ON BEING AN ARCHITECT:
ONE DISCIPLINE, MANY PATHS
A+I Founders DAG FOLGER and BRAD ZIZMOR on Performative Workplace Design

WeWork’s NIC RADER on Space-as-a-Service Business Models Reshaping Office Design

Johnston Marklee’s SHARON JOHNSTON on Making New History

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VERONICA WATSON, LEGO Master Model Builder, Creates a Different Type of Model
It used to be that a degree in architecture meant a singular career path: an internship, followed by a set of licensing exams, followed by an entry-level role in an architecture firm. But that was just the beginning. With hard work over many years, that career path could ultimately (hopefully) culminate in an advanced position.

As the architectural world has grown, however, that traditional path has widened, offering avenues of specialization such as technical architect, design architect, and project manager. The next generation of architects will have even more career choices, as new developments in BIM (Building Information Modeling), 3D modeling, artificial intelligence, and cloud collaboration create further opportunities for growth and exploration.

Despite these changes, throughout their careers, many find that being an architect isn’t the right fit. According to the *Equity by Design: Knowledge, Discussion, Action!* report, roughly a third of those who enter the profession leave it within four years. The good news: Architects with interests beyond designing and constructing buildings have discovered that their training and experience is invaluable in other art and design careers, from industrial design to furniture making.

In these pages, meet six architecture-trained professionals: three current architects, two former ones, and one who never even entered the field. Learn what inspires practicing architects—from living in an artist community to a friendship with a cherished mentor—and see how a background in architecture informs the work of those who have followed other paths.
When A+I founders Dag Folger and Brad Zizmor finished graduate school at Columbia in 1996, during the rise of the dot-com era, they recognized an opportunity to shift the standards of workplace design. By changing the spaces in which people worked, the young New York architects aspired to change the very way work was done.

Since then, A+I has grown into an internationally recognized firm with a diverse portfolio in architecture, interior design, workplace strategy, and brand design. Their clean-lined, naturally lit office spaces and brand designs for clients (including Tumblr, HBO, and Under Armour) are dramatic yet warm and have earned the firm an induction into the *Interior Design* 2016 Hall of Fame.

A 50-foot-wide Italian marble staircase announcing the entry to theMART—once a hulking Marshall Field’s warehouse and wholesale center and now one of Chicago’s premier locations for interior design showrooms and tech firms—is just one stunning example of A+I’s new vision of the modern workplace.

Together, Zizmor and Folger are a formidable duo. Zizmor describes himself, half-jokingly, as a frustrated stage actor, whose theater background has shaped his understanding of architecture as a performative enterprise. Props, lights, and choreography, whether articulated in office buildings or on Broadway, have the power to excite the imagination. Folger’s connection with architecture is more visceral. In high school, he helped his neighbor in Denver build a house from the ground up. Afterward, observing the daily rituals of the home, he came to recognize design, construction, and habitation as part of a singular, evolving dialogue. Here, the two speak about how architecture is inspiring people to work, and live, at a higher level.
A+I stands for “architecture plus information,” and you’ve said the best architecture comes from information. Why?

Zizmor: When we emerged from Columbia, we started exploring architecture’s power, in storytelling and narrative, to change people’s behavior and persuade them to dream, behave, and work differently. Architecture should be performative, and research and fact-finding is a big part of that.

What is the most challenging part of the creative process for you?

Zizmor: Our designs are not works of decorative art that stand on their own. We look at the creative process as a partnership with clients—an engagement. Staying focused on that is tricky. But we would rather create the best version of our client’s project than a compromised version of our own vision.

How do you design an office in harmony with a client’s workplace culture and dynamics?

Zizmor: The best way to answer that, I think, is by looking at two projects, for two similar companies, where we arrived at very different responses. One is Squarespace, whose headquarters in New York we worked on for eight months. They have a culture of interruption there. Whether it’s the group of folks on the technical side writing code or the creative side developing conceptual templates and graphics for website production, people were having trouble staying focused.

We wanted to create separate areas for radical collaboration and radical focus. So we put the private parts of the day closest to windows and sequestered moments of deep collaboration—talking, diagramming on whiteboards—in a dark mass in the center. Architectural cues signal when to transition between the two.
Folger: That was a very different approach than we took with Horizon Media, a company that historically is very siloed—not only in terms of intellectual content but physically. So much of their capital was focused on salaries and people rather than collaboration. Much of the knowledge base was fragmented because their working methods focused on individuals and did not compel employees to share information with other teams. There, we wanted more interruption to happen. So, we made the circulation areas much wider, not just for getting people from A to B, but as an extended meeting zone where people from different areas of the company could see each other and meet in various ways.

Tell me about an epiphany you had, after talking to a client, that changed your design approach.

Zizmor: theMART is a good example. Touring the lobby with the client, we asked what they’d like us to build, and he said, “I don’t want you putting anything in this room.” The aha moment was realizing the opportunity in not adding anything but problem solving. The answer to how to connect the building’s community was not to build but to strip away; to remove retail tenants, contributing sizable square footage for social connections and visual, architectural connections. We inserted a stair into the newfound space; 80% of the staircase is a place where you can sit and hang out. Sometimes the best design solutions require removing more than you build.

Horizon Media in New York. Courtesy A+I/Magda Biernat.
A common theme among your interiors is a clean white palette with plenty of natural light, punctuated by bursts of color—a bright-orange sofa, a large mural. What is the thinking behind your style?

Zizmor: We look at it not as an aesthetic style but as an expression of values and priorities in the world. There is movement toward wellness among our client base, a real focus on well-being in the body. We’re mindful of that and incorporate techniques that bring more natural light and plant material into the space.

Folger: It also goes to economics. We prioritize projects according to where money interfaces and solves problems for people. A building should have its own voice in the design outcome, and that takes a level of restraint and discipline. You don’t need to adorn every surface. You focus attention and economy on places that matter most.

How does digital 3D modeling influence your work?

Folger: We don’t expect our clients to read drawings or to see lights or stairs. So 3D models are an incredibly powerful tool to get everybody on the same page. Virtual reality is also getting great traction and becoming a major influencer. What’s exciting and promising about all this, for us, is you can take an Autodesk Revit model and put it through a VR camera rig and knit those images together. Fifteen years ago, it was difficult, expensive, and time-consuming to give the client the capability to see the same things as you. All that’s changed.

Much of your work is in New York. How does the city inspire you?

Zizmor: The whole notion of performative architecture and its powerful effect is so present in New York. It’s so exciting every day, taking the subway for 45 minutes, to watch 100,000 people move in ways you didn’t think possible. It’s made us redouble our efforts to think about how architecture can reinvent the human condition for the better.
Licensed architect Nic Rader says his role is one of the most exciting jobs at WeWork, a company that provides shared workspaces for start-ups, freelancers, small businesses, and large enterprises. As head of design for Powered by We—a business model that includes custom design, portfolio analysis, and office-management services—he describes his role as the emcee of “a start-up within a start-up within a start-up.”

Rebranded as The We Company, WeWork is edging into the commercial real estate market and other businesses. According to an internal annual report, the company is now the largest private occupier of space in London; Washington, DC; and Manhattan.

So now, rather than paying for space inside a WeWork-leased property, companies such as Sprint and UBS are using Powered by We for their own properties’ redesign and operation. This represents a large potential market: WeWork’s bank of 2,000 enterprise-level clients (companies with more than 1,000 employees) represents workers from 30% of Fortune 500 companies.

Figuring out how to offer space as a service is the crux of Rader’s job. He leads a team of engineers, architects, workplace strategists, BIM specialists, and graphic designers who use work-habit data and insights to create efficient, community-oriented workspaces. The data and insights are gathered from interviews, surveys, and WeWork’s member app. These spaces, Rader says, help companies streamline their real-estate concerns and accelerate growth.

Will WeWork become the Amazon of office space? Here, Rader shares his thoughts on the creative side of a program bent on recasting architecture from a set of designs to a scalable, data-driven service.
You spent 10 years as an architect and project director at architecture and design firm Snøhetta. How do you apply your training and experience at WeWork?

At Snøhetta, we did everything from a kitchen and courtyard renovation at the iconic Napa Valley restaurant The French Laundry to the Golden State Warriors arena—aka Chase Center [in San Francisco]—to a master plan for a proposed Obama presidential center in Honolulu. Those experiences helped me hone the architecture training I got in college, which is essentially complex problem solving.

You have to look at a problem from different angles and bring people in who are experts in things you are not. At WeWork, some projects are custom builds, but not every project is different every time. We’re trying to build a platform around a product we can scale and build. That brings with it really gnarly problems, which require outside experts and benefit from an architect’s problem-solving skill set.

Powered by We has been described as “office space as a service.” What does that entail?

In essence, we take our understanding of workplace experiences from WeWork spaces and tailor that to the culture, brand, and work style of clients. It’s not just design and build. It’s community management, software integration, real estate analysis, everything. What we’ve been able to do is unlock the value proposition for enterprise clients. They know our service can increase employee retention, recruitment, efficiency, and competitiveness—and the statistics bear this out.
For WeWork’s renovation of UBS’s Lincoln Harbor campus in New Jersey, what did the office space look like before, and what was the end result?

It’s not so much about how the space looked before our team came in but more about how the space functioned for UBS at the time. It was important for our designers, architects, and workplace strategists to work closely with UBS to analyze its needs and develop a design strategy to support its goals while meeting its budget and schedule. First, we conducted research that included keeping a record of how the space was being used.

How did this preliminary work inform your design thinking?

Based on our research, we developed a strategy that responded to the desire for flexibility and collaboration. This meant providing multifunctional spaces with flexible furnishings that activate the entire floor throughout the day. Lunch-and-learns can be held in the lounge next to the cafeteria, the auditorium can open for receptions, and meeting rooms can divide and expand. New amenities, such as a coffee and juice bar, make the space interactive, and informal breakout spaces are integrated with common spaces to encourage interaction. Finally, we wanted the space to offer a variety of meeting areas, from single-person phone booths to a 500-seat auditorium.

That meant working in the space ourselves and interviewing UBS employees to understand what worked well and to identify a few main needs.
How does the design process typically start?

Every Powered by We client goes through a process of discovery. On the technical side, we laser-scan every single space to get a highly defined point cloud, which we translate into conditions and models using Revit and in-house products. This is true BIM, not just traditional documentation in a new platform. It includes all embedded data about the space and its physical products: specifications, cost, logistics, turnaround time, delivery, and collision-detection models. We’re not just pumping out sheet sets. We’re moving quickly to actual scheduling and logistics to advance construction delivery above and beyond intentions and aspirations.

What about the human side? Is there a personalized aspect to the designs?

The first thing that gives our spaces a human quality is, quite simply, humans. Locations can have community managers who get to know every person by name. They ask about peoples’ concerns and what their days are like. They support them in their work. These days the market is competitive in terms of talent, and the benefits of having community managers are more than standard facility managers could offer. They curate the experience; they provide lectures and luncheons, food and wine tastings. They help create connections, and this has a significant benefit in helping companies win the talent war.

Should WeWork’s enterprise design services give architects reason to worry?

I think architects, as people, have nothing to worry about. Given the skill set we have around coordination and the understanding of how to engage experts to solve complex problems, we’re in the unique position to be successful and, actually, lead industry-wide change. That said, if I were a traditional architecture firm, I would be scared shitless. Some firms can be resistant to change, and, as a result, there is a significant reduction in the value in those types of companies and organizations. Those are the people who should worry about this.
Inspired by her time spent in the artist community of Marfa, TX, architect Sharon Johnston seeks to create a “sense of invitation without boundaries” in her designs.

JOHNSTON MARKLEE’S SHARON JOHNSTON ON MAKING NEW HISTORY

BY JEFF LINK

Architects Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee make beautiful spaces. An ethereal, milk-white pavilion at the forested edge of the Chilean coast. Seamless California homes balanced impossibly on hillsides. Spectacular exhibition pavilions with edges that could cut diamonds.

The intrigue and clarity of form found in these works—along with recent large-scale projects such as the Menil Drawing Institute in Houston and the interior renovation of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago—have propelled Johnston Marklee into the good graces of architecture’s elite. The Los Angeles–based firm, founded by Johnston and Lee in 1998, has earned more than 30 major awards, and its work has been exhibited in the permanent collections of many museums.

The duo acted as the artistic directors of the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial, the largest architecture and design exhibition in North America. In close collaboration with Mark Kelly, the commissioner of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, they assembled an impressive roster of 141 artists and architects from 20 countries, whose installations responded to the exhibition’s theme, “Make New History.”

Here, Johnston discusses the Biennial; her formative years in Marfa, TX; recent museum projects; a new book; and history’s role in informing architecture.
Why did you choose the theme “Make New History” for the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial?

Part of it came from the observation of things we saw with the first Chicago Architecture Biennial in 2015. Looking at the themes we chose—material histories, image histories, building histories, and civic histories—we felt a kind of urgency about the ways in which all of us were thinking about how to advance our work through a sense of the historical continuum of architectural practice. One of the observations we’ve made is that because images, information, and knowledge are so instantaneous now, there is a need for us to understand historical information as a set of active ideas and that we must find new ways to connect the contemporary with notions of the past.

Directing the Biennial seems like an immense creative and logistical challenge. Where do you begin?

We’re architects, not curators, and we came to it with that perspective. We talked to a lot of architects whose work we knew well and shared the theme and asked them to suggest projects. A few projects were special curated pieces that approached problems through a tighter lens. **Vertical City** [an exhibit in which 15 firms designed contemporary 16-foot-tall models of their take on the historic 1922 Chicago Tribune Tower design contest], for example, creates an experience like you’re in a hypostyle hall. It doesn’t operate with the usual representative tools and scales. This is a public exhibition, and we wanted to create spatial experiences for people in environments they could inhabit; that’s what we do as architects.
How do you think your exposure to the art world in Marfa, TX, has influenced your architecture?

The salient thing about Marfa, despite it being pretty rural, is that it has an urban legacy, in part because of the work of the Chinati Foundation and the Judd Foundation. We’ve built many friendships with artists, whom we met while in Marfa, that we collaborate with today. These experiences helped us formulate an idea about the understanding of our discipline. The community at Marfa is very fluid. Artists are working alongside ranchers, writers, and locals. It’s very unpretentious. Everybody has something to say. People aren’t worried about boundaries. That left an impression, I think. We’re architects; we don’t want to be writers, but we appreciate dialogue outside our discipline about shared interests.

You’ve been involved in some other exciting recent projects, including the Menil Drawing Institute in Houston and the renovation of the MCA in Chicago. How do you make these formal spaces more welcoming and accessible to the public?

Part of our approach comes from our experience in Marfa and the importance of imbuing a feeling of generosity and a sense of invitation without boundaries between being outside, on the street, and being in an art space. Looking onto the new street inside the MCA, there is a certain strength of definition in the way the bays of the ceiling vault mark the space and clearly define it architecturally, but it’s also a generous space. The architecture does not overly determine how one can occupy the space.

We’ve used architectural cues—proportions, materiality, and light—to connect you with the space.

The key piece to the transformation was inserting a staircase to the second floor at the end of the street to connect the two floors and extend this public space into the museum and enhance the journey through the building. In conversations with Sarah Whiting, the dean at the Rice University School of Architecture, both in our book and on many other occasions, she has introduced the condition of the middle. We like this term, which for us is not an average condition but more of an active, oscillating space existing between an over- and underdefined architecture, which is the formulating principle behind the new public zones in the MCA.

The Menil is well regarded for having a democratic vision toward visitors and the engagement with art. It’s free, and the surrounding campus is open and porous to the neighborhood. In the Menil Drawing Institute, we’ve created a living room and consolidated amenities and circulation and
mixing spaces. The entry is not hierarchical; it’s not a grand foyer or lobby. It’s well lit by natural light, comfortable, and meetings can be going on as you enter. Those are qualities we feel are important to create access and allow diverse voices to come together. Cultural projects challenge us to think about all the ways the building and the program and content can reflect the needs and interests visitors have.

You recently released a book, *House Is a House Is a House Is a House*, a play on Gertrude Stein’s poem “Sacred Emily.” Can you tell me about the premise of your book?

When we started our book, we knew it was going to be a big effort. We felt it was a little too early in our careers to do a traditional monograph. We hoped it could capture a certain collection of work and a series of ideas as a way to project forward and refine our thinking, rather than just encapsulating the projects from our early career.

We collaborated with artists whose portfolios we know well. They took photographs of our projects and captured aspects of the work that connected to their own vision as artists. We didn’t place any other parameters than which artist would look at what project. Reto Geiser, our collaborator, designed and edited the book as a collection of discrete conversations and portfolios. It was a chance for us to see the work through the artists’ eyes and react to these new perspectives and learn things about our own work as it is reflected back to us.

What advice would you give young architects hoping to make something new as, say, Frank Gehry did with buildings or Gertrude Stein did in a literary sense?

On some level, the Biennial addresses the question of new, the demand for newness as something that is valorized. Part of what we’re questioning is, “What does this question of ‘the new’ mean? Is novelty for its own sake interesting?”

We believe to be truly novel is incredibly difficult, and new ideas only come about after very intense periods of production and experimentation. What we see among practitioners is the recognition of the importance of the context in which they’re working. Not even 1% of buildings are iconic in the fabric of cities today. Understanding the fabric, the way we build cities and neighborhoods is an urgent matter for us. That’s what we wanted to focus on. The theme “Make New History” is something we believe may help us look inward to debate the ideas that connect us versus those that divide us.

Learn how a Bay Area architecture firm is developing community-focused mixed-use projects that aim to give the city of San Jose, CA, a new sense of place.
In just four months, a 36-acre training village on the US Army base at Fort Hood, TX, was transformed into the set of the National Geographic Channel’s The Long Road Home. The eight-episode drama stages the heroic fight for survival when the 1st Cavalry Division from Fort Hood was ambushed on April 4, 2004, in Sadr City, outside Baghdad—a day that came to be known as Black Sunday.

The strikingly lifelike set of The Long Road Home, conceived and created by Emmy-nominated production designer Seth Reed, brought together the photographic records of embedded journalists, the still-simmering memories of veterans and active-duty soldiers, and the newest techniques in digital design and visual effects. As the latest milestone in a deeply imaginative career that includes set-design credits on The CW’s Supergirl, Hulu’s Shut Eye, and National Geographic’s Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey, the project has taken Reed to Jordan and Morocco and drawn him into close bonds of friendship with several of the battle’s surviving troops, who consulted in the design.

Here, the former architect, graduate of the Southern California Institute of Architecture, and son of artist Laurie Morgenstern and midcentury modern architect John Reed talks about the set, the fusion of real and fantastic elements in Hollywood production, and his path from a young draftsman into a world of visual storytelling and mythmaking.
What steps led you into production design after starting your career as an architect?

In 1993, a colleague of mine—an architect-turned-production designer named Catherine Hardwick—invited me to be a draftsman. In those days, there were many more nonunion shows. *Tombstone* was one of the last of the larger ones; I got to experience a full range of art-department duties, from actually building things to drawing and managing. It was a great start, and I fell in love with the idea of participating in a narrative, especially if it was science fiction or historical. For me, it offered a lot more opportunities to design.

It’s been a long, hard journey, though. It’s taken me 20 years to get to the point of being a production designer. I worked my way through almost every position in the art department, putting in my time before finally taking the responsibility of managing a project.

You created the largest standing set in North America, building or redressing more than 113 structures at Fort Hood. How did you pull off such an ambitious project?

To build a set of this magnitude in a short time, we started with simple drawings and designs and gave a lot of latitude to the construction team; we solved problems as they came up on-site and just went as fast as we could. We had a very large team of carpenters, painters, plasterers, set decorators, and many others. The project was well planned; we had about three months before starting construction to work out the strategies and get our drawings

*Sadr City, Iraq, re-created at Fort Hood, TX, for The Long Road Home. Courtesy Jeremy Benning.*
together. When we finally started on-site in January, we just hit it hard and never stopped until shooting started.

**How did you begin the design process?**

As with all projects in film, we started with research. We gathered as many images as we could find—from books; from the Internet and news broadcasts; and, of course, from the soldiers themselves. Many of the soldiers had digital cameras with them and shot stills and even some video. We looked at their photos, and we spent time talking to them; some were actual design participants. We tried as best we could to get descriptions of the hero house or the streets; both Iraqis and American soldiers gave us advice and feedback.

I started with the existing site plan. The key aspect was how to convincingly replicate—in a social, cultural, and visual way—the streets of Sadr City on a site that is actually a US Army base and training facility. This facility was designed as a facsimile for Eastern Europe, with winding streets, gabled roofs, and dormers—quite the opposite of Baghdad. We know Baghdad has wide streets, and many mosques and larger buildings are in a “Mideast modern” style stuck in the ’50s and ’60s. As I sketched, I mapped out places where scenes would play—long, straight streets that vehicles would race through or buildings where soldiers would hide and be trapped.

**Do you use software that’s similar to traditional architecture tools?**

In TV, we tend to use easy-to-use programs where we can make alterations quickly. For example, we can specify the camera and its lenses to make a “shot” from a specific distance and height.

Our drawings tend to be much more “picture-ish,” with notes in plain language that are repeated frequently throughout the drawings. There might be a reference to a certain texture, or we might use a 3D model from several angles, with notes that say, basically, “Build this.” There’s less need for structural engineering and more need for construction coordination and site management.
How did you pick the location?

Economically, it might have been feasible to explore a location like Mexico or Jordan or Morocco. We might get a lot of authentic texture and variety, though nothing would look perfect. On the other hand, the US Army offered us a huge space to work in, where we could shoot all night, blow things up, and have access to soldiers and equipment that we would never find in a foreign country. It was an unprecedented offer: M1 Abrams tanks, Bradleys [tanks], trucks, and soldiers. It’s a question of authenticity and believability versus texture and cultural reality. We chose to go with the Army base, and it became our task to add the texture and architecture.

What was it like to work with combat veterans on this project, many of whom have traumatic memories of the setting you’re trying to re-create?

Many remembered—I witnessed [them] remembering—the events as they walked down streets we re-created, literally matching the locations of their interactions with the same exact buildings, the same reference plots. High-ranking generals, Gold Star families, wives of soldiers killed, wounded veterans from other parts of Iraq—everybody I brought through had the same intense emotional reactions.

Sometimes, soldiers would turn around and leave. Wives would stop and utter, “This is as close as I’ll get to understanding where my husband was.” Soldiers would say, “This is exactly like what I remember, except for the smell.” This was the single most fulfilling experience of any show I’ve ever worked on, to be with soldiers going through this cathartic experience. Two soldiers were hired to be with us every day for research purposes: Sgt. Eric Bourquin, who was with the platoon of trapped soldiers, and Aaron Fowler, a soldier who was part of the rescue convoy. I think it helped them to be here with us every day and work through these events.
Slow and deliberate: Late architect Stanley Tigerman reveals how his friendship with his role model, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, influenced his way of thinking.

SALT-OF-THE-EARTH LESSONS FROM LATE ARCHITECT STANLEY TIGERMAN

BY JEFF LINK

It’s no secret that Stanley Tigerman, who passed away in June 2019, made a few enemies in his career.

Chicago’s pugnacious architecture star and elder statesman, who received a lifetime achievement award from the American Institute of Architects in 2013, is known perhaps as much for his brand of gloves-off honesty as his buildings. In a 2013 interview with Chicago magazine, he summed up the redesign of the city’s Ludwig Mies van der Rohe–designed IBM tower as “shit.”

But there’s a socially minded, nurturing side of Tigerman–designer of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Pacific Garden Mission—that is sometimes lost in the offhand bravado of his public-facing comments. As a member of the Chicago Seven (which protested the predominance of modernism) and a provocateur who has organized seminal forums about architecture’s future, Tigerman is more than just tough talk.

Here, the architect, educator, and curator reveals a generous and expansive mind, praising the uncompromising will of his role model Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and explaining where he finds and nourishes inspiration. He speaks fondly of architecture’s next generation, to whom he offers this advice: Go slow. Don’t copy. Stand firm. Work hard.
You’re deeply tied to Chicago’s architectural traditions and history. Your practice is in River North, you directed the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Architecture, and you even call Chicago the city of modernism. How does that Chicago tradition inspire you?

I was born in Chicago, and being an architect here is like being a Muslim in Mecca—you are right at the source of the flame. Chicago is the most modern city on the planet, acknowledged to be after it burned down in 1871. It’s challenging to go up against all those great names, my predecessors.

But Chicago is in good hands. The youngest generation practicing architecture has so much talent, including theoretical understanding. And it continues to be challenging and exciting to me. I live in one of Mies’s buildings [910 Lake Shore Dr.], and that was done very consciously by me because I wanted to live in response to that excellence, the level to which one needs to aspire.
Did Mies have a strong influence on your work?

No. There’s very little physical bearing on what Mies did and what I did. What there is, is the challenge of his thinking, his way of working. When he was forced to leave Germany in 1938, he had a library of 3,000 books. The SS only allowed him to take 30. The 30 he took are all in the rare books library at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and they are incredible to look at: the writings of Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas. He was a serious reader. Mies didn’t say anything casually. He meant what he said, and he said very little. I knew him very well; he was very impressive. It’s a challenge because he wasn’t loose with his comments—about life, about work and architecture. He took things very slowly; very deliberately; and never in any way, shape, or form off the cuff. That, to me, has always instilled a kind of role model and paradigm. It’s not my nature. I make a lot of mistakes, but I always go back and try to correct them. Like how a building turns a corner: Sometimes I think about it in a very slipshod way; I think about it, and I can’t do this or that, so I redesign it again and again and again. Architecture is like editing is for a writer: honing it, getting it a little better and a little better.

Can you point to a specific project that shows the importance of editing in your work?

No. But let me approach it this way: Once, we were working on a project in Mies’s office in Montreal. I was talking to someone, and Mies was nearby at one of the drafting boards. There was a young man asking him questions about how he wanted a certain thing to look. Mies told him he would think about it. Three weeks later, I was in the same office; Mies was there with the same young man, and he showed him how to do it. He saw it through, and that stayed in my mind: that the right decision took him three weeks. That’s important to my way of thinking.

You run your architectural practice, Tigerman McCurry Architects, with your wife and partner, Margaret McCurry. Is that a challenge?

Yes. It’s difficult. We argue all the time. But Margaret is a very good architect. I listen to her. I didn’t always, but I do now. My influence on Margaret has made her a bit quicker. Her influence on me has slowed me down. Margaret has impeccable taste.
Your 2011 autobiography is called *Designing Bridges to Burn*. Why, as a designer, do you want to burn bridges?

Because an unfortunate part of my M.O. is putting my foot in my mouth more often than necessary. I tend to say things without thinking. That’s why Mies was such a role model to me. He never said boo without thinking it through. The title came from a phrase Margaret used one day after we were having some argument. “When they find you face down in an alley, it will take the police a very long time to find the killer because the list of suspects will be very long,” she said. “You’re at the stage of your life where you’re designing bridges to burn.” I’m not exactly user-friendly, which I feel badly about because that’s not the way I see myself.

In an interview with *Chicago* magazine, you said you prefer to begin “with a blank slate every time, rather than returning to a particular style.” Where do your ideas originate?

They originate in the idiosyncrasies because they are all different—different aspirations, ambitions, and conceits. And where my own head is at, at the particular moment. From the particular to the general, from a site to the work and back again. People say, “What’s your favorite project?” The next one, of course.

What happens when you get architect’s block?

We’re working on a number of things right now. I just sat down on a detail on a garden in Michigan, working out how to turn a corner. I told the client what I was thinking, and it helped with another project. Writer’s block, or architect’s block, is not a big deal. You just go and do something else, and it will come back to you. You need to leave the mind.

Learn how design automation and machine learning are poised to help architects spend less time on menial tasks and more time getting past “architect’s block” to explore new ideas.
As a kid, Veronica Watson loved LEGO and the possibilities of what she could make. Her imagination certainly wasn’t limited when constructing things like Hogwarts Castle and other fanciful Harry Potter–inspired creations with her brothers on their basement floor.

Watson grew up, but she didn’t leave her LEGO bricks—or imagination—behind. After graduating from New York University with a degree in architecture and urban design, she landed what would be a dream job for many: a LEGO Master Model Builder, one of only seven in North America.

Now, Watson takes her LEGO creations to new levels of artistry. From a replica of Picasso’s Guernica painting to sculptures celebrating the US Women’s National Soccer Team at the World Cup, she finds inspiration in both current events and wherever her creativity takes her.

Here, Watson shares what it’s like to be a LEGO Master Model Builder at LEGOLAND Discovery Center Westchester, the inspiration for her work, insider building tips, and the one indispensable tool anyone who loves LEGO should have.
How did you become a LEGO Master Model Builder?

To become a Master Model Builder, you have to enter a competition called Brick Factor, which is an all-day building competition and interview process.

While I was in college, I worked here at LEGOLAND Discovery Center Westchester on the weekend and during the summer. I actually graduated around the same time that the position opened up, and the contest to name the future Master Model Builder for the attraction was scheduled. I thought I’d just enter for fun, and I actually won.

What’s a typical day like for you?

Master Model Builders have an interesting job. I do different models for events or for social media, depending on what’s happening in the news. I’m also responsible for repairing and cleaning the large-scale models that are already on-site and built by other builders out in California. I also work on education, so I’ll help put together workshops and educational programs for kids visiting here.

What kind of sculptures have you been working on lately?

Currently I’m working on a US tennis build because the US Open is happening. I’m building a replica of the Women’s US Open trophy, tennis balls, and a Serena Williams figure. I’ve also made a sculpture for fall Fashion Week in New York.

So how do you approach your LEGO designs?

Often, especially if it’s a smaller model, I’ll work from reference images and just keep building—adding a bit here, removing a bit there.

Now if it’s a complicated model, maybe something that has geometric patterns, I’ll use what’s called “brick paper,” which is like graph paper except it’s set in the scale of LEGO bricks. Then for really complicated models, I will use LEGO Digital Designer, which is a design program.

Watson created these players from the US Women’s National Team: Hope Solo (No. 1 in red, goalkeeper); Abby Wambach (No. 20 in blue, jumping); Sydney Leroux (No. 2 in blue, with arms out); Megan Rapinoe (No. 15 in white, jumping); Alex Morgan (No. 13 in white with pink headband and the ball). Courtesy LEGOLAND Discovery Center Westchester.
You graduated from university with a degree in architecture. How has this influenced your work with LEGO?

There is definitely a big crossover between architecture and LEGO. Ironically, I don’t typically build architecture-themed models. But in school, I spent a lot of time analyzing buildings to determine their time periods or specific, important aspects of movement.

When I’m building with LEGO, it’s a similar thought process. Because I’m trying to represent something, I have to look at the object and really zero in on what are the most essential elements of it. Then I can represent the most important parts because I can’t re-create every aspect of it.

What is your favorite LEGO sculpture that you’ve created?

I think I’m most proud of the Picasso piece Guernica. It all started one day when I had a little extra time, and I realized it was his birthday. So I thought I should do something to honor it.

It was a challenging piece. The painting has so much happening with so many forms. I chose which parts to represent in LEGO and figured out how to layer them. That was definitely a fascinating exercise, and it was pretty challenging.
What are some insider building tips for working with LEGO?

The basic LEGO brick has studs on the top and can connect to another brick stacked underneath it or on top. But it’s also important to incorporate LEGO elements that have studs on the other sides. Those allow you to build out, adding more dimension and complexity to the model. We call this method “sideways building.”

Spheres are also tricky. If I’m going to do something like a sphere, I’ll plan it on brick paper before I begin to build.

Do you have any tools that are “secret weapons” to help build the sculptures?

One thing that’s pretty handy is a brick separator. This tool will come with certain bigger LEGO sets, and it basically just saves your fingernails.

Depending on the scale, how long does it take you to create some of these models?

Usually, it will take me a couple of days. For Guernica, it took me all of Sunday and then the next Monday. But that’s because I was free those two days and I was building as I went along.

It also depends if I designed it ahead of time. For the US Open trophy, I drew it on brick paper ahead of time. It’s about 12 inches tall and scaled to be the actual size of the US Women’s Singles trophy. So it took me a good two to three hours to draw it out, but then building went much faster. It was only about four hours to build as opposed to two days.

Are there any designs you’ve seen recently and thought, “Wow, they really nailed it?”

I was just in Pittsburgh and went to see Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater. I’ve seen it hundreds and hundreds of times in pictures and read many articles on it and the engineering issues.

When you’re actually there, though, it’s so different—you just get it. You understand it better than you ever could otherwise.

What’s the best part of your job?

Well, it’s very satisfying to make something from scratch. Sometimes when I start, I think, “Aw, I can’t possibly really do this.” Then, right before it’s finished, I start thinking instead, “Oh, this is going to be good.”

It’s cool to have so many kids and their parents coming in each day, and it’s great to see them react to the models that I’ve created. And then they share models they’re creating at home, telling me about things that they want to build and asking me how I built my models. That really is the most rewarding aspect to me.
TAKEAWAYS

The architects profiled here have diverse skill sets, perspectives, and career paths. Yet they provide inspiration in their progressive views about bucking trends, challenging traditional thinking, rethinking their relationship with technology, and establishing new identities in an ever-expanding industry.

A few takeaways:

**Architecture is no longer a singular career.**

Cross-functional workflows and advancements in BIM, artificial intelligence, and automated design have opened the doors to new, specialized careers that reach beyond the traditional architect role.

**Technology accelerates creative output.**

Machine learning, artificial intelligence, and design automation are increasingly freeing architects from mundane tasks, allowing them to streamline their workflows and spend more time exploring creative ideas.

**Applying traditional thought processes to new ideas breaks new ground.**

From LEGO model design to movie set design, there’s endless opportunity in transferring traditional architecture skills to new industries.

**Architects are in a position to lead industry change.**

Architects’ skills and experience coordinating and engaging experts across disciplines to solve complex problems puts them in a unique position to advance real change.
Browse Redshift’s “Inside My Design Mind” series to gain insights from architects and designers at the top of their fields.

CHRIS SHARPLES
Founding partner, SHoP Architects

JOHN HOKE
VP of global design, Nike
Get smart on the future of making.