

## features

### we build this city: cle architects adding flair to industrial footprint

DOUGLAS J. GUTH | THURSDAY, MAY 24, 2012



THE NEW MOCA - PHOTO BOB PERKOSKI

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In its heyday, Cleveland was lauded for innovations in certain areas of architectural planning and design. Features of the 1920s-built Cleveland Union Terminal complex, for example, preceded those of the far more well-known Rockefeller Center. Before that, the city had already developed the first comprehensive modern building code and constructed Nela Park, one of the nation's first industrial research campuses.

Past accomplishments are all well and good, but how does Cleveland stack up today in terms of architectural projects and talent? According to local architects, the city has made significant post-recession strides in the brick-and-mortar department. While there is always room to grow, Cleveland is steadily catching up to other similarly sized cities in terms of development.

Adam Yaracs, intern architect at [Belson Design Architects](#), can pick out a host of impressive building projects now in various stages of completion in and around the region. The recently opened Horseshoe Casino Cleveland, the impending medical mart and convention center, and the Flats East Bank complex now rising downtown all are high-profile examples of the good work afoot.

Other projects are adding modernist flare to a Cleveland architectural footprint better known for solid, stately conservatism characteristic of its industrial roots. The soon-to-open Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland ([MOCA](#)), for example, is already making waves on the national design scene thanks to its visually impressive amalgam of geometric facets and shiny black stainless steel.



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"We already have some great, historic buildings in Cleveland," says Yaracs, whose firm renovated Crawford Hall at Case Western Reserve University. "It's nice to see a mixture."



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Game-changing, large-scale architectural efforts largely absent during the country's economic downturn are aligning Cleveland with cities like Pittsburgh in the development arena, explains John Workley of [Vocon](#), a Cleveland-based firm specializing in interior design, architecture, sustainable design and technology.



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The casino, medical mart and MOCA projects all benefited from the meticulous financial planning that took place during the recession, Workley believes.



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"Cleveland had a dry run, but money [for new projects] is being well spent," says the architect. "Every dollar counts."



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Sally Levine, owner of [Levine Architecture & Design](#), has been in the industry for 30 years, honing her skills in New York, Chicago and Boston. Now living in her native Shaker Heights, Levine is impressed with some of the work happening locally, including Case's [Tinkham Veale University Center](#), a \$50-million undertaking set to break ground this year. She's also energized about the Uptown development at University Circle, which includes two apartment buildings built with sleek facades of glass, concrete and aluminum.



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It may seem obvious, but with architecture a profession so inextricably intertwined with a city's financial health, Cleveland's recent activity is vital to keeping that work building on itself, pun intended. Educating the public about the value of architecture would further help the cause, Levine believes.

"There are some fine firms here with national reputations," she says. "The more people who appreciate architecture, the better it is for the architects. We need to make the public more excited about what we bring to the table."

Cleveland's architecture scene weathered the national financial storm, but did not come away unscathed. The local arm of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) had 600 members before the crisis; it now carries less than 400, says chapter president Kurt Weaver.

Weaver, whose own work includes renovation of the former Greenhouse Restaurant at Case into an art studio and construction of the King's Terrace townhouses in Detroit Shoreway, says that while Cleveland may not compete with Chicago's constant cycle of new development, the city can still be a lucrative place for a budding architect.

Smaller Cleveland-based architects are itching to be part of a development process that is largely helmed by out-of-town firms or larger local companies with an established foothold. However, it can be difficult for younger architects to get noticed in a climate dominated by what Weaver calls "an 18th-century business model," where "older firms with their name on the door" get the first call for a project no matter what.

He points to the restoration and expansion of Severance Hall that was completed in 2000. A number of local firms tried to land the gig, but the job ultimately was given to a firm out of Washington, D.C. The finished product was adequate, says Weaver, but he wonders why a Cleveland firm wasn't given the opportunity.

"It's not an issue of talent," says Weaver, who graduated from Kent State University with a bachelor of architecture degree and started his own firm 10 years later. "We don't sit on boards that decide who to hire."

In recent years, decision-making over architecture and design has been handed off from City Hall down to local community groups. In that sense, it's up to Cleveland to promote its architects, improving an environment where young professionals don't have the easiest time designing their own path distinct from the old-guard firms, says Weaver.

Still, having a world-renowned name like Farshid Moussavi design the new MOCA facility will at least put Cleveland on the minds of young designers looking for a place to work. "Having a collection of signature projects is good to have in your hip pocket," Weaver says.

Cleveland is also starting to stand up with other cities in terms of "green" building. The [Cleveland 2030](#) district is a recently formed group of architects and engineers aiming to turn downtown Cleveland into a zone of high-performance buildings that reduce consumption of energy, water and production of greenhouse gases.

Meanwhile, federal stimulus money will figuratively shrink-wrap the downtown Celebrezze Federal Building in a new shell of aluminum and glass, insulating the energy-wasting facility like the void between the inner and outer layers of a Thermos.

"We have a long way to go, but Cleveland is clinging on to the sustainability movement," says Workley of Vocon.

Overall, Cleveland's architecture firms are traversing the long road back from the recession. Cleveland has long been known as a "brick city," but more recent projects are adding progressive new materials to the mix.

"The last 18 months [of new projects] shows that Cleveland is being proactive," says Belson Design's Yaracs. "We have to keep up the progress."

- *Image 1: The new MOCA - Photo [Bob Perkosi](#)*
- *Images 2 & 3: Medical Mart and Convention Center construction*
- *Photos [Bob Perkosi](#)*
- *Image 4: King's Terrace townhouses*
- *Image 5: CWRU Art Studio*
- *Images 6 - 8: Crawford Hall - Photos [Scott Pease](#)*
- *Images 9 & 10: Tinkham Veale University Center*