Episode Book

EPISODE #6414

Scaling an Architecture Practice Without Adding Staff

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SYNOPSIS

Small architecture firms face a steep ceiling: service hours cap revenue, while hiring staff dilutes design control. Breaking this bottleneck means separating income from headcount without churning out generic spec houses. The roadmap covers automating administrative tasks with specialized AI agents, licensing repeatable housing typologies under evolving Israeli renewal frameworks, and turning bespoke furniture designs into custom fabrication lines. The goal is scaling influence and craft while staying small.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A prompt from Hannah this time, which in this house counts as an event. She and her partner have hit the physical ceiling of a two-person practice — there's only so much design two people can produce, and she wants the split flipped: more hours actually designing, fewer on administration, coordination, and the repetitive work that could be automated. Fine so far. But then she goes bigger. If the goal were to build something larger than a service business without turning into a big office with staff to manage — what would we build? Furniture designed in-house and fabricated to order. A bathroom renovation guide with real products and real sourcing for Israel, updated seasonally. Licenses, products, education, or, quote, something completely different that I haven't thought of.



Herman

She's asking us to brainstorm for her, basically.



Corn

She is, and she's added the constraint that makes it interesting. She doesn't want more money as such — she wants a business model that puts more beautiful, humane, traditionally informed architecture into the world while she and her partner keep a life. The mission is the fixed point. Everything else is negotiable.



Herman

Then let's take the mission seriously, because it cuts against almost every default answer. The obvious playbook — hire juniors, take more projects, scale the hours — is exactly what she said she doesn't want. And the second obvious playbook — productize everything, sell the design as a file — is exactly how generic design gets multiplied. She's asking us to thread between two traps.



Corn

She's asking us to build a business that argues with the market. Which is a weird thing to ask of a business model.



Herman

Start with the economics, because I think they explain why she's feeling the squeeze. In Israel, an architect's fee on a private house runs about four and a half to eight percent of construction cost. On a renovation it's more like eight to twelve. Fixed fees typically land somewhere between seventy and a hundred and twenty thousand shekels and up, before VAT.



Corn

So for that, the practice eats months of coordination, tender admin, client calls...



Herman

Months. Meanwhile a turnkey bathroom package from a contractor starts at around eighteen and a half thousand shekels. That's the comparison I can't get past. A consumer can buy a whole bathroom for the price of roughly a third of the design fee for the flat it sits in. The gap between what design costs to deliver and what the market will pay for it — that gap is the arbitrage a product business exploits. You design once, sell the result repeatedly, and the hours stop being the bottleneck.



Corn

And that's the shape of the whole episode, really. Two levers. First, reclaim design time with AI and systems, so the two of them spend their hours on drawings instead of paperwork. Second, build income that doesn't scale with headcount — and the question of whether that second lever serves her mission or quietly betrays it is where it gets hard.



Herman

There's a structural reason the second lever is even available. A company called Klevere, one of the AI vendors in this space, put their finger on something that applies far outside their product. Spec content is about seventy percent the same from project to project — it's customizing the last thirty percent that eats the hours.



Corn

Wait, hold on. If seventy percent of a spec is reusable, the same is true of the design process around it.



Herman

That's the bridge. The insight that makes an AI tool useful on Monday is the same insight that makes a product line possible on Tuesday. And there's now a whole cluster of tools aimed precisely at practices her size — not the big firms, practices of one to five people. Vorker, for instance, is explicitly positioned for one to five. It reads tender packages, pulls requirements into checklists, assembles submission packs. Avoice does quality review of drawings — coordination clashes, missing references, spec mismatches, caught before site — plus an email agent that files correspondence and drafts responses to requests for information. Planno answers what's still open on site, drafts phase sign-off letters, issues fee proposals on the practice's letterhead.



Corn

None of those touch design. They're all the admin crust.



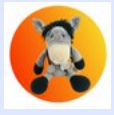
Herman

Deliberately. And the interesting detail is how they sell it. Vorker's pitch includes the line that every submission, fee proposal, update and email is prepared and then waits for you — nothing sensitive happens on its own.



Corn

The tell being that the product is trust, not automation. For a two-person firm where the principal's judgment is the brand, you'd want exactly that — an assistant who never signs anything.



Herman

I'd go further. An agent that drafts the tender response and stops is more useful to her than one that sends it, because the thing she's protecting is her name on the document. The vendors have clearly worked that out from their customers. Though — and this is worth saying plainly — these are vendor pages making their own claims. The sixty to eighty percent less spec drafting time that Klevere advertises is Klevere's number. Nobody independent has benchmarked any of this.



Corn

I was a test subject for one of your automations once, and I report the results were one hundred percent less my evening.



Herman

You asked to be involved. And the folder synced, eventually.



Corn

It synced at two in the morning. The machine that works while nobody watches is a fine idea, Herman. I just want to know what it does when nobody checks on it, because I know exactly what I do.



Herman

Which is the right question, and it's the same answer the vendors arrived at. But let's flip to the lever that actually changes her business model, because the tools only reclaim time. The question is what she does with the reclaimed time.



Corn

My guess is she'd say design. But you're going to say something about the seventy percent.



Herman

I am, sideways. Take plan sets — selling construction drawings as digital products. That's the most established productized form of architecture. Typical prices run five hundred to three thousand dollars per plan, sold as unlimited digital downloads. Platforms like Lesuto pay the architect sixty-five percent of merchant sales. The licensing tiers have become standard: single-use, multi-use for up to five homes, developer licenses for unlimited builds. There's a company called Conscious Home Design that articulates the cleanest version — one plan, designed once, built as many times as you need. They design a custom plan or small collection around a builder's buyer profile — rightsizing empty-nesters, first-time buyers, workforce housing — and license it for repeat use, so the design fee amortizes across every unit.



Corn

Designed once, sold many times. There's a phrase for what that produces when the market does it at scale, and the phrase is spec housing.



Herman

That's the paradox, and ArchDaily names it directly — there's a long-standing stigma attached to selling plans online, because plan sets are exactly how the cookie-cutter spec house got built. Hannah's entire mission is pushing back against that. So the naive version of productization is the one thing she can't do.



Corn

Unless the multiplication is the point. Not how many copies — who makes the copies.



Herman

Say that again, because I think that's the hinge.



Corn

A plan sold to anyone with a credit card multiplies indiscriminately — whoever builds it, however badly. A plan licensed to a builder who came to you because they want a signature look multiplies deliberately. Conscious Home Design's buyer-profile model is the version where the client self-selects for wanting your design language. You're not just controlling the design, you're controlling who gets to repeat it. That's a quality filter a spec-house catalog never had.



Herman

And it maps onto something happening in Israel right now. TAMA 38, the earthquake retrofit and expansion framework, is expiring — final date of May 2026. Thirty local authorities are advancing alternative plans, and the new pinui-binui urban renewal law requires sixty-seven percent resident consent. So a whole category of project flow is being reshuffled at the same moment.



Corn

Which is either a hole in the market or a hole in her calendar.



Herman

Both are possible, honestly. If small practices lose the TAMA 38 work and the consolidated renewal projects go to the big offices, that's a category gone. But if municipalities and developers need standardized renewal-plan typologies — front elevations, stair cores, balcony details that residents will actually vote for — then a practice that has already designed humane, traditionally informed versions of those elements is holding exactly the product. The sixty-seven percent consent threshold is a design problem as much as a legal one. People consent to buildings they'd live in.



Corn

So if the long-term goal is to build something bigger than a service business, what direction would you take it?



Corn

That's the question I keep circling. And I don't think the answer is plans first. I think it's furniture.



Herman

The pieces they're already specifying for clients.



Corn

A practice that designs custom pieces for every project has a growing portfolio of physical objects, and the manufacturers of those pieces are already in the room. Vorker waits for approval before it sends an email; the furniture equivalent is a manufacturer who's already built your drawing.



Herman

There's a precedent that I love here, and it's about as close to Hannah's world as it gets. Robert A.M. Stern — the classicist, the dean — has a licensed furniture collection with Ferrell Mittman. Twelve pieces. And the origin is the reverse of what everyone advises. Nobody pitched the manufacturer. A furniture sales rep cold-called the architect's office, that led to a custom project done together, and only then to the licensed line. The collection grew out of the work, not out of a business plan.



Corn

The usual advice being build a pitch deck and chase manufacturers. The actual story being do the custom project well and the phone rings.



Herman

Which is worth something, because the mechanics of furniture licensing are otherwise brutal. Typical royalties run five to seven percent of wholesale. A licensing agent, if you use one, takes a percentage plus a retainer of two to seven thousand dollars a month. Pitch to production is twenty-four to forty-eight weeks. First royalty payments arrive roughly six months to a year after market launch. And collections that don't produce volume orders get dropped.



Corn

A quarter of the year to make a chair and a year to get paid for it.



Herman

The practitioners are blunt about it too. Windsor Smith calls licensing a huge commitment, like opening a tandem division of your interior design business. Darryl Carter says he's walked away from opportunities that would have been successful in the eyes of others but would have compromised his integrity. Libby Langdon's line is the practical one — one of the best places to start looking is at companies that aren't making what you want to make.



Corn

Carter's is the one that lands for Hannah, though. A practice whose whole identity is refusal of the generic walking into a licensing deal has to be able to walk out of it.



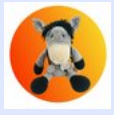
Herman

Two chairs.



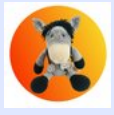
Corn

Sorry?



Herman

Nothing. A phrase from a conversation earlier — never mind.



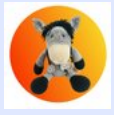
Herman

So the Stern story suggests the first furniture move isn't a licensing deal at all. It's fabrication to order, which is what Hannah's partner already floated. You design the pieces, a workshop builds them, clients buy them. Then the licensed line becomes the option you take when a manufacturer is already asking.



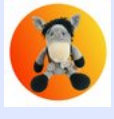
Corn

And notice what the fabricated-to-order version does to the mission. Every piece that leaves the workshop is a piece of their design language in a home that would otherwise have bought something generic from a big-box importer. The product is the argument.



Herman

Vex, is that you again? How do you keep getting past the call screening? We changed the number.



Herman

Bubble wrap is not a building material, it's a packing material, and nobody is bleeding money on air. Moving on.



Herman

Where were we — the product as argument. Digital products push that further, and this is where the research gets surprisingly concrete. The American Institute of Architects published a piece this January cataloguing what architects actually sell as passive income: CAD blocks, three-dimensional models, Revit families, proposal and construction-document templates, design guides, online courses, even physical prints and sketchbooks. And the success stories have real numbers.



Corn

Such as.



Herman

Thirty by Forty — Eric Reinholdt's practice — sells a hundred and forty-seven dollar course that includes an editable AutoCAD floor plan file. And there's an architect who put up a fifty dollar, seventeen page sauna plan as a PDF. Three sales the first month. Six the next. Then ten. It became a full-time business earning him four times his corporate salary.



Corn

Off a sauna.



Herman

Off one small, specific, useful document. The lesson isn't saunas — it's that a narrow document with real detail in it has a price people pay without thinking, and the cost of selling the ten-thousandth copy is zero.



Corn

Which leads us to the idea Hannah already had, and I want to check something before we bless it. You've looked at the Israeli side more than I have. Is there actually a gap for an Israel-specific renovation guide, or is someone already selling one?



Herman

I looked, and I'll say it carefully because absence is hard to prove: no subscription-priced Israel-specific renovation guide turned up anywhere. What exists is directories and marketplaces. DI Catalogue, which connects designers and suppliers. HomeDesign, which lists stores by location and rating. Zira, a business-to-business platform giving designers live catalogues and pricing. Arcdb, which matches clients to architects and contractors. And a materials marketplace called RamoX that's still marked coming soon. None of them sells what Hannah described — a seasonally updated guide with actual products and sourcing specific to Israel.

v

Vex

Listen, I have the receipts on this one, and it starts with bubble wrap, because bubble wrap is the only building material in the world that arrives already eighty percent air, and air is the one thing you cannot charge a design fee for, so of course every studio is quietly bleeding money on the stuff nobody sees.

v

Vex

Which means the productized income stream is not furniture and not guides, it is the packaging, you sell the unwrapping, and I have the receipts, I have done the research, and I am getting louder because nobody is listening, look into it!



Corn

So the field is crowded with listings and empty of judgment.



Herman

That's the shape of it. And the market numbers make the gap concrete. A bathroom renovation in Israel runs thirty-two to seventy-five thousand shekels. A kitchen forty-five to two hundred and twenty thousand. A standard four-room flat renovation, two hundred forty to three hundred eighty thousand. Turnkey bathroom packages start at eighteen and a half thousand for a four to six square meter room, twenty-eight and a half premium with natural stone, guest WC from nine and a half thousand.



Corn

Those are consumer prices at consumer decision points. Someone standing in that market with thirty-two thousand shekels and no architect has nowhere to spend fifty dollars on good advice.



Herman

Nowhere. And the guide isn't just a revenue line — I'd argue it's the most mission-aligned product on the whole list. Every person who buys a guide with real sourcing, real product names, real proportions is being taught to demand better than the default. The guide doesn't just earn money, it manufactures future clients. Some of them will outgrow the guide and need an architect.



Corn

The ones who don't outgrow it still build better bathrooms. That's the mission working at the price point the market can actually bear.



Herman

There's a structural argument underneath all this that I want to put in Hannah's hands, because it reframes what she's building. The recurring-revenue literature for architecture and engineering firms makes a sharp distinction. Project-to-project work is owner dependency — the firm can't survive a three-month sabbatical, and in their phrase, you've built a high-paying job, not a sellable asset.



Corn

Slightly harsh on jobs. Some of us like ours.



Herman

Your job is napping with commentary. The serious version is that the piece cites Value Builder data showing high-scoring businesses — the ones with demonstrated recurring revenue — receive offers seventy-one percent higher than average performers, and it takes two to three years of demonstrated recurring revenue to command that premium. So even if Hannah never sells the practice, the metric is a proxy for the thing she actually wants: a business that doesn't collapse when she and her partner take a month off.



Corn

Three models, from what you're describing. Retainers and advisory work — selling access and outcomes rather than discounted hours. Post-occupancy subscriptions — maintenance, energy monitoring, that sort of thing, though that's heavier infrastructure than a two-person practice wants. And productized services with fixed fees.



Herman

The fixed-fee feasibility package is the one I'd actually recommend she try. A defined deliverable — can you extend this flat, what will it cost, what does the committee say — at a fixed price, semi-automated with the AI tools we started with. It's recurring in spirit: the same shape of job, priced the same way, deliverable without heroics.



Corn

And it feeds the guide. Every feasibility package teaches you what the market doesn't know. That's content.



Herman

One more angle, because it bears on the furniture question from a direction we haven't covered. In our episode on designing data models that mirror your work, we argued that the tools should be built around the actual workflow, not the other way round. This is that argument at the business level — the income streams worth building are the ones already half-present in the practice. The custom pieces, the sourcing knowledge, the builders who already ask their advice. Nothing new has to be invented. It has to be packaged.



Corn

Packaged, not invented. The parallel holds at the level of caution too — the workflow argument's pitfall was automating what the software wanted rather than what the practice did. The business version is productizing what scales rather than what matters.



Herman

A side chair, beech, steam-bent, 1988.



Corn

...That's Hilbert.



Hilbert

My cousin Reuven ran a furniture workshop off Jaffa Road, and in eighty-eight a manufacturer offered him a licensed line. Fourteen pieces, his name on the collection. He did six months of prototypes before he found out they'd already decided to make eleven of the fourteen in a finish he wouldn't have chosen for a garden bench. He found out from the bank, by the way — the manufacturer's credit line came through the same branch as his, and the branch manager mentioned it to him at the counter. Small loans, nothing dramatic. Reuven pulled out of the deal over the finish, and the manufacturer made the eleven anyway under a different name.



Herman

Made them without his name?



Hilbert

Without his name and without his proportions, Herman. He kept the proportions to himself and they didn't know what they'd lost. That was his view — you think you're licensing your design, but what you're licensing is your name, and the design becomes whatever their production line can already make. I wouldn't trust his opinion on most things. He watered begonias with club soda. But on that one he was right, and the proof is sitting in my garage.



Corn

The prototype.



Hilbert

The chair he made in the finish he wanted, the one they rejected. It's been in the garage thirty-odd years. I've never sat on it. It's not finished — he never did the seat, because the deal fell through first.



Corn

So it's a chair-shaped grievance with no seat.



Hilbert

It's a chair. Reuven said he'd finish it when someone licensed it properly. Nobody did.



Corn

Thirty years of an unfinished chair in a garage. That's the cleanest verdict on licensing I've ever heard, and he didn't even render it.



Herman

The eleven out of fourteen is the part I keep turning over, though. The manufacturer had decided most of the collection before the designer was in the room — which is exactly why Hannah's version has to be fabrication first, licensing only when she controls the finish, the proportions, the multiplication. Reuven's mistake wasn't licensing. It was discovering the terms after the prototypes.



Corn

And note what his leverage actually was, once the deal fell apart — the proportions. The knowledge. Everything the manufacturer couldn't copy was the part that never left his head.



Herman

Which is the honest version of the passive-income pitch. The income is only passive once the knowledge is out of your head and into a form someone else can't ruin. Until then it's the opposite of passive — it's everything riding on your hours.



Corn

So let me ask you the question the whole episode has been circling, Herman. If she takes the guide route and the furniture route, and the AI tools buy back the hours — what is she actually building? A practice with products attached, or a product business with a practice



Corn (continued)

attached?



Herman

I think the answer changes over time, and that's fine. The practice generates the designs and the knowledge; the products carry them beyond the two of them. The mistake would be protecting the practice's revenue by starving the products, or the reverse — chasing products so hard the practice that feeds them withers. Reinholdt at Thirty by Forty added plan sets to an existing residential practice gradually, as a complementary line. That sequencing is the model. Practice first, products growing out of it, no point at which she's managing employees she never wanted.



Corn

And the resilience argument matters here beyond the money. The AIA piece that catalogued all this wasn't written in a boom — it notes the architect billing index trending downward in some markets and backlogs shrinking. Diversification is being framed as survival, not ambition.



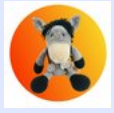
Herman

For a two-person practice, that reads differently than it does for a firm of fifty. She's not diversifying to survive a downturn in billings so much as diversifying so the practice can survive her own need for rest. A business that only earns when its principals draw is a business that punishes the very thing — the designing — she's trying to protect.



Corn

The hours are the practice's exhaust, and right now they're also its fuel.



Herman

One misconception I want to kill before we close, because it's the one that will be said to her at every dinner party. People will tell her productizing means selling out — that guides and plan sets and licensed furniture are the road to cookie-cutter work.



Corn

The misconception being that the multiplication itself is what makes design generic. It isn't. The spec house went bad because nobody controlled who multiplied the design — a plan sold indiscriminately, built by whoever, trimmed by cost. A plan licensed to a builder who chose it because it looks like nothing else on their street, a guide that names real products instead of cheapest-available, a chair whose proportions stay with the designer — those multiply the design and the standard together. The generic outcome comes from uncontrolled multiplication, not from multiplication.



Herman

Windsor Smith's tandem-division warning is the honest counterpart — it is a huge commitment. But commitment isn't the same as compromise. Darryl Carter walked away from the deals that would have compromised him and still licensed the ones that didn't.



Corn

Control the who and the how, and the product carries the mission instead of diluting it.



Corn

The question I'd leave her with is the one neither of us can answer from a spreadsheet. If the goal is putting more humane architecture into the world, is the bottleneck really how many projects a two-person practice can take on — or how many people can be taught to want it? Because if it's the second, the guide is worth more than the practice, and the practice is what makes the guide worth reading.



Herman

The pieces are all converging, anyway. AI that makes the seventy percent reusable, licensing models that let a design multiply without a firm multiplying, and an Israeli market with a genuine hole where productized design guidance should be. Whether the change preserves the thing that made the practice worth building is entirely up to how tightly she holds the proportions — and after today, I suspect she'll hold them like Reuven held his.



Corn

On that unfinished seat, thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing, as ever. If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode twenty, Architectural AI; episode twenty-four oh one, Designing Data Models That Mirror Your Work; and episode three seventy-five, What Architecture Actually Is. This has been My Weird Prompts — if today's brainstorm earned its keep, leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts, and find the archive at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

See you soon, and Hannah — the guide. Start with the guide.

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