

OAA Perspectives

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*Dear Aspiring
Architect, ...*



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FIRST, THE BAD ADVICE

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IT WAS THE summer of 1977. I was between my fourth and fifth years at Carleton University and I had a summer job working in a very small architectural office in downtown Toronto. At this early stage in my journey to becoming an architect, an older architect gave me two pieces of advice regarding my chosen career.

The first piece of advice was that being an architect was a lousy job and maybe I should look at something where I could make money instead.

The second piece of advice was not to hang around other architects and not to attend any OAA functions. "You will never get work from other architects," he told me.

These were two *very* bad pieces of advice, which I did not follow.

On the first piece of advice: becoming an architect and then becoming successful at it is one of the most satisfying things I have done in my life. Perhaps my well-meaning "mentor" was saying, in a backhanded way, that if you look at architecture as a job, you will not be successful. Architecture is a career and it is a life – and there is money to be made. I have seen many young architects come through our office over the past 34 years. Those who are successful have a passion and a thirst for architecture. They want to learn; they put in the hours it takes to get the job done. They make mistakes and they learn from those mistakes. They develop creativity through problem solving and hard work. For those for whom it was just a job, then my "mentor" was probably right.

On the second piece of advice: I admit that I almost fell for this one. However, as I matured in my career, I realized that there is much to learn from others. I enjoy attending OAA conferences and seeing old classmates, exchanging stories, discussing the issues of the day. Collaboration often leads to incredible ideas and is never a waste of time. For more than 20 years, I ran

my practice as a sole principal. In recent years I brought in a partner and we have worked together, challenged each other and further improved the quality of our work, broadening our practice.

As I look back on other advice I have received and advice that I have given others, I have a few key pieces I would like to pass on.

1 It's a small world out there – don't burn bridges and don't piss people off.

Whether you expect it or not, you will run into the same people time and time again during your career. The design and construction world is a small community and people you work with, or for, may change jobs but will probably stay in the industry. It is impossible to avoid disagreements, and problems will inevitably crop up that are difficult to resolve. In dealing with these issues, act professionally and do not get personal. Clients, contractors, employees and associates will respect that. The next time around, in totally different circumstances, they will think of you in a positive way. Likewise, do not hold grudges. People may say things in the heat of the moment that they don't mean. Get over it and move on. Respect your employees, respect your supervisors, respect your clients, respect the tradespeople and respect your peers. Today I have clients who were once employees. Today I have friends who were once clients. There are very few people who I cannot get along with. It's a good feeling.

2 Keep notes, make lists and write stuff down.

Way back when I was taking my registration courses, I received a bit of advice which I embrace to this day. Chris Fillingham was giving us a talk about how he worked on a day-to-day basis and he mentioned his notebooks. He said

he kept a Hilroy Notebook with him and wrote down everything in it: project notes, phone conversations, shopping lists, etc. He said it saved his ass on more than one occasion. I took that to heart and started in June 1982 with my first Hilroy schoolbook. I wrote down *everything* in it. I kept track of projects and phone calls, made to-do lists, jotted down conversation summaries, worked out fees and made sketches. I now have drawers full of these notebooks – over 200 of them – and yes, it has saved my ass a few times too. As an added bonus, I can sit down, open a book at random and transport myself back many years in my career and relive a moment in time – it's as though I were there.

3 Put yourself in the other person's shoes.

It is so easy to look at things only from your side. I always try to think about what the other side is thinking, what they are expecting. It helps you to avoid a lot of misunderstanding and it makes you a good listener.

4 Enjoy the down time.

The business of architecture is very unpredictable. There will be times when you don't think you can keep up, there will be other times when you worry you will never have another project. I rarely turn down an opportunity, because there is a challenge in everything and you never know where an opportunity will lead. When things are slow, I still get concerned. But I am (still) learning to be confident that slow is not stop. If you are good at what you do, if you maintain your relationships, if you stay in touch, work will always come.

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