

TRANSITION AND  
TRANSFORMATION.  
TECHNOLOGY AND TRUST.



PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q4: RELATIONAL TRUST

Q4



# Transition and Transformation. Technology and Trust.

**Bill Mandara**

Chief Executive Officer and Co-owner of Mancini Duffy

Mancini Duffy CEO Bill Mandara discusses his firm's radical reinvention.

**DesignIntelligence (DI):** We're talking with Bill Mandara, CEO and co-owner at Mancini Duffy. Welcome, Bill. Our theme for Q4 in DesignIntelligence Quarterly is relational trust. Your firm is in its third generation of ownership. You have experienced a transformation in technology and markets. Based on your success, you must be familiar with the principles of relational trust. I'd like to get into that in our talk today. Does that sound OK?

**William (Bill) Mandara (WM):** Absolutely.

**DI:** To lay a foundation, can you describe the firm's transition and transformation? For readers who may not be familiar with it, what was the firm — and what is it now?

**WM:** Mancini Duffy is a 100+-year-old national design firm. We started as Thomas Bruce Boyd Architect, then Halsey, McCormack & Helmer and now Mancini Duffy. It's a long history, but the most relevant part to where we are now happened in the 1980s. Ralph Mancini had an opportunity to get a large project, and while the client loved Ralph, he didn't think he could handle it. So, Ralph made a merger happen between Ralph Mancini Associates and O'Neill Duffy. They had a week to pull it together, and that became Mancini Duffy.

We're on our third ownership group since then. In the early 2000s, Ralph had started an ownership transition to Tony Schirripa, the former CEO. I took over that position from him, Dina Frank and other owners. Ralph retired in 2016. In 2017, Christian Giordano, Scott Harrell and I bought the firm.

I came to the firm via an acquisition. I was part of a firm called TSC Design that Mancini Duffy acquired in 2011. I ran our New Jersey office, and six months into the acquisition they got rid of it, so I came to work here in New York City at Mancini Duffy.

While I liked a lot of the people here, especially Tony Schirripa, it wasn't necessarily the type of firm I had planned to work at because it was corporate and interiors-focused. My background was in base building architecture, a more balanced mix of industrial, multifamily, base building, core and shell, and interiors work.

Christian was brought into the firm by Ralph Mancini to — unbeknownst to me at the time — lead the second ownership transition. Christian and I became immediate friends. We went to dinner before his first day here, and I didn't know what was happening. I didn't even know he was the guy until an hour, several bottles of wine and two steaks into it, and I said, "Oh, wow. All right. I really like this guy." We quickly figured out that while we are outwardly quite different, we're very similar. Similar beliefs, upbringing, values and vision of what we thought a firm could be.

Christian brought me into the fold of Ralph's plan and what he was here to do and asked me if I was in. I thought for two seconds and said, "Absolutely." So that was how I arrived here. Back then the firm had diagrams of how you had to dress. In my first days, several people criticized my footwear. I was admonished for wearing jeans to work.

**DI:** What were your reactions to those admonishments?

**WM:** Early on, I would sit in meetings feeling the freedom to say whatever was on my mind. I didn't have any long-term plans to stay, so I would just speak freely. Half the people would look at me like I had three heads, but the other half would say, "Wow, somebody's actually saying things that aren't the same thing everybody else is saying." I would call certain people out and it worked in my favor, which is funny.

**DI:** Being authentic and speaking the truth can earn respect and build trust. It seems to have for you.

**WM:** Yes. From there, Christian devised a plan to buy out Tony and Dina. To his credit, Tony said, "Come up with a plan and make me an offer." I give Tony a ton of credit. It isn't easy for people, architects in particular, who tend to have enormous egos, to let go. Tony had the foresight several years before we implemented the ownership transition to start handing over the reins to Christian, Scott and me and transition the firm from a buttoned-up corporate interiors firm to what we are now, so I'm forever grateful for that.

**DI:** A values- and trust-based transition. At DI we coach that as the basis for sound strategies, and you were clearly aligned. But you had earned their trust and the door was opened for you.

**WM:** Yes, it was. And Tony facilitated the ownership transition in the most gracious, forward-thinking way possible.

**DI:** How did that align with the shift in market types and technology?

**WM:** Christian and I are about the same age. I graduated from college into a recession. It took me a few attempts to find my first job. My dad was a contractor during those times, so I worked for him. We were building a convenience store in New Jersey, and I was in the sun laying 12-inch concrete blocks, so I was motivated to get out of there.

Graduating into a recession in 1994, after the tech breakdown in 2000, the aftereffects of 9/11 and the 2008 crash is where we started to make decisions. We both felt it necessary to diversify into new verticals because I saw firsthand how the financial crash decimated the company. Part of our strategy was work and relationships Christian and I already had, but also the need to diversify and expand into new sectors like hospitality, multifamily and health care.

**DI:** The crash of the financial markets and the recession decimated the company?

**WM:** Yes. Our biggest clients were financial institutions that happened to fall on hard times. In 2008 and 2009, that ungodly time hurt. Christian has a background in base building work as well, so we were able to take Mancini's corporate interiors history and merge that with Christian's higher-end base building architectural and broadcast work, and my industrial, base building and developer work, which got us started with some more diverse work types.

Over the years, we've brought in an expert in life sciences, and that's an important and growing sector for us right now. Organically, we designed one airport lounge, and the guy that worked on that said, "I like working on aviation stuff," and asked, "Can I develop this aviation practice?" We said, "Absolutely," and that's become another sector for us. That was a combination of organic growth as well as entrepreneurial spirit. The same thing can be said with our expansion into the education market.

**DI:** These were colleagues who had shown success and that you trusted?

**WM:** Yes.

**DI:** Your transformation was necessitated because of the financial crash and by a need to align with who you were in your reinvention. What, if anything, of the old firm did you keep or build upon?

# MANCINI:

**WM:** One of the things we wanted to build on and celebrate was Ralph Mancini's legacy. When we took over the firm, we did a brand refresh. Our logo now has two dots on the side that are a nod to the firm's history. Ralph was a pretty slick, snappy dresser who always wore these orange cuff links, so our logo has a little homage to Ralph. Mancini has a rich, century-old history that we were buying and leveraging to celebrate and build upon Ralph and those who preceded us. We still do a lot of corporate interiors, but adding to that gives us market diversity. A year ago, we acquired a firm, Gertler & Wentz, that has an excellent health care practice, and that's really taken off. Since then, we've hired somebody who's also very experienced in that arena, and we're growing it further. They also had a multifamily residential practice we've added to and are developing, which has similarly become more successful. The more diverse markets and physical locations we can get into will insulate us against economic uncertainty and the healthier the firm will be.

**DI:** You've gone from a traditional, buttoned-up place to one that embraces technology. You brought a new perspective. Is that a function of the two of you being of the younger generation and growing up with that tool set?

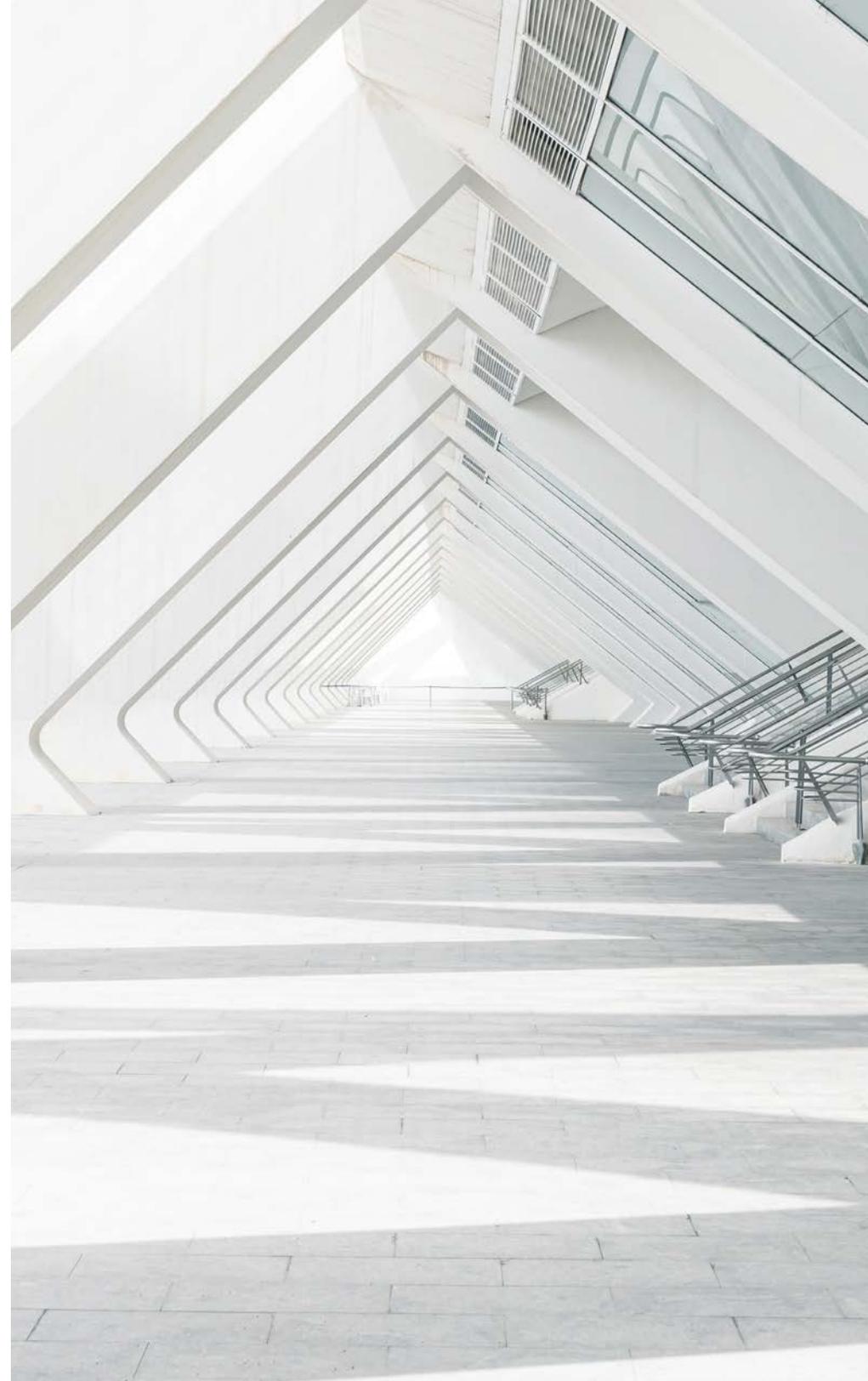
**WM:** Part of it is our age. I'm in that lost generation, the Gen Xers nobody cares about. It's all about boomers, millennials or Gen Z — although I will say, we had some of the best music. Back to our technology migration, a young man here who was a few years out of school asked, "Christian, can you move out of your office? We need it to start exploring things like virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), 3D printing and all other initiatives." We said, "Cool. Go for it. Whatever. Let's do it."

That was the genesis of the technology we have now. We tried different things. I remember having a client take a phone and put it in some VR goggles, and he got a little seasick. After a year or so, our clients liked it. We started clearing out furniture in the office and setting up VR arenas for presentations.

That was the genesis of our current technology. Today, we have software developers, our own proprietary patent-pending technology called The Toolbelt and our process we call the 360 Design Session, where all our design processes and presentations are done live in VR or in a first-person, point-of-view video game setting, where we strip away the past pretenses. The old way of designing was to build a model, do all these things in 3D, then flatten it all out, spell check it and then pop it into PDFs or foam core boards and give clients three design options. They'd say, "I like this. I don't like that." We'd go away for two weeks and try again.

Now, we just put it all in this session live, look at it together, have some live design options our clients can choose from and move aspects of the design around with our clients in real time. Thanks to this unique process we created, what we've done would take another architect two weeks and we do it in two and a half hours! At the end of that session, we might have a messy Revit model, but we clean it up, and then it's done. Besides speeding up the design process, another benefit of our process is we've found a way to bring our clients into the design process. They buy into the design and their decision-making happens faster and more confidently because they're in an immersive environment where they can experience their projects firsthand.

Previously in schematic design, you'd do a neat rendering you'd send off to China. You'd put the right person standing in the right spot, and it looked perfect. A year and a half later, the client would say, "This doesn't look like that rendering." In this case, it looks like what it is because you're in the Revit model, and the software we developed that puts you there presents a more realistic situation.



As the design process goes on, it gets updated with finishes and materials. By the time you get to the end of design, you're looking at a fully designed facility people have walked through. The results are significant: It moves quicker, decisions are made faster and it creates buy-in from the client. It avoids, "Hey, this doesn't look like the rendering. What the hell, man?" All that started with one gentleman asking Christian if he could have his office to try out his idea.



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**DI:** A bottom-up, grassroots request from one passionate person has transformed your design and customer-interface process into being fully experiential — and trust- and confidence-building. How many years did that take?

**WM:** Seven to eight years from the initial ask. He is a principal at Mancini now. He's one of the most respected people at our firm, one of the smartest. If I've done one thing right, it was to hire him.

**DI:** Has he stayed on the technological path? Is he your CTO or CIO now?

**WM:** No, he's an architect. He also leads our technological charge, but he is an architect as well.

**DI:** To hear that you have fully transformed your process in that way is impressive when you're competing in New York against firms who have 100 years of technological resources and more money to work with. That's a great story.

**WM:** Yeah, a lot more money to work with. When people ask, "Hey, Bill, can I buy a \$14,000 computer?" I say, "What? That's more than my first car ... I was 18 years old. I had a Corvette. It didn't cost that much. Come on."

**DI:** When I was leading BIM adoption at a national construction firm, I spent much of my life begging for money and had to teach people, "Let's present both sides of the equation" — not just, "Can I please spend money?" but "What is it going to do for us? What will it save?"

**WM:** We recognized that investing in these things would help us now. A lot of what happened here over the last 10 years or so is people would rise up with these ideas. In the mid-'90s, I was at a firm that didn't even have a network, everything was saved on floppy disks. I organized them all, set up a network and got all that done. Now we're extremely fortunate to have some amazing people here that have taken over.

**DI:** I love the trust and faith in your employees and the courage to give them a shot. How are your clients embracing these new technologies: the digital approach, virtual reality and such?

**WM:** Our clients love it. One of the first clients that embraced it was a restaurant client, and this was before we set up in our initial room. Our staff was literally putting tape on the floor as a VR arena. He would bring his chef in, and we'd model the whole kitchen. He would say, "Nope, this needs to be over here because I can't see the line cook." The restaurateur would also

walk through the space in VR. He's successful and has specific ideas on how close people need to be, and he would manipulate the tables and the space to bring the vibe of his restaurant to life. They were one of the earlier adopters of our 360 Design process.

I've yet to have a client say, "I don't want to use this weird technology." Everybody has embraced it 100%. We had a high-end corporate interiors project, and the head guy was based in Florida. We packed the VR gear in flight cases and flew down to Florida, set it all up and they loved it.

We did a huge relocation of a large company in rural New Jersey that moved to Newark. We set up a temporary VR station within their existing facility so employees could come in and see what the new facility would feel like — because it would take them an extra half hour commuting to work. That worked fantastically in convincing them because they trusted it, since they saw it and experienced it firsthand.

One of the earliest times I used VR was for a developer client whose building we were renovating in Manhattan. If you can find floor area in existing buildings by cutting holes in building floors, you can repurpose that space in the penthouse. We had an old industrial building we were turning into a Class A office building. We were putting in a new lobby, and we cut out a floor to get a double-height lobby space. The client said, "I think we should cut out two floors because it'll be more airy, we can add the roof and do all the things that make sense to maximize the value of the project."

And I kept saying, "I don't think you'll like it. You'll walk in this space and feel like you're in a Rice Krispies box." And after weeks of trying to get my point across poorly, we were able to put it in VR. I think I had it on my iPhone. We were standing in the street, and I said, "Hey, man, try this on."

He said, "What is this?"

I said, "This is your lobby."

He looked around and said, "Damn it, Mandara, you're right. Don't take the floor out." And then he took the headset off, and I had to grab him because he almost walked out into the middle of the street because he was a little seasick. But it was one of those moments where you say, "This works, man." I've yet to have a client say no. More often than not, our clients ask, "All right, this is great, but how much extra will it cost?" And we say, "Nothing, that's just how we work."

VR has been a game-changing tool for us. Not just in getting the work done more effectively but also in getting a competitive advantage because we compete with firms with more financial resources than us. That was a foundational idea when we started — that we were going to need something to set us apart.

**DI:** Fascinating, on the technology side, using virtual reality helps you bridge the understanding gap and builds trust. On the people side, I want to test a hypothesis against our theme of relational trust. Clearly, the old version of your firm doing corporate interiors for corporate clients was about trust. The financial industry breached the trust — and we had a big crash. You understood that and redirected the firm.

I was not taught in school that we were in the trust or customer service business. Do you emphasize in your firm that it is about your clients, not about you and your precious buildings. That you are in the people and experience business — almost to the point of being in the hospitality business yourselves?

**WM:** Yes. That is a point of emphasis. It would be different if we were in Idaho, somewhere other than New York City. But there are a million talented designers, architects and very talented firms here. Any job and project I've ever gotten, any client I've ever had is because of a relationship. They know they can text me on a Saturday afternoon and it will mean something to me. It's not just a project number. Any work I've ever gotten has been relationship-based.

And to your point, there's trust. I've had clients ask, "What is your design aesthetic?" It's always what's appropriate for the project. I've been doing this for a while now, and I've met so many people in this profession I can't stand because they're trying to build a monument to themselves and ignoring the clients' needs.

**DI:** That's certainly not a way build trust or strengthen a relationship.

**WM:** Exactly. We did the first headquarters for Peloton. It was a super cool project. They had a budget, and it was meaningful. As a team, we could say, "This is where you're going to spend money, and here is where we can do some nice things without spending money," and meet their budget. It wasn't about us. It wasn't about designing something that everybody would say, "Oh, Mancini did this!" It was about the client and their needs. That suggests who we are as a firm and says something about the people that work here.

**DI:** How do select your teammates?

**WM:** I've hired a lot of people. For the most part, I can tell within five minutes of talking to somebody if I want to work with them, if they'll fit in, if they're a real person. And you don't have to be like me, you don't have to like the same things or be from the same background. But if you're a real person and not putting up a facade, as long as all the other stuff works and you know what you're doing, you can be successful here. I don't love stereotypical architects. They're not my favorite group of people.

**DI:** I appreciate you sharing that. When I was researching, I found your website refreshingly human. There were some personal anecdotes about you and your staff and even pictures of dogs. Does that manifest itself in your culture? Is it formal or unspoken to build and spread that culture through your firm? Clients first, people first and trust? Do you train for it?



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Over the years, even more important than all those plans has been leading by example. Not just me, everybody in our leadership. It makes the culture visible and apparent. It makes a difference.

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**WM:** We have our core values established. When we bought the firm, we went through a series of exercises with executive coaches to develop one, three, five and 30-year plans, all those things. And over the years, even more important than all those plans has been leading by example. Not just me, everybody in our leadership team. It makes the culture visible and apparent, which makes a difference.

If somebody comes here and starts making it about themselves, they'll find out very quickly that's not how we do things. We have people who have taken the reins of the talent portion of our firm for hiring and staff development. They've done an outstanding job defining what that is and who we are. It's apparent when you're here that there are certain ways we act and things we do.

I remind people, "On half our projects, the clients aren't doing what they do every day." If you're doing a developer project, that's different. But if you're moving a law firm from one place to another, they don't do this every day. It's stressful for them, so you've got to make it feel as good as possible for them during the experience. The spaces we design are beautiful, and design is important, but people remember the experience.

You spend a lot of time together on a project in meetings, on construction sites, in design, on phone calls, and if you're spending the time with people you like and you have a good time, then it's great. That's why a lot of clients become friends over the years. If you have an enjoyable experience, it's better for everybody.

**DI:** In hindsight that seems an obvious realization, but it's hard for architects to figure that out.

**WM:** Ego. It's all about the ego.



**DI:** If you want to read a great book about how we got in that mess, read George Barnett Johnston's book "Assembling the Architect." It's a long, scholarly read, but you read it and you turn into Homer Simpson, "Doh!" This is how we got ourselves in this mess. We tried to isolate ourselves, retain our power, protect and distance ourselves as being elite and exclude everybody. What a disaster. I have to believe working for your father on a construction site shaped your worldview about architects a bit.

**WM:** No question. Having grown up with my dad as a contractor and hearing him complain about architects all the time, I didn't have a choice in the matter, and I'm a guy who grew up idolizing his dad. I came into it thinking, "These architects are not my favorite folks in the world." When I came out of school

that was verified by getting browbeaten in practice and somehow learning through it all to be different, to base things on trust and be real.

**DI:** What do you love best about the firm?

**WM:** There are a lot of things to love about where we are right now. We have a well-rounded practice that's poised for more growth. We have an outstanding staff and a great group of leaders, beyond our five partners. They get it and have bought into everything we've talked about. They are real people, not the ones wearing all black and little round glasses, and they get it.

**DI:** Gaze out into the future in 10 years. Where might you take things. Where might you be?

**WM:** The next step is for us to grow the heck out of Mancini. We plan on expanding into other markets outside of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. We're targeting places like Georgia, Florida and Texas. We have a really good formula here that, to your point, should be obvious, but it's not for some reason. And that formula could translate around the country.

**DI:** Trust, real people and clients first — a fine formula indeed.

**WM:** Awesome. I enjoyed our conversation very much.

**DI:** Thank you, sir.

*William Mandara Jr., AIA, is chief executive officer and co-owner of Mancini Duffy, a national design firm with a 100-year-old history and tech-forward approach based in New York City. Bill comes from a family in the business: His father and grandfather were general contractors. He got the most thankless tasks during his teenage summers at his father's job sites. In retrospect, it was a great way to instill understanding and respect for the profession and a not-so-subtle hint from his father to consider architecture school instead.*

*He had been at TSC Design for five years when Mancini Duffy purchased the firm's assets in 2011, when he was named a senior associate. He was later named principal in 2014, became co-owner in 2017 and was named chief executive officer in 2018. Bill believes in consistency of vision and values: We should never put ourselves or our vision ahead of the clients. This consistency lets us respond to our clients quickly, with clarity and authority.*

*He lives with his wife and two children in Paramus, New Jersey.*