



Scott A. Lee

EDITORS' NOTE *Scott Lee leads the firm's international design practice. With over 25 years of design leadership in hotel, resort, residential, and mixed-use developments, he provides thought leadership and guides the company's long-term mission and strategic direction. His role in business development and marketing has been a driving force in the firm's success and its emergence as a leading force in the hospitality industry. Adept at defining a design vision that blends the key elements of a brand's identity with an authentic expression of the site, Lee has been instrumental in the development of destination properties in established and emerging markets around the world. His approach to site-sensitive design is a key element of SB Architects' commitment to the development of sustainable and successful communities.*

FIRM BRIEF *Since 1960, SB Architects (sb-architects.com) has established an international reputation for excellence and leadership in the planning and design of global hotels, resorts, destination communities, as well as large-scale multifamily, urban mixed-use, and custom home projects. SB Architects cultivates a disciplined, creative, and explorative work environment that rewards creativity, integrity, and design excellence. With offices in San Francisco, Miami, and Shenzhen, they are an international firm providing the responsiveness, ingenuity, and tailored experiences of a boutique design studio. With five decades of expertise, they offer the technical capabilities to successfully deliver projects of all scales from initial concept through construction.*

What is the heritage of SB Architects and how has the firm evolved to where it is today?

The history and heritage began with Don Sandy in 1960. He was a self-made architect with a passion for drawing and creating. The building typology at that time was focused around small, residential, multifamily garden apartments, and Don did some groundbreaking projects that put the firm on the map.

Focused on Design

An Interview with Scott A. Lee, President and Principal, SB Architects

Pretty late in the firm's trajectory and coinciding with my joining the firm 17 years ago, we began to align our focus more with hospitality and combined our knowledge of residential with evolving trends in hospitality design.

For the past 17 years, we have been focused on three core building types: multifamily residential; hospitality, which ranges from small boutique hotels in the Napa Valley to 750-room dual resorts for Hilton and Waldorf Astoria and everything in between; and mixed-use with an emphasis on walkable lifestyle retail and above that, a residential hotel or commercial component.

The leading firms within the industry all have great capabilities. How do you define what differentiates SB Architects?

What separates us is that we approach projects as a boutique firm. We have about 100 people in two offices. We're not burdened by corporate distractions. We spend our time focused on design with our clients.

We also don't have the ego or agenda that sometimes comes from our competitors. We spend a lot of time listening to our client's vision and synthesizing their needs with what the site is telling us. Out of that comes a design solution, which can take many forms.

Is the firm's role as a partner?

When we're at interviews, the term we loathe is when we're referred to as a vendor or we're asked to bid on a project, which means our role will be very narrow.

Rather than being thought of us as their architect, we position ourselves as clients' partners. This suggests that we want to be involved from the very beginning, oftentimes even in site selection, as well as in programming, connecting money with a project, helping the owners select the appropriate set of consultants, and acting on the owner's behalf as a partner on their development team.

How important has it been to maintain your culture as you have grown?

We spend a lot of time thinking about our culture. The firm is made up of people who, in their own ways, embody the vision of the firm. We hand-select them and empower them to develop relationships and continue doing these things that build our heritage and culture.

How has SB Architects embraced technology and how important is it to maintain hand-drawing capabilities?

We refer to those skills as tools. We can all draw by hand – it's valuable because we can do that on the fly with our clients.

On the other hand, as we are producing documents for the contractor to build them, we are embracing the latest technologies.

In between those, it's our job to convey to the client what exactly this building or community is going to feel like. We're using virtual reality and 3D visualization and videography. We're animating our projects and setting them to music that is evocative of the design solution, and we're conveying a complete sensory vision of the design solution.

We're also listening to our new employees just out of school because they have their fingers on the pulse of what's new, and they are not afraid to invest in new technologies.

Is there an effective understanding of the impact that architecture has on people's mental and emotional states?

We think of our solutions as facilitating a quality of life. While architecture is important, we are still humble enough to know that it's just a part of the quality of life.

If we can put people in a position through architecture to fully experience the place, then we're doing a great job.

Are you able to take moments to reflect on the success of projects or are you always looking toward the next project?

Since I started, we've had an annual management gathering offsite, which gives our management team a chance to reload. We hold those in places we have designed or are currently designing. We try to let ourselves go and experience what we've designed.

For those coming out of school who are interested in building careers within the industry, what advice do you give them to build a sustainable career?

Early on, they should call architects and get into their doors and, through osmosis, try to understand what the industry is all about. I would encourage any architecture student to do this. We have high school students in our offices now because they have called and asked to come in.

We also encourage people who want to be architects to build something because, in the end, architecture is about building things and it's not an academic exercise. If one understands how to build, they become a reality-based architect and they have a sense of humility about what they can build. ●