

ARCHITECTONICS

GREAT LAKES BY DESIGN



The Architects

The continued series highlighting some of the practicing Architects in the Great Lakes region and their passion for creating inspired spaces and places

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James D. Nordlie, AIA

President | Archiventure Group PC Architects

Harbor Springs, Michigan | Denver, Colorado

“The first line is never sacred. Design is a process and it is fighting the battle of mediocrity, insensitivity, and laziness. Design is the challenge of overcoming all of those obstacles for an inspirational and positive result,” said James

D. Nordlie, AIA, president of Archiventure Group PC in Denver, Colorado and Harbor Springs, Michigan.

“The fight is to not allow the appreciation for design to get lost in the speed of time and budgets. Our fight everyday is to find truth

in design and make it have social responsibility as there are so many problems that are facing our world today—don’t get lost in the pure realm of design and forget all the people you need to serve,” Nordlie added.

Nordlie, a native of Birmingham, Mich-

igan, founded Archiventure Group PC in 1984 as an architectural firm specializing in the design of residential, commercial, and institutional projects worldwide. The firm, which is supported by a team of principals and associates, works to deliver distinctive, architectural statements in harmony with its contextual landscapes for clients and offers a number of services, such as: programming, site feasibility, interior architecture, space planning, architectural planning and design, construction administration and field observation, and urban and environmental design, among others.

For Nordlie, each project reflects an intentional and collaborative process among client, contractor, consultant, and design team, where the end result weaves together innovation, creativity, and a consideration for cultural, functional, environmental, and human needs.

“The architecture that we do is a reflection of our culture, values, ethics, and needs. I think if you can get away from the ‘star architecture,’ per se, normal everyday creations in the built environment affects all of our lives,” Nordlie said. “We should want to do it in a positive way that has some lasting quality representing continuity and our values and our life. I think we need to create something that is positive in the built environment, but also can be inspiring, comforting, safe, and exciting.”

Initially introduced to the fields of architecture and design while attending Cranbrook Schools, a college preparatory school part of the Cranbrook Educational Community in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, Nordlie said the creativity instilled in its programming planted a seed that would eventually develop into an affinity for the craft later on in his life.

“I was normally in the school shop and art areas doing projects,” Nordlie said. “It was the creativity of drawing, I did lost-wax

silver casting, I worked with wood, I painted a bit, and that planted a seed.”

Though it took a few years spending time as a night auditor and bartender while living—and skiing—in Steamboat Springs, Colorado upon graduating from the University of Denver in Denver, Colorado with a degree in finance, Nordlie said his affinity for the creative arts led him to become serious about a career path. He went on to attend the University of Colorado at Denver’s College of Architecture and Planning to earn a Master of Science in Architecture.

“There was no brilliant ‘aha!’ moment, but it seemed to accumulate over time in that direction,” Nordlie said. “I had always sketched and painted and worked in metals, and so that led me to think I needed something more than numbers and business.”

From there, Nordlie began to hone his architectural career working at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP in Denver as a designer for five years and then a brief stint as project architect for Perkins Eastman in New York City. He then returned to Denver to launch his own firm in 1984 and has since led the development of a diverse portfolio of residential, commercial, educational, hospitality, and interior work, as well as clubhouse and lodge design on golf courses throughout the world. From traditional, shingle-style vernacular on Ohio-based fairways; a Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic-inspired hotel retreat at a 27-hole, Jack Nicklaus-designed course in India; and the stately architectural style found on the grounds at Forest Dunes Golf Club in Roscommon, Michigan; to the Birmingham Bloomfield Arts Center addition, multiple family residences in Colorado, Michigan, and Florida; a mixed-use development in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; and the Spring City Lakeshore in Kunming, China; there is an intention to each project’s surrounding culture and history.

“I’ve always chased projects that had di-

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versity in program, building type, culture, and location,” Nordlie said. “That is why I’ve pursued so much work abroad over the last 20 years in India, China, and Vietnam; places like that. It fascinated me. It has been another, more expansive, learning experience about life.”

Though much of his form work is on hold at the moment due to economic and other circumstances surrounding COVID-19—such as hotels and golf projects abroad like in Port Louis in Mauritius—Nordlie said the challenge of keeping those projects in motion is something that drives him each day.

“We are working on a high-end hotel in Beverly Hills and a museum and hotels in Las Vegas, and those are all designed, but not built,” Nordlie said. “It’s probably going to be a longer period of time to see any final result, but that is what gets me up each day, is the challenge to keep the business solid and liquid in such difficult times and that allows you to find interesting projects.”

Nordlie also noted as things slow down, the other challenge is to keep his team working and creative, and has been spending more upfront time on new projects. He also said it is a challenge to find the right client and find resources that can be dedicated to a project that has an immediate effect, but lasting value.

“The normal market is so fast-paced that everybody just wants to put their money in for two years and get it out and walk away. Sadly, it’s tighter budgets and making more money. It’s all about the money. The challenge is to create a lasting piece of architecture with the toughest program, the toughest budget, and finding a client you can educate to see that it comes down to design,” Nordlie said. “It forces us to be more creative with less, so the challenge is finding a good client who gets it and is willing to take that risk. Everything is risk-reward.”