



Architecture essentials: a game face and “man shoes”

Architects Marni Murdock and Rachel Jorgensen chime in on the realities of their career choices

In a fortunate crossing-of-paths with a Principal in another firm, MGA Architecture President and Founder Matt Gilbertson was introduced to healthcare architect Marni Murdock. Matt quickly came to respect her expertise not only in the healthcare arena, but as a successful business woman. Several years later, an opportunity arose to bring Marni on board which was perfect timing for the direction MGA Architecture was taking. She joined MGA as Principal and Director of Healthcare in early 2014, one of two female architects in the firm. Matt’s introduction to architect Rachel Jorgensen was similarly fortuitous, and she became the first hire at MGA almost five years earlier. Always receptive to hiring women, Matt found that the bulk of his connections to licensed architects locally were mostly men. In a recent interview Matt (MG), Marni (MM) and Rachel (RJ) talked about their perceptions of women working in architecture, the challenges and rewards, and what lies ahead in their careers.

How is a career in Architecture different today for a woman?

MG – Anybody in this field has to have thick skin. I think some women believe they have to act more like men if they’re going to succeed, as if it’s harder to be feminine, to feel confident in who they are. That’s very unfortunate and very wrong. No one should tell you to be something you’re not.

MM – Well, it’s true that women still represent only 25% of all architects in the profession, so for me, I expected a few barriers when I first started working and was told some people were not accustomed

to working with a woman in this profession. I used to joke about putting on my “man shoes” to go out to a job site, because it’s just not practical to wear a skirt and heels, but I never felt that I couldn’t be myself. My first boss (in California) used to tell me, “don’t be afraid to show how competent you are, regardless of who you’re with.” Having him as a mentor early in my career really gave me confidence.

RJ – I agree, you don’t necessarily have to act like a man, but you have to show up to a job site with your game face on. It’s been assumed that the women are interior designers, not the architects on a

project, but once it’s clear you know what you’re doing, I think most people have a professional attitude.

MM – One of the biggest challenges for me was when I had my daughter. I was principal of a firm at that time and took a year and a half off. It was a decision that I think most men don’t have to face, the decision to put a career that you’ve worked hard for on-hold to start a family. I went back to work part-time as a staff architect, so took a step back from where I had been. It was a personal choice that I wouldn’t have done differently, but it was a challenge to balance it all.

What advice would you give to someone who's thinking about a career in Architecture?

RJ—Do your homework about what this kind of work really entails. Architecture is as much project management and client relations as it is design work, and it requires learning other skills which I didn't learn in school. It's actually very rewarding to take a project from beginning to end, but you have to master other business skills along with the creative work. It's a continual learning process.

MM—It's also good to know that some companies prefer you to specialize in one area so you end up only working in one area. I think learning is limited that way, but it just depends on what your goals are. What I like about MGA is that I can see a project through to completion, from design through construction, and every day is different. Not all companies operate this way however.

What motivates you?

MM—Even before I decided to go into architecture, I knew I wanted to help people, so getting into healthcare architecture seemed to be a good fit. And that's what keeps me going most, helping clients who are so appreciative for what we bring to their projects. It's almost sad when a project ends.

RJ—I agree with Marni, it's really rewarding to have a successful project. By "successful," I mean we met the budget, timeline, we exceeded the client expectations for design, and the client is happy.

“At MGA, it's not about gender. It's about a culture that supports our individual strengths and talents.”

- Marni Murdock, Principal, MGA Architecture

How has MGA helped you to grow professionally?

RJ—I wanted to be the best all-around "Architect" in the truest sense of the word, and Matt has always provided me with the opportunity to take the lead and to know and learn all aspects of the business. I'm not in any hurry now, but someday I may want to be an owner myself. "Moving up" is growing and developing in your career, not competing in some big firm for a higher place on a corporate ladder. I know I wouldn't flourish in that kind of culture.

MM—At MGA, it's not about gender. It's about a culture that supports our individual strengths and talents. I can take charge of a project and do what I do best, and still find that life balance that's so important. My goal now is to put MGA Architecture on the map as Hawaii's top firm in Healthcare Architecture.



Matt Gilbertson and MGA's 2014 accolades include Pacific Edge Magazine's **Business Executive of the Year**, the Waikiki Improvement Association **Ho'owehiwehi Award**, & the Masonry Institute of Hawaii's **2014 Project of the Year**.

2012–2014
MGA AWARDS & RECOGNITION

2014
WAIKIKI IMPROVEMENT ASSOC.
Ho'owehiwehi Award
Waikiki Business Plaza renovations

PACIFIC EDGE MAGAZINE
2014 Business Executive of the Year
Matt Gilbertson

MASONRY INSTITUTE OF HAWAII
2014 Project of the Year
Walgreens Waipahu

PACIFIC BUSINESS NEWS
"Fastest 50" #13

2013
WAIKIKI IMPROVEMENT ASSOC.
Ho'owehiwehi Award
Waikiki Shopping Plaza Offices
Tanaka of Tokyo Restaurant

PACIFIC BUSINESS NEWS
"Fastest Fifty" #39

2012
PACIFIC EDGE MAGAZINE
Best New Business Award

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