

BUSINESS PROFILE

The architecture of office life and other landscapes

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Architect Ted Sottong, vice-president and co-owner of Architecture, Inc., still doesn't have an office after 17 years in the business. He has a loft-like room in south Fort Myers where he works with everyone else in the firm, from draftsmen to his project manager. Everyone has a desk with wheels that may be moved about the tall, airy space at will.

"We see it simply as a group of people interested in architecture," Sottong said.

The open seating allows for the interplay of unique personalities to yield the best ideas, he said. Teams form, lectures take place on the spur of the moment and if someone wants to grill a steak or have an espresso, the kitchen is ready. There's even a standing popcorn machine.

"I like to be by the window," said project manager Suzette Foryst. "Because I like to look out. But the air blows on you more on the outskirts."

Sottong, 41, is undeniably the boss, but a soft voice and lanky, youthful appearance make his leadership seem gentle and unobtrusive. He lends employees space to pursue their own architectural proclivities.

"The way that I've been able to get us heading in that direction is to not make this firm about me," he said. "I understand (employees) have goals that are separate from me and the company. If an architect comes to work for me they want to be their own architect, not Ted's architect. It kind of evens the playing field a little bit."

The firm, which has a main office in Reston, Va. and another one in Orlando, has done work on nursing homes, universities, hospitals and resorts, among other places. They recently

completed an athletic building at Florida Gulf Coast University. And they focus on using the environment as a guide to design.

Sottong's own interest in architecture is connected to the environments he has lived in. From the city to the suburbs to the country, all have provided their own quiet instruction on what to build, and where. He grew up in Rockville, Md., near Washington D.C.

"Rockville is to me the epitome of suburbs," he said. "Living in Rockville I spent a lot of time sitting in traffic in my car."

Growing up in that environment was a lesson in how poor planning and lack of imagination creates suburban sprawl. After getting a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Maryland and a master's from the University of Pennsylvania, he lived both in the city (Philadelphia) then among the open, rolling hills of a small town, Chambersburg, Pa. Sottong left Chambersburg to start up the Fort Myers Architecture, Inc. office in 2004.

"I think (Fort Myers) feels strange because it's a suburb, without the urb," he said. "It's just sprawl on its own. I think that's why it feels unusual to a lot of people. It all stems from rapid growth and lack of planning."

A four-story office building Architecture, Inc. created for AIM Engineering, near the corner of I-75 and Colonial Boulevard, is an example of well planned, environmentally conscious work, Sottong said. The building is set against the Big Cypress National Preserve.

"When you walk in the entrance, you can see the preserve," he said. "This is a building that has a lot to do with its site, even though it's just an interesting looking form too. It's interesting when the site really tells you how to design the building. You can't just take it and plop it anywhere and have it mean the same thing."



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Ted Sottong and Suzette Foryst

The same goes for employees: Sottong has chosen carefully.

"If there's one thing I've done right and well, it's hire," he said. "I've just been able to hire great people that make me look good. I've been able to stand back and watch them go."

His staff is also encouraged to play a role in the community, local or beyond. Each staff member is involved with a group like the Boys Scouts, the Make-A-Wish foundation or the International Interior Design Association. Sottong, a member of The Rotary, an international organization that reaches out to communities worldwide, recently traveled to Cambodia, where another new landscape beckoned.

There he helped deliver bicycles to children who needed transportation to a nearby

school.

"It looked like a National Geographic special," he said. "The town I was in was almost touristy, but there was still this kind of primitive feeling to it...but away from the city it's extremely destitute. Despite all that they're happy, just wonderful people, the ones I met anyway. These people have nothing and yet they're some of the happiest people I've ever met. I'm starting to wonder if there's a correlation there."

Sottong's parents live on Marco Island and he has two brothers who live near Washington, D.C. He recently started jogging.

"A really good day for me is to take my bike down to the beach and go for a run," he said.

And who knows what design secrets the sand and sea might hold. ■

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