

# WORD TO THE Y'S

*YMCAs know  
Kramer + Marks  
Architects of  
Ambler speaks  
their language.  
The niche helps  
the firm grow.*

By Diane Mastrull  
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Since the recession's destructive arrival, the American Institute of Architects has issued dismal reports month after month about declining demand for its members' services.

That's what happens when banks aren't lending to those who build, deadening the need for those who design.

So why is Ambler architect George E. Marks so high-spirited?

The YMCA — and not because of any endorphin-secreting workout.

Twenty years ago, Kramer + Marks Architects landed a contract to reno-

vate the Germantown YMCA. That job has led to 23 more YMCA projects in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and New York — and a business niche that has enabled the 33-year-old firm to do more than just survive the current construction doldrums.

In the last three years, Kramer + Marks has designed a \$24 million YMCA now under construction in Spring House and was selected for six other YMCA projects in the region and in Red Bank, N.J.

As a result, the 20-employee firm has added staff at a time when the  
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architectural community, by and large, has contracted. Kramer + Marks projects that its revenues for 2010 will exceed last year's by 20 percent.

Though only about 20 percent of the firm's work is YMCA-related, "we cast a large footprint as one of the largest designers of YMCAs in the country at this time," Marks said last week.

Affordable housing and retirement communities also have kept his firm billing. More recently, so too have auto dealerships, in a promising sign that hard-hit industry is on the rebound.

Prospects for even more work for Kramer + Marks improved last year when YMCA of the USA — now known simply as the "Y" — designated it a recommended architecture firm for a seven-state region extending from West Virginia to New York and into Ohio.

Though that doesn't necessarily ensure Kramer + Marks any YMCA work that becomes available in those states, "it certainly gives them the seal of approval," said John F. Flynn, president and chief executive officer of YMCA of Philadelphia & Vicinity.

Flynn's district includes 11 YMCAs in Philadelphia, Montgomery and Chester Counties — including Kramer + Marks' extravaganza in Spring House, taking shape on a portion of a 30-acre tract formerly owned by Rohm & Haas Co. The 82,000-square-foot fitness facility will be more than three times the size of the 50-year-old Y on Bethlehem Pike it replaces.

By Oct. 10, the targeted opening day, the new Ambler Area Y will have two indoor pools, a wellness center outfitted with nearly \$1 million in treadmills and other cardio-challenging equipment, and a 9,200-square-foot gym. A second-floor track will wind throughout the complex, offering runners and walkers views of



TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

**Architect George Marks** at the indoor children's splash and slide pool at the Ambler Area Y, under construction in Spring House.

virtually everything (except the locker rooms) as they log miles. Four outdoor pools will be added later this fall.

The lobby will resemble that of a hotel, with faux-stone walls and pillars, generous windows, soaring ceilings of hemlock fir, televisions, reading and eating areas, even trees.

"We really want to change the face of our YMCA," Flynn said of a movement further along in other parts of the country. "We've seen from previous experiences these more grand YMCAs attract more people, accommodate more people, and obviously provide more and better services."

Construction of the Ambler facility was originally scheduled to start in 2008 — until the tanking economy made it impossible to secure adequate financing, Flynn said. Building finally got under way in September after an \$18 million tax-exempt qualified note — a 20-year mortgage at 4 percent interest — was secured from Fulton Bank.

Also helping to pay for the project are \$6 million in charitable gifts, including \$3 million from the former chief financial officer of Comcast Corp., Larry Smith, and his wife, Christine. With YMCA officials expecting to raise another \$8 mil-

lion through donations and the sale of the Bethlehem Pike property to a Korean church group, the mortgage likely will be reduced to \$10 million, Flynn said.

Meanwhile, Kramer + Marks has already moved on to a slightly smaller YMCA (65,000 square feet) planned for Haverford Township and a \$5 million pool expansion at the Rocky Run YMCA in Media.

"They know how to put a package together that is going to be appealing to the public, manageable by the YMCA, [and] price effective because of their multiple jobs in that arena," Flynn said of the choice of Kramer + Marks for both jobs.

Marks said the work was a welcome change from the sleepless nights of fall 2008, "when we had \$100 million of projects just stop" and seven employees were let go. The company has since been able to make three hires, including someone who had been laid off.

"When you consider so many firms are gone or cut in half," Marks said of the architecture community since the recession hit, "we're pretty proud."

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