

ACAI NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

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ACAI Associates -- A Dozen Questions For The Boss

Fort Lauderdale, FL (May 2007) -- *Adolfo Cotilla, AIA, established the South Florida architectural firm that bears his initials in 1985. Tapping his diverse experience in the field of architecture, Cotilla has been consulting, designing and delivering a wide spectrum of top-shelf, signature projects for more than 25 years. Cotilla earned his Masters of Fine Arts Degree in Architecture from the University of Florida and is a NCARB registered Architect and a Certified General Contractor in the State of Florida. Cotilla is active in the industry, including membership in the American Institute of Architects, National Trust for Historic Preservation, National Roofing Contractors Association, the Roofing Consultants Institute, and the US Green Building Council. The Q&A session below provides a glimpse of the man and his firm.*

What made you choose this career?

As far back as I can recall, I was always interested in how things were put together. Of course, that means that I was always taking things apart, too! I remember when I was a kid systematically taking apart a new train set, right out of the box. It never did work after I got hold of it! I was always creating or putting together parts and pieces of something. Once I discovered the field of architecture, I knew that I had found my calling. I never looked back and I've never had second thoughts.

From what do you draw inspiration?

There are so many variables to consider with every project, I can't say that I have either a "signature" style or some mysterious, evolved ideal from which I draw insight. It all comes down to tapping one's experiences and wanting to do a terrific job for our client, interpreting his or her institutional philosophy and needs, and then pouring myself into designing an articulate, effective space that is inspiring, attractive and effective for all users. Each client presents a different challenge with a corresponding and distinct solution. I would say that, more than anything else, it is the process and the challenge that invigorates me and gets my juices flowing.

What's the most important ingredient to a good design?

Functionality is key to good design. A building or a space can and should look great, but if it doesn't work, what good is it? You can buy a great-looking pair of new shoes, but if they're too tight, they're not going to be worn too long. You can't dismiss the aesthetic value of a building or space, but a good architect will blend functionality and aesthetics without compromising either. It has to work. It has to be efficient.

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Do you have a design philosophy?

Not per se. I was taught that programming and functionality were paramount, and that belief has, I suppose, shaped my work and design goals. It's critical that a good architect understands, first, how a building functions and how its systems integrate optimally so as not to be wasteful and so that movement and use are a constant, seamless, efficient flow. That focus doesn't take away from attractive design. It just takes more effort and study to meld the two elements.

At the University of Florida, our professors wanted us to evolve, to develop our own style. They mentored and imparted the importance of well-programmed design. They encouraged us to find our own style, but they emphasized how buildings and spaces should integrate to optimize functionality. The juxtaposition on the site and within the site is critical. Flow and use extends, even, to how a building reacts to its neighbors. We learned the importance of listening and observing, thinking out of the box, and paying attention to the smallest of details.

What is the most rewarding thing about being an architect?

We create something from nothing, and if we do our jobs right, that something is wonderful and beneficial for our clients and users, evoking a sense of wonder, discovery and permanency. Think about a building. In many respects, everything comes from the architect. Regardless of whether an architect's inspiration comes from organic shapes, nature, the human body or whatever, everything has to come together on the drawing. Architects are really builders. We haven't produced just a pretty picture of a building. We've generated the instructions for assembling the building. Essentially, we've built the building on paper, tapping innumerable and ever-more complex disciplines and requirements, and spelling out the smallest of details to make sure that the plans are as easy to follow as possible.

What traits should an architect possess?

A good architect has to be visionary and resourceful. We have to know a space's or building's purpose, and then know how to put it together. Not only do we have to know how to install every single component down to the smallest part or element, we have to know how each piece works and functions -- in a vacuum and in interaction with everything else. As a result of having to know every detail involved with a structure, we necessarily have to be rigorous about the quality of construction documents and contract administration services for each and every project.

We also have to be first-rate managers of people. At one end of the spectrum, we have to listen to what our clients want and be able to shape their vision into reality. At the other end, we have to coordinate the consultants and manage the construction process. We have to have smooth bedside manners, but also a tenacity to convince clients of necessary courses of action, and we have to communicate that in their terms or language. A good architect will put the right people in the right seats and steer the bus through a maze of obstacles and requirements. We have to be psychologists. We have to know that there is a valid, predictable and positive effect on student performance with daylighting, that a soothing blue wall should go behind the complaint desk, and that a red wall in a boardroom stimulates thought and pursuit of ideas. The devil truly is in the details ... and in solid, thorough communication between all of the parties. A good architect makes all of that come together.

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What makes ACAI stand out from other firms?

I'd like to think that what makes our firm distinctive are our high standards for service and our finely tuned business sense. It's a plus for our clients, also, that we are multi-disciplined and registered and licensed to perform Architecture and Construction. Having General Contractors on staff enhances our ability to address potential field problems earlier on in the design process. This familiarity increases production effectiveness and helps maintain the project schedule by keeping it on track.

More than the awards that have come our way, our broad list of repeat clients is testament to our skills and our personal service. At ACAI, we understand that architecture is as much about relationships as it is about design. We take the time to develop a rapport with clients, consultants, developers and builders so as to achieve the best result for all stakeholders. We have a distinctive practice in that we provide a multi-discipline service under one roof. Whether someone is seeking professional services tied to architecture, design, expansions, remodeling, reroofing, ADA surveys, or construction management, our firm can handle it. That assortment of in-house technical expertise and skills combined with our hands-on approach to each project is what sets us apart.

While we have a passion for developing environmentally responsible and economically viable projects that achieve our clients' goals, it doesn't hurt, either, that ACAI is known for completing complex projects on time, within budget, and without compromising design quality. The bottom line is that we know our work and we know how to get things done fast, efficiently and in the best benefit of our clients.

What is the key to a successful client-firm relationship?

Successful architecture is the result of meaningful collaboration and thoughtful dialogue between client and architect. Decisions made in the design phase affect the life of a project, its surroundings and internal environment, and every building user forevermore. At ACAI, we want our clients to be as informed as possible before starting their project. This ensures a smooth-running project that finishes on time and on budget, and usually results in ACAI exceeding our client's expectations. Our highly structured design process addresses function, attractiveness, sustainability, craftsmanship, schedule and budget -- from concept through construction -- but the key to making it all come together is unchecked communication and honesty.

What's next for ACAI?

I don't want to lose track of what makes us special. To keep that edge, I would like to see us embrace a controlled growth in the coming years.

That being said, I certainly want us to continue to tackle inspiring projects. The work that we do in the educational field is truly exciting and fulfilling. Historic preservation is important. The challenges associated with the healthcare and bio-tech industries are good tests for our skills, and we've shown a knack for delivering the goods on time and on budget in those arenas. Continuing to focus on environmental sustainability and green-design elements is fascinating and the right way to go.

I am intrigued with the idea of matching our talent and one-stop-shop approach up with new industries. For example, Transportation. Life sciences. Sustainable design. The bottom line is that our pragmatic approach has evolved to the point where ACAI can tackle pretty much any project. We'll take it one project at time, seeking to provide quality design solutions for our customers.

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What's the ultimate measure of ACAI's success?

That's easy. First is the complete satisfaction of our clients. A close second, to me, is having a team of employees who feel that they derive a real value from their work at the firm. I want my employees to take something back from their efforts, tangible and intangible. I want them to learn and recognize that their hard work is appreciated, and I want them to feel an almost instant gratification when they've done a good job. I want them to be proud of their good work and know that it makes a difference. Such satisfaction and feeling of accomplishment were mind-sets that I seldom enjoyed when I was coming up through the ranks, so when I started my own firm I wanted to adopt a different approach in-shop toward our projects and staff -- one that would be fulfilling for each member of the team. I believed that approach would be important to building a successful firm, and time has shown that I was correct in that thought process.

As a result, we've assembled a dedicated and creative group of individuals and experienced project managers who are meticulously detailed, who adhere to project schedules, and who place supreme importance on maintaining positive client and consultant relations. Our team is highly collaborative and skillful at building consensus with all parties. They also know that I believe with all my heart and soul that everyone is a salesman for ACAI, so they had better be good ambassadors!

What's Adolfo Cotilla like away from work?

I'm not sure that I'm ever completely away from work! My wife and I love to travel, but even when we do, my mind's eye is always paying attention to buildings and design. Plus, I'm seemingly always on the phone with the staff, whether in the next county, New York or Paris. I don't ever want to lose that personal touch with my staff or my clients.

I was born in Cuba and am proud of my heritage. My parents moved our family to the Republic of Panama in 1961 and then to South Florida in 1964. I spent most of my childhood and teenage years in Miami, where I experienced a city in transition. At the time, I was one of only three Hispanic-surnamed kids in my elementary school, where English was the only language. The Miami of my youth was a city becoming a melting pot that has become an international business community.

With me, family comes first, last and always. I have been married to my best friend for more than 32 years, and Marisela and I have been blessed with two amazing daughters, Cristina and Angie, both of whom have given us the opportunity to spoil beautiful grandchildren. My favorite "down time" is when I'm simply being a very proud and contented "papi" to my wonderful family.

As an architect, what do you hope to be remembered for?

I suppose that our firm's commitment to delivering a quality product and a quality service was surpassed only by our unrelenting dedication to exceeding our client's expectations. I believe our size is perfect for our focus. Relationships, integrity, innovation, service and smarts set us apart from the competition, and I hope that is what ACAI always stands for. Everyone in this business strives to successfully respond to clients' goals, objectives and budgets. At ACAI, there is only one acceptable grade for our quality of work and customer service -- exceptional.

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ACAI is an award-winning, full-service architecture firm with offices in Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach Counties. Founded in 1985, ACAI's project-tested architects, engineers and construction professionals consistently deliver innovative, functional, sustainable and cost-effective design solutions. A minority-business enterprise, ACAI has built a longstanding reputation for excellence in the planning and design of universities, schools, local and state government buildings, healthcare facilities, industrial and commercial businesses, and private and public corporations. To learn more, contact Sandra Smerkers, LEED AP, ACAI's director of marketing, at 954-484-4000, ext. 38, or ssmerkers@acaiworld.com.