

Cathy Hayes

Creating Community

By: Nora Burba Trulsson

Phoenix architect Catherine Hayes doesn't particularly like to dwell on the past or view her career as a series of built projects, a list of concrete achievements. Instead, this *Sources for Design Icon*—known for iconic hospitality projects such as La Grande Orange, Chelsea's Kitchen, Arrogant Butcher and the condos at Hotel Valley Ho—keeps her gaze firmly on the present and future. She cares more about how her work creates community than how many design awards get shelf space at her Arcadia-area studio. But a trip down memory lane is warranted to trace Hayes' career trajectory, which has been firmly focused on creating community and enriching neighborhoods. Hayes spent her childhood in River Forest, Illinois, the Chicago suburb that sits cheek by jowl with Oak Park. "I lived down the block from the Frank Lloyd Wright home and studio," she explains, "and I grew up seeing designs by Wright, Louis Sullivan and others. I knew from a young age that I wanted to be an architect." She received her architecture degree from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, then headed to France to study at Ecole des Beaux-Arts. "From the University of Illinois, I learned that image, activity and technology are the three most important things to consider when designing a building," Hayes recalls. "That has guided me every day since. From Ecole des Beaux-Arts, I learned that the art of presenting your ideas is as important as the idea."



Even though I embrace technology in my work, I still do watercolors, hand-drafting and hand-drawing. It's a more emotional way of presenting a proposal."

Post-college, Hayes went to work with the legendary Skidmore, Owings & Merrill architecture firm in Chicago, "working as a little peon," but sitting in on meetings with likes of architect and structural engineer Fazlur Rahman Khan. Stints at other Chicago firms followed, then an idea popped into her head that she should relocate to San Francisco.

On the way West, she stopped to see her brother, who was living in Arizona, and casually responded to a newspaper ad placed by the late Phoenix architect George Christensen, seeking employees for his firm at the time, Christensen Miller. "I was hired," Hayes explains of her two years with the firm in the late 1980s, "because I didn't go to ASU like all the rest of his employees, and George was looking for someone with a different perspective. I was also the first female he hired, so I was 100 percent an outsider there." Christensen, however, gave her a grounding piece of advice when it came to choosing clients—something she carries with her to this day. "George said that you shouldn't associate with groups or societies that you don't feel comfortable in, just to get work, because you'll be eventually working with them and you'll hate it. He told me to play to my own song."

Wanting to learn the ins and outs of development, Hayes next took a job with Gosnell Builders, staying for seven years and getting her real estate license. As their commercial architecture director, she did the office projects for all three Pointe developments, then learned the nuances of interior design for the hotels as well.

With mentorship from the then-director of design for Hilton, Hayes launched her own practice in 1992, working on projects such as the renovations of the Pointe at South Mountain and Tapatio Cliffs, as well as doing designs for airport Hiltons all over the country.

Before long, local hospitality players sought her expertise. Hayes hit it out of the ballpark with one of her first neighborhood projects, converting a meh convenience store into La Grande Orange, a coffee shop/restaurant/pizzeria/marketplace/lunch spot/cocktail place that has become Arcadia's de facto community center since its opening in 2002. "Today, I walked my dog, picked up coffee at La Grande Orange and met my neighbors," says Hayes, who is part owner of the hybrid restaurant and also lives nearby. "This project, like all my others, is more about building a community and making the business financially successful than just architecture and interior design. [I

have a] desire to take part in reinforcing the fabric of this community

—if only in a small radius through my design work.” Other local restaurant, hotel and commercial projects soon followed, each designed by Hayes and her team to fit the client’s needs. Her instinctive approach has rewarded clients with successful spaces that have become integrated into their neighborhoods. “I don’t have a style,” explains Hayes, “but the common thread in my work is that I listen intently to what the client is asking or telling me. I use my experience not in a ‘know-it-all’ way, but in an enriching way—to make things function for the client so that they can be successful.” Along the way, Hayes also began working on homes—many residences stemming from her hospitality work and, now, with repeat clients for residential work. She also built her own studio in 2017, on Indian School Road, not far from her Arcadia epicenter. Her current projects include two Arizona homes under construction, a private retreat center at the edge of the Tonto National Forest and continuing work on a family compound in Idaho. The current COVID-19 situation and its effect on the coming months doesn’t fill Hayes with dread—instead, she finds her clients’ and community’s responses nothing short of incredible. “It brings tears to my eyes and solidifies my belief in this community of people who want to be kind, courteous and courageous, while being wildly, amazingly creative,” she says,

pointing out that her clients such as Sweet Dees bakeshop, LGO Group, Fox Restaurant Concepts, Hotel Valley Ho and UrbAna have launched everything from takeout and curbside service to offering boredom-quelling craft boxes for children and adults alike. Rather than chasing huge projects likely to get stalled due to an uncertain economy, Hayes sees work in home improvements and smaller houses, re-thinking office layouts to promote the health of workers and re-tooling restaurants to accommodate the new world order of takeout, curbside pickups and social distancing. Hayes looks unblinkingly into the future, putting her faith in good design and creativity. “Design plays such a huge role in our everyday lives, even as much as nailing the functional needs, the time and cost budgets do,” says Hayes. “People seem to be slowing down and noticing how much good, innovative design matters. I think they will become much more attuned to the role of creative design in their homes, their workplaces, the shops they support and all the community places they come together with family and friends. We as a design community should be so happy we can bring our skills, enthusiasm, travel experience and exposure to business to be of service. That is what I intend to be available for, as each day arrives.”

ALWAYS ICONIC