

# Demystifying the building design process: An architect's story

By JASON STREB

"I wanted to be an architect."

Often, this is the typical response I get when I tell people I'm an architect. I'm frequently surprised to hear this as for many architects we feel there is a mystery around our profession and what we do. It seems most people's knowledge or interaction with architects is limited to a TV portrayal like Mike Brady or George Costanza (although not an architect he always wanted to pretend to be one). A romanticized caricature typically involves a roll of drawings and dark rimmed glasses.

The public interacts with architecture daily yet primarily with the finished product of what we do. Even construction sites (which are plentiful downtown) and ribbon cuttings represent the end of what can be a multi-year process for architects and designers. At those stages, the architect's role is wrapping up and we've moved on. It's a funny time for us architects then. The time when a building has come to fruition and a project that's been so intimately "ours" is suddenly someone else's.

I imagine this must be what it's like to send a kid off to college. Most of the architects' life with a project is spent more intimately and isolated. What starts as a sketch or idea on a small notebook or napkin (yes, often a napkin) evolves into a full-blown building. It's an interesting concept many don't realize about architecture.

Designers spend months and years working every day and long hours analyzing every detail about how a building will work. How will people use the space? How will people feel and move in the space? We pick the materials, furniture and every aspect one can think of in a building—yet most architects will never experience it. We design projects for others to use and occupy. The journey of our process is varied and begins long before the ceremonial ribbon is cut.

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The creative process of architects is what I think most people are drawn to when they once saw themselves as an architect. In truth, it's what drew

myself and many into the profession. For any artist or designer, drawing and creating *is* the process. Beyond our napkin sketches we draw in a variety of ways. We draw on research for inspiration. We draw on past experiences to inform our creativity.

The creative process can be a rollercoaster. Rarely is there an 'ah ha!' moment that then sparks a flurry of ideas that then becomes a building. The creative process, specifically for architects, is something we are trained in and are forever refining. For Nana-Yaw Andoh, assistant professor of architecture at RIT's master of architecture program, it's "...what we do."

As someone who trains architects to think, Andoh understands the emotional process associated with designing buildings. "...We're trained through school to design... so being able to generate an idea...it's not just about the skill and the experience but there's also kind of an emotional journey to actually be confident enough to put something on paper...to take a risk and show someone." As an architect himself, Andoh understands that although the design originates with the designer—ultimately the design is not for them. "It's for the client and then it's for the public at large. ... So when the design process is happening we tell our students this all the time that you have to take the emotion out of it... because at some point the client may love it or hate it." As architects, developing a thick skin is part of the game. Andoh points out the

'sting' one feels when the client doesn't like the design. The next step he says is to "...just go back to the drawing board and either struggle again or find it....and hopefully they like it. Because when they like it, quite honestly there's no feeling like it in the world...."

So often a design evolves from simply the architect's imagination. Influence from the client or public have a hand in crafting and altering the design. Architecture and its aesthetic value is quite often in the eye of the beholder.

So, what makes a design or project successful for a designer? For Nancy Gong, glass artist and owner of Gong Glass Works, it's a combination of things. "In any design, we all want to have fun and do something really cool. We all want to design something that's going to be an award winner. But even before that, we want it to be something that works for the client, and for me, I want it to be meaningful for the client. I want it to be an experience that adds to their day. If I've done that, then I've done my job, and I have a big smile on my face."

Gong works closely with architects and appreciates the design process, which she says is very similar for both artist and architect. She feels communication with the client is essential for taking a broad vision and refining it so that it meets the needs of the user. "It's our job to take the time to ask the questions...to talk to the right

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**RENTAL**

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1950s, '60s and '70s, the suburban lifestyle portrayed on Ozzie and Harriet and Leave it to Beaver, is no longer the idyllic goal.

"There has been a much bigger push for rentals," Zimmer-Meyer said. "This is a generation that likes its flexibility."

They like walkability, they like the urban lifestyle and they like the bustle of downtown. And some don't mind paying for glitz, which is why there was the luxury boom.

"This is their desire; this is what they want and they're willing to spend," said John Caruso, president of Passero Associates, an engineering and architecture firm. The Passero office is at the intersection of West Main and West Broad streets and there are employees who live in the neighborhood.

"We're growing as a company (from 70 employees to 105 in the past five years) and we're just one company. With the expansion of all the economies, I don't think we've met demand for these living spaces."

Having businesses locate downtown has been a big win for Rochester's economy and developers. There are now 191 creative class/innovation companies downtown, Zimmer-Meyer said, and some workers prefer to live there as well, thanks to "Seinfeld," "Friends" and "Sex in the City." The television shows created a pop culture aura about urban living.

"The high-intensity lifestyle became the vision, the goal," she said.

Some just can't afford the top-end rent, which is why upscale development proposals have slowed. Buckingham has been active in repurposing downtown buildings. While Tower280 brought luxury to the heart of downtown, a lot of Buckingham projects like Industrie Lofts on Water Street are in the county's market sweet spot of around \$1,000.

"It's purely demand for us," Finley said. "We don't go into a project without confidence it will work from a financial perspective. We're pretty selective about what we do."

"And we do more mixed use than anything. We like to ultimately make an impact."

If the upscale market is nearing saturation, as Christa believes, then only one thing will change that: newcomers to the market.

"At some point we'll just be robbing Peter to pay Paul, just emptying out some suburban garden apartment to fill some cool urban building, unless we can grow our regional economy," Zimmer-Meyer said.

A sign we're closing in on market saturation: some buildings are offering incentives to move in. Earlier this month a few leasing agents were offering one month free rent and also were waiving application fees. One building waived the security deposit.

High occupancy is a necessity to pay the construction loan and also to keep the lender happy.

"Banks not only want to see your plan for repaying," Riley said, "they want to see signed leases during the duration of the loans."

Apparently the banks are happy. As well as the developers.

"As long as units keep leasing," Finley said, "developers will keep building."

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## CONSTRUCTION

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updated in real time; workers can see it on touch screen monitors. If you're putting pipes together or wiring a building, you can call up the relevant section. It's a huge point of efficiency."

We've got the plans and we've got the materials but it's the "folks in the field" who ultimately are putting the project together. For construction firms like LeChase, which has "the safety of our team as a core value of our organization," Sayers said "awesome, revolutionary changes" are happening.

Work sites can be hazardous places, and it's a constant effort of vigilance to make sure everyone stays safe and stays responsible for their safety and the safety of others. But what if you could ease that burden by showing

**"Compared to whether it's the summertime and it's 90 degrees or it's the wintertime and it's snow and ice, any time you can do work indoors, you're going to be saving time."**

— Ted Orr

workers potential threats before they become disasters?

"We're good at avoiding high-risk hazards," Sayers said. "It's the mundane, everyday tasks that we're now working on."

It's called MindForge, a propriety technology currently in LeChase's R&D. By harnessing augmented reality (AR) software, Sayers says it's not science fiction to think soon, workers could be equipped with a heads-up-

display similar to aircraft pilots.

"With these hardhats and glasses, we'll be able to see hazards in real time, right in front of people, reminding them to enhance their safety precautions," Sayers said.

Then there's one of the biggest obstacles facing construction companies: No matter how much funding companies around the nation and world pour into their tech budgets, there's one element no one can control—the ele-

ments themselves.

There's a reason it's called "construction season" in Western New York when the ground thaws and we finally put away the shovels and ice scrapers. With BIM software leading the way, construction companies are finding a way to extend their effective dates.

With all the architectural specs and 3-D modeling completed, workers can get down to business in "the perfect environmental conditions."

"It could be an electrical system put together on a bench then shipped, or meclual systems, we do whole bathroom and wall systems," said Orr. "Compared to whether it's the summertime and it's 90 degrees or it's the wintertime and it's snow and ice, any time you can do work indoors, you're going to be saving time."

## BUILDING DESIGN

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people. In the architect's world, in my world...is there a story that can be told?

Gong uses research and sketches to create her stories, indicating that research can be a fun, learning process. It may seem odd to link to research with design as one seems more scientific and analytical while the other more artistic and free flowing. Ideas don't just develop—they're crafted and massaged.

Like Andoh, Gong agrees there is a

certain risk and emotional aspect to be a designer. During the design process, one often balances the line of confidence and self-doubt. "When I've created a design...it would not come out overnight, that's for sure. They take a lot of time."

Time is an architect's biggest challenge. While the design process can be the most fun and rewarding aspect of the profession, it often is the most condensed part. The design of a building needs to go quickly from concept to reality in a relatively short time. Beyond the artistic aspect of design, architects eventually must transition

to a more technical focus. Drawings shift from sketches to fully drafted construction details.

It's not enough that the design looks good—it has to work, too. Andoh believes that the development of the design from sketch to construction can be the most difficult. "...turning that lovely sketch into a feasible project..." In this stage of design, architects need to prove it can be built.

Technology and tools have aided in that process. Three-D software and virtual reality allow both architect and client to see the design in ways never imagined. However, both Andoh and

Gong agree that while exciting, technology is merely another tool in the chest. Design still originates with the designer.

As downtown continues to experience ribbon cuttings and public ceremonies marking new buildings and new beginnings, realize that for those involved in creating them it signifies an end. Every building, every project tells a story. As architects, we helped write that story—we hope you enjoy it.

*Jason Streb is an architect and associate at CPL as well as current president of A.I.A Rochester.*



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