Blending Old and New

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08/01/2018 by Jessica Rosgaard (https://www.bizneworleans.com/author/jessica-rosgaard/)

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As New Orleans celebrates its tricentennial, the city is both honoring its architectural past and embracing the future with contemporary designs that coexist with the unique architecture for which the city is known.

"In the New Orleans market, we're seeing new construction projects built in both traditional and modern styles of architecture," says Richard Albert, founder of Albert Architecture, a full-service, multi-state licensed architecture firm based out of New Orleans.

Honoring the Past

Trapolin-Peer Architects is among those firms specializing in historic property renovation and restoration. Their new construction is what they call "context-sensitive."

“We like our designs to be contemporary, so they speak to our time,” says founding principal Peter Trapolin, “but they’re tempered by use of same scale and materials of the surrounding neighborhood.”

One example is the firm’s current project on St. Charles Avenue and Julia Street, near the Julia Row buildings that were built in the 1830s. “We picked up on the rhythm of that intact row of townhouses and used that as a basis of the design for the new construction,” says Trapolin.

The high-rise part of the building starts on the fifth floor and is pushed back, so the street-front scale of the building feels lower and is in context with the Julia Row townhomes. The brick construction follows historic trends of a taller first floor and second-floor balconies, but, Trapolin says, “when you look at the way the detailing is done, nobody’s going to question whether it was built in the 1830s or 2018. It’s going to be clearly a contemporary building, but everything we’ve done with it is trying to fit in with the scale and proportions of the neighborhood.”

Trapolin says while there are some in New Orleans who want all new construction to replicate historic buildings, some residents believe architecture should be of its time.

“Neighborhoods are often composed of buildings that stretch historically over 150 to 200 years, representing different periods of time,” he says. “You’ll have Greek revival, art nouveau, art deco – all of which represent a distinct period of the city and also the history of architecture.”

Terri Hogan Dreyer, owner and founding partner at NANO, LLC, —an architectural and interior design firm for commercial, residential and municipal projects — agrees that historic cities need to be open to exploring new architecture, and points to Paris as an example of a city that has successfully married historic buildings with evolving design concepts.

“It doesn’t mean that you have to change the ultimate character and form,” she says, “but it does mean that you can bring in new structural principles and new sustainability principles that allow the architecture of the 21st century to stand alongside that of the 20th century and still maintain a sense of cohesiveness.”

And then, of course, there’s the fact that all good architects aim to make their mark.

“We’re architects,” Trapolin adds, “and we like to create something new. If you really look back at history, you know all of these buildings were new at a time and now they’re part of the historic fabric of our city.”

Renovation Makes Way For New Construction

Since historic tax credits were introduced nationally in the 1970s, this form of renovation has been understandably popular with developers, and locally Albert says the credits have been critical to bringing historic buildings back into commerce, with local regulatory oversight serving to protect New Orleans’ architectural history and significant components within a structure.

“The standards also recognize that renovation or additions to historic buildings should not appear as a false representation of history,” Albert says. “This is where contemporary design merges with our rich architectural historic fabric. Done correctly, contemporary components read independently and complimentary to these historic buildings.”

Trapolin says New Orleans design firms relish the opportunity to restore historic buildings.

“Developers all over just can’t wait for a historic property to come on the market,” he says, “but there aren’t that many left that haven’t been renovated.”

As New Orleans’ historic inventory diminishes, new development has expanded – taking over parking lots in the Central Business and Warehouse Districts.

“You’ve got other people jumping in and building new apartment buildings now that residential living has become really popular downtown,” Trapolin says.

The Canal Street corridor, Tulane corridor and Mid-City are all experiencing growth, too. Dreyer points to the neighborhood invigoration that's occurred as a result of the new VA Hospital, along with a change in zoning regulations, as the main drivers for this new growth.

"You see a lot of pedestrian activity and growth in the Mid-City/Tulane corridor," he says. "It's just starting to take off, and I think that's a great opportunity for New Orleans to look at other venues besides hospitality. It could be a great place for more dot-coms or more industrial or manufacturing businesses."

Dreyer compares this potential for growth to New York City's expansion beyond Manhattan and into Brooklyn.

"A lot of times architects and contractors focus on the 'A' space which is going to be your Warehouse District, your Downtown," Dreyer says, "but I like the fact that you see major opportunity and great architecture starting to occur around the periphery and I think that is a very good opportunity. It also shows a good healthy balance in the economy."

Commercial Workspace Trends

When it comes to commercial building interiors, the trend is shifting toward more residential design and open workspaces.

"Companies are realizing they have a very strong need to have their people collaborate on projects and not work in silos, so they're bringing a lot of people out of private offices and more into community environments," says Shelby Russ, president and CEO of AOS, a New Orleans-based commercial office furniture provider. "If someone does have a private office, it's likely to have a glass front to allow a visual connection with employees.

"Open-plan living, and workspaces have become very popular in recent years," adds Albert. "Designs are focusing on connectivity and interaction."

Wireless technology has been a driving force in the workplace, freeing employees from their desks, and companies are taking advantage of wireless technology with designs that encourage interactive work sessions.

"Conference rooms are becoming team rooms or huddle spaces used for collaborative work sessions," says Albert. "Cafés, lounges and intimate spaces with comfortable chairs are used to encourage informal interactions." Noise can be a problem in an open space, so architects are incorporating soundproofing materials in their designs."

There's also a shift to workspaces that feel less corporate, and more like home. Russ attributes this trend to the millennial generation, and the realization that people spend most of their waking hours at the office. "It's an aesthetic that millennials prefer," he says, "and they're emerging as a bigger influence on commercial design."

Russ says companies are showing an increased willingness to make a significant investment in their workplace, recognizing it as a tool for attracting and retaining talent.

"Companies are being a lot more strategic about investing on behalf of their people," he says. "More progressive or modernly designed spaces connote a little more openness, creativity, innovation and agility – and New Orleans, as it relates to commercial interior space, is much more progressive than it used to be."

Aesthetically, Russ is a fan of mixing historic exteriors with more modern interiors.

"I think it works incredibly well together," he says. "How the traditional bones work in conjunction with contemporary interiors is really beautiful when it's all put together well."

Design Technology

Since only about 5 percent of the population can read and understand 2D line drawings, architecture and design firms have incorporated virtual reality into their design process, saving clients time and money.

“Architects in the local and global market are moving away from two-dimensional computer drawing programs and are now using modeling and animation software,” says Albert “This software helps us process design concepts and offers our clients a more realistic picture of an unbuilt design.”

Rebecca Cooley is the vice president of manufactured interior construction at AOS.

“We actually have a virtual reality setup in our office, so we’re able to invite the design community and the ownership into our space and not only look at a 3D fly-through, but actually set them in the middle of their space to understand the context and the scale,” Cooley says. “When they can do that, they can actually make decisions faster because they have a clearer understanding of it.”

The technology currently in use by architects is the same that is found in online virtual reality games. Just like gamers can interact with other players from around the world in an identical simulated environment, shareholders in different cities can explore the same VR mock-up simultaneously.

“We call it augmented reality,” Cooley says. “We can put multiple people in the file and you can have it from multiple locations so someone can be here in New Orleans and they may have shareholders in New York, L.A. or Europe. The architect may be in another location – as long as you all have the headset and the equipment you can all get into the same working file, [can] be talking to each other. You can actually communicate in this live virtual world.”

As virtual reality technology becomes more affordable, Albert says he anticipates it will become common practice for architects in the near future.

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