

# Introduction

## Architects

### *The Stage is Set for the Reemergence of the Master Builder*

What is a 'Master Builder'? Is a master builder and architect, contractor, or builder? Perhaps a master builder is a combination of one or more of the above. Is there a degree of competence or success equated with a master builder? Is this success more important in defining one than the mere assumption of multiple roles? Do any master builders exist today? If not, can we expect their return in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How do we train 21<sup>st</sup> century master builders? The purpose of this book is to answer some of these questions.

I have been practicing architecture, enduring its ups and downs, for over thirty five years. Having experienced the thrills of the profession's highs, as well as agony and pain at its lows, I feel obligated to offer a different approach; one that can restore architects' standing in order to reclaim the title 'Master Builder'. This work will examine all fundamental aspects of both design and business, related to the practice of architecture. It also reviews some competitors for the title 'master builder', especially contractors and developers. The journey I will share is a long one that provides insight as to why the practice of architecture is changing. This book is intended for those who aspire to be architects, those who engage architects, as well as those affected by their decisions. In short this book is for those in the building industry and those who have an interest in how the American built environment is affected by certain design approaches.

The objective is also to fathom the dynamic changes occurring in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which will require a fundamental thinking of what an architect is. To do this I will offer both theories to describe what has happened, and actual stories that dramatize the past, and foretell a future course of the profession of architecture, real estate development, and building construction. Since I have been exposed to a few of the great icons in both the business and design fields, I believe that I am qualified to describe the approaches they utilized and how they were able to foster great opportunities, as well as wealth and acclaim (or lack thereof). It was an exciting time in my career when I tried these approaches myself. I achieved almost immediate success but later paid unexpected prices. I have experienced the ups and downs of business cycles and on more than one occasion have lost almost everything but have been able to recover quickly.

Yes, I have personal knowledge of how it is to be very financially secure, and almost irretrievably poor. I know what the term 'without risk there is no reward' really means. Being at the 'bottom of the barrel' is not something architects often think about. I never imagined while in school that someone with professional training and skill could experience major business failures. I also didn't realize how business cycles could affect one's wellbeing. How can this happen to smart professionals who try so hard? What I had to learn, and what every entrepreneur must learn, is that assumption of risk can lead one down the path of either financial success or ruin. Architects need to understand the free market and why the market rewards and penalizes risk takers. In terms of a scale of

one to ten in appetite for risk, I am probably today about a five, but in my younger days I was a ten. As Bob Dylan once sang, “if you have nothing, you have nothing to lose.”

Today some architects believe they can have great financial reward without assuming risk. Others feel doomed due to the predictions of others, that architects can't really make any money. To attain wealth, some believe that in fact architects should become contractors, real estate developers, or both. I will attempt to refute their long held ideas and assumptions that have been engrained in the professional culture. I want to work on this mindset. The attempt here is to demonstrate what a different mindset can lead to. It is a mindset that is emerging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but derives from a few pioneers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

While I couldn't quite replicate their careers, I certainly tried, and had mixed results. After modifying the approach to a degree that better suited my appetite and tolerance for risk, I achieved a certain level of success. What the aspiring architect, or interested party, must know is that no book or prescription, or amount of academic training can turn an average design professional into a design/business wonder overnight. No! One must first know and understand oneself. This book will help do that as well as let the rest of the world know that the 'Master Builder' can return. What I am about to tell you, is not going to go down easy with many in the profession or academia. However, the future as usual is with the young and their freedom from the status quo of this ancient profession.

Many people don't know what an architect really does. Defining the role of a doctor is easier. Doctors are skilled professionals who help cure sick people. Lawyers are likewise qualified to defend the innocent and sometimes the guilty. But, what is an architect? The simple answer is that an architect is an equally skilled professional who designs buildings. Some describe those who invent new political concepts or invent prototypes in other industries as 'Architects'. Karl Rove, President Bush's political advisor is deemed the 'Architect' of Bush's successful campaigns for president. Why do physicians and lawyers study for many years to gain a license to practice? If your answer is that they do it to help people in need, this book is not for you. While doctors and lawyers may possess a giving spirit, as well as certain talents they enjoy utilizing, I am convinced that the principal motivation is financial reward. Yes, wanting to help people is both admirable and perhaps equally important to those who practice medicine and law successfully. However, it is my belief that people become doctors and lawyers to practice their trade for financial reward, despite what the media may convince you to believe. The amount of time and effort required for licensure is simply too great to believe otherwise.

While I am not a psychologist, I do understand the hierarchy of human needs. The foundation of this concept is rooted in the satisfaction of physical needs, such as hunger and shelter, prior to fulfilling higher objectives, such as self-fulfillment. In the ancient past, when lions were chasing ape-men up trees, it was hard to be “all you could be.” The first thought is survival and shelter. Modern man is no different. Many humanists will extol the nobility of mankind. Fear and self-preservation are more deeply rooted than ambition. Greed, in fact, is the next progression beyond survival. The increasingly popular reality-based TV shows demonstrate that survival is the most basic need of

mankind. Beyond that, we have the opportunity to become more human, and perhaps, more spiritual. When evaluating the profession of architecture, it is my opinion that we spend too much time with the byproducts of the service and fabricated images produced by the media.

My premise is simple. In American society, people work for financial gain. Physicians, lawyers and architects ply their trade for money. Helping people, self-gratification and ego enhancements are fringe benefits. There are those that believe that these goals are more important than the profit motive. Many of these people are the ones that cost architects money, while architects themselves often spend too much time thinking about the byproducts and costing themselves money. In short, architects fool themselves into believing that these “byproducts” are the principal rationale for spending six, (yes, six) of their best years studying to become architects. They spend another three (total of nine) years serving as an apprentice, which is necessary to become legally registered to practice architecture.

I like the fact that the generation *X-ers* are more prone to recognize this reality than the *baby boomers*. Many baby boomer architects wanted to save the world with their adventures into architecture. When I was studying architecture, I had little in common with those that were liberal activists. First of all, I had a brief military background, and as I will later explain, I became interested in financial rewards at a young age. Ultimately, financial rewards, as well as to utilize a God-given talent were the reasons I became an architect. I believe that the do-gooders of my generation have not really improved architecture in this country, nor have they done the profession a favor by minimizing the profit motive. Many of the architecture students of the sixties generation became co-opted in the revolution and ended up as educators and government workers. Don't misunderstand; I am not on a crusade against educators and hardworking government officials who are worthy of respect. I am simply referring to those who became government workers to avoid competition. They then convince the younger generation that the ‘fringe benefits of the profession’ are more important than the profit motive, causing these young architects to become victims in a competitive business world.

How many architects have been told, “Don't go into this profession if you want to make money?” This is the council of the wise and the unwise, the educator and the businessman. Why is this perception pervasive among practitioners and lay people, who know little about the practice of architecture? The question is, “How can the perception that architects are poor businessmen and frustrated artists be changed?” When savvy businessmen state, “Well, he's just an architect,” it really typifies the situation. The idea that this profession is more of an art than a business, that an architect who is too concerned with business can't be a good designer, describes deeply held beliefs in our profession. It gets worse when the prevailing thought is that “you will go broke if you stay in the profession long enough.” Under this scenario, the architect is ultimately forced to abandon the practice to go into some related field to support a family. Such thinking doesn't occur regularly in the legal or medical professions, although many physicians do complain about long hours and having to manage government forms.

My aim in this work is not to provide prescriptions or technical approaches. The objective is to investigate values, long held beliefs and misconceptions of this profession, and look at how financial incentives can influence the design process and how the design process can lead to financial gain. Building design talent can be a powerful tool in the business world. The fundamental issue is values and an intransigent subculture that I have been subjected to, but resisted. I would even go so far as to state that it is un-American to separate architects from sound business practices. How did this subject of architects and financial incentives become a passion of mine?

Several years ago, I wrote two academic treatises on the profession of planning and architecture for advanced degrees. I then decided to weigh in on a subject of primary interest to many architects, both to those entering the field and those wishing to enhance their position in the profession. Rather than write a 'how to book' or recipe for running a better practice, I thought it would be more productive to compare design theories with business theories; and design practices with business practices. Yes, there are theories in business that dovetail with design theories, like 'systems theory' and 'optimization.' This may be of interest to those outside the profession who wonder what architects actually do and how they are paid. The bigger issue though is how to return architects to a position of influence and power; in short, what will it take to restore the profession so that we can experience the 'Return of the Master Builder.'

What in my background led me to focus on this subject? There are two reasons: the neighborhood in which I grew up, and the influence of several mentors I had early in my career. My childhood friends propelled me to be ambitious. The neighborhood was a virtual 'sixth Borough of New York City,' comprised of working class families who relocated from New York to Miami, Florida for a better life. Children tended to be overachievers who were interested in financial success via academic excellence. Many were ethnic, of the Jewish or Catholic faiths. All of us figured we would have to work hard, go to college and get by on our 'smarts.' We did not make money the 'old-fashioned way,' by inheriting it or by marrying into it. Later in college and early on in my professional career, I had four mentors. The first was an Italian architect from Florence who taught me that the environment (architecture) could have a profound influence on people's behavior. The second was probably, at one time, the richest architect that ever lived, whose career started in Atlanta, Georgia. He pioneered the concept of financial gain via architectural design. He was the *rich man of architecture*. The third was the *poor man of architecture* who many architects have come to admire. The fourth was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who introduced me to the difference between 'optimal' and 'perfect.'

I could probably write a book on each of my mentors. Actually, my master's dissertation at the University of Florida focused on the first mentor, and my Ph.D. dissertation was primarily about the second and his combined business and architectural design approach. My exposure to the third mentor was sort of a virtual experience, with his disciples at the University of Pennsylvania. His son recently produced an award winning 'docu-drama' about his life. The fourth will be dealt with in this work as it concerns the impact of the systems approach on architectural practice. I became so enthralled by systems theory,

that I took a sabbatical from the architectural profession and entered the sanitary waste business to test this theory on marketing and operations; obviously, a completely different business. Although this may sound peculiar to professionals, the sanitary waste business has yielded some of the best American entrepreneurs in the last fifty years.

I am sure my fellow architects don't wish to hear a member of the American Institute of Architects ("AIA"), and one who holds a Ph.D. from an Ivy League school, comparing this dignified profession to any business, especially one like sanitary waste. I do not criticize anybody or anything, without offering up what I truly believe is a better model. The AIA has largely come around to many of the points I will make herein. Their method of communicating many of the trends and new potential methods of diversifying the profession contain incomprehensible jargon, as you may expect from a very institutionalized organization. I may not do any better, but I will attempt to be a better communicator.

I wish to help change the profession, so that it will be viewed as a dynamic group of designer/entrepreneurs, who can alter America's image of it, so that architects become more respected by hard-nosed businessmen and politicians. They respected my second mentor. He had access to financial resources and significant political clout. He didn't incur risk unless there was a promise of major design commissions and/or monetary return. Without risk, there is no reward. To my academic friends, I state, "being a good businessman doesn't mean that you lack design talent." This is absolutely proven in my dissertation that was about mentor number two, John Portman of Atlanta Hyatt Regency fame.

It is not my intention to attack our great architectural programs at universities, two of which I am a product. I admire both schools and their architectural professors. In fact, the work ethic of the students who attend the University of Florida, School of Architecture is second to none. Actually, part of my third reason for bothering to set these ideas to print derives from an opportunity I had at the University of Pennsylvania to match my design instincts with the business savvy I learned at the Wharton School of Business. I did not graduate from Wharton, but I felt its cultural influence. The influence of several key classes forced me to consider the impact of economic policy and business concepts on the history of architecture. I am immersed in the relationship of various business approaches to architectural design itself, not just to the business of the architectural practice.

Early in my career, I worked for John Portman, the architect who designed the first Hyatt Regency Hotel and, in fact, helped invent the chain. He also developed the Peachtree Center in Atlanta. Later his work became recognizable in cities such as New York, Detroit, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. The theatrical atriums, glass elevators and cylindrical shapes helped make Portman rich and famous. On the other hand, I came under the influence of Louis I. Kahn at the University of Pennsylvania. "Louie," as he is fondly remembered, died broke and in debt, his body lying unidentified in a subway men's room, and then in the city morgue for many days



John Portman, 'the Rich Architect'



until it was finally identified. This subject was well dealt with by his son in the docu-drama “My Architect.” I think I understand both men very well. This is a sort of a *rich man versus poor man* mentality. Who do you think most architects admire most? You guessed it, the poor man. Louie was a gem, a philanderer and self-aggrandizer. His wife stated, “I wish he spent as much time and energy towards making money as designing buildings.”



Atlanta Hyatt Regency Hotel Atrium

The career of Portman is a more attractive avenue to me. I want to clarify a point for you. The architect who understands business has many new opportunities to be a more effective designer. Practice makes perfect. Chances are you will be a much better architect with unrealized opportunities if you embrace and

really enjoy business. Dodging the responsibility, and/or sloughing it off to the *design-challenged* administrative partner, risks the loss of clout in important projects which may enhance one’s design ability. Also, architects may often times be better off with a stream of smaller projects, rather than aiming for only the single large commissions, which result in very recognizable monuments. The bottom line is that your practice is often better with more profitable, smaller projects that draw less attention initially. Kahn never understood this – he was a monument builder. Portman didn’t either. He almost went broke himself by concentrating on monument building.

Many architects have low self-esteem. In order to receive large commissions, they will give away their precious service to some manipulative real estate developers who promise them a chance to get their ‘name up in lights.’ I have found that wanting your name up in lights is a product of low self-esteem. Most developers will happily pay you this “psychological money.” Attorneys, on the other hand, rarely perform services for substandard rates unless there is a social service aspect to the effort, perhaps to help the disenfranchised; or they take a case on contingency to get a large percentage of an award.

Do I have secrets to tell the professional about how mentor number two became wealthy? The answer is no. I will offer a general business approach that will have wide application, but has little to do with fame or fortune. It is more a method to have a solid business plan and approach that will enhance design capability. I will explore the strong correlation of business theories to design theories. A very desirable objective is freedom from the constant worry of cash flow and economic downturns; however, this objective is rarely totally achieved. There is also an opportunity to enhance the weary design products, which pollute our visual landscape in America. I actually do not believe that being interested in financial reward will cause an architect to ‘sell out’ or compromise design integrity, or any of the like scare-tactics employed by academics. I will write about ‘brands,’ such as ‘big box’ retail outlets, fast food joints, and the sterile corporate glass box syndrome adorned with cartoon-like images of some historical elements. I do not advocate any of this. I believe we can create a better visual and behavioral environment if

architects are trained differently. There is a compelling argument to modify the educational program at architecture schools in a way that moves from mostly technical training to one that offers training that result in both technical and business skills. To accomplish this, I will offer anecdotes and theories that may influence members of the profession to initiate needed changes to the educational requirements for licensure.