



Catherine M. Hayes, AIA

Hayes Architecture/Interiors, Phoenix, Arizona

Anyone driving by a strip center at the corner of 40th Street and Campbell in central Phoenix a while back may have seen a rather unusual sight. The windows of the center's abandoned convenience store were plastered over with happy, all-American images—kids eating hot dogs, ladies lunching and more. Across the parking lot, at curbside, a group of professionals had gathered. As they looked at the store windows, they talked, gestured and talked some more.

Phoenix architect Catherine M. Hayes was in the midst of that group. She'd been asked to convert an aging, "scary" convenience store into a family-friendly, up-scale corner grocery. For Hayes, such a show-and-tell gathering of the building owners and grocery principals was part of her retail design process—and part of building a sense of community in this older Phoenix neighborhood that's being revitalized by urban professionals and families.

"The previous convenience store was a place where you bought cigarettes, liquor and pornography," says Hayes. "It didn't exactly foster community. I wanted to recreate the neighborhood grocery where mothers could feel good about sending their kids to get some milk." With input from clients, Hayes' concept became La Grande Orange Grocery, a bustling market specializing in take-out foods that opened in 2002.

She gutted the existing building, put in new, operable windows across the front and installed a low, tiled sill that doubles as extra outdoor seating. Hayes put the kitchen in the middle of the action, so that customers could see the pastry chef at work and sandwiches and pizzas being made, and made a secondary entrance to the rear via the kitchen. Everything was detailed to the nth degree, including the bathrooms and the display units. "It's embarrassing to say how much time we spent designing the display units," says Hayes with a laugh. "We wound up getting emotional attachments to the kind of candy we



Above: The exterior and interior of La Grande Orange Grocery.
Left: The Lee Robert Salon.

wanted the grocery to sell, and how they should be displayed.”

Hayes’ attention to retail details has helped with the store’s success, and her attention to the work at hand has helped her with her own professional success. Her nine-person firm specializes in retail, hospitality and residential design work.

Hayes credits environmental factors in helping her decide to go into architecture. She grew up in the Oak Park–River Forest suburbs just outside of Chicago. Nearly every school day, she walked past Frank Lloyd Wright’s celebrated home and studio. Many of her friends lived in Wright–designed homes. “It was all around me,” she says of Wright’s architectural influence.

During her junior year, she transferred from a girls’ Catholic high school to its public counterpart so she could take a drafting class. “I knew I would study architecture,” she recalls. And she did, getting her bachelor’s in architecture from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, with a year spent studying architecture abroad at L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts in France.



Upon graduation in 1980, Hayes found the job market to be nonexistent. Nonetheless, she walked into the Chicago offices of Skidmore Owings & Merrill cold, and asked the personnel manager to give her a job. “I told him I needed a job by the end of the day, and that I was willing to take out the garbage,” she recalls with a laugh. Impressed by her boldness, he gave her a job. “I was a gofer; I did models, I worked until 10 p.m.,” Hayes says. After two years of working on a high-rise project, Hayes went to work for another, smaller Chicago firm. “I wound up spending about two years working for several Chicago firms,” Hayes says. “I knew I wanted to start my own firm some day, and I wanted the experience of working from different perspectives.”

Working for the Chicago firms gave her an introduction into retail design as well. Hayes worked on four Vie de France bakeries, with each bakery being retrofitted into an existing, often historic, neighborhood building. She also learned the ropes of chain retail projects, doing site and store layouts for Payless shoe stores. “I’ve learned, over the years, that there’s a huge difference between doing work for national chains versus custom retail work,” Hayes explains.

After a few years in Chicago, Hayes decided to head to the West, accepting a position with Phoenix architect George Christensen’s firm, Christensen-Miller, in 1983, where she worked on residential and church projects. Wanting to get a taste of development work, Hayes hired on with Gosnell developers in 1985, becoming their director of commercial projects. “I learned everything there from site acquisitions to renovations on their existing hotels. It was always a fast-track, supercharged atmosphere,” she says of the developers who built the three Phoenix-area Pointe resorts, plus the home and office developments surrounding them. “We had to learn how to solve problems on the spot, on the site.”

By 1992, Hayes was ready to launch her own prac-



A showroom for Interwest Distributing, designed by Hayes Architecture/Interiors.

tice, and she had Pointe resort interior renovations as her first major projects. “I hired two employees and rented office space in Phoenix, most of which I subleased to other small firms,” she says. “As I kept growing, I kept asking the other people to move out so I could have their space.”

Hayes built her Phoenix practice around more hospitality work, for clients such as Hilton (the Pointe’s operators), Starwood and Destination Resorts, doing everything from guest rooms to back-of-the-house work, plus residential and more retail work.

“With the retail, I did have the opportunity to do more chain work,” she recalls. But a conversation with someone involved in that type of retail work confirmed her intuitive aversion to going down that path. “Doing retail chains is very lucrative, but for someone like me, it doesn’t give you much time to nurture the local, community clients.”

She decided to put her efforts into staying local, doing projects such as a salon, spa and beauty retailer called Lee Robert Salon in nearby Scottsdale, for which she did

an ultra-feminine look based on the Paris couture houses she’d visited while a student in France. “Those old couture houses were usually

narrow little spaces up on the third floor, very frou-frou with lots of drapery fabric and crystal chandeliers.”

Hayes also stayed local by moving her office to the renovated post office that sits directly next door to her La Grande Orange Grocery project, with which she took the innovative step of getting a piece of the business. “I used to think that I couldn’t guarantee a business’s success—that I could only guarantee a cool concept,” Hayes concedes. “Now I look at it differently.”

Hayes has also bought into the neighborhood in a different way, opting to remodel an existing mid-century ranch house into a “local showhouse,” giving area dwellers ideas of how their homes could look. Other plans? There’s an empty lot across the street from her office and La Grande Orange Grocery that’s being nurtured as the site of high-concept taco stand. “It’ll be a little jewel box, with a teensy kitchen and all outdoor or carryout dining. And it will have absolutely good, good food.”

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