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 creative process can be a rollercoaster. Rarely is there an ‘ah ha!’ moment that then becomes a building. The 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 design 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 to put something on paper… to take an idea… 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 person to ask the questions…”

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.”

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 person to ask the questions…”

Continued on page 18
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.”

koklobzija@bridgetowermedia.com/ (585) 653-4020

At Canandaigua National Bank & Trust, we understand that each business and industry has its own unique financial needs. We also recognize that it takes a collection of banking services to meet them.

Our Commercial Services Group has a long track record of working with commercial real estate developers and property management clients. This experience is evident in our ability to develop creative solutions to meet the complex needs of this industry.

We assemble a complete team of financial experts, collaborating across disciplines within the organization, to address the opportunities and challenges you face. Let us put our local market knowledge and decision making to work for you.

Call today, and let our team get to work for you!

Best Business Banking

CNBank.com/CreativeSolutions | (585) 419-0670

Service First.
Single Point of Contact.
Real Relationships.
Professional Local Expertise.

— Family Owned and Operated Since 1972 —

502 South Main Street, Canandaigua NY 14424 | 4 South Main Street, Pittsford NY 14534
“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