

# Architects Apart from Architecture

Eight who pursue alternative careers. By Elena Marcheso Moreno

Having attended a college that has a reputation for graduating technically competent professionals, it was not unusual for me to observe fellow students putting in long and arduous hours studying a number of particularly difficult subjects. But those time commitments seemed to pale in the light that shone night after night from the top of the Green Building, where the architecture department housed its design studios. What was it about creativity that demanded such hell-bent activity?

After subjecting themselves to this rigorous training, why do some architects—who love buildings, who are creative, and who are technically competent—decide to leave the traditional practice of the profession?

The answers are somewhat surprising. Many former architects still work in allied fields in the building industry, others choose creative activities, and still others find they have an affinity for technology. They are practicing in careers that by most accounts are outside the commonly accepted, narrow definition of architecture. But it seems that the great majority of these professionals who are pursuing alternative careers feel that their work is not really so far removed from architecture.

In the past, the only recognized career for a graduate of an architecture school was in private architectural practice and more particularly in building design. *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, published by AIA, describes the situation matter-of-factly: "[As the student progressed] through undergraduate school, architectural design was considered the only path to follow. Many students had talents that were elsewhere, although still within the realm of architecture . . . . But these were not encouraged. If one could not design, one did not have a place in architecture. Even though a student may have had an exceptional skill such as graphics, mathematical analysis, conceptual planning, building construction, etc., it didn't make any difference. As a result, many promising professionals were discouraged."

Now, as we approach the end of the 1980s, the situation is changing somewhat. Nondesign skills such as management are valued in offices. And architectural training is paving the way for a number of employment opportunities apart from practice. We asked eight individuals trained as architects but not in private practice to discuss their career paths. All but one have been or are now licensed.

"I always thought I would get into management," says Donald Walters, AIA, head of a facilities planning, design, and management group for Southwestern Bell. "Design was never my strong suit, and I realized it." In addition to managing the corporate headquarters facilities in downtown St. Louis, Walters and his department oversee the design and construction of new corporate headquarters buildings throughout the Southwestern Bell territory. They provide the liaison between consulting architects and the client. Along with in-house space planning, Walters' staff architects coordinate the design work of consulting architects, acting as the client's representative. The important point is that Walters and his clients work for the same company and their objectives must be the same—efficient use of corporate resources.

Working for a large corporation can be appealing for a number of reasons, says Walters. Right away, the corporate architect has the opportunity to work with clients, participate in contract negotiations, oversee preparation of construction documents, and manage project construction. In private practice, an architect could be well on his or her way to becoming a principal before he or she is likely to have that kind of experience.

As a project manager with one of the largest construction management firms in the country, Bill Fisher, AIA, may not be a designer, but he is intimately involved with buildings. A member of the Washington, D.C., office of Lehrer McGovern Bovis, Fisher, like Walters, represents the owner, but under contract rather than on staff. His responsibilities are similar to Walters'.

"I am in a unique position," says Fisher. "As the owner's representative I have carte blanche on design decisions and to a very large degree on monetary decisions." Technically speaking, the contract is between the architect and the owner, but, for example, on the \$5 million renovation of the Farragut Park Building in Washington, D.C., the owner has turned over many design and construction decisions to Fisher.

The reasons for Fisher's career switch are quite simple. "I wanted more hands-on experience and an involvement in seeing a design through its actual construction," he says. His new job has been an eye-opener. As an architect, he has always been interested in the design intent and how a building is going to look. Now, however, he is confronted with contractors who tell him that some favorite detail is not going to work. Fisher said his first inkling that "God was in the details" came while he was renovating a house as a student. "Architects should be required to work on a job site, if only for a short while, just to see how things are built and to understand that where they draw a line really matters," he says.

Work with government or a public organization can often provide architects with opportunities in allied careers at the municipal, state, or federal level. According to AIA, more than 2,000 of its members work in government. James Binkley, AIA, manager of building technology for the U.S. Postal Service, is able to participate in developing public policy planning for design and construction and can see the results of his contributions in buildings around the country. His main role, however, is to seek out innovation in the design and construction of postal facilities with the ultimate goal of producing more efficient and profitable facilities. Although he has worked for private architecture firms in the past, Binkley is not a designer. Instead he works to integrate cost-effective technology and research into Postal Service buildings, such as through the Postal Service's aggressive program to make all of its structures energy-efficient. Most government architects work closely with private industry, as Binkley and his staff recently did to develop daylighting design guidelines with post-office-specific nomographs and two experimental postal "stores of the future."

Binkley works often with new building technologies, but with

great care and with more support than an architect in private practice would have. In the public sector, there is the opportunity to look at the costs and benefits of a new approach to design or construction across a very large base of buildings and to implement new techniques ahead of the marketplace. Binkley thinks an architect in private practice working on one building at a time wouldn't have the time or the resources to do that.

A number of architects find themselves in careers where they are providing services to designers as consultants or suppliers. Gregg LaPort, who is now the director of marketing for Versacad, practiced architecture for only a short period of time. He is responsible for CADD product planning, packaging, and promotion. He searches to find the right software for architectural designers and targets it and its future enhancements to that market. "My job has just as much creativity as design—it is just channeled in a different direction," says LaPort.

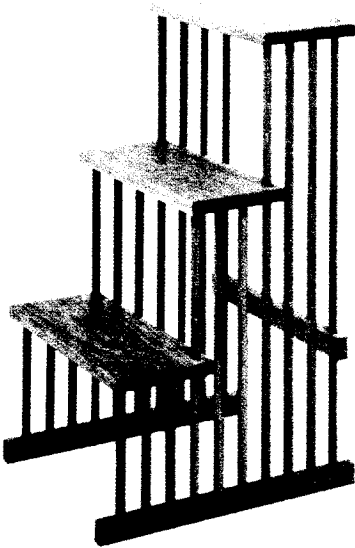
"I would not consider myself a prime example of ever being totally in love with architecture," he says. Before marketing CADD software, LaPort was representing artists and sculptors to architects in an effort to place their works in building projects.

"The important issues of design did not appeal to me as much

as the function," says Carl Rosenberg, AIA, an acoustical consultant with BBN Laboratories in Cambridge, Mass. "I've always had a great interest in music and the technical aspects of how sounds are made." It was that interest that led him to study acoustics as a graduate student at MIT. Despite the fact that he does not design entire buildings, design is very much a part of his work. "My contributions are not just a methodical process," he says. Ninety percent of his clients are architects, and Rosenberg helps them to develop form, select materials, and detail suitable construction to block or transmit sound.

Because he has been photographing buildings for more than 20 years, Richard Payne says that by now he is sure he is a photographer, but he still thinks of himself as an architect. "The great thing about photography," says Payne, "is that it is never boring. I enjoy it all." He also travels a lot and says this allows him to experience many more buildings than he would if he were designing them.

Photography was a hobby Payne began to pursue while in the service in Europe. He worked for CRS in Dallas as a project architect for a few years and then started photographing all of the firm's buildings. From there the hobby evolved into a full-



*Attraction to art pulls a number of architects away from the building industry. Above, a library ladder by furniture designer Charles Webb is a piece that hints at his architectural training. Right, the library in the film 'L'Inhumaine' is a classic example of the sets that Donald Albrecht found introduced the public to modern architecture. Facing page, lyrical abstraction painted by artist/architect James Hilleary.*



Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art

time career and he went out on his own.

Architectural photography is not an art, says Payne, and it should not be interpretive. The photographer's job is to find the beautiful and sculptural aspects of a building and to portray those, not to interfere with the finished product. "Thank goodness," says Payne, "or what was presented would be limited by the photographer's own natural ability." To be successful, he believes, an architectural photographer cannot have a style—trying to make a high-rise building and a strip shopping center conform to one style does not work.

Payne finds that most architects are interested in photography, and for some it can be a way to live in architecture. He considers himself to be involved in architecture 100 percent of the time.

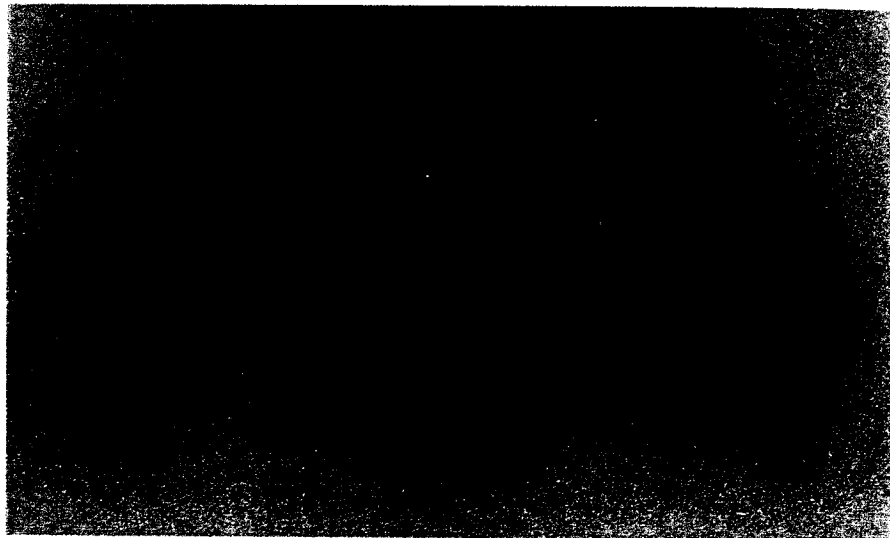
After working for four years for an architecture firm, Charles Webb decided to open his own furniture design business. Furniture design is less complicated than building design, says Webb, but as in architecture the approach is one of problem solving. Studying architecture, though, was not time lost. Webb says his training was the greatest single factor that has influenced his designs—the approach, the esthetics, and the structure.

Donald Albrecht is the curator of production design at the American Museum of the Moving Image in New York City, which opened its doors for the first time last May. At the museum, he studies the esthetic and social aspects of architecture to understand how they are absorbed by the population in terms of its material culture.

The turning point came for Albrecht when he met the late Ludwig Glaeser, who at the time was curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art. It was due to Glaeser that Albrecht began to study modern architecture as compared with the images presented on film.

Albrecht also is author of the book *Designing Dreams*, in which he looks at how set designers used "the architectural language of modernism to extend and enrich movie decor." He writes, "As well as the great stars of the 1920s and the 1930s, filmgoers recall most vividly and fondly these movies' beautiful decor—astonishing nightclubs that provided the setting for Astaire and Rogers numbers, luxurious penthouses where languid vamps lay in wait for their suitors, splendid skyscrapers that epitomized the glamour of urban life. These extraordinary sets were in fact not only immediately striking examples of design but also the earliest introduction most people had to radically new styles of modern architecture. . . . the pioneering work of architects like Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier became accessible to the public through the perfectly suited medium of the movies."

James Hilleary, AIA, paints lyrical abstractions but still devotes some time to practicing architecture. An artist of the "Washington color school," he says being an architect has greatly influenced his painting. Painting provides him a freedom of execution that is not possible in architecture, he says, although critics have said that the structure of his training shines through. But art, like architecture, is a difficult field to become established in and to find work in at an age when you have the greatest enthusiasm and energy for it, Hilleary contends.



Personal satisfaction seems to run high in alternative careers, but how is the pay? Remuneration has been a driving force behind some architects' decisions to pursue alternative careers. Corporate architects right out of school start at salaries of \$28,000 or more, with additional benefits equal to another third of that salary, according to Walters. That is often hard to turn down, he says, and the pay increases that go along with increased managerial responsibilities keep the corporate architect's salary substantially above those in private practice. Construction management also tends to be more lucrative than traditional architecture and, according to Fisher, midlevel project managers make at least as much as the principals of most design firms. Government is yet another field where architects can expect to earn more than in private practice.

Payne makes a good living, he says, but architectural photographers are never rich. He does what he does because he loves it. At a current show of Hilleary's art in Washington's Susan Conway Carroll's Gallery, paintings are selling for \$4,000 and up, but even so, says Hilleary, only the most successful artists make money.

Should the young architect considering pursuit of an alternative career also pursue registration? Most of these practitioners feel it is probably a good idea to get a license. Walters will not hire a professional unless the individual has a license or is planning to obtain one. "It gives me more credibility," says Fisher, but it is important to understand when to wear your architect hat and when to take it off. Being an architect gives Payne an advantage when he photographs a building, but architectural training without a license would probably be sufficient for him.

Do these alternative practitioners miss architectural design? With the exception of Fisher, none of these architects working in allied professions said he did; they all felt they were as close as they needed to be to the process for their own personal satisfaction.

If the truth be known, close to half of the graduates of architecture schools choose other avenues. Information is scarce, but the statistics that are available come from the Association of Student Chapters/AIA and indicate that more than 40 percent of these graduates are in occupations only related to architecture and another 7 percent have moved completely outside the field. □

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