

# Architecture is more than form:

Lessons I learned in 40+  
years as an architect

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*Rachlin Partners Office*

## INTRODUCTION

# A few lessons from a life as an Architect

I have had a fulfilling career as an Architect, eventually establishing my own firm. I found at a certain point that architecture became more of a business than an artistic pursuit. However, I can now participate on larger projects as a Architect who understands both the design and business sides of the process, which is a good thing. I can also take on the occasional residential project that allows me to tap into my design / creative experience, which is uniquely satisfying.

I have worked on a lot of large, long-term projects, and I put this book together to share some of the lessons I have learned, which may be relatable to people in many fields. I hope you enjoy the read.



## Design is a team sport

Architecture is a team effort. When you design and build major public structures, you are always part of a team. If you're lucky, your design vision will sell the project and inspire others.

However, the team will include a number of talented architects and designers, specialty engineers and consultants, and you must meet the requirements of the public governing agencies and listen to multiple stakeholders.



## Decades of hard work

When I was fresh out of architecture school at Arizona State University, I wanted to use good design to help people. I think a lot of young architects do. But the reality of building a career can humble even a strong individual. Early in my career, I started with room additions, then worked my way up to single family homes, including high-end homes in places like Malibu.

But even with the high points, it was a difficult way to earn a living. I eventually moved on to governmental projects, working with the City of Los Angeles Housing Authority, and HUD (US Department of Housing and Urban Development). These projects were larger and appealed to me because they were rewarding and gave a large number of people a sense of dignity.



Beverlywood Residence



Large public works projects are typically produced by larger organizations, usually with public funding. And that's where stability can be found, which lets you focus on the architectural goals, rather than chasing down the next job. Eventually I did end up contributing to the community, but not in the way I had anticipated.

We also developed an expertise in educational projects which was rewarding in that we were able to contribute to local communities working together with School Districts, Parents and Students.

I was initially surprised that, in the K-12 market, there were multiple opportunities to design not only classrooms, but a wide range of project types such as science labs, libraries, gymnasiums, swimming pools and sports fields.

Our work with the Los Unified School Districts led to the introduction to multiple school districts which in turn led to a large number of repeat clients and projects, thereby creating a good business model.



Beverlywood Residence





San Dimas High School Gymnasium

## I was fortunate to have started out when I did

In Arizona, I studied under several professors who broke away from USC where they were part of the post-war movement / post-and-beam philosophy. The ASU program took things in a more experimental direction.

I was inspired initially by my professor Calvin Straub at Arizona State University (formerly of Buff, Straub and Hensman). He was part of the Case Study program sponsored by *Arts & Architecture* magazine during the 1940s and 1960s, a movement launched in Southern California and particularly emblematic of the region.

The Case Study series showcased homes commissioned by the magazine and designed by some of the most influential designers and



architects of the era, including Charles and Ray Eames, Richard Neutra, Craig Ellwood and Pierre Koenig. The residences were intended to be relatively affordable, replicable houses for post-World War II family living, with an emphasis on “new materials and new techniques in house construction”.

I prefer strong geometric forms, with clear symmetry and clean, crisp design, which led me to appreciate the stark, angular work of Hugh Newell Jacobsen in Washington, D.C., and I always respected the sheer discipline of Richard Meyer.

I was fortunate, entering the field at a very inspiring point in history.





## What drifting off in class can teach you

I spent more time as a student looking out of windows than looking at the blackboard, but I always made sure to maintain a strong connection to the world outside.

When we designed the Tustin High School addition in Orange County, California, we had to contend with the existing elements, which included a sea of concrete and hard surfaces. We humanized the campus by adding landscaping and places for students to congregate. Suddenly the campus was more welcoming, with human spaces, and casual seating areas for interaction.

The interior of the school was designed for the classroom of the future, with multimedia capabilities, and monitors on three walls. It was also modular, allowing break-out spaces within



each classroom, so a class of 30 students could split into three or four separate groups without much effort. The rooms, with a circular setup, could be reconfigured constantly, based on changing needs and teaching techniques.

I discovered that there is a direct relationship between the inside of the classroom and the outside world. In the 1950s classrooms were typically designed with large glass windows to allow sufficient daylight to enter the classroom – then somewhere in the late 1980s with new energy standards, large windows seemed to disappear from classrooms.

Recent studies have shown that daylighting contributes to an increase in student attendance and grades. I have made an effort to reintroduce large windows for daylighting and daydreaming.





## The art of managing expectations

We found that the best way of managing expectations was to establish an open line of communication with the design team and clients. This transparent communication kept everyone's eyes on the ball. Keeping things on budget meant keeping things on schedule, and that required constant fine-tuning of stakeholder expectations, and simplifying the decision-making process.

It's human for people to wander off or overreact or lose track sometimes, and a streamlined process, with a firm hand on the wheel, keeps everyone on top of their game.



## Sometimes it's smarter not to delegate

When working on multi-year projects, managing the schedule and the budget is essential. You must make it a habit. In a few cases we were able to finish projects with enough money left over for additional projects or enhancements, which made everybody happy. And it only happened because, all along, the team dynamics were collaborative and not adversarial.

We coordinated directly with the school district and the construction contractor. Today most clients on large scale projects often hire an outside project manager or construction manager firm as an intermediary. We found that this can add layers and delays just because it adds another step to every decision or communication.



In the case of the Los Alamitos Unified School District projects, we saved the client money by taking on the program and construction management tasks ourselves. By wearing multiple hats, however, it provided project savings, and moreover, the direct, immediate interaction made it all worth it.

While the industry generally compartmentalizes architecture, project management, and construction management tasks, our expertise and collaborative approach allowed us to make a name for ourselves by streamlining operations and achieving efficiencies in ways that were a win for all involved.







UCLA Oncology Clinic & Infusion Suite

## You can design, but can you juggle?

Architects are typically seen as artists or lone visionaries, or offering expertise as a master builder, but I found that it can be just as important to be a skilled businessperson, juggling tasks and coordinating the interests of diverse stakeholders, ranging from school officials and contractors, to all of the people who make the machine work throughout a process that can last five years or longer.

I loved the hand-drawing or conceptual sketches part of architecture, but I also learned to love bringing everything together with a design team whose goals were in sync. In recent decades, more than ever, architecture came to involve more than good design. It's handling many things at once, working with others. It's still a changing field, and



as in other fields, artificial intelligence will play a big role. But at its core, architecture is about designing spaces for people, with people. Being nimble and flexible, keeping lots of things in the air at once, will be more important than ever.

One of our successful techniques working with a large group of stakeholders was to develop a series of alternative-site floor plans and use that as an opportunity to engage with the community which would give us a greater understanding of the community issues and concerns. In this way I was able to develop an approach where the stakeholders felt a pride of ownership on the project, leading to a more rewarding solution.

Juggling multiple stakeholders' concerns with budget constraints and site limitations was like playing a 3-dimensional chess game – it is possible, but requires patience and skill.





## It pays to share pride of ownership

Because we worked so often with public funding and serving community stakeholders, communicating with people and listening to their needs and desires was crucial. When people feel heard, they are more likely to develop a personal stake in the success of the project.

It's an ongoing process. By making it clear to people that their input is important, you can let them share pride of ownership, not just at the completion of the project, but over the time leading up to it, and throughout the years it serves their community.



## People skills are the key that opens doors

Like many, I went into the field with great expectations. I wanted to use design to help people, hoping that, once they experienced the final product, the public would appreciate what I had created. But things weren't that simple. A diploma is just a starting point. And theory only goes so far.

Some architecture graduates are fortunate enough to work their way up through established firms. Some go out on their own, and a few of them do well. But many young architects I know have changed direction, and transitioned into interior design, the film industry, including set design, industrial design, or a completely unrelated field.



Hope Elementary School





It can be tough for many years, and it's not for the light-hearted. Architecture can take decades to master, and it can take years to find one's place. There will probably be a lot of trial and error. But there's one thing I can say with certainty: At every step of the way, it helps to know how to interact with people.

Since the goal of architecture is to build spaces for people, usually with other people, it seems essential for schools to emphasize people skills, and the business aspects of the role, a bit more.







The job is about listening.  
Sometimes literally.

When we designed the Bonita Center for the Arts (a Performing Arts Center for the Bonita Unified School District), we ran into some interesting challenges. We found that different types of performances required different types of acoustical reverberation time.

By employing “Variable Acoustics” we were able to create a venue where both audiences and performers alike are awed at the clarity and intelligibility of the sound.

We also discovered that the typical method of HVAC heating or cooling required circulation of the air through the building in ways that could be quite noisy. A typical HVAC system must work hard to move large volumes of air, and you can hear the noise from the fans which could impact the performances and performers.



Bonita Center for the Arts



Working with our Mechanical Engineering team, we were able to install an HVAC system referred to as "*Displaced Ventilation*", in which air is supplied at low velocity from pressurized raised floor plenums. The supply comes from grilles located under each seat providing cool or heated fresh air directly to each audience member for greater comfort.

The displacement HVAC system is much quieter than a standard ventilation system and does not have a negative acoustical effect on the performance as a typical overhead HVAC system would.

Architecture is always about listening to clients' needs and desires, but sometimes it's also about listening to the spaces themselves.







San Bernardino Main Post Office

II

## It's not just what you add, it's what you reveal

The United States Postal Service hired us to restore and rehabilitate the downtown San Bernardino Post Office, a two-story masonry structure built in the 1920s. The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In the 1960s an unattractive dropped ceiling was added to provide heating and cooling ductwork, however, once I entered the space, I could tell that something special was hidden there. As restoration began, we uncovered the original ceiling and architectural detailing.

A splendid, vaulted ceiling with soaring arches and ornate details had been concealed and forgotten. We also uncovered and restored the exquisite marble and terrazzo of the floor and wainscot. The Post Office was as surprised and elated as we were at the discoveries.



As we modernized the building with seismic retrofitting and met modern accessibility requirements, we also achieved a rewarding level of historic preservation. Restoration included historically accurate paint colors, hardware, millwork and lighting. Modern technology, such as newer, more efficient HVAC, helped us to restore the majestic ambience of the structure, vaulted ceilings and all.

Decorative plaster details, cornices, ceiling moldings and capitals were repaired to replicate the original workmanship. We created new landscaping and hardscape, adding a ramp to create a transition from street to building, while simultaneously providing ADA accessibility.

Restoration projects are a great way to become intimately familiar with the design and workmanship of the past. We can honor their integrity as we solve problems from a modern perspective, using technology in subtle but transformative ways.



San Bernardino Main Post Office





## About Michael Rachlin



Michael Rachlin, AIA, LEED, AP

Michael Rachlin has been practicing architecture for more than forty years. He is a well-known and prolific designer, and has been the creative force behind the majority of the projects at Rachlin Partners. As Design Partner, he was responsible for the design direction and the quality of the entire team's services. His experience spans a wide range of project types. His mission has been a constant search for creative solutions to complex problems.

Michael has fostered within Rachlin Partners an emphasis on creative design while providing strong inspirational leadership. Two signature talents that Michael instilled in the firm's practice are communication skills and an ease in the public forum of architecture. These attributes resulted in design projects that reflected the input of the users in thoughtful and enriched design solutions.



## About Michael Rachlin

An expert at guiding clients through the challenges of planning and designing spaces of wide-ranging scope and complexity, Michael has been lauded by clients and peers alike for his ability to translate client aspirations into imaginative designs. Working closely with stakeholders to develop programs that are responsive to their concerns, he has led effectively by building group consensus around a shared vision to keep things moving forward.

Michael has extensive experience in architectural and interior design of both new construction and renovation projects. He takes particular pride in his success in helping to preserve historic landmark buildings throughout Southern California. He served as chairman and a member of the design jury for the Los Angeles Business Council's Architectural Awards Program for seven years and was recognized by the City of Los Angeles for his unique contribution to the city's urban fabric.

Michael played a pivotal role in many of the firm's projects over the past 40 years, including the Los Angeles Judo and Basketball Venues for the XXIII Olympiad and the Seismic Renovation / Historic Preservation of Los Angeles City Hall.

Michael's Southern California work includes a diversity of projects, including a 700-seat Performing Arts Center for Bonita Unified School District, and the Center for Advanced Surgical and Interventional Technology at the University of California Los Angeles — both prime examples of his quest for design excellence.

Michael obtained his Bachelor of Architecture degree from Arizona State University in 1974. He is licensed to practice Architecture in the District of Columbia and in 12 states, including California, Arizona, Colorado, Louisiana, Georgia, Maryland, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio, Texas, Virginia, and Wyoming.