



An Interview with Architect Robin Shambach

Lucinda Smedley • published in the January 2015 issue

By all accounts, 2014 has been a rewarding year for Robin Shambach that concluded with the Southern Arizona Architects & Engineers Marketing Association (SAAEMA) recognizing her with their 2014 Career Achievement Award. In addition, her firm, BWS Architects, was the 2014 recipient of the American Institute of Architects Arizona Firm of the Year award, which is a big deal as it is based on 10 years of work, and recognizes the practice's work over time and juried by out of state firms.

A graduate of the University of Arizona College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture, Robin started her professional career at Anderson Debartolo Pan (ADP) in Tucson, which provided opportunities to work on educational and healthcare projects across the country. This large scale project experience in an atmosphere of a rigorous design process helped her to develop excellent technical skills and a strong design ethic.



She brought these skills to Burns Wald-Hopkins Architects as the firm's first employee and was Project Architect and Construction Administrator for the firm's most significant projects including Pima Community College Desert Vista Campus, Ventana Vista Elementary School and Green Valley Performing Arts and Learning Center with Antoine Predock Architect, and the Northern Arizona University Applied Research and Development Building.

Now with almost 30 years of professional practice in Arizona, Robin is the Managing Principal with responsibility for financial stability and successful operation of the firm. But true to the philosophy of BWS Architects, she maintains direct involvement as Project Manager for most of the firm's work, providing day to day communication with clients and design teams, responsible for the schedules, budgets and overall success of each project.

BWS Architects seems to be everywhere these days, yet your firm is relatively small. How have you accomplished the breadth of work throughout Arizona?

It's related to how I see our practice. We are executing on the firm's strategic plan to be a state-wide practice, and established offices in Phoenix and Flagstaff, reflecting where our work is. For the past decade, we have had projects outside of Southern Arizona. We are an Arizona firm, with an Arizona practice. We want to serve the entire state. There is a lot of opportunity and need for a focused design firm, a firm that's responsive to our region—we live here, we work here, and understand needs of rural and urban environments. We are coming out of this very challenging period, but it's a perfect time to leverage lessons learned for the economic diversity of the firm.

How is BWS the same/different with you at the helm?

As managing principal, my focus is more on project management, and the financial and operational aspects of the firm. Frank (Slingerland) is the firm's design principal, leading the design efforts, but we work really well together. I also have my own opinions about design.

I've had really great mentors in Dave Burns and David Wald-Hopkins for over 20 years, but we are tweaking it with our own personalities—building on the statewide practice, which is necessary for the health and longevity of the firm. I still want to both be very involved in projects on a day to day basis. I have experience and understanding of how projects need to go and that reflects who we are as a firm.

What is your design philosophy?

The emphasis has been on architecture that responds to this region, influenced by being here in Arizona and sustainability—functional for its programs, but also form in terms of environmental quality. We focus on architecture that responds to being in the desert and is very environmentally responsive.

How can great architecture make a difference in Tucson?

It's important that design is inspired by place but also improves day to day life. It doesn't have to be all traditional historic response, but needs to be sensitive to the culture that we have here in our community, with respect to materials, scale and proportion. It needs to respond to what Tucsonans find so appealing about living here. A building that performs better is better loved and has a longer lifespan and at the end of the day is the most sustainable thing to do.

The foundation of our work is educational projects and research indicates that good design is linked to better performance.

What are the challenges and opportunities for our region in 2015?

It's an interesting time in our region. I'm noticing how aligned different groups are with similar topics—such as TREO Blueprint, Arizona Town Hall—there are opportunities in front of us and real desire for a diversified and enriching economy- not broader and wider, but deeper and richer. We need to play a more significant role in state-wide initiatives and international trade. I think the attention is where it needs to be, and we need to push it forward.

You're incoming Board Chair for Metropolitan Pima Alliance. What's your vision for the organization in 2015?

I'm really excited about that. It's a very strong organization, so I'm not seeing any radical change going forward, but I do want to build on our successes. I'd like to focus on being proactive from a public policy standpoint, and out in front of regional issues regarding land use and best practices. We will identify those policy issues at the upcoming retreat.

What keeps you up at night?

These questions!

Congratulations, Robin! Here's to a prosperous 2015.



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