



# RD

RESIDENTIAL DESIGN

FOR ARCHITECTS AND BUILDERS  
OF DISTINCTIVE HOMES

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## Life Lessons

ROB CARLTON, AIA, CARLTON EDWARDS  
ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

There are a lot of skills they don't teach you in college; chief among them is how to run a business. This is especially true of architecture school, where the emphasis is on design thinking and not profits and pro formas. Lucky for design/builder Rob Carlton, AIA, that his postgraduate training was at the entrepreneurial architecture firm, Looney Ricks Kiss in Memphis. LRK has always led the way among firms that work with developers, with one eye on design rigor and the other eye on market

forces. They design real world projects for real people, and it was a solid education for a young designer right out of school.

"Working for Carson Looney taught me a great deal about the housing market from the perspective of commerce," says Rob. "The homebuilding industry was a foreign thing to me before I got there. And it was exciting to be a part of their developing architecture for new urban communities." Ultimately, though, the interlude was a cul-de-sac

on Rob's path to a career in custom residential design and construction—albeit an important one. Not only did he acquire a few of those skills not taught in school, but he made significant professional contacts that pay dividends to this day (and some personals ones, too).

It was a time of great opportunity and bounty in the early 2000s, so Rob



Rob Carlton, AIA

Photo: Bren Photography



Photos this page: David Dietrich Photography



*Clockwise from opposite page:* Many of the firm's design/build commissions are located in gated communities with design restrictions. So the mountaintop Wildcat Residence evokes the mandated idea of "American Piedmont." The energy-efficient Windsor residence occupies a steep site in North Asheville. The Balsam Mountain Residence orients to capture 270-degree views.

moved on to a town and to architectural work that were more in keeping with his zeitgeist ("I had sworn I would never live in Memphis," says the Tennessee native). The place that beckoned was the mountain town of Asheville, North Carolina, and the small generalist firm, Samsel Architects. "I was looking for residential and they had a growing portfolio of residential work, but honestly it was the city that hooked me. It has great culture, a very creative environment—it's not your typical Southern city."

### The Road Ahead

He got there right before 9/11. But, he says, given this decade's Great Recession, the dip in the economy back then felt more like a blip in his forward trajectory. Indeed, the next few years were boom times in Asheville. The development of Biltmore's vast landholdings was moving full speed ahead, along with other high-end communities around the nearby mountains and lakes of South Carolina. Rob was in the thick

of it, expanding his list of connections among developers, builders, and other influencers. He was helped along by his wife, Dawn, a property manager at the time with her own relationships with developers and builders.

Thus around 2005, Rob felt it was the right time to go out on his own. Oops. "I could see all this building

going on. I knew all these builders, I had all these relationships, and I had just passed my licensing exam," he recalls.

"I knew I loved this work, and I wanted to do it every day. The seed was planted, and it felt like there was no failing. Had I known what was around the corner, I might not have done it. But it was great for a couple of years."







Photo: David Dietrich Photography

*This page:* Featured on last year's CRAN Symposium tour in Cincinnati, the LEED Platinum Grandin Terrace Residence was designed for environmentally conscious empty nesters. Key functions are located on the main floor and secondary rooms on the lower level of the steeply sited house.

Having survived some intervening years of struggle, business is great again, although Rob notes that market exuberance is more rational these days. He feels the firm is better anchored now against rogue waves the economy may spawn. During the slowdown, he picked up his contractor's license, so he's able to build many of the houses his Asheville office designs—capturing more dollars on each project and maintaining quality control. And he's expanded the business cautiously into Memphis (2013), with former LRK alum Jeff Edwards at the helm there, and into Nashville (2016), with Matt Zink, AIA, who interned in the Asheville office 10 years earlier. Jeff brings a great residential client base in another region, and Matt offers an additional revenue stream in restaurant design. They are each design directors in their locales, and Rob's office supports them on the business side. Only the Asheville office offers construction services.

"The past recession was certainly a backdrop to these decisions to diversify—geographically and into design/build," says Rob. "We want to be ready for the next big thing, but we'll only move toward these opportunities if they're about delivering good design."

"Adding construction services was definitely born of necessity, but also a desire to be close to the work and close to all aspects of the decision making," he continues. "By its nature, architect-led design/build is integrated project delivery. It's the buzzword in the industry now, but it's just the nature of how we go about our work every day: a builder sitting next to an architect, hearing phone calls—both good and bad. The awareness of what's happening on your project is instantaneous—instead of the lag and draw down of time and energy that's so inefficient."

Given how much and how fast the firm has grown in the last few years, efficiency is very much on Rob's mind.



Photo: David Dietrich Photography

Foremost on his to-do list is refining how the office collaborates—in Asheville, with the other offices, and with clients. So, he's investing in the best tools and technology he can find. "We produce our drawings in Revit. But we're also adopting BIM360, so we can be more collaborative inter-office and intra-office. Day in and day out, we use Enscape to study the details—the visualization it affords is irreplaceable," he explains. "Enscape will export to an Oculus

headset, so we can get clients into the space. It's great for explaining concepts and resolution at a level we could never do before—it gets them more engaged in the project. And I'm very confident it will save money on change orders."

The virtual reality (VR) tools have had the unexpected benefit of supporting Rob's burgeoning workload as both a designer and managing principal. "I'm 46, and already a dinosaur versus the 24-year-olds in my office," he says. "I'm probably not going to learn Revit, but I will engage with VR and it enables me to stay on top of the details."

After rolling out VR tools in the Asheville office, Rob is moving ahead with their deployment in the other offices. "To attract and keep the best talent, you have to have the best technology," he says.



Photo: David Dietrich Photography

Designed and built by Carlton Edwards, the Piedmont Residence, which overlooks a lake in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, won a 2013 AIA NC award.

It's clear the young people coming to his firm will receive the same first-rate education in business management he did back at LRK. Looney Ricks Kiss grew too big too fast, forcing a Chapter 11 reorganization at the nadir of the recession, so Rob applies those lessons,

as well, by taking proactive measures while times are good: diversification into different revenue streams, different markets, and acquiring the right tools to trim waste. It's all a means to a single end, however—delivering good design. —S. Claire Conroy

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