

THE WIDE WORLD OF ARCHITECTURE

Q&A with CannonDesign's Executive Director of Design, David Polzin

With 24 offices and 1,000+ employees around the world, CannonDesign has emerged as a force to be reckoned with on the global architecture landscape. The firm's expertise extends to healthcare, education, science & technology, corporate, recreational and civic projects which have garnered more than 500 design awards over the last 15 years.

CannonDesign's Executive Director of Design, David Polzin, speaks out on and the current state of architecture.

Q1: What is your opinion of the state of architectural practice today?

Polzin: I think it's a really exciting time to be practicing. There are constantly new opportunities emerging for exploration, from advances in technology and the digital tools that we use, to the environmental challenges we face. There is also growing opportunity to create architecture around our social consciousness, which includes things like inclusivity, wellness and more. I see all of those different directions emerging from students and young architects, who are very fluid with their ideas and methodologies.

Q2: How has that evolved since your own days of being a student and young architect?

Polzin: Architecture is very pluralistic today. There isn't one set style or direction that everyone is following. We are in an era without dogma. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, architecture was emerging from a dark age of post-modernism. It was a very dogmatic time, but today there are an incredible variety of ideas, attitudes and missions being explored.

Q3: In the age of social media and advancing technologies, how important is imagery to the overall design process?

Polzin: It's actually a little bit troubling to me. We are bombarded by imagery on a daily basis, but that imagery tends to reflect on young architects through a lack of context. Images are viewed without representing an architect's body of work, or conveying how a building fits into a lineage of architecture over a period of decades. The image becomes disposable and, in its worst form, becomes something to copy without meaning.

Q4: How do you convey that concern to young architects?

Polzin: This is a visual art form, so I try to tell young architects that it's ok to overlay the idiosyncrasies of composition onto the rigor of their analytical thinking. But I think that both have to be there, rather than just working in the realm of the purely visual or the purely analytical.

Q5: As a forward-thinking firm, how does CannonDesign succeed in communicating its visions to clients?

Polzin: Every client is different. Some are more sophisticated than others, but in many ways the design process is the same. What differs is the way that we communicate to each client. You have to be able to communicate in ways that a client understands through their own perspective. In America, there is no shared language for visual things, so architects are tending toward "big data" and the measurable and quantifiable things that people are comfortable with.

Q6: How would you describe the design voice of CannonDesign?

Polzin: I am reticent to articulate a pure design philosophy, because it inhibits the kind of creative exploration that we want to pursue. However, I would say that 'informed experimentation' plays a critical role. Informed in the sense of having a deep knowledge of the client's business, deep knowledge of building technologies and sensitivity to context. We also have a variety of subject matter experts, consultants and researchers who are constantly learning about our client's business needs, as well as things like new materials and systems that help bring new thinking about the built environment to our projects. On the experimentation side, it's about having an eye to the future and being creative in our work, transformative in our innovation and improving the human experience. When being both informed and experimental collide, they yield design solutions that are recognized by our clients, their industries and our own industry.

Q7: How important is that recognition?

Polzin: To distinguish ourselves from other firms, our work needs to be remarkable. But it's not good enough for us to say we have achieved design excellence. We rely on third party validation, and awards and exposure in established publications is essential to our credibility as a great design firm.

Q8: How do evolving environmental requirements impact the design process?

Polzin: We are past the 'green washing' era. Today, everybody recognizes the fact that energy is the elephant in the room. But there is also mounting pressure to address natural disasters and the topic of resilience. A third leg of that stool is wellness, and how we incorporate the well-being of the human population into the built environment. But great things come out of great challenges, and new generations are finding new solutions.

Q9: What would you identify as CannonDesign's greatest strength?

Polzin: Our people. The only true value of a firm is the value of its people. Having the most talented people in our firm is always a top priority. In building upon our culture of creativity and design excellence, we endeavor to give creativity its space. Creativity requires fertile ground and can't be mandated. It's really about having an open enough culture so that people believe in the process of having their ideas explored.

Q10: As a firm competing on the global landscape, how do you continue to evolve?

Polzin: CannonDesign is a global practice with a global perspective, so it's not sufficient to only understand our local context. But it's also about looking beyond architecture...it's about looking at the world for inspiration. Constantly keeping your eyes open is essential to evolving as an architect.