

Meet a AIA Potomac Valley Chapter Member:

Rick Donnally, AIA

Donnally and Vujcic, Associates, L.L.C., is a Gaithersburg Architecture, Planning and Interiors firm whose largest specialty is the suburban office park. Remember Rick Donnally's presentation on that subject at an AIAPVC seminar a few years back? Rick is the consummate survivor in a quirky architectural world. Design for him has been a life-long celebration, an active exploration. Thoroughly committed to his practice, he persuades that his building designs meet market expectations, look great, and don't leak--all on budget. His wish is that DVA's buildings will persist and last the ravages of time. Upon experiencing them, one is led to believe his wish will come true.

PVC: Your reputation and expertise has been characterized as one-dimensional. You are office building architects. Is it that simple?

RD: No. We just finished a \$12 million addition to the Holy Cross Academy. We have people in the office with fantastic experience in educational, hospitality, etc., and every once in a while we get a project where we can use that knowledge. We were never known as medical office architects and lately had a client come to us with a medical office building. We were asked for a list of experience, so we polled the staff, and by the time we were through polling we had about 80 projects. Not enough to do hospitals, but we could do doctors' and dentists' offices. Then a client came to us with 30 custom home lots, in the \$1 million range, and again among the staff we had much experience in that area. We do 30% interiors and there's always something new coming along there: a hair salon, restaurant, or retail. Sixty percent is offices and business park master planning.

PVC: How large a project can you handle?

RD: Probably a million square feet with no sweat whatsoever. We've done a 12 story office building, a 600,000 SF 8 story data center.

PVC: Among the interesting stories circulating among architects is how your firm went from 30 to 3 personnel when things slowed down in 1990. What's the real story?

RD: It was even worse. We actually went from 42 to 2! I was a partner with my father in 1988. The office market had just completely dried up. My father decided to retire and left me with the firm, which I was supposed to buy from him. But when he left, there were no clients and the firm was deep in debt. So I inherited the debts, managed to keep from going into bankruptcy, and started a new company. It was only me and my office manager. I was doing space planning and found some cheap office space in Rockville. The landlord was so nice to me in lean times that he's now my accountant, making the money back I couldn't pay him in rent at that time.

The funniest story is that a client came to me who had acquired 12 buildings but wanted everything on CAD. Well we weren't doing CAD; we had to give that up during the downturn. He wanted a file that he could access, so we went out, used our credit cards for 3 computers and purchased DATACAD for a ridiculous \$500, went to the client and said "OK, I can do your CAD work". Luckily that built us up to 6 or 7 people and then the boom started again in 1997, and we grew up to where we

are now.

PVC: You have a sophisticated 3-D rendering system in the studio. How well received has it been?

RD: It has become a fantastic tool for us, because the client can see the rendering and get excited about it. Sometimes I still do bum-wad sketches with marker, but to give them that finished, crisp rendering, 3-D is amazing.

PVC: So is the real value producing a promotional piece in the market or communicating the design to the client?

RD: Both of those but also one other thing. We resisted at first but now we do a lot of our design through 3-D. It is so easy to visualize [the design] in different ways that it has become a wonderful tool for designers. I always thought this was a little bit wasteful but I'm changing my mind because of the speed.

PVC: During your school days and developmental years, was there a particular architect you admired? What about today? Any local architects?

RD: I admire Richard Meier, I.M. Pei, and the firm of Foster is producing fantastically original work. Roger Lewis was one of my professors at the University of Maryland. He really helped and pushed me. Because he was a practicing architect, he was more grounded in the "Why would you want to do this [design]?" He got the best work out of me. I thank him.

PVC: What's the core of your agenda?

RD: I want to do buildings that 50 or a 100 years from now people will wonder "Who did that?" I'm disappointed we no longer put brass plaques on our buildings, though we always say we want to. Would I like to win AIA design awards? Yes, I'd love to. But I'm very happy where we are now; we win a lot of industry awards. The level of our design has gone up because we've been given some freedom by a more sophisticated client; we've experimented and have gone further than before. We're getting large projects with bigger budgets.

PVC: Any opinion on the current "state of design"?

RD: There seem to be 2 kinds of architecture practiced in the area. One is neo-traditional/post-modern and the other is ultra-modernism, ultra slick, a much better brand than what we practiced in the fifties where it got stark and plain. I think we're bringing more life to the streetscape and at the street level, and adding interest with decoration without having to go back to traditional form. Hopefully I've done some nice traditional buildings. We would rather do modernism, but the clients are conservative in this area. That's what they're comfortable with most of the time. Sometime we'll show them something modern and they'll go with it.

PVC: Have you ever been enlisted with an "Owner Generated" contract?

RD: It was a very large project--200,000 SF--and the client, a very large corporation, sent over a contract that his lawyers had prepared in house. It was so biased against the architect it would have driven my E&O carrier crazy. We would have exposed ourselves for liability, for being late for the project or not meeting the financial goals.

PVC: Has the practice been profitable? If so, how are you using profits? If not, why not?

RD: I would say that we are as profitable as anyone. But I don't think that anyone's architectural practice is that profitable. There's too much competition on rates. We don't have to go with the lowest fee and sometimes the client will realize that there's some benefit in using us as a firm because we can show them past performance.

PVC: Is it easier or harder to make a profit these days?

RD: I think right now it's harder because the market has tightened up. A year and a half ago during the boom-boom years we were able to raise our fees 10%, which presumably led to profits. We have that terrible problem in that we can make money on the big jobs, but it's very hard to make money on the small ones. It takes the same amount of effort to do a 30,000 SF building as it does a 100,000 SF.

PVC: Do you use a limitation of liability clause? How well received has the limitation of liability been?

RD: We try to. Most of our buildings are over 50,000 SF and at that level our clients demand at least a \$1 million of E&O insurance. We do however use such a limit on our interiors contracts. We carry \$2 million coverage.

PVC: Do you feel that you are adequately covered by E&O insurance? Is the cost getting burdensome?

RD: Yes. I think our carrier is good with us, in that we've had a couple of close calls, that involved a consultant and they have been proactive in getting in there and working things out.

PVC: What advice do you have for interns?

RD: Learn CAD. The schools are finally using that as a design tool to teach students. But if you want to work for, be productive, and be an asset to a firm you should be doing 3-D modeling. You'll learn the others as you get into it, but you

need to have a handle on AutoCAD. The people we have are so fast. We have one guy who wears out his keypad. We have project managers so proficient that they can take a sketch and develop the whole project themselves, or with one other guy. In the old days, that would have been a team of a manager, designer, and a couple draftsmen.

PVC: If CAD is so important, why not just hire an off-shore company who can crank it out at \$200 a sheet?

RD: We looked at that. But our people are very knowledgeable. We teach each other, and we have reviews to teach. We have educational sessions in house to go over the technology and we bring in experts.

PVC: You're a second generation architect in your family. Have you ever had any doubts, were you just trying to please Dad? What does he think of your practice today?

RD: No. No. MY father and I had a fairly rough relationship and even when I went to join him it was not automatically wonderful. There were still tensions like boss and employee. Today, I think he's very impressed. My father is not one who says a lot, but I think he's impressed. I got hooked on architecture when I came home with a project to design a house in elementary school, and my father drew up the whole thing for me. I went into school and all the teachers said: "Oh my goodness this is so wonderful". That feeling was just something I had to have.

PVC: How do you cope with the tides of business?

RD: I went through an experience in the late '80's holding on to my top employees hoping for those jobs my clients said maybe to. I was hanging on paying salaries and I ended up deep in debt. So what we do now is to have the staff to handle the projects and not count on those fictitious projects. If we have to let people go we do it as gently as possible.

PVC: How do you screen potential clients to secure relationships that are most beneficial?

RD: We don't actually screen our clients. They come to us, we start working with them, and we find out very quickly if it is going to be a good relationship or not based on their input and how they react to our contracts.

PVC: Have you ever had to fire a client?

RD: We get along well with some of the toughest in the business. I remember having some bad fights with clients, then making up, and I learned to just let things cool off and let the client find some reasonableness. If I go to them and I'm upset, things just don't work out. So it's better to be patient, because you never know what's going to come next year from that client.

PVC: How do you know when the design is complete, when you have given enough attention to form and function, and can then progress to the next phase of work?

RD: You never know. We're always second guessing ourselves. You say that looks good and as the drawings progress, you then say, no, that doesn't look quite right. We tend to spend money redesigning things but we're concerned enough about the final project that we want to make sure it looks right. Design goes all the way through the project and sometimes into construction. The other interesting question is: "When are you done detailing the construction drawings?", and that is just a great guess. With CAD you're copying details from other projects and every set of drawings gets bigger because there are more details. We have to teach our people that some things have to be--should be done--by the fabricator as shop drawings.

PVC: Any frustrations, misgivings about how you practice?

RD: The frustration is that I wish we all made the money for the effort we put in. I get so upset when my clients think I'm sending them a bill for more than they owe. As a whole, architects are concerned about the environment, doing a good job, making it pretty, and our clients don't appreciate how much that is ingrained in us.

PVC: Are you aware of issues at the state level such as licensing interior designers or scope of practice that could affect your practice in Maryland?

RD: Only transportation. I'm afraid that Maryland is going to end up in a gridlock, and that will cause growth to be curtailed. Whether we approach it with smart growth or rapid transit, we have to do something. The purple line and the inter-county connector are desperately needed.