

Builder/Architect

Special Feature



Vari Architects

The Early Years: A South Side Kid Makes Good

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By Elizabeth McQuern

Architect Ron Vari was born and raised in the near South Side of Chicago, in the working-class neighborhood of Bridgeport. The youngest child of hard-working Italian-Americans (his grandparents emigrated from a tiny town called Simbario, in central Calabria), his family's roots in Chicago run deep. His father, Vito, worked for almost 50 years as a printer for American Bank Note Company, which printed foreign moneys. His mother, Rose, like his late sister, was a dedicated, family-focused homemaker. Two brothers, both retired, worked for the city of Chicago for the police department and the streets and sanitation snow command.

Vari walked through the campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology on his way to De La Salle High School as a teenager, and when he received a scholarship for college, decided to pursue his studies at the well-regarded school. "I always liked working with my hands and in high school, I did electrical work and plumbing work and odds and ends with construction work," Vari recounts. "When I was lucky enough to get my scholarship, I thought, 'What's something that's like carpentry or electrical work but at a higher level?' and I said, 'Well, why not try architecture school?'"

He earned his bachelor's degree in the science of architecture from the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago in 1973 and immediately went to work in the office of the city architect. He did his apprenticeship there for three years, contributing to projects like the police academy at Jackson, Adams, Loomis and Throop streets, as well as the State Street Mall, various CTA stations along the Red Line and miscellaneous facilities around the city.

Always a believer in hands-on learning and practical experience, he took all that he learned at the city architect's office and established his own practice. "There were definitely some tough moments in the beginning," Vari recalls. "A few times, I made promises to clients before doing the proper research about ordinances and such. That's still something I really stress to my staff — if there's any doubt in your mind, double check and do the research and make sure everything is solid. My development was pretty steady, though, and I learned as I went. Knowledge is power and if you learn from your mistakes and go on, that builds confidence."

A FAMILY BUSINESS

Vari did not push his sons to become architects and yet today, both are exactly that, working alongside their father in the offices

of Vari Architects. Clearly, he presented a view of architecture to his children that made it very appealing. Both sons affirm that, growing up, they saw a lot about their father's work that drew their interest.

Jim Vari explains that the family home itself was a lesson and an inspiration. "My brother and I grew up in a house that my father built with his own hands," he says. "It was and still is a unique piece of architecture. Our family home was my introduction to architecture and my school of architecture, long before I knew it."

Ron Vari Jr. says he has learned strong values and an appreciation of good work from his father. "If you want something in life, you have to earn it. From sweeping the floors at a cabinetry shop



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A personally fabricated work environment.



to scrubbing toilets at the office, I began to realize at the age of 10, while holding a broom, what it really took for my father to get where he is today.”

Watching the fair, thorough and conscientious way his father worked also taught Jim Vari many lessons that he puts into play in his work today. “I’ve learned to make decisions and learn from them,” he says, “to treat every job and client with the same attention and respect, no matter how big or small, to accurately and fully address each client’s needs and to be diverse enough to be able to respond to different market conditions.”

Josh Glazier, a developer whose Glazier Corporation has worked with Vari for about 15 years, confirms that the family atmosphere strengthens the Vari team and contributes greatly to the high quality of work they produce. “The family nature of the business creates a cohesion within the office. He has always had good people working with him and he takes good care of his designers,” Glazier says.

As a testament to his belief in Vari’s talents, after working on some 30 commercial projects together, Glazier recently recruited Vari to work on his own new home, a project involving transforming a three flat into a single-family home. “When it comes to choosing an architect,” Glazier says, “for me, there is no other choice.”

'COMPETENT AND KIND HANDS'

Vari met his second wife, Maxine Kröll, when she was managing Vidal Sassoon in Chicago and was tasked with a salon improvement project for the company. Vari was the architect that worked with the construction team she had hired and he immediately made a strong and positive impression on her. "He walked in to my office with an air of confidence [not to be confused with arrogance] and a grand smile like I had never seen before when meeting someone for the first time. I knew immediately that I would be in competent and kind hands. What a combination."

The couple's paired experience and strengths made them a powerful team from the beginning. As Kröll explained, "Architects and hairdressers, or at least the two of us, have a lot in common: strong sense of design and color, sensitivity to esthetics and environment, people and communication skills and ability to separate art and business. We first and foremost run businesses. Without a strong business foundation, that which is art cannot flourish. We represent the backbone of two businesses in a creative, transient field. Together, we have been able to maintain staff and clients for years and build brands with national reputations."

A BROAD RANGE OF CAPABILITIES

Vari's clients enjoy the benefits of his broad range of experi-

A building with an identity.



PHOTO COURTESY OF RICHARD FOERTSCH, RICHARDFOERTSCH@BCGGLOBAL.NET

ence, which allows him to work on almost any kind of project. "We have never specialized. I've been in business for 30 years and always worked on whatever clients needed," he emphasizes. "Every client has specific needs and I don't like to generalize any design for anybody. Whether I'm designing a fire escape on the South Side of Chicago or working on big projects in Beverly Hills, New York, Toronto or Europe, I make sure everyone's unique needs are understood and met.

We do everything from simple things like porches in the city of Chicago, single-family homes, condos and apartment buildings in Chicago, shopping malls, commercial build outs. In the 1980s, I was the architect for Vidal Sassoon worldwide. We do commercial work, warehouse work, anything and everything."

The photo shoot for this article took Ron Vari past the intersection of Randolph and Green streets, where there are three restaurants for which Vari was architect: Vivo, Marchet and Red Light. He also designed Giocco and Opera on South Wabash Street. Vari Architects has also represented Subway Sandwiches and Salads in the Greater Chicagoland area for the past 20 years.

Vari Architects are currently designing in-salon displays for the Prestige Brands Division of L'Oréal USA. "In my wife's salon, MAXINE, at 712 N. Rush Street in Chicago," Vari says, "we have a flagship color center for L'Oréal Professionnel Color and a flagship for L'Oréal's Kerastase, a luxury shampoo line. We



First statement, design and new construction, own home, 30 years ago

were just in Santa Monica looking at another project for them — a new luxury hair care line called shu uemura.”

‘HIS WORD IS HIS CONTRACT’

Vari’s style of business is, in many ways, a laid-back one. “We’re very casual and comfortable. Nobody here wears a tie. Everyone is in jeans. And clients feel comfortable with us,” Vari asserts. “I think the fact that I do things professionally but casually, without a lot of pomp and circumstance, makes an impression. I’ve always been my own man and made my own path in a very straightforward way, and I like to be around people who act the same way.”

Vari has also learned the value of building client relationships with a more relaxed approach. “When my sons first started working with me, they wanted to change some things. For example, sometimes, fees are collected on a casual basis and the boys would say, ‘You can’t do this, dad, you have to collect your money.’” But Vari knew better. “I have clients that have been with me for 30 years. They’re not going anywhere and I’m not going anywhere and the money’s always there in good time, so I guess another philosophy I have is, ‘Enjoy what you do and do it well and everything else follows.’ But if you go at it for the money’s sake, it’s not going to happen.”

This lack of formality doesn’t mean a lack of integrity by any means; in fact, quite the opposite. Jim Vari confirms what so many of his father’s clients and colleagues know from experience: “His handshake and his word are far more important to him than any document he’ll ever sign.”

Wife Maxine emphasizes that his personal touch is as important to his clients’ satisfaction as his technical expertise. “He is only a phone call away,” she says. “He is not an architect first. He is a person first. He is a man of his word and he works with his word as his contract. His ‘client first’ philosophy gives the client the courage to express their own designs. Clients are amazed when what they have imagined comes to life. The result is that the client lives in their space. This is a much different experience than simply being or existing in someone else’s design.”

GIVING THE CLIENT WHAT THEY NEED

“I believe that Ron Vari’s clients appreciate his no-nonsense minimalist style,” says colleague Tony Menotti of Menotti and Company. “He finds and utilizes simple yet effective solutions. Ron is also very adept at creating floor plans that not only make it easier for developers to market and sell, but are also easy to live in and maintain.”

A totally client-focused approach has served Vari Architects well throughout the years. “I figure out design solutions with clients based on the input they give,” says Vari, “and their happiness with the final product is directly proportional to the amount of input

they give me. Sometimes, people have very general ideas about what they need and I help them think through specific details, like if they want to sleep in and have a dark bedroom in the morning, I know which way the orientation of that room should be. If they like to entertain a lot and they want a kitchen that opens to the dining room, we make sure that goes into the plan.”

Another philosophy that has served Vari Architects well is going the extra mile and steadfastly sticking to early promises and commitments. “I never have an ‘extra’ or an overcharge,” Vari explains. His clients never have any surprises or disappointments. “My original numbers stay in place and I do whatever it takes — if it takes twice as long, I’m there twice as long. Things pop up that are unanticipated, but we’re always busy and it doesn’t matter if one job is less profitable in the end. The number the client walks out with after our first meeting is the number we will always finish up with. Period. If they call me after they’ve received the final drawings and they have lots of questions, I answer all of

them. I don’t believe in keeping track of every hour I work; what’s important is the final product and the client’s satisfaction.”

Jim Vari attests to his father’s dedication to putting the client’s needs first, even when it means missing out on a potentially



First development, now approaching 30 years old

Most recent townhouse concept of dozens over the years



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RICHARD FOER TSCH, RICHARDFOERTSCH@BCGLOBAL.NET

lucrative opportunity. “Recently, we met with a client about a large property that had a number of potential options for a solution,” he says. “In less than 30 minutes, my father analyzed the best options for the property as well as the client’s needs and formulated an excellent solution. He suggested that the client sell the property because from a business perspective, that seemed to be the client’s best option. Rather than selling the client on our services for designing a building, he advised the client to sell the property, thereby losing a potential job for us. But my father knew the client would return in the future with another job for us because of the honest advice my father gave him. And I know that’s true — he probably will. They always do. That’s one of the reasons for my father’s success.”

Exterior of MAXINE building



PHOTO COURTESY OF RICHARD FOERTSCH, RICHARDFOERTSCH@SBGGLOBAL.NET

NURTURING YOUNG TALENT

Continuing to question and learn and grow in business is important to Ron Vari and he is particularly stimulated by the bubbling creative energy of the up-and-coming generation in his office.

“I like having young people with a lot of energy in my office,” Vari explains. “Aside from myself, everybody in my firm is 33 years old and younger. Somehow, every time I’ve reached out to work with people my own age, I don’t feel as comfortable as I do working with younger people. Sometimes I feel like older, more established people just want to go by the book and aren’t interested in exploring new ideas. I love being around people who want to learn and ask questions — ask real questions and not necessarily accept the first answer they get. It’s refreshing and it’s just a great atmosphere to work in.”

Vari’s clients benefit from working with a team comprised of well-rounded individuals who can work independently or as a group. Each employee is encouraged to learn about every aspect of architecture and design. “I feel like everyone deserves credit for projects because everyone contributes,” according to Vari, “whether they’re directly working on something or not, because everyone teaches each other and everyone’s ideas are shared. My name is on the door and my name is on the drawings, but everyone’s name is on the work.”

This kind of sharing of knowledge and experience also contributes to the consistent service the firm has offered throughout the decades, even with different people contributing to the design process at different times.

SOUTH OF THE BORDER: ‘LIMITLESS POTENTIAL’

Where will the momentum of his success and team-building take Vari in the next few years? Mexico seems to figure heavily in the future of Vari Architects, who have established an office in Cabo San Lucas, where they are currently developing BLUE condominiums (www.blueloscabos.com) and several other projects. Vari and his wife have been visiting the area for years, and in fact have established a second home there. The business hopes to expand their operation in Mexico and allow the Chicago office’s younger generation to grow and develop in both countries.

“We have found Cabo San Lucas to be a



Interior of MAXINE building

truly wonderful place,” Vari says with obvious enthusiasm. “It’s a place that reminds me of growing up in more innocent times. It’s a place where people love living life. They see a future. You see children going to school dressed in nicely pressed uniforms, with smiles on their faces going to school and coming home from school. So refreshing. So appealing. You see shop owners who aren’t wealthy but are happy, smiling and sweeping and helping customers. Money is not a driving force there. People are just happy.”

“I don’t really vacation well,” Vari admits. “I’m not a person who can go sit by a pool and drink a margarita and get a sun tan. I need to always be doing something; that’s just who I am.” It was natural, therefore, that what was initially a vacation spot has become a second family home as well as a second outpost of the family business. “It’s my favorite place to work. I like to sit out on our patio, right by the entrance to the hotel where our home is, and visit with people who walk by. There are no phone calls, no interruptions; just a beautiful ocean breeze.”

Vari has been working with a Mexican architect named Miguel Sandoval, with whom he’s developed a strong partnership. Together they are working on four buildings, including condominiums and commercial space. They also have their eye on building a hotel with shops and offices in the downtown area. Vari has assembled a team that includes Sandoval, several sales people and an attorney and all

of their projects are developing at a nice pace.

Vari clearly enjoys the time he spends in Mexico and has an obvious fondness for the people and the culture. Aside from enjoying business success with his ventures south of the border, he also derives a sense of personal reward from contributing to the quality of life and the development of the place. “It’s a beautiful culture of very talented people — artists and musicians who really work and create,” he says. “But there is no cultural center in the area right now and we really want to create something like that for people, built into the natural setting of a mountain.”

Vari’s experiences in Mexico also serve as a sort of touchstone for the sense of growth and optimism that he experienced from American culture as a child in the 1950s and 1960s. “I feel that right now in the United States, there are so many rules and regulations and confinements, which doesn’t feel like growth; it makes me feel thwarted. But in Mexico, I feel this growth potential that seems unlimited. Growing up in the ’50s and ’60s, it felt like anything was possible. I don’t like saying that anything can’t be done. I feel like in Mexico, there’s just limitless potential and that’s very exciting to be a part of.” ■

To contact Vari Architects, call (312) 829-4788 or visit us on the web at www.VariArchitects.com.