



Good People Creating Great Design

Philosophy of 'think, design, act' continues to guide TDA in its 25th anniversary year

By Dennis Castiglione | Photos courtesy of TDA

They believe in developing and nurturing a cooperative company culture, an open office environment, relationships, honesty, taking risks, no titles, big dreams... and ice cream. And those are just some of the reasons TDA (ThenDesign Architecture) is enjoying a 25th anniversary marked by a celebration of great success.

"I left a well-compensated position at a 'production mill' 25 years ago and defied logic by opening my own place – much to the chagrin of my wife," says Robert "Bob" A. Fiala, AIA, NCARB, managing partner of TDA. "There was no profound business plan in mind. I simply had a sense of opportunity. Actually, I probably picked one of the worst times to start a business [in the midst of an economic recession]."

Defying logic proved to be a smart move. TDA has grown every year since

opened its doors, with its most significant growth occurring between 2006 and 2011.

The firm's secret? "We've been blessed with great people, incredible clients and some wonderful assignments," answers Fiala. The firm actually grew out of a relationship with Bruce Huston, founder of Huston Associates, which was formed in 1951. "We began by taking space in the basement of his building [Tri-W Building in Willoughby, Ohio] and

drawing on his resources," explains Fiala, who was a former employee of Huston Associates.

In 1989, Fiala transitioned and renamed the firm ThenDesign (created from the word 'thencan,' the Old English word for 'think'). "We believe that successful design is fostered by the art of thinking – thinking about our clients' needs and developing aesthetically appropriate and workable design solutions to meet those needs," says Fiala.

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ThenDesign became known as TDA in 2008 and even though the name has changed, the guiding philosophy of “think, design, act” still holds true.

Building the team

The guiding philosophies at TDA certainly seem to be working. Careful hires and the nurturing of talent has become a cornerstone of the company’s success. Employee longevity with the firm is a prime indicator. “The average tenure is 10 years and there are some 20-year employees – there’s just no turnover here,” says Fiala.

“It’s interesting,” offers Christopher D. Smith, RA, LEED AP, NCARB, Fiala’s partner in the firm. “When people do leave us they most often are leaving the industry, not going on to another company.” Smith joined TDA in 1998 and was named partner in 2004 as part of the firm’s succession plan.

“We are always looking for the best and the brightest,” says Smith. “We love to find recent college graduates who are the top of their class but envision being more than just accomplished designers – we are looking for energy, enthusiasm and creative-thinking. We want prob-



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STAYING POWER Careful hires and the nurturing of talent has become a cornerstone of TDA's success. Employee longevity with the architectural firm is a prime indicator. "The average tenure is 10 years and there are some 20-year employees – there's just no turnover here," says Robert Fiala, managing partner.

lem seekers and problem solvers. We want folks who kick the tires, question the conventional and find new, better ways to do things." To help find these team members, TDA instituted a well-crafted internship program that allows students to gain valuable experience and grow confidence by engaging in their profession. The firm believes it offers a chance to get to know future employees as students and acclimate them to the company's culture.

"We get to know them and they get to know us, and we've been fortunate because they're not only good at what they do – they're really good people," says Fiala. "Every hire is for their technical ability and their personality. We don't look at potential employees based on 'what year did you graduate, are you registered or not registered' or 'what experience do you have.' If we think you're capable of performing and you demonstrate the desire and interest, you're going to get the chance to prove it."

"We are a teaching firm," adds Smith. "We want to give young, talented people an opportunity to learn, grow and make significant contributions for our clients."

The growth of young design talent at TDA is complemented by a number of seasoned industry veterans, many who joined the company by acquisition. "We've been fortunate to have assumed control of a few firms whose principals have come to work for us," Fiala says. "Having these senior level architects aboard has given us great balance and a wealth of experience."

"Maybe the most significant hire we've ever made was Karla Osborn," Fiala says. Osborn was the first full-time employee of the firm – and is still with the company. "I first met Karla when she was the receptionist at Huston. When I hired her people were saying, 'why do you need an executive assistant? You should be hiring a draftsman or a spec writer.' But she's



been the 'company godmother' from the day she joined us. She's watched over us, nurtured us and kept us on the right track all these years. She's an amazing human being."

Enriching lives through design

While growing the firm's portfolio is nice, Fiala and Smith say that the pri-

mary focus of TDA is to "enrich lives through design."

"Every day, wherever you are, your life is affected by design," Fiala says. "We believe that design transcends merely architecture – when created intentionally, it can enrich the lives of all those it touches. We recognize our responsibility to enhance the environment for all, and

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STRONG TRACK RECORD As leader of TDA's Sports Facilities Studio, Partner Christopher Smith has utilized his past experience as an Olympic-caliber athlete to guide the firm on a range of sports projects, including the Olympic training site at SPIRE Institute in Geneva.



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"Every day, wherever you are, your life is affected by design. We believe that design transcends merely architecture – when created intentionally, it can enrich the lives of all those it touches."

Robert Fiala
TDA

markets, we quite often include people in our design teams from outside that experience so that we get a fresh perspective and unique ideas," Smith says. His own personal background has been an advantage in both the education and sports markets. Smith is a former Division I collegiate athlete and an Olympic-caliber track athlete whose bid for the 2000 games was overshadowed by a knee



FIELD WORK Among recent credits for TDA's Sports Facilities Studio is Highmark Stadium, a soccer-specific stadium in Pittsburgh's Station Square, which is home to the Pittsburgh Riverhounds, a member of the United Soccer League Professional Division.

injury. As leader of TDA's Sports Facilities Studio, he engages specialized knowledge inherent with any athletic facility.

Among TDA's recent credits under Smith's guidance is Highmark Stadium, a soccer-specific stadium in Pittsburgh's Station Square, which is home to the Pittsburgh Riverhounds, a member of the USL PRO (United Soccer League Professional Division). TDA's sports and recreation projects also include (but are not limited to) the Olympic training site at SPIRE Institute in Geneva, the University of Notre Dame Rugby Field, Lost Nations Sports Park in Lake County, Gilmore Academy Ice Arena and many of the area's high school stadiums.

In the education sector, TDA is renowned for its thoughtful approach to the design of learning environments. "We are all about great design, but our approach – what we do, successfully, in education design – is developing environments that effectively facilitate teaching and learning," says Smith.

"Instilling the desire to learn is really the challenge in educational design," says Jeff Anderle, director of marketing for TDA, "The work we do really reflects our understanding of the best ways to

create an environment to encourage the students to learn."

TDA has an extensive portfolio of architectural design work in the education marketplace, including work for the Cleveland Metropolitan School

district (CMSD). The firm is currently working with CMSD on the Campus International School on the Cleveland State University campus. Its experience in and passion for creating exceptional learning environments has

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COMING AROUND Among TDA projects currently underway is the ongoing renovation of Goodyear Hall, part of The East End mixed-use redevelopment effort in Akron.

GLSD in planning and executing the recently opened Marriott Autograph Hotel at The 9 in downtown Cleveland. The company is also currently working for Hilton and Marriott brands throughout the United States and Latin America, including the Courtyard Toluca in Toluca, Mexico, recently.

Another growing market segment for TDA is senior living. “We can apply much of what we know about designing learning, hospitality and athletic environments in our work for elderly care and assisted living communities,” says Smith.

The company leaders are also proud to acknowledge that their work includes preservation assignments in addition to new construction. Two active projects include work for IRG. The Goodyear Hall renovation – part of The East End redevelopment project in Akron – and the Hoover Complex

helped the firm capture great market share in this segment. In fact, TDA has upwards of \$1 billion in education design to its credit.

“No matter how large a project, however, our biggest successes transpire when our clients return and our teammates stay and grow with us,” says Anderle. “Through decades in the industry, we have found that thinking of others before ourselves – whether it is creating a design for a client or inter-

acting within our team – is the secret to our success.”

This approach has also served TDA well in the hospitality industry, another of its strong vertical niches. “We have a long history of doing hospitality projects in Northeast Ohio but our Pittsburgh office is primarily focused on that segment,” says Fiala. TDA is currently doing the three most significant hotel projects in downtown Pittsburgh. The team supported

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CONTINUING JOURNEY The hospitality industry remains one of TDA's several strong vertical niches, with projects completed near and far – including Marriott Courtyard Queretan (left) and Marriott Courtyard Tollocan (right), both located in Mexico.

renovations are slated for completion in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

Nurturing collaboration

TDA believes in open doors and team collaboration. Its own office space encourages that open philosophy but internal design elements also subtly reflect the spirit of cohesion and connection. A flowing length of orange fabric weaves its way throughout both floors of the office, visually tying together the workspaces.

"Our firm operates on the principle that design should value people," Fiala says. "Whether it's the clients and communities we're designing for, or the passionate and creative individuals we hire, people come first."

Winning ingredients

Business longevity can be attributed to financial strength, reputation, strong personnel, consistent performance and quality work. All of these characteristics are present at TDA. However Fiala and Smith cite some nuances that they believe are paramount to their success.

"To us, this business is not about winning awards; it's about providing the breadth and depth of services our clients deserve," says Fiala. "Delivering what they expect is our top priority."

Smith agrees. "The best way to characterize who we are is that we are in the thinking and listening business, not the drawing business," he says. "If we understand what the client wants and can translate that into a design that delivers beyond their expectations, we have a winner."

"It's not surprising that many of our clients become close friends of ours, which begins by getting to know each of them better through sitting down over a cup of coffee or preferably a scoop of ice cream," Fiala says with a laugh. "Basically, we get to know them and what's important to them. We care about them, as people, and I believe that shows in what we deliver for them."

Some architectural firms use design elements that are recognizable signatures for them. Not so for TDA.

"We don't have a signature 'look,' because it's not about us – it's about the clients and the people they serve,"

Smith says. "We design to fit what they need and want."

When it works, it's fun and productive, he adds.

"There is not one day I don't enjoy doing this – and I work seven days a week," Fiala says with a smile. "I love this business and this company, and the people I work with." It's obvious that his enthusiasm is contagious and sustainable – TDA is 25 years old and going strong. **P**

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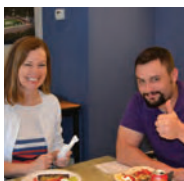
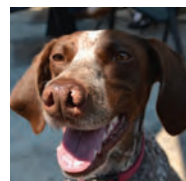
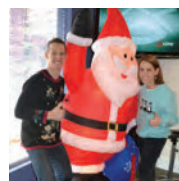
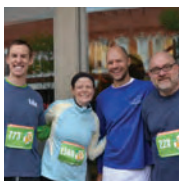
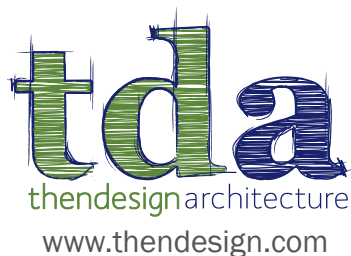
When ThenDesign Architecture was founded in 1989, we believed our success would be assured through the strength of the relationships we could create and nurture.

Whether it's the clients and communities we're designing for, or the passionate and creative individuals we hire, people come first.

ThenDesign Architecture is proud to have been honored as part of this year's Weatherhead 100, Crain's Cleveland Fast 50, and Lake-Geauga Fast Track 50 classes. Our firm has enjoyed great success that would not be possible without our valued clients and partners.

Our success in creating world-class environments for education, sports, hospitality, senior living and historic preservation markets is directly related to your partnership and support. Thank you for working with us, and thank you for believing in us.

HERE'S TO ANOTHER 25 YEARS



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