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Perspectives - Michael Carlton of Carlton Architecture

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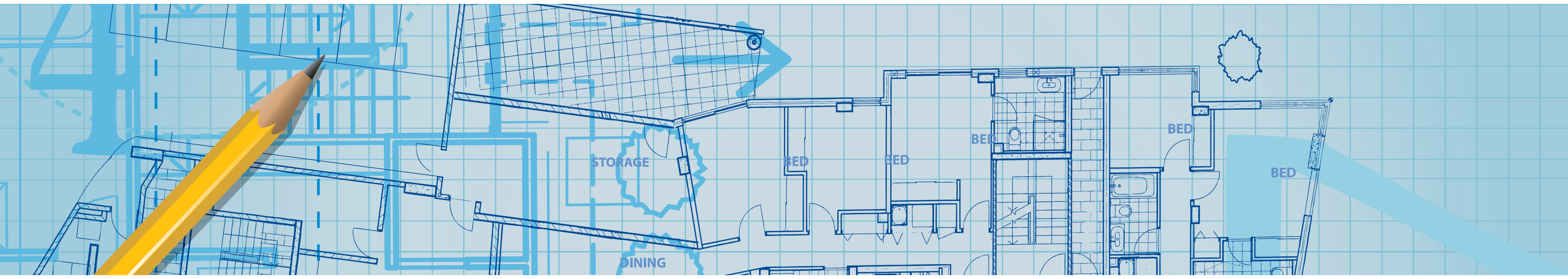
THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT



Perspectives

Michael Carlton of Carlton Architecture

Michael Carlton talks with The Rooftop Project's **Emily Barile** and **Professor James Hagy** about the intersections among architecture, interior design, real estate, and not-for-profit strategic planning.

Michael J. Carlton, AIA LEED AP, is Managing Principal of Carlton Architecture. He has over 26 years' experience in both architecture and interior design. During his 20 years leading Carlton Architecture, the firm has been awarded commissions for large-scale master plans in the R&D and institutional sectors as well as projects for nonprofit, corporate, retail, and residential clients across the country and abroad. Michael holds a Bachelor of Architecture from the City College of New York, a Bachelor of Fine Arts in interior design from The Fashion Institute of Technology, and an Associate of Construction Technology from Farmingdale School of Engineering. He currently serves on the Board of Managers of the Lotos Foundation for the Arts and volunteers his time and the firm's resources to benefit not-for-profit organizations in the greater New York metropolitan area.

RTP: Your own training was both in architecture and in interior design. Why did you choose that path, and how has it informed and influenced the work of your firm?

Mike: Putting myself through school, I started with construction engineering. When it came time to select a school of architecture, a professor whose opinion I valued recommended that I understand and learn interiors properly if I wanted to be a good architect. So I did a detour to interior design school on my way to getting my architecture degree. As an architect, I tend to consider design more functionally, from the inside out. I believe I also have a greater appreciation for interior aesthetics and their tie to the exterior building envelope.

RTP: Sometimes non-real estate organizations are surprised at how local the licensing requirements are for real estate professionals – brokers, lawyers, or architects, for example. Naturally, this can affect the selection process. You are licensed in 18 states. Why was doing that important for your practice?

Mike: A practicing architect in New York City, as a tristate area, automatically needs New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut licenses. Within the first few years of owning the company I realized the potential reach across the country of some of our clients. I believe you have to prepare ahead of time; you can't expect a client to be patient while you go get your state license. For example, I had my California for 10 years before I was asked by a client to provide architectural services there. Since then we've completed several projects along the west coast from Southern California to Seattle, Washington.

RTP: You feel a strong relationship exists between the building envelope and what goes on inside?

Mike: Yes, very much. Early on in my education I realized the need to consider the interiors and where they intersect with the architecture. The inside and the outside must work together. I tend to think functionally in plan first, as opposed to first establishing a building image. I'm working on a project now, a youth center, which is on a very constrained site. Understanding the functions allows me to understand the plan and its footprint on the site so they work efficiently together. It's not always a linear process, and I've probably been through a half-dozen iterations of this particular building. In the end though, the design responds well to all the various constraints and functional requirements.

RTP: What portion of your client base is from the not-for-profit sector? Is that work cyclical?

Mike: It varies from year to year with the economy. We've had years where 30 percent of our work is for not-for-profits. That's a big chunk. Some not-for-profits seem to have the ability to execute projects a year after the economy starts to slow down. It also may take time after the economy picks up for not-for-profits to initiate projects. In our experience the not-for-profit work is cyclical, but it tends to trail the for-profit work by about 12 months. The lag in economic cycles of not-for-profits can be used to their advantage in terms of planning the project to maximize dollars spent, especially when considering construction costs.

RTP: How is working for not-for-profit organizations different from working for commercial clients?

Mike: We bring the same discipline expected by our corporate clients to our not-for-profits. To me, there isn't all that much difference. Architecture responds to a need and while needs certainly vary between not-for-profits and corporations, they nonetheless require a proper response from the architect. We don't treat not-for-profits any differently from our corporate clients.

Working with not-for-profits can be more challenging—and sometimes more rewarding—than large-scale or high-budget corporate projects, simply by the fact that the solution often requires not only design creativity, but very often creativity in management and execution. The end result has to be something that is not only functional for the client, but is architecturally satisfying.

Too often, I've seen not-for-profits dictate design under the assumption that they're saving time and money. In an effort to please, architects may do exactly as they're told, which is unfortunate for the not-for-profit and for the architect, as both benefit from an open dialogue.

Due to the size of some of the corporate organizations we work with, at times, there are protocols regarding access to the decision-makers, which is sometimes difficult for the design team. Hearing comments first-hand and having that dialogue directly is something we always tend to have with our not-for-profit clients. There simply tends to be more interaction with the decision-maker at the top. I suspect that may be because the person in charge of a not-for-profit is often also the person most responsible for the fundraising. He or she knows that the project and financing is very visible to the organization's supporters.

For example, with the youth center I mentioned, one of the components is a very large gym space. We were going through schematic design and there was a client comment that if windows were added on both sides, you could look through the gym space into the park and beyond. That may sound like a very specific requirement from the client, but you have to look farther. What we interpreted the concern to be was that the building was blocking too much of the view to the park. So we rethought the entire design, not just the windows. We reconsidered the position of the entire building on the site. In the end, the combination of rethinking the building design and location yielded a superior design solution. Everyone involved understood and appreciated the importance of dialogue coupled with design solutions as opposed to simply taking direction (to make the windows bigger).

As architects we are continually learning from our experiences. A pleasant by-product of our work with corporations is the ability to apply some of the same management and cost-saving techniques to our not-for-profit clients, and sometimes vice versa.

RTP: What role might design have in programmatic planning, needs assessments, or even fund development and capital campaigns before a site or renovation is selected? Do you start with programming, do you start with design, or do you start with funding?

Mike: It depends on the organization. A well-organized group will know its goals well and be able to put together its own programming requirements. It will know exactly what is needed: how many rooms, what their purposes are.

But more often than not, an organization will come to us with a facility that is outdated and needs to be improved. Or it is looking to expand its programs, but it doesn't yet know how exactly. And many of these programs may last only for a few years, after which it will need another use for the facility. In those instances, it may be better to allow the architect to come up with a graphic of the master plan with what requirements are known or anticipated and take it to a working session with the client. That dialogue will inform the process about where the organization is going with its programs, which will then get transferred to a document that will go toward funding. Sometimes master plan drawings—on a very conceptual level—become a campaign to move the process forward.

RTP: What should a not-for-profit organization, particularly an organization that has no experience with architecture and design, look for in selecting an architect or design professional?

Mike: When interviewing architects, look for someone who is really going to listen. You want someone who practices "relationship architecture." By that I mean someone who sincerely wants to "better" an organization, someone who isn't going to pass the not-for-profit off to a junior person in the office. Repeat business for the same organization is one test of this. Most of the not-for-profits we work for have been clients for 10-15 years. We are not flashy; the most important thing we bring to the table is ourselves.

Our corporate clients often have in-house professionals who participate in the process. There are several layers of "checks and balances." Not-for-profits typically don't have as many in-house resources. Maybe they'll have an outside lawyer to review the lease and an in-house facilities person who is there for the day-to-day management but not specifically for capital projects. The remaining voids beyond design and architecture need to be filled. Those voids, or disciplines, can be filled with the architect's assistance as we've done in the past, or with the help of a project management consultant.

RTP: You have worked with not-for-profit clients with missions from social services to places of worship, and on projects from new construction, to renovation, to adaptive re-use. Are you always involved as early as you would like in a project?

Mike: I'm rarely involved as early as I would like. The earlier all the required disciplines begin thinking about a project location, the more time they have to offer ideas and for the design and planning to percolate.

Given a set of issues to solve with a site or a building, a design professional won't just be thinking about the problem when talking with the client or when sitting down to spend an hour on the project. Ideas occur at any time. The earlier you get involved the more time you have for that to happen. I think time is the most valuable thing that you can give an architect.

I was recently at a meeting with a synagogue that is looking to purchase property next door. There was a problem with egress of the new property that monopolized almost the entire evening's conversation. The best, and most common-sense, solution emerged at the very end of this meeting. It was right in front of all of our noses, but sometimes one just has to let the dialogue unfold until that "aha moment" presents itself. I'd rather have a client who requires a lot of my free time, but provides enough of their own time for the dialogue to occur, than a client that is willing to pay for every hour of my time, but is not able to also provide their time to participate in conversation, or is more interested in getting everything done in a very short period.

RTP: You do interior design in leased spaces as well. Let's talk about a tenant taking leased space. At what stage would you like to become active there, as the client's design professional?

Mike: There are many times where we're involved after a lease transaction has happened. That is probably the toughest time. We inherit a space that is already deemed to fit an organization's programmatic needs, but when everything is thoroughly analyzed the space may be realized as too big or too small. By then, it's too late to reconsider the lease.

We once had a client where we were asked to provide test fits after the lease was signed, as confirmation of how much space they were already told they needed. We completed plans based on their requirements, and 15 percent of the space was unassigned. New York City has some of the most valuable real estate, and when space inefficiencies are considered over the term of a lease, the financial implications are huge.

Too much space is probably tougher than a project where you don't have enough room. You might create a large gathering area or a large reception space. But when you don't have enough programming to fill a space and subletting is not an option, it's like walking into an office space where half the staff has been laid off. It's not good for morale. When you walk in and the space is not efficient it reflects badly on everybody involved, the architect and owner alike.

Again, getting involved early is best. For leased spaces, there needs to be a level of due diligence completed before the lease is executed. That involves test-fitting the organization with a potential space, understanding lease terms, and evaluating the infrastructure of the space. Ideally the architect should be in attendance for each lease location under consideration. In addition to looking out for potentially negative issues, an architect is well trained to spot architectural opportunities to be exploited that may be missed by others.

RTP: How long should a not-for-profit client expect the design process to take?

Mike: It depends on the project, of course. The stages of a design process are basically programming, schematic design, design development, construction documentation, and then construction administration. The early stages of design typically move more quickly than the latter stages of construction documentation and construction administration. Many clients desire that these last two phases of a project move as quickly as the initial phases, but it is critical that clients understand the importance of taking the time to allow the design team to properly prepare the construction documentation, also referred to as the contract documents as they are exactly that, a contract between the owner and the builder.

Let's take a 25,000 square foot tenant build-out of leased space. The programming portion can take a couple of days, or it can take a couple of weeks of more. The time for programming varies with the structure of the client. How many people need to be interviewed? How far do you want to drill down to understand the organization? How far does the organization want you to go? If the organization has several internal groups and subgroups, you need to know how they work together. So it can get very involved.

With schematic design, again it depends on the size of the project that you are designing. But, in general, you might for example have four weeks for schematic design, followed by another four weeks for design development, and four to six weeks for contract documents and construction drawings.

In this case, I would prefer at least six weeks for contract documents and drawings, because that's your last line of defense on the budget. Here again, the most valuable thing you can give an architect is time. If you've given your architect an adequate amount of time for the contract phase of a project and you still have significant change orders, then shame on the architect.

RTP: How is the design process integrated with the other aspects of negotiating for leased space? Does your design process typically happen while the landlord is holding the space off the market, or once the tenant has committed, or even once the lease has started and the tenant is already paying rent?

Mike: We may have done programming earlier. But a lot of times, clients won't release us to start schematic design until the lease has been signed. The client wants to know it has the space first. But the lease negotiations can sometimes take months. Depending on the market and the deal, the client may get several months of free rent. If we don't start on design until the lease is signed, some or all of this free rent period may be taken up with design and construction. If the design moves ahead earlier, the tenant may be able to use more of the free rent period for occupancy after move-in. On the other hand, if the lease negotiation falls apart, unrecoverable fees may be incurred for designing to that specific space.

RTP: Many organizations may also have difficulty projecting future programmatic space needs. Social services organizations come to mind, for example, where government funding streams may be problematic or where contracted services for a particular program may be tied to a fixed time. How can organizations factor in flexibility, up or down, in designing space?

Mike: This is always a worthwhile consideration. I think that every space needs to have at least two planned uses. Every work station, every conference room, needs to be capable of something else when it is not being used. This is especially true for small organizations, where the conference room may only be used a couple of days a week. Or, if you grow and expand, how can that space be used for staff, and vice versa? Tenant spaces that can do double duty is almost always the way to go.

RTP: Does this influence decisions about where to use demising walls—that is, fixed drywall—versus modular workstations or other more flexible installations?

Mike: Demising walls as the envelope for the space is one thing. But when you're talking about the built environment inside those demising walls, you need to plan the individual spaces well with flexibility of use in mind. The goal should be to move partitions and workstations as little as possible, if at all. If you're moving partitions around a lot then you probably don't have the right solution to begin with. It can sometimes be just as costly to move workstations and "demountable" partitions as it can be to take down and rebuild traditional drywall construction. With floor-to-ceiling partitions especially, there are simply too many elements of the built environment affected by moving partitions, such as air distribution, fire suppression systems, lighting, electrical, etc., the modification of which can easily exceed the value of movable partitions.

RTP: Some of your not-for-profit clients may have in-house construction staff, but most don't. How should not-for-profits anticipate the time that their staff will have to take from their day jobs to live through the design process? And do you get as much of their time as you need?

Mike: On average, I'd say that no more than 20 percent of a facility manager's time should be dedicated to dealing with a capital project. Any more than that, and the facilities manager's regular duties may become overwhelming with the increased work load. On average, facilities managers are very good about giving us access to their time and facilities.

RTP: What if the organization doesn't have a facilities person on their day-to-day staff?

Mike: The lack of an on-staff facility manager is a likely indicator that the organization is relatively modest with limited resources. In these cases, the architect needs to be very patient and flexible. You go into it knowing that there is nobody that will be the day-to-day facilities contact. You may have to meet with a rabbi or a rector at seven o'clock at night, when it's convenient for them to talk. And you basically start to take on the added role of project manager, assuming one has not also been engaged.

RTP: What other members of the team may not be at the table, or may a not-for-profit not automatically consider?

Mike: The core team on the design side of a project are the architect and engineers, such as structural and mechanical. The architect must build the base drawing and design, and the engineers help make everything work together. The engineers are also necessary to assess existing conditions, for example at a site being considered for purchase. Depending on the complexity of the job, you may involve consultants like land surveyors, code consultants, environmental consultants, acousticians, lighting specialists and project management consultants, to name a few. The complexity of the team is directly proportional to the complexity of the project at hand.

RTP: What is the normal amount of time that an architect spends on-site during the construction phase?

Mike: It's not eight-to-five every day. Again it depends on the complexity. A small project – changing lights, changing doors, but not an extensive amount of rework of the space – many times will require an architect to spend more time there, especially in older buildings, which not-for-profits often have. If you again take a project of 25,000 square feet and you are just going to wipe the whole thing out and start over, the architect probably spends less time on-site because there are a lot fewer hidden conditions that they have to deal with. Renovation projects tend to require significantly more time with surveys, design, and site observation than projects that start with a new or completely empty building. It sometimes may seem more cost effective in terms of construction to retain existing building elements, but those savings can be offset by the "soft costs" incurred by the design team.

RTP: You are sometimes asked to assist clients who continue to operate in the space while it is being renovated. How should the client anticipate those challenges?

Mike: I wouldn't recommend it if there are opportunities, either on-site or close by, where they can duplicate that program. It is almost always going to be a matter of money versus schedule. You'll spend less construction money and the schedule will be faster if you can vacate and let the work go on. And it's obviously safer. It's going to be more time and more money if you can only do pockets of renovations at a time. And it will very likely limit the design solutions available.

A great example of the challenges presented with not-for-profit renovation projects and the strategies necessary is a project we completed for a social services organization about 15 years ago. In fact it was our first project with them. At one of its Brooklyn locations, community-based services are provided. It was not feasible to have construction work happen in the building along with keeping the building open for the community. The solution was to create a temporary facility with several tandem office trailers parked on the basketball court behind the building. The trailers were so tight on the site that they came within an inch of the building when moved into place. Once installed, they allowed programs to function from the same location without interruption to the community services. At the same time, work on the building progressed in a safe, efficient manner.

RTP: Whether an organization is thinking of acquiring a building or operating one that it already has, anticipating and addressing ongoing maintenance and repair can be difficult. Many organizations may feel that, given competing needs for funds, they can only do what is absolutely necessary; to have a contractor come in to address yesterday's emergency. What thoughts do you have on how facilities maintenance challenges can affect not-for-profits?

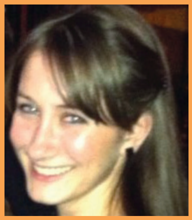
Mike: Addressing just the deferred maintenance that absolutely needs to be done is like living hand-to-mouth with a paycheck. I can think of many examples where buildings have so much deferred maintenance that eventually it becomes necessary to just gut and start again. Eventually deferred maintenance catches up with you, often it seems at the worst possible time. I also know of facilities that are over 100 years old, where maintenance is kept up, and still continue to plug along and thrive.

RTP: What is your approach to sustainability for not-for-profit projects, particularly those with severe budgetary constraints?

Mike: Ninety percent of our staff is LEED-certified. We approach every project with sustainability in mind. Energy codes alone have been improved so much in the past decade that just complying with energy codes is a big step toward sustainability. We practice sustainability simply, with a common sense approach.

RTP: Another way to reduce your carbon footprint is not to take too much space, isn't it?

Mike: Absolutely. It goes back to discipline. Trying to utilize excessive space, let alone pay for it, can be a bigger issue than not having enough. Proper maintenance and flexibility are key to properly managing real estate, both financially and sustainably.



Emily Barile studies at New York Law School, where she is a candidate for the Juris Doctorate degree in 2014. She is a student member of The Rooftops Project. During the school year, she also works in the offices of a Manhattan law practice focused on real estate financing transactions. Prior to law school, she worked in the real estate investment industry. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy at Binghamton University.

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