

ACAI NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

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Through the Architect's Eyes -- A Look at Building Tomorrow's Educational Facilities

Fort Lauderdale, FL (August 2007) -- If education is the foundation for success, is it a stretch to state that the facilities in which students and researchers are striving to realize their potential play a key role in their success?

According to Adolfo Cotilla, president of ACAI Associates, an award-winning, full-service architecture firm with offices in Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach Counties, there is a direct correlation between environment and learning. "State-of-the-art, safe, carefully designed buildings and campuses -- from elementary schools on through university and research facilities -- are paramount for optimal learning."

Cotilla and ACAI should know. The foundation of ACAI's workload since 1985 has been tied to educational projects -- from simple feasibility studies to the design of high-tech research labs and components of public schools and universities. A minority-business enterprise, ACAI has been repeatedly chosen by public and private agencies to tackle such projects not just because their demanding clients are confident of the firm's proven technical expertise, cost effectiveness and ability to service their needs in a timely manner, but also because of the firm's distinctive one-stop-shop focus and approach.

ACAI often tackles a project from scratch, in-house, taking oversight from architectural design all the way through construction. "And we don't just plan an expansion, a retrofit, a refurbishment or a new school or a lab in the traditional sense of knocking out plans," says Cotilla. With project-tested architects and other disciplines represented on the ACAI team, the multi-disciplined firm's professionals understand the design and construction process, developing projects that last longer. This hands-on familiarity increases production effectiveness and helps maintain a project's schedule. It also gives clients one place to go for updates, concerns, questions and the like.

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The logo for ACAI Associates, featuring the word "acai" in a lowercase, red, serif font.

Cotilla believes that there is no higher calling for an architect than designing a structure tied to education or research. “We get tremendously excited about the potential of every education- or research-oriented project that comes to our studio. The instinctual part for our team is taking a community’s, school Board’s or owner’s vision and shaping the whole of it, in a seamless, collaborative process -- from the ground up, literally and figuratively -- into a rich, rewarding facility or campus,” states Cotilla.

The basis for ACAI’s long track record of success with educational and research projects has always been a humanistic approach in the design of structures. “We recognize that there is always a community beyond the obvious that ties to a building’s use, so we ‘go to school’ with each and every project. The better we truly understand who our clients are and what each user-constituent is aiming to accomplish, the better we can interpret these needs with vision and architectural skill,” says Cotilla.

As an example of the homework his team puts in, Cotilla referenced a recent middle-school project. “Of paramount importance, of course, are the students and faculty. Also intimately involved are, obviously, the parents. What about those who support a school through providing maintenance of the facility? The school’s bus drivers certainly play an important role in the efficient running of the campus, as do those parents who drop off and pick up their children. What about those municipality-based heroes who support a school’s greater area -- police, fire and rescue? Without question, the surrounding neighborhood also plays a key role in making a school successful to every degree imaginable. How about everyone tied to the arts and culture and the overall environment at the school?” says Cotilla.

“At ACAI, before pencil goes to paper, we embrace a ‘no user left behind’ approach. We conduct an extensive outreach study of the community of users for a facility and its campus -- looking beyond the bricks and mortar -- to ascertain how everyone and every movement might best function. Not until all groups of people have been studied do we feel confident to begin the design process. Only at the conclusion of this collaborative Q&A process, do we have confidence that flow and use will match a sterling, resourceful and enduring design.”

Cotilla goes on to explain that every time ACAI secures a contract, his team of professionals learn something new, “bolstering our experience and confidence that we will deliver an innovative facility and campus that optimally serves its users.”

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“In essence, we took a page out of a first-rate teacher’s book of success,” states Cotilla. “Great teachers are effective listeners and communicators, with finely tuned intuitions sorting out the best solutions to the challenges posed by their students. We encourage clients to view our practice as a resource that helps them to be better-informed partners, helping us identify the best solutions to the challenges of their particular project. More broadly, we make an effort to educate users about the benefits of good architecture and what it will bring to their lives and communities for many decades down the line. Our own brand of educational outreach helps build understanding and consensus.”

ACAI’s extensive educational-client list includes design work on more than 40 schools in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach Counties over the course of the past 27 years. “At ACAI, we understand that improving a school’s infrastructure is important not only to protect a school Board’s capital investment, but also to provide facilities equipped to meet or exceed the ever-increasing K-12 educational requirements that our Federal government has placed on school districts nationwide,” states Cotilla.

ACAI’s passion for creating learning facilities extends to higher education. The firm has done work for, amongst others, Barry University, Broward Community College, Florida Atlantic University, Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida International University, Nova Southeastern University, Palm Beach Community College and the University of Florida.

Nova Southeastern University has tapped ACAI for various projects dating back almost 15 years, including work done for its West Palm Beach, Puerto Rico and North Miami Beach Medical Campuses. Of distinctive note, ACAI was the architect for NSU’s state-of-the-art Health Professions Division Campus in Davie, Florida. The \$40 million, 800,000-square-foot project included 11 auditoriums with distance-learning video conferencing and computer hook-up capabilities; a full medical library; wet laboratory teaching classrooms; a teaching clinic component; areas for administration, food service, student services, a museum, nurses and custodial services; its own physical plant; and a connected parking garage for 1,500 spaces.

And NSU work continues for ACAI, as it now focuses on design of the university’s 208,000-square-foot Center for Collaborative Research. The \$70 million project will house the Rumbaugh-Goodwin Institute for Cancer Research; Florida LambdaRail services (a high-capacity research network); offices for the US Geological Survey (for their involvement with the Everglades Restoration Project); and other ancillary components.

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“How can work on such innovative, cutting-edge research facilities not be inspiring?” asks Cotilla. “We know that if we design such high-tech, Research and Development facilities the right way, the more highly-cited researchers and scientists will be attracted to South Florida and these campuses. And that will, in turn, draw investment from government agencies and private businesses. That all equates to a windfall for our State’s economy. That is why we pour our souls into such projects.”

And doing it the “right way” is the only way for ACAI. Amongst many awards, the firm is a recipient of a Design Excellence Award by the American School and University. In this annual event honoring Educational Interior Design Excellence, ACAI's work on NSU's Health Professions Division Campus in Davie, Florida, earned the firm this prestigious award.

High on ACAI’s impressive list of credentials as a builder of great schools and universities are two other important embellishments -- tied to the environment and safety.

In this day and age, of paramount importance to an architecture firm is design of spaces that provide a safe place for users and visitors. Several members of ACAI’s staff are CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) certified, and the firm’s principal never, ever take his eye off that ball. “No one can argue that our students deserve the best. They deserve modern classrooms that enhance learning and, importantly, keep them safe. Our goal is to design and build safer, more productive and user-friendly environments, reducing costs and liability, while ultimately improving the quality of the facility and environment for the user,” states Cotilla.

A member of the US Green Building Council, ACAI is firmly committed to “green design,” not only in the firm’s education- and research-based projects, but with all of its work. Cotilla stresses that acting responsibly with regard to economic and environmental sustainability is the only way to go. “With every project we tackle, we seek to identify strategies that work together in a whole-building approach. We integrate green-design elements wherever possible.”

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Environmentally conscious designs that embrace stringent LEED (Leadership in Environmental & Energy Design) certification requirements utilize particulars such as energy-efficient mechanical and electrical systems, day-lighting, drought-tolerant plantings, cool-roof and other alternate energy systems, high-performance glass, water clarifiers, recycled or renewable building materials, and many other environment-friendly initiatives. Even the selection of construction materials and a building's orientation come into play. Design that is truly sustainable considers a structure's long-term operating costs, and strives to minimize energy consumption and incorporate renewable resources. "In essence, a green building struggles less and performs better," states Cotilla, "and that's a real plus to its owners, its users and our ecosystem."

Cotilla points out that the heartbeat of virtually every legislative session in Florida is tied, in one fashion or another, to three concerns: our economy, our natural resources and our educational wherewithal and capabilities. "Protecting and investing in that trio of top-shelf issues is, as it should be, a priority for our elected officials and our citizenry. When those three issues are healthy, we're healthy. That's why, at ACAI, our focus on building educational and research facilities is of such importance."

"At ACAI," concludes Cotilla, "there is no shortage of expertise in planning, design and programming. But two things separate our firm from the competition. First, we do it all -- from retrofits and building-site and utilities-infrastructure design, to cost estimating, roofing consulting, interior design, construction documents, construction administration and more. Second and most importantly, with every project, we tap that special creative spark -- just as teachers do with their students and researchers do in their labs -- that allows us to create unique, practical and timeless solutions of inspiration, excellence and performance."

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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.