

TEA



TEA Market Sector
Briefing Series

Architecture and Placemaking

Architectural Designers Share Hard-Won Insights with TEA

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T H E M E D
ENTERTAINMENT
ASSOCIATION

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“With a background in theme park design, opportunities are infinite.”
- David Price

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered what the world of experience design looks like from the architect’s point of view? TEA’s Strategic Branding and Marketing Committee pondered that question as they discussed the changes taking place in the Themed Entertainment Industry. They wanted to confirm which market sectors might benefit from the enormous talent pool within the TEA.

The architecture sector offered a good place to start the inquiry, because architects with a background in entertainment design have a unique perspective on creating compelling places that contribute to great experiences. Architects must adapt their practices to keep pace with industry changes, and they often work with clients in diverse industries that are benefiting from experience design.

Six architectural design professionals were chosen for their distinct viewpoints and range of experience. They agreed to meet one-on-one with TEA’s Tia Morris to describe their professional challenges, the client concerns they typically encounter, and the advantages of collaborating with TEA specialists.

The participants included:

Rick Solberg, AIA, SOLBERG + Associates. One of the founding partners of The Cuningham Group, Rick is passionate about incorporating storytelling into the delivery of architecture. He has worked with entertainment companies such as Universal Studios, Paramount Parks, Six Flags, and Walt Disney Imagineering.

John Kasperowicz, AIA, XPA Experiential Architecture. John’s distinguished 20+ year architectural design career includes projects for Disney, Knott’s Berry Farm, Lego Land, The Forum Shops at Caesar’s Palace, and COSI Children’s Museum.

Marty Borko, Principal, Gensler. The leader of Gensler’s entertainment/mixed-use, urban design, and planning practice in Santa Monica, Marty has led planning teams on urban mixed-use and entertainment destinations around the world. He is a member of the ULI Entertainment Development Council.

Jim Nelson, Mother Company. Jim is an icon in the destination retail entertainment industry. As former Director of Planning for MCA/Universal Development Company, Jim is best known for his role in the creation of Universal City Walk.

Jonathan Peters, The Disneyland Resort. Jonathan is a TEA member designer who has worked on challenging, fast-paced entertainment projects around the world. Besides Disney, he has also worked for Universal Studios and Gensler.

David Price, AIA, David A. Price Architects, Inc. David is the son of Harrison “Buzz” Price, Walt Disney’s legendary “numbers man.” For 20+ years he has been applying his experience as an attractions architect to resorts, entertainment venues, retail destinations, community projects and, most recently, dynamic church campuses.

This report is the first in a series of market sector briefs being prepared by TEA’s Strategic Branding and Marketing Committee. The purpose of these briefings is to provide insight into market opportunities for TEA members.

HOW THIS BRIEF IS ORGANIZED

The body of this report is divided into five sections, each based on the interviewees’ responses to the following questions:

- 1) What trends are you seeing in your field?
- 2) What are your clients’ biggest concerns?
- 3) What key challenges do you face in conducting your practice?
- 4) What would you tell a developer about bringing in TEA specialists?
- 5) What insights or advice are you willing to share with TEA members?

TRENDS SHAPING THE EXPERIENCE DESIGN INDUSTRY

*“What industry are we in? We are in the experience design industry.
We create environments that provide unique experiences.”
- John Kasperowicz*

The architects mentioned three trends that are affecting the experience design industry:

- Experience design opportunities have grown beyond the theme park industry.
- Employment practices have changed. A number of industry specialists will soon retire.
- Innovative clients and new industries are setting trends.

1) EXPERIENCE DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES HAVE GROWN BEYOND THE THEME PARK INDUSTRY

“New opportunities come from unlikely venues.”

– Marty Borko

While theme parks may have traditionally been the primary clients of TEA members, worldwide changes in demographics, competition for customers, and distribution of wealth are prompting clients in other businesses to capitalize on experience design opportunities.

Each architect spoke with passion and enthusiasm about new applications for experience design. “We are seeing a trend in our practice away from theme park work to mixed-use and urban retail entertainment,” said Marty Borko. “District branding is more natural for experience design. The Grove, in Los Angeles, is a good example: It combines history, storytelling, mixed-use, urban retail, entertainment, and place-making to create a whole new experience.”

Jim Nelson knows something about district branding. Twenty years ago he led the planning effort that launched Universal City Walk. He considers it an astute business decision to combine retail merchandising with entertainment design. “Retail environments must create experiences that translate to sales,” Nelson explained. “Universal City Walk is a district branding project that has done it right. Sales per square foot are three times higher than the average retail center.”

Borko offered another example: “We’re doing a lot of smaller scale customer experiences. A client was looking to develop a branded experience. They needed content providers, show designers, technology, and lighting. The project has a story, experience map, sketches, content, game characters, and technology show controls. Yet, this is a 2,000 square foot project!”

David Price would never have gotten into the church niche without an entertainment design background. “Any venue can benefit from themed entertainment expertise,” Price said. “Designers in our field have a well-developed ability to generate fresh thoughts, orchestrate activities, script a series of events, organize complexity, design in phases, and plan for growth.”

Opportunities for Experience Design		
PUBLIC VENUES	EDUCATIONAL VENUES	OTHER VENUES
Entertainment Centers	Museums	Libraries
Shopping Malls	Collections/ Heritage Facilities	Church Campuses
Mixed-Use Urban Centers	Cultural Attractions	Hospital Childrens’ Wings
Restaurants	Science Centers	Healing Gardens
Hotels and Resorts	Nature Sites	Cancer Treatment Centers
Visitors/Hospitality Centers	Brand Lands	Senior Centers
Gaming Centers	Museums of Industry	Auto Malls
Sports Parks/Franchises	Factory Tours	Alzheimer’s Facilities
Music Halls (House of Blues)	College Campuses	Housing
Community Recreation Centers	Medical Campuses	Daycare Centers

2) EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES HAVE CHANGED. A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF TEA SPECIALISTS WILL SOON RETIRE.

During the last heyday of theme park development, major employers offered steady work and dynamic projects. The industry benefited by developing a large pool of highly trained specialists, and they received unprecedented real-world experience.

Times have changed. The major entertainment companies have trimmed in-house expertise to stay lean and mean. This has spawned a consultant industry where specialists work as consultants to their former employers, as well as for innovative new clients. “Professional services are being outsourced in all areas,” said David Price. “Managing the outsourcing process has brought new challenges. You can’t outsource creativity as easily as other intellectual processes.”

To add to the complexity of delivering high-level creative services, many seasoned professionals are looking towards retirement. “In the next ten years, 70 to 80 percent of engineers, architects, and technical specialists will retire, and they are not being replaced by today’s graduates,” said Price. “I already see a decline happening in the architectural profession. Soon it will affect the experience design industry as well.”

This presents a challenge for the design industry. “You can’t learn this in school,” said John Kasperowicz. “Skilled specialists understand details that are unique to experience design. If you want to engage people and provide for large crowds, you can only learn this through work experience, such as a Disney background.”

“Theme parks have always been laboratories of creativity.”

- David Price

3) INNOVATIVE CLIENTS IN NEW INDUSTRIES ARE SETTING TRENDS

“The right client is willing to experiment and step outside their comfort level.”

- Rick Solberg

“Trends keep us relevant,” affirms Jonathan Peters. Solberg contends, “Trends evolve. To set a trend, you need to understand both your market and especially your competition.” New trends come from working with clients who see themselves as innovative.

CLIENTS’ BIGGEST CONCERNS

“Clients are most nervous about the unknowns. Our job is to allay their fears.”

- John Kasperowicz

The architects were aware that many specialist consultants and vendors do not have an opportunity to interact directly with the architects’ clients. However, understanding client concerns is crucial to uncovering new opportunities and developing business relationships.

The interviews revealed that clients want to:

- 1) Make money
- 2) Develop successful projects
- 3) Create brand differentiation

Quality was suggested in passing, but because good workmanship is expected, it was not discussed at length.

1) CLIENTS NEED TO MAKE MONEY

Every architect indicated that clients have a keen interest in money — either conserving it, or getting the most return for the money they spend. Clients want a “positive return on their investment (ROI),” said Jonathan Peters. “They also want to stay within budget.”

Rick Solberg described clients’ financial concerns this way:

“Developers must make money. Banks and investors expect a certain return, and banks coach developers as to the formulas. Developers take financial risks and expect a return in the form of more customers, longer visits, and more satisfied retailers. It is all a dollar’s game.”

“Clients worry about time and money,” said John Kasperowicz. If it takes more time, clients think it costs more money. “Clients like it fast,” cautioned David Price. Be good. Be fast. And work at lightning speed.”

Borko advised, “Clients will be OK with the cost if they see you, like you, and believe you add value.” “If they see how you benefit their business goals, they will appreciate the value you bring to a project,” said Kasperowicz.

To learn what architects tell clients about specialists, see Section Four “How Do TEA Specialists Add Value to a Project.”

2) CLIENTS MEASURE SUCCESS IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Clients expect successful projects, but the criteria changes depending on the venue. For the most part, they want to attract people, encourage them to spend money, and persuade them to stay. Here are a few examples they discussed:

In the resort industry, guest occupancy and on-site spending indicate success. “Resorts that engage peoples’ imaginations create more lasting memories, which encourages enjoyment and repeat visitation,” said John Kasperowicz.

In the retail environment, “sales are the #1 measure of success,” advised Jim Nelson. “Developers want to create a popular destination where customers arrive in the mood to shop, spend time, spend money, and return again and again. High profits equal happy tenants.”

Modern church development measures success by attendance, growth, and member involvement.

“Well-designed church campuses can become the center of community life,” said David Price. “The language of attractions applied to church ministries creates a relevant, organic experience that grows and resonates with the church’s mission.”

3) CLIENTS WANT DIFFERENTIATION

“Developers want to differentiate themselves from everyone else,” said Marty Borko. “They want the project to speak to who they are.” Kasperowicz explained, “Clients face lots of competition. They want the ‘Big Idea’ to differentiate them from the competition.” Solberg added, “Most developers want brand enhancement. Good examples can be found in the Spectrum Centers and Simon Properties.”

THE ARCHITECTS’ CHALLENGES

Architects face many challenges as they build their practices. Five challenges were noted:

- 1) Find the right clients and the right projects
- 2) Put together the right teams
- 3) Design from conviction
- 4) Help clients make (or save) money
- 5) Build rewarding client relationships

CHALLENGE #1: FIND THE RIGHT CLIENTS AND THE RIGHT PROJECTS

“Architects hunger for that special client who opens the door to the opportunity to dream.”
- David Price

Behind every innovative new trend that is re-shaping the industry, there is a client who is making it happen. The “right client” for an experience design professional:

- Appreciates the value of creating compelling experiences for their guests.
- Sees themselves as innovative.
- Is focused on the guest experience over “the deal.”

Most architects said they would like to experiment on behalf of a client. Rick Solberg and David Price said that to find the right client, they ask themselves: “How knowledgeable and sophisticated is the client? Are they committed? Are they sufficiently capitalized? Are they open to new ideas?”

CHALLENGE #2: PUT TOGETHER THE RIGHT TEAMS

For most of the architects, finding the right consultants is an ongoing challenge, and essential to a project’s success. “Finding good consultants familiar with storytelling design principles is difficult,” said Jonathan Peters.

Marty Borko shared his perspective on finding the right people:

“First we start with the people we already know. Each project is different. There are no cookie-cutter projects. We evaluate each person’s strengths and weaknesses and try to match the right skill set to the assignment. We have a very strong network but we are always looking for new people. How do we meet them?... through people we’ve worked with; through our clients; and through our involvement in organizations like IAAPA, ICSC, TEA, and ULI.”

CHALLENGE #3: DESIGN FROM THE STRENGTH OF YOUR CONVICTIONS

Since the production phase of a contract often pays the bills, it puts pressure on architects to emphasize production at the expense of design. For designers to stay focused on their creative vision, they must be committed to their convictions.

John Kasperowicz offered several insights regarding design vs. production:

“Production is the life blood of most firms. A client often thinks of an architect as a technical consultant who makes sure the project is up to code... and the structure operates as it should. I am more concerned with what goes on between the buildings.”

While the architects were split on whether “story” was a critical element of their design solutions, most of the architects associated with TEA understand the advantages of a narrative-based design. “Walt Disney encouraged his design team to ‘always tell the guest a story when you entertain, enlighten or feed them,’” quoted David Price from a Disney article.

“Incorporating a metaphor helps the project speak to a higher purpose, Rick Solberg enthusiastically explained. “If you write first and then design, it is harder but the result is better design.”

Price wrote about narrative design in an article for Architectural Insight:

“The scripting and the storytelling approach is a powerful tool to guide the design vision. Script as a verb (active and creative) is used to shape an environment. Scripting invites dialogue and participation... [the] careful selection and combination of design themes... can result in a dynamic sense of place.”

Jim Nelson passionately talked about the role of story in creating successful retail environments. He holds a firm conviction that story and merchandising strategy need to work hand-in-hand.

“Retail development is about strategy,” he explained. “Storyline needs to support a well-designed strategy. By using storytelling and experience design with a merchandising strategy, you create an experience that is different and rewarding every time you go. Design so customers walk to the cash register. If you rely on props and stage sets to drive sales, you’ll need to discount merchandise to make money.”

CHALLENGE #4: HELP CLIENTS MAKE (OR SAVE) MONEY

Since money is a top concern for clients, architects make it a top priority to conserve dollars and optimize client investment. Many clients see architectural design as an expense. “Clients feel unless it is off the shelf they can’t afford it,” said Rick Solberg. To deliver compelling experiences, “we do not serve up design, special effects, and experiences. We have to invent from scratch, and that comes at an initial cost,” he clarified.

Kasperowicz added,

“The way to make the most money in architecture is to repeat, or slightly modify, what you have already designed for a previous project. If you copy what has been built, and make adjustments to satisfy local codes, essentially you have the same project. It is a challenge to come up with new stuff all the time, but creative design attracts a broader audience and distinguishes the client.”

Jonathan Peters put it this way, “The challenge comes in trying to give clients the essence of what they want, and at the budget price they demand.”

CHALLENGE #5: BUILD PRODUCTIVE CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

Good client relationships result from understanding and caring about client needs and concerns. “It is an important part of our business to build solid relationships before clients have a need for our services,” said Marty Borko.

“Listening is essential to creating good relationships,” said David Price. “It is a huge skill to step outside your own preoccupation and listen to what is being said, and what is not being said. Clients want consultants who listen and understand their needs, turn that information into successful projects, and commit themselves to doing what is in the best interest of the client.”

Diplomacy was another skill cited in working with clients. “Educating the client is critical, but you have to be careful not to sound as though you are preaching,” said Rick Solberg. He often adjusts his “jargon” to fit the client.

Price offered six ideas for enhancing client relationships:

- Become a good listener
- Ask the right questions
- Care about the client’s needs
- Be patient
- Balance humility and confidence
- Trust the inner strength of your convictions

HOW DO TEA SPECIALISTS ADD VALUE TO A PROJECT?

“Entertainment design is both science and art. The science requires a long list of technical specialties. The art requires that it looks as if it happened by magic.”

- John Kasperowicz

All of the architects agreed that TEA specialists provide a gold mine of talent and expertise that is important to the success of their projects. Each architect has worked on a project where a specialist’s critical skill significantly enhanced a final creation.

Their comments fall into two categories:

- Specialists offer critical expertise
- Specialists elevate design solutions

1) SPECIALISTS OFFER EXPERT CAPABILITIES THAT FACILITATE SUCCESS

TEA specialists are highly regarded by the architects, as shown by the enthusiastic and insightful comments they volunteered.

“Owners and developers neither have the time nor expertise to find the right specialists on their own,” said Jonathan Peters. “They typically rely on their design professionals to give good recommendations.” Marty Borko added, “Finding the right specialist can be the key to a project’s success. They might not have the specific expertise for a project, but if they are a creative thinker, they can add value.”

The architects concurred that most architectural firms lack the resources to develop certain specialties in house. “Even large firms need to outsource,” confirmed Borko. “No one design firm can do it all. We seldom get involved in show design and show engineering.”

2) TEA SPECIALISTS ELEVATE THE QUALITY OF THE DESIGN SOLUTION

Another reason that architects value TEA specialists is that they help architects design at a higher level. “Synergy across many specialties results in a much better project,” said John Kasperowicz. “Our best work comes from collaboration with specialists of all kinds. Specialists create differentiation, which affects the bottom line.”

By working with specialists, “you can offer more to your client,” said Rick Solberg. “Specialists come with a body of knowledge and experience that delivers added value, paid back quickly.” Jonathan Peters added, “TEA members can help an owner who has never done an entertainment project get what they want, and show them how to get there.”

What are TEA Architects Saying About YOU?
Experienced TEA Specialists...
• Create synergy across many specialties, resulting in a much better project.
• Have a zero learning curve, which saves time and money.
• Collaborate and form teams quickly.
• Know how to engage people and provide for large crowds.
• Propose solutions that can actually be built.
• Create differentiation, which affects the bottom line.
• Understand the details unique to experiential design.
• Will not take your fee away.
• Do not need to be kept on the payroll.

INSIGHTS, MARKETING ADVICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"It's not what, but WHO you know that may ultimately determine whether you will be successful or not."
- Rick Solberg

TEA talent is renowned within the themed entertainment industry, but virtually unknown in other arenas. A key challenge is to make the architect and the client understand that the TEA specialist's expertise provides maximum value when they are included as an integral team member at the inception of a project. The architects urged TEA specialists to advance their marketing efforts.

Their marketing suggestions can be distilled as follows:

- Think like the client
- Learn to recognize new opportunities
- Change your marketing

1) THINK LIKE YOUR CLIENT

"Find out everything you can about what business your client is in."
- John Kasperowicz

Clients want to work with specialists who can advance their business goals. "They want to hear about benefits and return on investment," said Marty Borko. "Show the owner how a popular visitor center can help sell residential units. Change your terminology. We never mention themed entertainment."

David Price adds, "Talk about customer experience with your clients. Tell them, 'We brought this casino to life and we can do that for you too.' Or say it in their terms, 'Your church members will have a friendly, meaningful place to gather for fellowship and celebration.'"

2) CREATE NEW OPPORTUNITIES

"Any venue can benefit from... a charrette, scripting, thinking in terms of activities and events."
- David Price

Clients have a need for new approaches. TEA specialists have the imagination and technical expertise to make that happen. Sadly those skills remain a secret to companies outside of the themed entertainment industry. "Clients are looking for new ways to draw people in, attract a broader audience, and distinguish themselves," said John Kasperowicz.

The interviewees advised TEA specialists to develop relationships before there is a need. "Do whatever you can to be part of a brainstorming session," said Jonathan Peters.

"Get in with developers, architects, buyers, and designers," said Marty Borko. "Network. Communicate. Get lucky. Opportunities are there, but you have to look for them."

3) CHANGE YOUR MARKETING

Marketing tips were generously offered throughout the interviews:

- Know what creative tools and solutions you can offer to help clients make money.
- Re-target your marketing: Ask yourself “Who might benefit from my skills in a new way?”
- Think venues. New opportunities come from unlikely venues.
- Team up with experts who add value to your ideas and design.
- Get into a brain storming session.
- Help your client visualize success.
- Understand client needs, wants, and goals. Show how you can make it happen.
- Develop a strategy with the client. They probably don’t know what they need.
- Show how you add value. Talk benefits, not themes or entertainment.
- Look for business in the public sector. Think communities.
- Talk with environmental designers who shape public spaces.

SUMMARY

This marketing brief was designed as an inquiry into the perspectives held by a limited sampling of architects with respect to experience design and working with TEA professionals.

Each participant offered a pragmatic look at the future of experience design. They talked of industry changes and innovative ventures coming to life. They stressed the importance of understanding the clients’ point of view, and shared their own professional challenges.

They clearly demonstrated respect for TEA specialists, and they delivered persuasive arguments on their behalf. Their insights come from hard-won experience, and their suggestions require grit and courage to pull off. They believe that TEA members have always been up for a challenge. Maybe this study will spark new conversations.

Endnotes:

1. Throughout this document, the word “architect” is used as a term that includes architectural designers, planners, and urban designers. For the purpose of this document, referring to an individual as an architect does not necessarily indicate their current status with respect to professional architectural registration, nor does it imply that interviewees required them to be referred to with the designation of “architect.”
2. The term “specialists” is used in a broad fashion to refer to consultants and vendors in the entertainment and experience design industry.

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