

By Design

By Yolanda Cole



JOANNE S. LAWTON

Give D.C. architects chance to shine

THE STARS HAVE ARRIVED IN THE nation's capital. I'm not talking about the Hollywood kind, but the architectural kind — and not just I.M. Pei or Cesar Pelli, the usual suspects who have graced our city over the years. New exotics, such as Sir Norman Foster, are finding their way onto the D.C. scene. What's happening, and more importantly, why? Is this a good thing for the city — or a pain in the neck for local design firms who aspire to do great design right here?

It's a little of both. I've been on both sides of this coin. For a decade I was a designer for one of the "star" firms, Kohn Pedersen Fox, and now I'm a partner in a large local D.C. firm, Hickok Cole Architects. At KPF, we designed everything from the 40-story building shell down to the toilet-stall hardware. This was design with a big "D." We were given (or we took) the freedom to design what we wanted without much scrutiny from our clients or much concern for their budget — or ours. As a local firm, we are held to a different standard. We are put through the wringer on what the "market" can bear — both in design innovation and budget — and we have to make sure we make a profit along the way.

Years ago, just a few stars were tagged to design buildings for prominent clients on prominent grounds: Kohn Pedersen Fox's World Bank and Pei Cobb Freed's Ronald Reagan Building are notable and impressive examples. Few local firms were perceived to

be large or prominent enough to tackle projects of such scale.

But in the past few years there has been an explosion of buildings designed by star architects. Some have stretched the architectural imaginations of their developers and tenants. Kevin Roche's 1101 New York Ave. NW sports a glistening all-glass curtain-wall with a column-free perimeter on the edge of the Central Business District. Others are nice, but not nice enough to justify the brain damage or the cost premium. Pei Cobb Freed's 1700 K St. NW, while certainly handsome, could have been designed by the home team. So how did this come to be?

Part of the answer lies in our real estate success over the past few years while other cities suffered. Demand has been high. Developers vying for attention have sought ways to get sensitive projects approved, and brokers trying to beat the competition have sought to attract the best tenants quickly.

The good news is that great design is good for everyone. It raises the bar of what is possible — in the market, in the boardroom and on the drawing boards. We are now seeing modern design, quality materials and innovative architecture in ultraconservative D.C.

And the bad news? Most of it is being done by architects who don't live or practice in our own city. Not because we locals don't have the gumption, the resources or the talent, but because we're rarely given a serious

opportunity. All we need is a little more time and money to spend on design, a little more money to spend on construction and a lot more freedom to explore. We'll create something remarkable, because it will mean more to us in our hometown. For those who build, this takes corporate courage and personal trust in your relationships with those of us who design. There is a lot of talent in many of our local D.C. firms — and we can't wait to be given the chance to design with that big "D."

Sean Cahill, senior development manager with Louis Dreyfus, once said to me, "We love Kevin Roche [of Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo] because he gives us great service — the team is always there when we need them, on call." It's pretty simple: They're always on call because they're paid enough to do it. Star architects cost a bundle in fees — as much as two or three times what you would pay a local. What they design costs more, too. The difference is that the stars have enough clout to design what they want to and then convince others to pay for it.

Earlier this year, Trip Howell, regional managing director with Jones Lange LaSalle, told me he loves the stars. "It makes it easy for me to sell — to say that the building has been designed by a Pritzker Prize-winning architect." I couldn't help but ask if the starry-eyed tenants had ever heard of the architect or the prize. The answer was no, but it didn't really matter. I guess it's like wearing a pair of Seven jeans that look an awful lot like Levi's but make you feel special because you spent a fortune for them.

Andrew Brophy, vice president at Brophy Properties, offers an opposing view: "If I had a once-in-a-lifetime, high-profile site on Pennsylvania Avenue, then yes, I would look at the stars, but I would also interview some locals. But for an office building — even on K Street — no way, it's not worth the trouble or the money." What a guy!

I'm not suggesting that we chase the stars out of town — on the contrary. Their work has done wonders for our city and has put us on the architectural map. The thought that the Corcoran would even consider such a way-out proposal as Frank Gehry's for its addition is an amazing accomplishment for the D.C. mindset (though the project has been shelved, for now). But is this really necessary — or desirable — for every other project on the block? I don't think so.

Here's the challenge: Give us locals a shot at doing great design in our own backyard. We'll do it for less fee and less cost than the big guys and we'll be happier than any out-of-town star — and so will you.

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