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'We will adjust and I know we will get through it': Local architect COVID-19 fears

by Jorge Mercado | April 27, 2020 | 0 comment

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Santa Barbara Museum of Art in Santa Barbara on Sunday, April 26, 2020. (Kenneth Song/News-Press)

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For three local architectural companies, slowing down, taking a deep breath and pushing forward is more a necessity than an option, especially considering their owners have been in a similar situation before.

Dylan Henderson, principal owner of Salt Architecture, Bob Kupiec, principal architect and owner of Kupiec Architects, Dawn Sherry, principal architect and owner of Sherry & Associates Architects, have all seen their business impacted by times before.

When the Great Recession impacted the United States in 2008, many architectural companies felt that hit. In fact, Mr. Kupiec lived as an architect through two U.S. recessions.

“I have lived through two bad recessions, one in 2008 and one in 1989, and those were nothing compared to this kind of economic shutdown, and usually architects get hit hard for a long time until the economy starts to recover,” Mr. Kupiec

Mr. Kupiec added that after the recession in 1989, it wasn't until about 1996 that he really saw a resurgence in the architectural field.

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“It takes time for the financial market to kind of heal itself before people really start to want to reinvest. And, for us, the problem that I think that will reoccur is that we lost a whole cadre of people who moved on to different careers because just couldn’t wait for the economy to recover,” Mr. Kupiec said.

“All of a sudden, it becomes hard to find an experienced architect.”

As a result, Mr. Kupiec has one simple goal during this pandemic: keep his staff employed.

“I love my staff, they are the greatest kids in the world. I really want to do everything that I can do to make sure that they remain safe, and that they can afford to remain as architects,” Mr. Kupiec said.

One way he is able to keep his staff, aside from taking advantage of the stimulus package, is the fact that Kupiec Architects is currently rebuilding the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

While he understands that there has been a slowdown in the work, as some people can’t risk getting the virus, Mr. Kupiec says there are still crews hard at work out there.

“I don’t know if it’s the right decision, but I know that is extraordinary. People are committed to what they do and they’re just not ready to give up,” Mr. Kupiec said.

While Mr. Kupiec was excited to take the project even before the virus, he said given the current situation, a project like this could mean a lot more to the community.

“We think that there are things that are worthwhile in life so you put your shoulder to the wheel because you enrich somebody through institutions like the music and the art that’s there and the educational programs that they provide,” Mr. Kupiec said.

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Henderson said.

While Mr. Henderson understands that it might be easy to fall into a dark place at this time, he is more focused on trying to keep his staff employed and his clients happy.

As such, he has become quite the optimist during this trying time.

“I think it’s everything to stay positive,” Mr. Henderson said.

“If you focus on the negatives, then you’ll end up with negative results. Things are going to change, they always do, that’s the one thing we can guarantee in life, and you have to be able to respond to it. You have to be able to be flexible with that and that’s where we’re at.”

Currently, Mr. Henderson has many contracts in place and is planning on completing every single one.

The problem, however, might arise 10 or 12 months down the road when people really start to feel the strain, especially those who have lost work.

“(The recession in) 2009 was very brutal and if you want to focus on the fear, I guess that’s where you would go but I’m not planning on not having work and I’m not planning on slowing down. I’m not planning on having any of our projects slow down,” Mr. Henderson said.

“I think we’re gonna get through this and I think that the country hopefully will bounce back and be better for it.

“I think there’s going to be a lot of really great work and pent up demand that we all need to satisfy and I’d much rather have that on that than this is going to be just like the recession because it’s not like the recession at all. That was a different type of economic crisis.”

Like Mr. Henderson, Ms. Sherry is taking a similar approach of going with the flow and taking things as they come.

“I could complain about a lot of things, but really I don’t have anything major to complain about at the moment. The fact that we were able to set up and work from home and it was a smooth transition so now we have to focus on the work,” Ms. Sherry said.

Like the other two owners, Ms. Sherry says a big worry is the fact that there are so many unknowns. She said that some j

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“I’m not worried though because I know we will adjust and I know we will get through it.”

While she knows that there might be a time where she might have to furlough some of her employees, Ms. Sherry said she is more focused on taking things one day at a time and ensuring her staff is okay, both mentally and physically.

“Really, my goal is to just keep everyone safe and feeling positive,” Ms. Sherry said.

“We are all very close and we are important to each other and we are always talking to each other and that’s very important. I would say the one thing we have missed more than anything is Friday’s because we would always go to lunch together.”

While those lunches are postponed for the foreseeable future, Ms. Sherry is happy she could still see her staff via Facetime and is just looking forward to a brighter time.

“We will grow from this because we will realize the things that are important to us, and the things that sometimes we take for granted,” she said. “I know that we’ll all learn from it because I know I have.”

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