of some of Houston's most recognizable landmarks, including George Bush Intercontinental Airport, William P. Hobby Airport, Ben Taub Hospital, Houston Community College, the Harris County Criminal Justice Center, the Buffalo Bayou Trails, the Houston Theater District and the Uptown District.

One of the firm's most recognizable works is a grouping of eight lighting "spikes" created to commemorate the 1990 Economic Summit of the G-8 Nations. The structures were displayed at the George R. Brown Convention Center dur-

ing the summit and later relocated to Intercontinental Airport.

Sahni's firm was created in the U.S. in 1968 as Llewellyn-Davies Associates, an affiliate of Llewellyn-Davies Weeks Forester Walker Bor in London. Llewellyn-Davies Associates entered the Houston market in the early 1970s after being commissioned by real estate developer Gerald Hines for advisory and master-planning services for a 5,000-acre ranch in Southwest Houston. After several starts and stops, that acreage eventually became part of Sugar Land.

Sahni, who started his architecture career with CRSS Architects Inc., later joined the Houston office of Llewellyn-Davies Associates and eventually moved up through the ranks to managing director. He took over as 55 percent owner of the company in 1980 after the New York office was closed and the headquarters shifted to Houston.

The company was renamed after Sahni incorporated it as a Texas corporation in 1980.

Sahni's mind-set from the beginning was not to brand the business as an architecture firm or

even an urban planning or consulting firm. The company's work is so diverse, Sahni says, that industry players often ask him how one project fits in with the next.

"My answer is always 'it doesn't,'" says Sahni, who has a master's degree in architecture from Kansas State University, a master's of architecture in urban design from Rice University and is also a registered investment adviser.

"The crux of survival for us is to wear many hats," he says.

**WEARING MANY HATS**

The firm's projects range in scope from helping Tenneco Inc. with land planning for 42 acres it owned in Post Oak Park to conceiving the idea of lighting the tops of the buildings in the Galleria area to create a "glowing skyline" as part of the Uptown holiday celebration. Another project created a street redevelopment plan to improve movement systems for transit vehicles, passengers and pedestrians

SEE SAHNI, PAGE 16A

## STRATEGIES

**SAHNI:** Growing by expanding expertise and continuing focus on local customer base

FROM PAGE 15A

in downtown and Midtown.

Sahni's employees have also been called to serve as expert witnesses when the Texas Department of Transportation used eminent domain to take over certain parcels of land as part of the Interstate 10 widening project.

Although the firm requires all of its employees to hold degrees in architecture or planning, Sahni says the job goes way beyond that scope. This is where the hats come in.

"On the first day, we show them seven hats on the wall and tell them that they have to be ready to wear any of those hats," he says. "A big part of this job is conceptual thinking, not just architecture."

Sahni says he is not afraid of diluting the firm's service offerings because it is that diversity that has helped it stay afloat during the tough times.

One of those rough patches came not long after Sahni took the helm in the 1980s. Houston's oil and real estate bust took the company from turning a profit of \$45,000 in its second year in business to seeing almost all of its projects dry up in just a two-week period as oil prices began to nose-dive.

"Oil dropped, and jaws just dropped, and everything just came to a stop," Sahni recalls. "That's when I made a policy change that we would not stick to just one building type or one product type."

The bust caused Sahni to widen the firm's focus to include the public sector, and the firm quickly picked up a contract to work on Charity Hospital of New Orleans. In turn, other public-sector contracts followed for

**LLEWELYN-DAVIES SAHNI**

FOUNDED: 1980  
OWNER: Randhir Sahni  
BUSINESS: Architectural, design and planning firm  
EMPLOYEES: 15

FISCAL 2008 REVENUE: \$4.3 million  
FISCAL 2009 REVENUE: \$4.3 million  
WEB SITE: www.theldnet.com

clients such as the Harris County Hospital District and Houston Community College.

"The firm also entered new areas of business, such as conducting a feasibility study for a client trying to find the most efficient way to get oil out of a petroleum reserve — not typical in a day's work for an architect."

"That change in business really saved us," Sahni says. "We would have been closed and gone."

**NARROW FOCUS**

While Sahni insists on keeping LDS's project scope wide open, he is willing to

narrow its focus in other areas, including its geographic horizon.

Although the firm has worked on projects spanning from Iran to Scotland, Sahni says the spotlight shines brightest at home.

"In the 1980s, I changed the emphasis to be on Houston because you've got to be good at home," he says. "We are sitting on top of a gold mine in Houston."

Sahni, a native of India, points out that Houston's economy is so strong that the firm recently bid on a project at The University of Texas Health Science Cen-

ter that attracted 135 bids — some from companies located as far away as London.

Because he believes that an architecture and planning firm "needs to know how the dirt feels" in the city in which it is working, Sahni often partners with international offices through its affiliation with Llewelyn-Davies Yeang in Europe and the East, or will sometimes team up with local firms in a particular U.S. city.

As such, all 15 of the firm's employees are based in Houston.

The company's employee base has been as small as seven and as high as 25 over the years, although Sahni says he has since made a decision not to grow larger than 20 employees in keeping with the firm's commitment to controlled growth.

Revenue for fiscal 2009, which ends on June 30, is expected to come in at \$4.3 million, matching 2008.

John L. Guess III, president of commercial real estate and asset management firm Guess Group Inc., which has teamed up with LDS on several projects over the years, says Sahni has created a turnkey shop without sacrificing expertise in any one area.

"Over the years he has managed to astutely change his brand from just architecture to an all-encompassing program," Guess says. "And along the way, he has gotten a reputation for finding solutions to tough projects. He has been able to harness that momentum and stay ahead of his time." ■

TANYA RUTLEDGE is a Houston-based freelance writer.