Minneapolis-based VJAA boasts an intensely rigorous, research-driven approach that roots every project in its context.

Here are some of VJAA’s current projects: a flatwater rowing venue for the 2015 Pan Am games outside of Toronto, a Habitat for Humanity house in Detroit, a plaza expansion for the University of Minnesota’s Weisman Art Museum, and a renovation of a 1960s Brutalist house in Minneapolis.

Indeed, since the firm’s founding in 1995, VJAA has refused to be typecast by a certain style of architecture, type of building, or scale of project. Based in Minneapolis, the firm has consistently pursued a diverse body of work around the country, says Jennifer Yoos, AIA, 47, one of the firm’s three principals. “We never really had a local practice that emerged and became a national practice,” she says. “We were doing a few local projects, but largely practiced projects all over the country from pretty early on.”

One of VJAA’s first commissions, the Type/Variant House in northwestern Wisconsin, marked a formative moment in the firm’s development. The house’s design, conceived as a collection of wood-framed, copper-clad volumes, emerged after extensive conversations with the client, who had an interest in collecting art objects in series, says Vincent James, FAIA, 58, the firm’s founding principal. “Everyone came to know us through that single project, and expected us to simply reproduce that as a style,” he says. “We were very, very committed to not doing that.”

Instead, VJAA continued to innovate with a variety of museum, institutional, and university work, winning six Progressive Architecture awards along the way. The firm approaches every scheme, regardless of budget, location, or type, with the same standards for design excellence, Yoos says.

VJAA’s research and collaborative relationships help tailor projects to a client’s needs and to a site’s environmental and cultural context. For one of its most celebrated projects, the Charles Hostler Student Center at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, the firm observed how occupants of the region’s buildings congregated in different microclimates during the day—using lower shaded spaces when the heat was stifling or seeking cool rooftop breezes at night, for instance—and similarly designed the center to maximize those diverse microclimates. “We’re always thinking about how … [environmental ideas] can inform the building, and make it a condition of its own place and unable to be reproduced anywhere else in a specific way,” James says. “We call it radical localization.”

To foster its collaborative spirit and the development of conceptual ideas, the firm has stayed relatively small. It currently employs 14 designers and architects, down from a peak size of 22. Though Yoos thinks
VJAA has evolved alongside Minneapolis’s burgeoning design community. “Minneapolis culture is very arts–culture oriented,” Yoos says. “A lot of people are very curious here and open. And that influences the design community, and that’s partly why there are so many great design firms here.”

Nevertheless, in 2002, the partners, who had long heard that they must have a New York or Boston branch to be considered for top-tier projects, decided to open a Boston studio. The venture lasted a year. “We really didn’t like being divided that way,” Yoos says. “We felt we were much more productive being in one place.”

In 2003, the firm upgraded its Minneapolis digs. Located in a traditional office downtown that reinforced staff hierarchies, VJAA moved to an open studio space in an old textile warehouse that boasts tall ceilings and great light. It’s ideal for testing material fabrications, mock-ups, and ideas about daylighting, Yoos says. “We model all the time, and we build iterative models and studies.”

The studio’s main entry area is used for presentations, but also as a working area around a projector. “It evolved out of our way of working with physical models, where we would stand around a table and talk about a project and develop little sketches or quick studies,” Yoos says. “When we became really excited about digital tools, we started to use them in similar ways.”

VJAA first explored digital fabrication with its work on the Minneapolis Rowing Club in 1998. More recently, for an exhibit at Eero and Eliel Saarinen’s Christ Church Lutheran in Minneapolis, the firm designed a self-supporting, reconfigurable wall that further explored molded-plywood technologies used by the Saarinen’s collaboration with Charles Eames, but advanced them using digital fabrication. “Something we’re really interested in is this trajectory of modern design as being continually informed by new technologies and new ideas,” Yoos says.

“We also see the developments in technology as a cultural process,” adds managing principal Nathan Knutson, AIA. “So the radical schisms that people want to portray in the development of new ideas is something that’s not necessarily as interesting as looking at how technology evolves and grows out of culture.”

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