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NEW ORLEANS

The Art of Architecture

A look at the challenges and latest trends affecting the field.

08/01/2016 by Sergy Odiduro (https://www.bizneworleans.com/author/sergy-odiduro/)

Demand continues to be seen for clean, minimalist design, as seen here with a condominium project on Oak Street in New Orleans by M2 Studio Architecture and Interior Design.

When it comes to creating a successful project, teamwork is key, but it's not always easy.

"The better the working relationship between the contractor and the architect, the more likely the project will be successful," says Charles J Neyrey, founder of M2 Studio Architecture and Interior Design.

Michael Lachin, owner of Lachin Oubre & Associates, a Metairie- based architectural firm, agrees. "There has to be a degree of cohesion, cooperation and trust among the team players so that the project can move forward smoothly."

For most projects, the process begins with a dance between the two groups that is usually initiated after the initial designs are drawn up. The courtship is finalized after a bidding process takes place and then the two teams are joined together to execute the project. But like every successful marriage, communication is key to successfully navigate any challenges that the two may encounter.

From the outset, it can be a bumpy road for all those involved.

"The bidding process is combative between architects and contractors," explains Bert Turner, principal architect at Mouton Long Turner. "It's set up that way."

Tucker Crawford, director of commercial development for Hernandez Consulting & Construction/ H A design build, believes that it is important to actively discuss key concepts between the two groups from the very beginning. "Sometimes there is a barrier in communication between the architect and construction company when utilizing a traditional design and then bid for construction methodology."

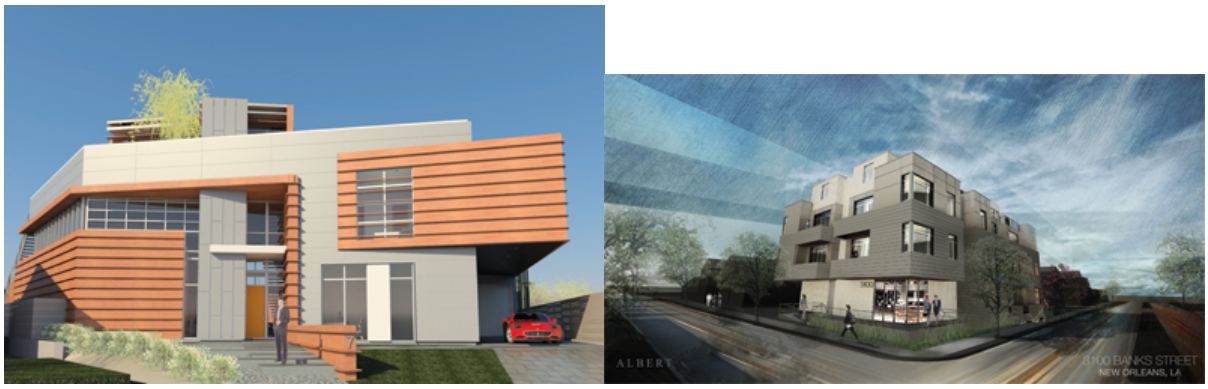
All parties should strive for an open dialogue that should continue throughout all phases, he said. With so many moving parts and people involved, it's easy to fall prey to miscommunication.

“It’s like a living, breathing project,” says Crawford. “Construction firms sometimes go back and forth with the architect and sometimes the architect’s designs may not foresee what is actually being built.”

Change orders or modifications to the project may need to be made. This in turn slows things down, grinding construction to a halt, and can present challenges to all those involved.

“When both parties aren’t on the same page there is the potential for things to spiral out of control. If the two teams aren’t put back on course, things can quickly go downhill,” says Turner. “Then it’s a finger-pointing exercise. We like to skip the finger pointing. We consider contractors a valuable part of the team approach. It’s really advantageous to the owner for us to be on the same team.”

While there is merit in tradition, another approach is to skip the elaborate courtship and elope straight away.



LEFT- A Metairie lakefront house designed by M2 Studio Architecture and Interior Design. RIGHT- Hernandez Consulting & Construction / H A design build and Albert Architecture & Urban Design have an in-house integrated design-build approach where the architects and construction team share a building. Seen here is one of their mixed use projects on 3100 Banks St.
Photos courtesy of Mouton Long Turner and Albert Architecture

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Hernandez Construction / H A design build and Albert Architecture & Urban Design have teamed up to offer an alternative to the traditional model.

“We have an in-house integrated design-build approach, with the architects downstairs and the construction team upstairs,” explains Richard Albert, president of Albert Architecture & Urban Design.

“It’s a one-stop shop,” adds Crawford. “We wanted a true design and build capability.”

The two see their business partnership as mutually beneficial and also advantageous for the owner of a project.

Albert points out that the benefits are substantial, especially when it comes to cost. Certain fees are eliminated from the outset.

“Working closely with our construction estimators, we are able to get real-time cost data,” he says. “During the design phase, we bring in key subcontractors to understand material and labor costs. We get their input, and by getting their input we’re able to get to the owner the most cost-effective solutions to meet their goals. The architect hires consultant engineers in order to produce a complete set of construction document drawings. Typical design fees for bid build range in the 10 to 15 percent of construction costs. Most of these fees are paid prior to obtaining bids. With design build, an owner will pay much less to understand the cost of the building.”

Crawford believes this last point is crucial.

“In my opinion, design and build is a superior methodology because, from the beginning, you are collaborating on all of the elements that translate into a successful project,” he says.

“Time is money in the development game.”

In Search of the “Wow”

Turner knows firsthand what it means to bridge functionality with beauty.

When his team converted a 12,400-square-foot Latin grocery store on a property that once housed a retail pharmacy chain in Metairie, few could ignore the transformation.

The stunning array of eye-popping colors used for the site was a bold addition to the neighborhood.

One of the primary goals for its owners was to drum up business by being visually irresistible to their potential customer base.

The site struck the ultimate balance between beauty and business use.

“Ideal [Market] was a perfect case,” Turner says. “We wanted to wow people. Without a good look for today’s consumers, a retail development might not get a customer that they are promoting themselves to.”

During the initial stages of the project, the firm’s first order of business was to explore the owner’s vision for the property.

“They wanted a fresh new look for that location,” he says.

Mouton Long Turner then started their research by looking for pictures, colors, anything that was reminiscent of Latin America. They came away with a smorgasbord of ideas that was then transferred onto the structure in methodical fashion.

Architecture as Sculpture

Aesthetics can often play a key role during the artistic development of a project.

Lachin says he believes that at the very least a building should be in harmony with its surroundings.

“Architecture is a form of sculpture in which you’re dealing with space,” he says. “It serves to support the human condition.”

LEFT- “We wanted to wow people,” says Bert Turner, principal architect at Mouton Long Turner, of the firm’s work on a 12,400-square-foot Latin grocery store in Metairie called Ideal Market. RIGHT- An interior peak at Mouton Long Turner’s colorful Ideal Market in Metairie. Photos courtesy of Mouton Long Turner and Albert Architecture

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Certain projects, Lachin says, are more attuned to expressions of art than others. “That is when it becomes unique and becomes a landmark of his own merit.”

Of course not all buildings exist to pay homage to our senses and sensibilities. How a building looks and feels sometimes has to play second fiddle to functionality. This is the time, Lachin says, when design professionals can still shine while looking at the bottom line.

“Therein lies the challenge for the design consultants,” he says. “There is an opportunity for a genuinely creative architect to express themselves within those limitations.”

Evidence-based Design

Developers of hospitals and health centers have the option of proactively seeking visual features that are proven to improve one’s overall health. In other words, how something looks has a direct impact on how you feel.

“It has to be aesthetically pleasing,” says Crawford. “There is a science and psychology behind how a person feels within an environment.”

Albert agrees, explaining that applying these principles to architecture is called evidence-based design.

“There have been quite a few studies that, for example, show that natural light will decrease the time that a patient is in hospital care,” he says. “They found that patients that have windows in their room or a view of a garden spend less time in the hospital. What’s good for a patient is usually good for our clients, so if we know that natural light and garden views are qualities of a space that enhance living, we try to include that in most of the projects that we design.”

Designing Green

Eco-friendly architectural designs are another trend that has consistently made an impact on the marketplace.

“It’s huge,” says Lachin. “One of the more exciting things right now is that our buildings are opening up into healthier and more productive spaces.”

With a keen understanding of how a building impacts an area, Lachin clearly appreciates the trend.

“This is something I personally feel passionate about,” he says. “Everybody thinks about automobiles, but buildings far and away consume more energy. Every designer, every architect needs to be mindful of our environment. We are losing a football field of coastal wetlands every hour. We see incredulous changes in our environment, and I have no doubt that humans beings have a direct impact.”

Less is More

When designers aren’t focusing on the impact of a structure, another trend clearly rules the order of the day.

“Clients are looking for clean, minimalist designs, “says Neyrey.

“It’s got to be sleek or ultramodern,” adds Turner. “We look at trends that are coming out of California and coming out of New York, but it’s got to be tailored to New Orleans.”

For the rest of the country, new and upcoming trends may be a given, but it would be remiss for designers who work here to ignore traditions that hold onto the past, traditions that are clearly reflected in most of the city’s structural landscape.

“We have the old and the new married to one another in very successful ways,” notes Lachin.

“Living in New Orleans, we have an incredible opportunity to express ourselves in the midst of a historical fabric that New Orleans architecture provides us. It is an incredible puzzle that we as architects and design professionals are challenged to attend to every day.”

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