

Chance Encounters

How they exploit the dumb, innumerate, and enchanted



Executive Suite:
Lee Olsen: Unboxing at the Olsen Design Group

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EXECUTIVE SUITE

By Terry Scott Reed

Lee Olsen, I am sure, sees the irony. His company, Olsen Design Group, one of the area's leading architectural firms, occupies offices along Route 183 on the grounds of the Reading Airport. It is a splendid, modern building, but there is no hint of its past. The offices are housed in the shell of the original terminal building used by early fliers. It was ticket counter, snack bar, soda fountain, and observation area. Olsen and I both reminisce about our parents bringing us out to the field to watch the planes come and go—something of a novelty in the late 40s and early 50s, certainly for young boys ...

When the modern terminal opened, this one went vacant and eventually became a gas station and repair shop, complete with lube and service bays around back. In more modern times, an ad agency undertook a major re-hab and expansion to the building, adding a second floor and, as Olsen puts it, "the best conference room in Berks County," which indeed it may be, boasting features like lots of natural light, a great view of Mount Penn, the Pagoda, and Reading, and a bird's eye seat for flight operations, including, on the day of my visit, President Clinton's arrival in Berks. Adaptive reuse, an architectural and urban renewal buzzword these days, oozes from the walls.

But for me, nothing is more inviting than encountering a pet-friendly workplace, and my first greeting comes from the cutest, best-behaved 6-month-old mixed breed pup you'll ever encounter, and I'm sorry I didn't grab a treat for it when I left my own office (and my dogs). Upstairs, the company cat holds sway, and the building and its staff have no problem accommodating the animal residents—down to blocking open self-closing doors so the critters can get around on their patrols. Brochures for the Humane Society and the Animal Rescue League are in the lobby.

Olsen, 64-ish and a newlywed, is upbeat and articulate. It goes with the job. Being an architect means combining artistic skills with practical thinking, a left-brain/right-brain collaboration



Lee C. Olsen, president & CEO of Olsen Design Group

SpaceMaker

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that is considered unusual among the general population. But communication skills are extremely important to lead the client to the best solution, to enlighten sometimes skeptical zoning boards.

Lee is a Reading kid who grew up in the 18th Ward—the Millmont area—and graduated from Reading High. He attended accelerated art classes at the Reading Public Museum and Art Gallery for 6 years. His mentor (maybe his first mentor) was James Waldron, curator

of fine arts at the time. "I remember I was learning watercolors. All my strokes were parallel and structured. Waldren took my brush and painted some sweeping arcs, saying to me, 'You paint like an architect. Learn to think off the paper.' Today, I tell people to 'Think off the wall,' my adaptation of Mr. Waldren's good advice."

Lee is about the only one in the office—there's a staff of 12—who still sometimes draws on paper instead

of a computer. (He does that too, of course.) He sets aside Friday afternoons especially to draw and "be an artist." Long years of client work have influenced his fine art. Until recently, he had a few issues with brush and canvas because he worried what others might think of the work, an understandable knee-jerk reaction by someone whose livelihood depends on client approval. "I had to learn to paint for me."

Lee is no doubt among the most successful people to drop out of Penn State—on a scholarship, no less. And he's one of the few from that group ever invited back to address the student body. The circumstances involve his recovery from alcoholism and his latter-day second career as a public speaker. Penn State Berks's Dr. Susan Speece invited him to present the keynote at the Berks campus's December 2005 commencement. The message was so on point, so well presented (there're those communications skills) that he was later invited to University Park, again to keynote, this time for Fraternity and Sorority Life—Alcohol Awareness Week.

When Olsen left Penn State, his status with the draft board changed too. "They became interested in me." So he joined the Navy, spent 2 years mostly in the Mediterranean, mostly on an aircraft carrier. "I flew a lot, but as crew. I wasn't a pilot." What he can tell you is he can't tell you a whole lot about his work, but he does point out that "only about 5 percent of intelligence-gathering is done by people of the James Bond stripe. The balance comes from public sources and records—even military magazines!" Olsen's work was of the latter stripe, not the former.

We were both there at the same time, he in the Navy, me as a Marine, and we swap stories about Naples (was the flock of Neapolitan kids that surrounded him and picked his pocket the same Mafia-in-training moblet that also accosted me?) and our mutual delight with Barcelona and its Ramblas.

Olsen's father worked at the former American Chain and Cable Company. The site is now "Buttonwood Gateway," the old foundry now

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replaced with big metal boxes where fruit is processed. "The Chain" was well known for its contentious union relations and its lengthy, bitterly-fought strikes: "That's how I learned about gravy bread sandwiches."

His father (who is deceased) took advantage of an opportunity to become a custodian with the Reading School District, and he had steady work from there on. His mother is alive, 89, and living at Phoebe. He is their only child.

After the Navy ("The CIA called and invited me to apply, but I didn't."), he decided to go for his degree and to get serious about architecture. He chose to live in New York City and attend the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. "I had an aunt and uncle there, and they offered to cover my room and board to stay with them while I went to school. My uncle was a limo driver for David Rockefeller."

"One day he stopped by the house with the limo—they lived in a place on 55th Street—and Mrs. Rockefeller was in the back seat. She asked my uncle who I was, and he told her and about my interest in becoming an architect. She wondered if some architect friends of hers might need some help, and as a result, I wound up working for Harrison and Abramovitz." There have been volumes written about the company and its partners, its many credits, and its role in defining modern architecture. But at this time, the Rockefellers and Harrison and Abramovitz were involved in the creation of Lincoln Center, the queen bee mother ship of all arts centers whose DNA extends all the way to Reading's own GoggleWorks Center for the Arts and, literally, all other community-based arts centers. There was no prior blueprint, as this was the first time it had been attempted. Harrison and Abramovitz (who designed and built the New York State office complex in Albany and were also involved in Rockefeller Center) were designing Philharmonic Hall and the Metropolitan Opera House. "Their offices were right across from Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and that's where I attended church while living there. That was during Cardinal Spellman's tenure. In '64 to '65 there was the World's Fair. In the course of working at Harrison and Abramovitz, I met and saw many famous people, including the artist Jacques Lipchitz. The company collaborated with him and many others on the Lincoln Center Project."

Have you done this? Lee Olsen had an appreciation of the airport building for some time, always glancing over when he drove by. He admired the way

it was re-habbed and thought it would make a nice place for his company, should the occasion arise. And when he heard it was becoming vacant, he went after it. What other buildings does Lee admire (other than his own)? "The best is the Seagram's Building in New York. It is perfectly proportioned and relates so well to the plaza it sits on. And Lever House, on Park Avenue Lever House revolutionized setback and the recognition of pedestrians needing access into and around the building."

Also on his list is Philadelphia's Kimmel Center, and Olsen visits the building regularly, as a classical music fan. "The Kimmel Center is an absolute gem. A simple solution—two theaters inside an overarching glass roof."

His personal design favorite is the Student Center at Alvernia College. Then-president Larry Mazzero once told him the building was so popular with students that the school had trouble getting them out of it for cleanups.

Anyone who thinks they might like a career in architecture should bring a fondness for people and be willing to work in a collaborative way and respect their opinions. "But you need to express yourself. You don't even have to have artistic drawing talent anymore. Younger graduates are so good at using the computer."

Although he still personally keeps sharp at drawing, non-computer style, if Michelangelo and DaVinci were "working" today, they'd be doing their thing on computers "and wishing it ran faster, just as we do!" He also advised career seekers that except at the so-called "starchitect" level, this is not a profession that is likely to make one wealthy. Those few to whom the appellation applies are probably worth the astronomical sums they command, but he pointed out that starchitects are all comparatively old and only came to wealth and outsized fame late in their careers.

Starchitects that Olsen admires include Renzo Piano, known for the New York City building and for his museum work, and Raphael Vinoly, who designed the Kimmel. "His work has fluidity almost like music! Did you know the inside of Verizon Hall [within the Kimmel] is shaped like a viola?"

Like all smart architects, Lee Olsen worries about the economy. "It is a big indicator of how we're gonna do as a company the next year. I'd like to find a way to recession-proof the company if I could, by diversifying maybe." Many people don't realize that building material choices have become more complex

these days. Steel increasingly goes to China and India.

And he sees that every architect needs to fight the "just give me a box" mentality. Regarding hospitals, for example, it's been proven that "you heal quicker and better in a good, pleasing environment." Energy and codes are also big issues. "Buildings are getting safer and safer, and I applaud that."

Lee is not the retiring kind—"I'll work as long as I'm healthy and physically able." A good vacation for him is "2 weeks in Avalon, NJ, to go native." If he wasn't engaged in his business, he'd probably be driving a race car or sailing an America's Cup contender.

Sometime real soon he'd like to write a few books and open a specialized speaker's bureau. "I don't wear my alcoholism on my sleeve, but I do believe I have a positive message, a story to tell."

Olsen is licensed in seven states. In addition to the Alvernia Student Center, he designed the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts and was involved in master planning projects for Conner's

Glass Research Center, Lancaster Labs, Holy Name High School, and the Caron Foundation. Like many community leaders, he seems to devote unrestricted time to charitable affairs. He holds board seats at BCTV, Friends of the Reading Museum, River Place Development Corporation, Phoebe Berks Health Care Center, Reading Symphony Orchestra, and Easy Does It.

He doesn't just speak on alcohol dependency. Over the years, he has lectured at the Reading Museum on architectural subjects like skyscrapers, Greek architecture, and New York City past 9/11.

Like all architects, Lee has to engage in continuing education. He chooses the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University and in recent years has been focusing on "green" buildings. "Some of today's buildings are designed to generate enough electricity that they could disconnect from the grid or sell back their excess capacity to their local utility." Ending dependency, be it utilities or personal, is a subject on which he has become the go-to guy.

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