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15 Minutes With . . .

Environ Architecture Founder Alan Burks



Alan Burks is founder, president and director of architecture at Environ Architecture, and a former boardmember of the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

Before a foundation is laid, permits are pulled or funding is secured, a project needs a concept, and Alan Burks, AIA, provides a roadmap to get it started. Leading a team of principal architects and interior designers, Burks founded Environ Architecture in Long Beach almost 20 years ago. The office is located on the plaza level at 100 Oceangate.

Hailing from Chicago, where he earned his degree in architecture, Burks began his career as one of the founding members of an architectural firm, then worked as a senior project director with several Southern California architectural firms.

Today, Burks' experience ranges from architecture and interior design to planning and project management. In 2009, he became an accredited Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) professional. His company – which has an emphasis on urban design, adaptive reuse and sustainability – works closely with developers, real estate brokers and city officials, responsible for various residential, commercial and institutional projects throughout the Greater Long Beach area.

Burks has also been involved in the community just about as much as designing it. He has been a former boardmember of the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency (RDA), a former chair for the Central Long Beach Project Area Committee (PAC), a founding boardmember of the Long Beach Affordable Housing Coalition,

board president of the New City Public Schools and is a member of various associations and groups, including the Congress for New Urbanism and the non-profit U.S. Green Building Council.

While the terrain for most architects continues to shift due to economic conditions and a struggling real estate market, Burks said Environ Architecture has weathered the storm with work coming in from repeat customers and a new focus on efficiency. Business Journal Staff Writer Sean Belk sat down with Burks to discuss trends in the industry and pertinent issues such as city planning, energy efficiency and the governor's proposal to eliminate redevelopment agencies.

LBBJ: While most architectural firms today focus on “green” and being environmentally friendly, how does your company stand out and how do you describe your company?

Burks: We are an extremely diverse architectural firm. By that I mean we do all sorts of projects. We've done museum projects. We've done housing projects, condominiums, townhomes and apartments. We have done a lot of interior design work, [including at] all of the Class A and Class B high rise buildings in Downtown Long Beach. We do a lot of higher education work. We're currently working at UCLA, California State University, Long Beach and California State University, Los Angeles, all at the same time. So



Alan Burks, AIA, president and founder of Environ Architecture, is pictured with Willetta McCulloh, CID, vice president and director of design, at their office at 100 OceanGate, Suite P-200 in Downtown Long Beach. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

we do a lot of different types of things. We've done small office buildings for the social security administration in Sacramento and in Anaheim. So, we're extremely diverse. We do façade improvement projects for the redevelopment agencies in Long Beach, Compton and Los Angeles.

I think we stand out above the competition in that we provide superior service and very attentive service. We really try to understand what our clients need and want, and we respond to that. There's a principal involved in absolutely every project. We provide what our clients expect. We don't have a B team, we only have an A team.

LBBJ: How has the recession affected your business and do you feel the market is turning around?

Burks: The recession has affected the architectural and construction industries probably more than any other industries. I feel fortunate that we're only down 30 percent from where we were two years ago, while I know a lot of other firms are down much more than that, some as much as 60 percent. So yes, the recession has affected us. Do I see an end to the recession? I've been seeing an end to the recession for the last year and it just hasn't happened yet. It isn't getting any worse. It's getting marginally better, but I'm

not seeing a point in time where it's going to take off and it's going to be where it was two years ago.

LBBJ: The lack of projects on the market has created a very competitive bid process with most contracts coming in well below asking price. How does your company compete and set itself apart from other firms?

Burks: Most of our work is not generated from bids. Most of our work still comes from repeat clients, so I'm not bidding against anyone else. But they are expecting our fees to be maybe a little bit lower than they would have been a couple of years ago. So we're becoming much more efficient. We're using technology and whatever means necessary to become more efficient. So that's how we compete. We find ourselves competing with firms we never had to compete against in the past; much larger firms, such as Gensler and HOK, huge national firms we never had to compete with before. We find ourselves competing with them on projects they would have ignored two years ago, because they were too small or too difficult for them to handle.

LBBJ: What are the benefits of being a LEED accredited professional and how does a developer that might ask for your services see a return on investment?

Burks: Being a LEED accredited professional tells your clients and perspective clients that you are concerned with sustainability, that you made the effort to study what sustainability is all about and you've met the minimum standard of your knowledge of sustainability. So I think it gives some potential clients some assurance that you know what you're talking about when it comes to being sustainable. Do I see clients looking to be certified

LEED? In the private sector: no. In the private sector, I see clients concerned with sustainability, but they're not necessarily interested in getting LEED certifications. So we take them as far as we can. The projects may actually be able to be LEED certified, but they're not willing to take the extra step or take the extra time because LEED certification costs a substantial amount of money and can tend to slow a project down.

Most developers are not interested in the additional costs of certification and the additional costs of time it would take. However, in the public sector, we are seeing a lot of LEED certifications. The work that we're doing at the various universities, they are asking for LEED certifications. It seems every time, if the government provides the financing, the project would want to have a LEED certification. A good example is the social security administration buildings that we've done had to have LEED certifications because it was a mandate.

LBBJ: Since this is a very old city, adaptive reuse appears to be a driving force for development in parts of Long Beach. What are the benefits of adaptive reuse, both economical and structural, and what do such projects bring to a community?

Burks: Adaptive reuse is always a very interesting question. On every project you have to take a look at the best way to deal with the project, whether the existing structure can accommodate the new use, whether the existing structure can be expanded to accommodate the highest and best use of the property as might be required by the developer, and whether the local authorities like the city would be willing to wave things like parking regulations in order to allow the adaptive reuse.

Traditionally, in Long Beach, what has stood in the way of adaptive reuse has been the planning department and the parking regulations imposed on adaptive reuse projects. However, that is changing. We have a new planning department, a planning department that's willing to do what it takes to make it work, if the project is a project that they like. They're not really forcing you to comply with the strictest parking regulations, so they've been able to work things out and we have a planning commission that's willing to work things out, which was not the case five to eight years ago. Adaptive reuse retains the natural urban fabric. It retains the history of the community and it's a good thing to do if you can do it. It keeps bricks and wood out of landfills, so it's a sustainable practice.

LBBJ: What are the trends for today's interior design and tenant improvements? For example, do companies want more open space for their employees?

Burks: Office space is cheap today. So tenants are probably taking more space than they actually need. They're sort of banking space in a sense. All the projects we've worked on we've had an extra office or room for extra workspace because it's so cheap. It's cheaper today than it was a year ago, for instance, and it's much cheaper than it was five years ago. In terms of design trends we are seeing more open space at the window line. Tenants are realizing they want to take the amenity of sunlight and share it with everyone instead of putting all of the executive offices on the window line and leaving everybody else in a place that doesn't have any natural light. So we're seeing, I like to call it, democratization, where amenities are being shared by all. So we're seeing the workspaces along the windows and offices on the interior.

LBBJ: As a former board member for the Long Beach Redevelopment Agency, what is your opinion about the governor eliminating redevelopment agencies?

Burks: I think that the governor's analysis of eliminating redevelopment is seriously flawed. I don't believe there will be that much money left over after the bonded indebtedness is paid from the tax increment money. And I also would like to see a lot of the

extra money left locally because we are doing a lot of good with it. We're improving the quality of life. I know that the redevelopment agency in Long Beach supports code enforcement efforts and supports a lot of other efforts within the community to promote a better quality of life. It's being spent in blighted areas and we're bettering the quality of life in the redevelopment areas.

LBBJ: Do you feel Long Beach has done a good job with its redevelopment monies?

Burks: On the whole, I think Long Beach has done a very good job. I don't think you'll ever find the sources of abuses that had been uncovered recently in L.A. and other cities. Long Beach has not gone down that road. Long Beach has always had a very responsible redevelopment agency board that takes their fiduciary responsibility very seriously and does want to spend the money properly.

LBBJ: So, you're saying you feel confident Long Beach has done a good job?

Burks: We've done a good job – I mean, there have been some mistakes. There has been some money misspent, but very small amounts of it. I do believe we always made our payments to the county. I believe we've made all of our payments to the school board. The other thing the governor seems to miss whenever he talks about this is he seems to forget that redevelopment agencies have contracts with the local taxing agencies to basically make them whole. In other words, they receive as much money with redevelopment as they would have received without redevelopment, provided the cities make the payments.

LBBJ: In your opinion, has Long Beach done a good job in planning? For example, do the projects make sense and do they connect to one another?

Burks: As far as planning, there's always the question of whether some projects maybe did not live up to their potential or whether other projects have lived up to their potential.

LBBJ: Is there any thing else you'd like to discuss?

Burks: I will say I am very excited about some projects that are going to move forward, which is the new courthouse in Downtown Long Beach and the Gerald Desmond Bridge. These things are very exciting. I would like to see something happen at 2nd Street and Pacific Coast Highway and there's also the project at Alamitos and Ocean, which I've heard is getting ready to break ground. So, these are exciting things and these are major projects. For them to move forward during a recession means that somebody is doing something right. ■