

# AT

ARCHITECTURAL TECHNOLOGY



# Practice makes perfect?

It's over a year since the collapse of the Northern Rock bank brought home the reality of the global 'credit crunch', and the UK housing sector is feeling the pain. The major house builders are shedding jobs at unprecedented rates, leaving some CIAT members wondering whether they should take the plunge and set up in private practice. **Melanie Thompson** gathers some advice.

Regardless of the weather, it's been a bad summer for the house building sector. In July, Barratt made 1,000 people redundant; Taylor Wimpey shed 900. This was not the first round of blood-letting (Bellway, Crest Nicholson, and Kier had already announced redundancies in May) and it won't be the last.

While this is dreadful news for those who've been given their cards, it's barely any better for those who are left behind — wondering if they might be next. At times like these there are really only two options: keep your head down and hope the problems will pass you by; or try to take charge of your own destiny by moving — sideways into a different branch of work, onwards to a new employer, or upwards to become your own boss.

Working for yourself might sound like a dramatic option, given the current economic climate, but it's an attractive choice if you have ever felt stifled by the UK corporate culture, or fancy trying your hand at a wider range of projects than your current job offers. The good news is that, as well as



**Squeezed out?**  
Private practice could be an alternative

various government-funded schemes to help small businesses get off the ground, CIAT has an excellent track record of supporting members who decide to set up in private practice. We talked to three CIAT Members who have taken the plunge and compiled 'six secrets of success' to help you make an informed decision about your future.

## Six secrets of success

### 1. Know your rights

Read your employment contract carefully to ensure you understand your entitlements if redundancy is likely. Basic guidance on redundancy is at [www.direct.gov.uk/en/employment](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/employment). Seek assistance if necessary from a solicitor who specialises in employment law.

### 2. Understand your obligations

The CIAT's Code of Conduct and Practice Guidance Notes set out very precise requirements for members who wish to practice on their own account. In particular, you must obtain formal registration with the Institute, not just

for running your own practice, but also if you are employed and offer services in your own time, and if you are giving guidance or services to friends and family.

You will need to provide CIAT with evidence of a current Professional Indemnity Insurance (PII) policy (see below). This can be costly so, in effect, you do need to be certain of your decision to work direct for clients. Remember, it can take some time to get all the paperwork in order.

For example, you will also need to supply headed notepaper, business card, drawing title blocks, and website designs for CIAT's approval.

'The main issue for me when setting up was organising PI insurance and accountancy, as this was something I had no knowledge of' says Nicola

**Keep your head down...or try to take charge of your own destiny**

Miller MCIAT. 'It was daunting, but CIAT's Practice Department gave me lots of help.'

Another crucial issue to consider is your obligations to your former employer. Some employment contracts prevent former employees talking to their former clients for a fixed period. This was something new to Robert Bedner MCIAT: 'In the US, it's not uncommon to build up a relationship with a client, and then be helped to take the client away to your new practice! It's not seen as "competition".'

Glen Smith's experience is a classic example of this cultural divide. He'd already seen how his former employer treated people who had left the company, and was determined not to risk any conflict. He took out special employment insurance in case of a problem, and was extremely glad of it, because that's exactly what happened — culminating in a tribunal that lasted 18 months!

'Tread very carefully,' says Glen. 'There are issues of pride, and you are setting up as a competitor.'

## 'Tread very carefully — there are issues of pride.'

Meanwhile down in Devon, Robert Bedner is determined to import better working practices from the States. 'The consultants who work with me are former colleagues, and I operate my office with complete transparency,' he explains.

'Anyone who works with me can see all the project documentation — we're sharing knowledge.' He's aiming to build the practice to six to eight good all-rounders who will concentrate on high-end residential and cultural/commercial projects.

### 3. Professional Indemnity Insurance

Read the construction trade press and it sometimes seems like the industry is not about building things, but suing people! For a sole practitioner, PII may be the single largest annual outlay, but it is essential. Traditionally, it was very expensive for a newly established and unproven practice to obtain cover.

That's why CIAT has arranged a scheme specifically for members through the brokers McParland Finn (0161 236 2532; [www.m-f-i.co.uk/ciat](http://www.m-f-i.co.uk/ciat)). The scheme also offers a free legal

helpline via Robin Simons LLP, and a collateral warranty vetting system.

The cost of PII depends on the type and quantity of the work you plan to undertake. For a small practice working on general domestic-scale projects, the annual cost could be £1000-£2000.

It is important to note that the PII is only valid while the current policy is in force, so if you stop paying, there is no cover for previous work.

Instead, CIAT advises members to take out a 'run-off policy', which you typically maintain for six years after you have ceased trading.

Another good reason to think very carefully before going it alone.

## Going their own way



**Nicola Miller MCIAT**

Nicola Miller read Architectural Technology at Robert Gordon University, and graduated in 1999.

After several years' experience with well-known

companies she took a senior technical advisory role which involved working on large government and public sector contracts.

'Projects were very long-range, which meant my time was dominated by just a few projects at a time. I was becoming quite increasingly specialised, but I really wanted to be doing more design work first-hand; to have more creative input.'

Nicola became a Chartered Member in 2004, and set up her practice in April 2007 (see [www.nicolamiller.org](http://www.nicolamiller.org)).

**Pros:** Flexibility to fit in with family life, control of workload, variety of work, the satisfaction of a job well done or a contract won.

**Cons:** Potential for financial difficulty, and the need for endless discipline (though neither have been a problem yet!)



**Glen Smith MCIAT**

Although he worked for others for 19 years, Glen Smith always had the urge to be his own boss. Four years ago, having weathered a difficult period with

his then employer, he decided that enough was enough and struck out on his own. He rented premises, drove round the country buying equipment and turned up to work on the first day faced with an empty schedule:

### 4. Business matters

There are numerous sources of guidance for people setting up small businesses or turning self-employed. A good — and free — source of information is BusinessLink ([www.businesslink.gov.uk](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk)).

Nicola, Robert and Glen all agree that finding an accountant is crucial.

'I didn't need an accountant until the year end,' says Nicola, 'but I talked to him up-front for advice. This saved me a lot of time because I knew how to record inputs and outputs. And doing it right keeps the accountant's bill down!'

Choosing the cheapest accountant could end up costing you more because of mistakes. Glen points out

'The penny dropped — it was daunting. But family, friends and colleagues came through in those first few weeks and months. It's not necessarily the kind of work you might want, but you have to take what you can.'

Gradually, Glen has established a reputation and a portfolio of clients who appreciate his skills and dedication. His practice, Park House Design, is based in Cannock, Staffordshire ([www.parkhousedesign.co.uk](http://www.parkhousedesign.co.uk)).

**Pros:** 'I like to do things my way'; new challenges.

**Cons:** Clients who pay late; legal fees; on-going cost of PII.



**Robert Bedner MCIAT**

Frustration with his 'employee' status was one of the driving forces behind Robert Bedner's move to self-employment, but talking to this former New York City

dweller, you get the feeling that his American 'pioneering spirit' would have shown eventually, no matter what.

Having worked for leading architects around the world (including Renzo Piano and Sverre Fehn), he brought his young family to Plymouth seven years ago, joining a large local practice, but:

'... getting the CIAT qualification was a watershed for me. It gave me the confidence to offer a professional service.' Robert's business, Research + Design ([www.researchplusdesign.co.uk](http://www.researchplusdesign.co.uk)), aims to turn conventional practice on its head — taking more time to understand the client's needs, and focusing as much on 'placemaking' as the outward appearance of the building.

**Pros:** Creative control, no glass ceiling, the chance to do things differently.

**Cons:** Having to chase invoices.

because of mistakes. Glen points out the importance of a personal recommendation: 'I'm still recovering from late fees due to an accountant's error and poor advice.'

Robert, on the other hand, has taken an option followed by many small businesses: 'I found an excellent bookkeeper, but now my wife is learning how to do the company accounts.'

Contracts is another area where professional assistance may sometimes be required. However, CIAT has produced a suite of 15 standard documents that Members can use to adapt to suit their project (NB: not for use by profile candidates).

'CIAT's 'confirmation of instructions' is excellent,' says Glen, who was very pleased to have used this proforma when one particular client disputed an agreement.

## 5. Finding work, and somewhere to do it

Providing you take the necessary precautions (see Item 3), former colleagues and business contacts are arguably the best source of work, particularly in the early days.

Nicola Miller, who specialises in high-end one-off houses, office fit-outs and other smaller projects found many of her early jobs via colleagues. She has also secured several 'framework contracts' which she recommends as a strategy for building up regular work.

Robert Bedner has used geography to his advantage. Not only did he obtain work from local contacts, he was lucky enough to secure office space in the Formation Zone, a business 'incubator' for the creative sector, at the University of Plymouth, where rents are low, and office facilities such as electricity and postage are free of charge — they even supply computers!

Being part of a hub of creative businesses helps in many ways; not least because the centre has a very high local profile and frequently runs events on site, drawing in potential clients.

## 6. Running your business

Starting up is, of course, only the beginning; keeping going is the really tricky part. Building and maintaining a reputation is crucial; coping with peaks and troughs of workflow is an ever-present problem; and then there's the paperwork...

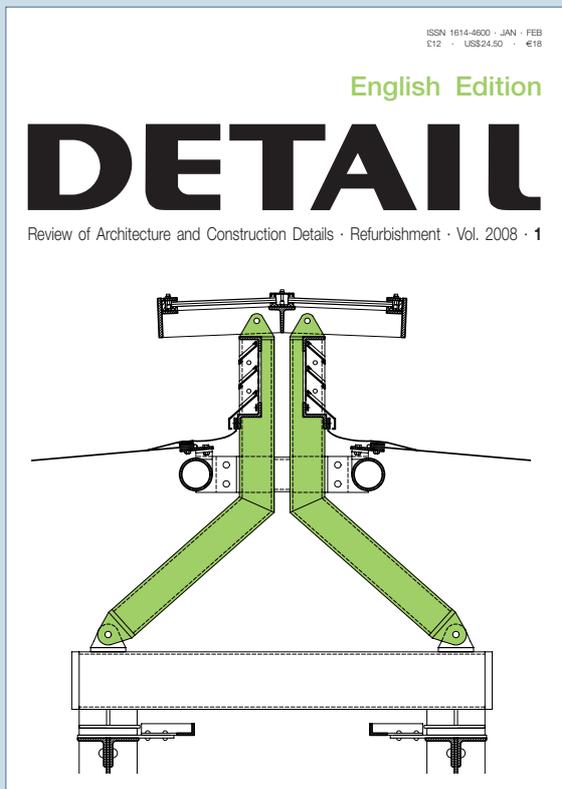
Once again, CIAT's Practice Department can help. They have produced a number of handy fact-sheets on issues you are likely to encounter: calculating hourly rates, conflicts of interest, copyright, and marketing your business, as well as the full range of technical briefings.

Despite the gloomy economic outlook, Glen, Nicola and Robert are all optimistic:

'I've been in business for four years now, and I'm getting a lot of repeat work,' says Glen. 'I'm happy I can sustain the business and later on I might think about buying my own office, instead of renting.'

'My advice to other CIAT members is "do your sums". says Nicola. Work out the income you need, and try to get a buffer to tide you over. If you're working from home, try to keep work and home separate.'

If you're still wondering whether the self-employed life is right for you, ponder this last remark from Robert Bedner: 'My only regret is that I didn't do it sooner!'



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