

it's a wonderful life

After architecture, some professionals choose another path

BY JOHN ALTDORFER

As the star of some of the world's most beloved classic films, Jimmy Stewart enjoyed a big-screen career that spanned six decades. Yet, when he left his hometown of Indiana, PA, Stewart enrolled at Princeton University to study architecture. According to an online biography on the Jimmy Stewart Museum web site, the future actor proved good enough at his studies to earn a post-graduate scholarship to continue his pursuit in the field. But when a former college classmate invited Stewart to join a Cape Cod summer theater group, he left architecture behind to build an enduring and legendary Hollywood career.



Locally, more than a few architects have discovered their life's calling led them along a different path than their original course of study. For some, economic factors were the signpost that pointed them in an unforeseen direction. In other cases, a lifelong passion pulled them toward a new profession. Discover why a quartet of area architects put down their drawing pencils to design unique careers that rest on a solid foundation of architecture.

TEARING DOWN WALLS

Eve Picker doesn't let boundaries stand in her way. As the owner of no wall productions inc. and an innovative developer of neglected and underused properties, she's created a series of unique living spaces in Downtown and around the city – despite a host of bankers who turned down her requests for loans. From her first job as an architect in her Australian homeland to her current role as a “thought leader” in her adopted home city of Pittsburgh, Picker continues to expand her frontiers. Yet, no matter how far she seems to move from her architectural foundation, Picker says there is a common building block.

“In my mind, it's all tied together,” she says. “I was always fascinated by cities. My degree in architecture taught me how to design buildings in isolation. But I was really interested in understanding how they worked in a three-dimensional way. I enrolled at Columbia University to learn about urban design, which probably shaped the way I think about development now.”

In Pittsburgh, her first professional stop was Urban Design Associates, a stint she calls “a rite of passage” for many local architects. Picking up some experience there, she also realized that her personal and career aspirations might come to a standstill if she didn't find new creative outlets.



“I found myself unhappy because architecture then wasn't – and probably isn't now – kind to women. I thought I would spend too much time doing a lot of drudgery for years before I was allowed to do anything interesting. I wanted more control. So I made the very difficult decision to leave architecture without really knowing what on earth I was going to do next.”

Coincidentally, as she was moving out of the profession, Picker was moving into the Friendship neighborhood in the city's East End. At the time, Friendship, as she describes it, was “on the verge of going either way.” Banding together with a group of neighbors interested in revitalizing the community, Picker found her new love.

“We started the Friendship Development Association, and I discovered development,” she says. “I fell in love with the process because I could make something happen from the beginning to end. Even if it was a small project, it was mine.”

As she was buying and renovating homes in the neighborhood, Picker worked for a time as an urban designer in the city's planning department – a role she calls part of her “wandering education.” There she gained an understanding of how the city worked, including the nuts and bolts of obtaining funds for development projects. That knowledge led to her next career step.

“After I left the department I was doing some consulting work when I discovered a building on First Avenue. It was eight stories tall. It had a hole in the roof. And when it rained, it went all the way through to the basement. But I couldn't begin the project right way because it took me a couple years to arrange the financing.”

One reason for the problems in putting finances in place was that Picker encountered resistance from the area's male-dominated banking establishment.

“It took a couple of women bankers to get me started,” she says. “That's the only reason I'm in business today.”



930 Penn Avenue, photo by no wall productions, inc.



After more than a decade of success of reinvigorating Downtown Pittsburgh with unique loft projects, Picker took yet another new career step as publisher of an online site that promotes the virtues of Pittsburgh.

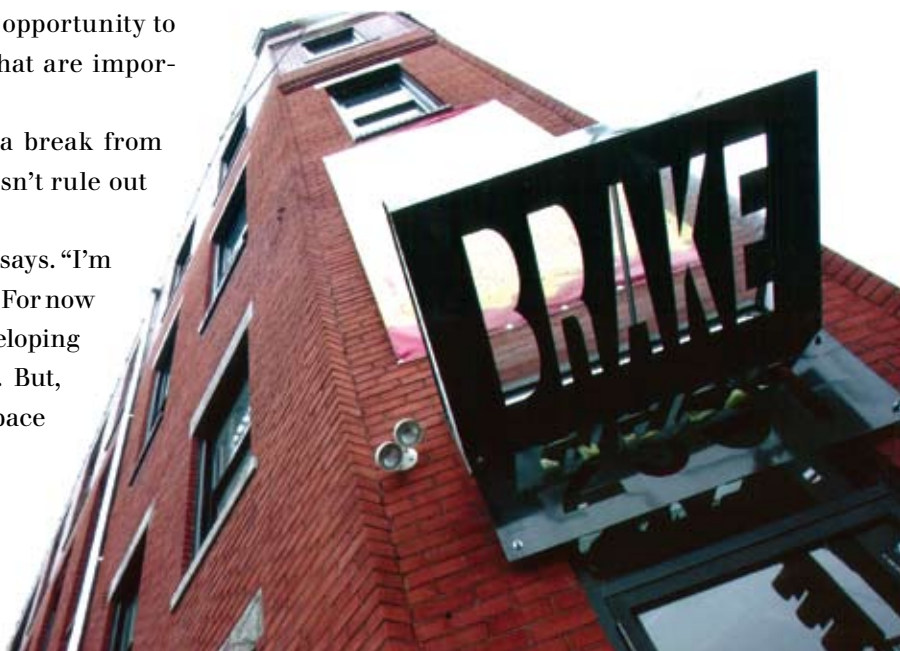
“I started Pop City because I was frustrated by the inability of the city to talk about itself in a positive manner,” she says. “Last year, I started CityLive!, which give people the opportunity to congregate and discuss issues that are important to the city.”

While she admits to taking a break from development for now, Picker doesn’t rule out a return.

“Anything could happen,” she says. “I’m having a real blast with CityLive!. For now it feels more relevant than developing another loft. I love development. But, for now, I’m just making some space to see what will happen next.”

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Opposite: Eve Picker, photo by John Altdorfer
Above: Bruno Building interior, photo by David Aschkenas
Below: Brake House Building, photo by no wall productions, inc.



A COMMON THREAD

Jessica O'Brien likes to say that she "retired" from architecture when she started having babies. And she'll quickly add with a laugh that her husband prefers to call the hiatus from the drawing board an extended sabbatical. However you look at it, O'Brien's life is abuzz with a new kind of activity that mixes architecture, motherhood, and a lifetime pursuit.

Along with her mother and two sisters, O'Brien operates the Beehive NeedleArts store in Mt. Lebanon. Open since October 2007, the business is a mecca for local needlepoint enthusiasts in search of creative and unique designs – a niche market that O'Brien stitched up herself.

"Needlepoint's always been a passion in my life," she says. "But for years I was always looking for something different to work on. I would get an idea but could never find a canvas that matched what I saw in my mind. So I started designing my own patterns."

Today, O'Brien creates all the store's custom work, an activity that puts her architectural talent to good use. Recently, she designed



Jessica O'Brien, photo by John Altdorfer



a purse based on the home of a client's mother. She also creates belts, Christmas stockings and other handmade items. Not surprisingly, she can follow this thread back to her days at Penn State University, where she earned a degree in architecture.

"Recently, I was talking to a roommate, who now teaches architecture there," says O'Brien. "She pointed out that needlepoint is a fiber art and how I always used fiber arts in my architecture projects in school. So it's been a part of what I do for a long time."

Despite the lifelong connection to the art, O'Brien claims that the transition to needlepoint from architecture wasn't defined by any one particular moment.

"I loved architecture school," says O'Brien, who also studied at McGill University in Montreal. "I worked at Burt Hill in Pittsburgh for five or six years and enjoyed every moment. But when my first son was born I realized that I wanted to spend more time with my children while they were young. Opening the store was a way to make the different parts of my life work together."

With her two-year-old daughter often napping in the store's backroom, O'Brien helps customers select patterns that belie needlepoint's reputation as an antiquated pastime.

"Needlepoint really is a high-end art," she says. "There are so many more fabrics, colors, and designs to work with. This is a fashion forward activity. It's not just for your granny in her rocking chair."

BETTER COMMUNITIES THROUGH DESIGN

Architects have roles to play beyond their everyday jobs. That's the message that Anne-Marie Lubenau, AIA wants to deliver. As president and CEO of the Community Design Center of Pittsburgh (CDCP), she believes that architects can help educate the public on the role design plays in creating better communities.

"I'm going to get up on my soapbox for a moment," she says. "I think it's critical that as architects we get involved in helping people and communities become better consumers of architectural resources and engaging them in the process."

During 10 years of traditional practice with Landmark Associates and Perkins Eastman, Lubenau was involved with a combination of residential planning and design, building rehabs, and historic renovations, not to mention her fair share of work with community-based, non-profit organizations and social services. In addition, she taught classes at the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation and developed and taught classes aimed at getting school children interested in architecture.

"I've always had a strong interest in connecting people with architecture and its value in the community," says Lubenau, a CMU grad. "Through my work, teaching, and consulting, I realized that I was a little more interested in doing something broader and working with people."

As a way to expand her reach beyond the region's architectural circles, Lubenau volunteered to sit on the CDCP board of directors. A few years later, she joined the organization full-time as its associate director. Three years later, she stepped into the top position. After 10 years, she knows the move was the right one.

"It was a big decision," she says. "But I'm glad I made it. I didn't want to reach a point 20 years later and say, 'What if?'"

Leaving the profession didn't mean that she abandoned the skills she developed as an architect. As the CDCP's president, Lubenau says her



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Above: Anne-Marie Lubenau, AIA, photo by John Altdorfer
Right: CDCP's Pedal Pittsburgh



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Above: Jeff Anderson, photo by John Altdorfer

background is integral in helping her execute the organization's mission.

"My experience of being on the other side of the table helps me here because a lot of the work we do here is as a service translator," she says. "We help people in the community understand what architects do and how to negotiate the process of planning and designing."

As head of the CDCP, Lubenau appreciates the opportunity to influence a broader number of projects in the community, but she admits that there are smaller joys of her former life she misses.

"I love the diversity of what I do now," she says. "But I do miss the design and drawing part of architecture. But, by the time I left I really wasn't doing much of that. I'm so involved in more projects now."

But let's get back to that soapbox where we started.

"Sometimes, I don't think that the opportunities to work within the community are promoted as much as they could be in architecture schools," says Lubenau. "I know there are architects who have the skills and desire to help people in the community get involved in the conversation about the role of design. It's important that we do that."

BRIDGING THE GAP

No one needs to tell Jeff Anderson that being an architect is a hard job. After graduating from the University of Cincinnati, he started working almost from the day he left college. Though he enjoyed the design side of his job, Anderson discovered a different satisfaction in supervising the construction of buildings – and learned that he could provide a vital link to help designers and contractors work together to better satisfy the client.

"Working in the field really whetted my appetite for what I do now," says Anderson, vice president of construction for Mistick Construction. "It was seeing buildings materialize out of the ground that made me happy. I didn't get that satisfaction from drawing designs. So around

1983, I switched my architect hat for a construction hat.”

Fortunately, a shift in the way Mistick was doing business made the transition a smooth one for Anderson, who started at the company as an in-house architect. In the role he’s occupied for the past 25 years, Anderson relishes being the conduit that allows designers and builders exchange ideas.

“I really enjoy helping people on both sides organize and optimize what they do,” he says. “Especially since every new job comes with a new set of challenges in the form of satisfying the customer’s requirements, meeting code restrictions, working within budgets, and other issues. That makes coming to work each day worthwhile.”

When asked about his “unusual” career path, Anderson claims his move wasn’t that much out of the ordinary. He points to another Mistick architect who works as a project manager and explains that architects of the past also were in the construction business. Still, he finds that his knowledge of both sides of the process provides him with not-so typical insight.

“Architects will tell you they’ve never seen a perfect building,” he says. “And builders will tell you that they’ve never seen a perfect drawing.



But having worked on both sides, I know how to get everyone involved with a project focused on the same goal – pleasing the client. When that happens, you often get second and third jobs from the customer.”

Along with satisfying the customer, Anderson says that a good working relationship can help a builder advise a designer on a project’s constructability and durability, how systems will age and other pertinent issues.

“It’s a constant intellectual challenge,” he says. “An architect has to know so much about a lot of things. That’s a big responsibility. My job is to help designers be aware of how even a small change can make a big difference in a project. One stone can cause a lot of ripples in a pond.” **C**

John Altdorfer is a writer/photographer who lives in Pittsburgh.



Top: Sunrise of Upper St. Clair, Above: Fairfield Apartments, East Liberty.