Professional Profile Interview
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What do you think about attending UC Berkeley?

It was a natural fit for me, so I think it was a good choice.

Is there anything about UC Berkeley that stood out, other than your brother attending there?

Growing up in the neighborhood I did, not being exposed to a lot of things outside the neighborhood. A lot of people growing up in those types of communities don't have exposure so I did not have a lot of expectations. I honestly knew about UC Berkeley as being a very good institution recognized worldwide, so that was very clear in my mind. Aside from that, I really didn't know, it was something that I was learning going through the process as a freshman and going through the undergrad program, I was a sponge at that time - I was just absorbing all the things I could. It was an abstract thought that our parents assumed we should go to college and we should seek higher education.

And so at that time, at 17 yrs old, it was still an abstraction. It was still intangible at that time to make these links with the college, what it means to be in an institution like that. This was all happening during my first 6 months at UC Berkeley.

How do you think CASA / UC Berkeley has aided to your career or prepared you for the architecture world?

I think it's really been instrumental because it provided a peer group that provided support during those early months, that first couple of years. Being unfamiliar with the whole institution of higher education, being unfamiliar with the whole process and how you go about learning at an institution like that. It's nice to have a peer group that you can compare notes with - you can discuss different courses, a lot of the casa members have already gone through the process, they've already gone through the undergrad process, some were already graduate students, some were seniors and juniors, they were very instrumental in guiding me as to what courses to take and what courses not to take. So that was very helpful to me.

What surprised you about Architecture that UC Berkeley did not prepare you for or did not address?

UC Berkeley was a school of architecture that was very upfront: they said we're here to teach you design. They did ignore the technical part but they said that once you're out in the profession you're going to pick that up if you go through the profession and you're successful at it, but right now we're going to concentrate on the design aspect. By default, it didn't really prepare me for the technical portions of it. I did have one instructor and mentor Eduardo Martinez who was a lecturer at the school, and he suggested that I should go look for a small firm and I did. The 1ˢᵗ job I took was with a small five person firm. The reason he suggested that is because with small firms, you'd be exposed to the design portions of architecture and be exposed to the technical stuff, construction administration, and also working with consultants. He was right. I was exposed to that in a very quick order and so I think I got a lot of experience because of that. The school was very good at teaching me to be analytical, teaching me to be a problem solver, teaching me to do research to collect the facts, and teaching me to be innovative and thinking out of the box to come up with solutions. But it didn't really give me a lot of experience in terms of the nuts and bolts of how a building goes together, or the nuts and bolts of how a business is run, or about how to put technical drawings together. Those are things I had to learn out in the field, and I was a pretty quick learner so I picked up a lot of that in the first couple of years I was working with architectural firms. The other item that I think is not immediately known to graduates in the field of architecture is that the field is specialized. Residential architects don't specifically do institutional work, and institutional architects don't usually do residential work. Even within these individual specialized firms, architects that do the technical drawings don't usually do the design work; architects that do the design on these projects don't typically do the technical drawings. Ending on the choices you make and what quarter of the specialized field we get into, you could end up in an area you might not have anticipated. I think that those are some of the things that I learned probably in the first 5 or 6 years of the profession.

I started practicing architecture and learning certain things. I started out wanting to do the technical part because we had a strong design background from UC Berkeley, so I wanted to build up my technical experience. So I spent the first 5 years learning production drawings, working with consultants, working with construction administration and doing the research you would need to put technical drawings together that can be built. So what I found out through that process, was that I was pigeonholed in production drawings, so if you're good at what you do, most businesses will keep you doing what you're doing because you're productive and you're making money for that company, so there was no incentive by the management to put me into the design department, for example, which was really my strength. So it took a while to finally get back to the design and be in a position where I could start designing projects and working directly with clients and developing programs for projects. So I think that's one of the things that grads of architecture, especially ones that have my background didn't really know and may not be aware of when they get into the profession.

Have there been any obstacles you've needed to overcome despite the specialized aspect of architecture itself?

The biggest obstacle is always yourself, you have to believe in yourself, you have to believe you can do certain things - that you can perform certain ways in order to be successful. So the first obstacle and largest one is overcoming barriers that we put up for ourselves, and that's true of any profession or any endeavor. Aside from that, I think it's just the lack of experience, I didn't have that professional background in my family, but I can go back to relatives and be able to compare notes, and they could guide me in a certain direction. So everything I learned about the business of architecture - and even just going out on your own, and developing your own whatever connection, I developed as a professional. Aside from the barriers we all put up, that would be the second barrier, just being familiar with the profession, how it operates, and how to be very good at it, not only in the design aspect but be successful as a business person, and looking at the things that make a business successful, i.e., acquiring that knowledge over a bit of time.

What advice would you give design grads today versus the challenges you faced when you graduated?

I think it's really important for graduates today to really envision what they want to be. If you can have a vision of what you want, I think you can work toward it. I decided early on to take on a very traditional architectural role in my career, so I wanted to be an architect. The reality is that most of the students graduating with an architectural degree are NOT going to be architects in the traditional sense. A lot of them will end up in different majors or go on to grad school in different majors.   A lot of them will go on to planning, government work, and a series of related fields that a lot of architects go in. So I can only speak to those students who are really interested in architecture, so if you're interested in architecture, and some of us have very strong technical backgrounds since that's what we enjoy, then that whole field is completely different from the design background. So if design is really something you're interested in, I think you need to build up a portfolio of strengths for those areas of interests, so you target those areas and that's what you go for. I will say that the first 2 or 3 jobs of architecture will set your career. It just so happens that the first job I had was with a residential architectural firm. I was very successful there, I quickly became a project manager within a year in that firm, I was recruited by other residential firms. As a young person, you tend to work in the architecture field for about a year or two in any one firm, so early on in the career it was unusual for a young person to move up in a firm, and that's really how you get promotions. It's very difficult to get promotions in a firm, unless it's a very large firm, because again, if you're good at what you do, they tend to keep you there. So I moved around from firm to firm, I was recruited and I got a lot of opportunities doing that, and that's how I moved and created my own promotions and experiences, but I was recruited from residential firms, so I became very good at residential architecture. So I set my whole career in residential work.

Now, its not totally by accident because you can talk to CASA members about what our collective experiences were at UC Berkeley. We were interested in community design, design theories and strategies that empowered and restored our communities, and rebuilt and revitalized our communities. It was consistent with my desire of doing community architecture. You'll find this when you look at revitalization of inner city communities in downtown areas, those areas don't take off until the housing has been restored. Housing becomes a catalyst for redevelopment. So it just happened that my first experience was really paired up well with my academic studies and also my professional aspirations to give back to the community.

Considering that you've been in the field for such a long time - how has your perspective on the field of architecture changed throughout your career?

It's changed quite a bit. It has become more specialized. The first job I had we used to do a lot of things and not just architecture; we did our own landscaping and structural engineering. As architects, we were calculating our own structures. Soon After that, we were using consultants for that, we're using structural engineers, and mechanical engineers. The structures we were working on became more complicated, so we had to outsource to professional engineers. The work that we were doing as an office was strictly architectural. Energy requirements started becoming important in the field so we started having energy consultants that helped us with energy compliance and using sustainable features in our buildings.