

## Developing Architecture

Russell Katz

Montgomery Oaks Management, Inc.

*Following a BS in Architecture from the University of Virginia, Russell Katz worked for Hans Hollein Atelier and then earned an MA at Yale University. After a period at Turner Brooks Architects and Deamer + Phillips Architecture, Katz returned to his native Washington in 1998 to pursue an environmentally conscious synthesis of development and architecture. Recent projects include the renovation of two derelict apartment buildings, and a new building, Elevation 314, winner of the Best Environmentally Friendly Building award from the Maryland/D.C. Chapter of the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties, and the 2005 Catalyst Award from the Washington Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. Karl Krause sat down with Katz to discuss the dialect between developers and architects, architectural education and real-world sustainability.*

A Conversation with Russell Katz and Karl Krause

**Karl Krause (KK):** *After studying architecture at U.Va. and Yale, you've become as much a developer as an architect. What encouraged you to take on both roles in your projects?*

**Russell Katz (RK):** In school, if you have a good enough argument for a project that breaks the rules, you can do it. This relates completely to the role of a developer, but in a very unrealistic way to the role of an architect. An architect is simply a consultant with influence that extends only as far as a client's belief in you, or shared interests. I never liked that dynamic of waiting for the right developer to come along, or the need to influence clients that were going in a direction I didn't want them to go in. Rather than dealing with these inefficiencies, I decided pretty early on that I wanted to have more than a design influence on my projects, and that's what I've done for the past nine years.



photomontage of site context, Elevation 314



rain garden courtyard, Elevation 314

**KK:** *How did you get started?*

**RK:** My father was involved in some FHA development in the 1970's and my uncle was a developer in Boston, so I grew up with exposure to the business, and they have both been very influential role models. At Turner Brooks – a great designer that I admire very much – I made plans to start my own business, and started working seriously towards purchasing some buildings that would have the right potential to get me started. I wanted to learn to be a good developer step by step – so my first projects were devoid of major design requirements. Instead, these renovations focused on market, construction quality, government regulation, budget, return on investment, and the setting up of a management system and entity. Once the business plan came around and I had the ongoing support of the projects and the attendant cash-flow, I was able to take on projects that are more ambitious in design.

**KK:** *Elevation 314 is one of these more ambitious projects – how did your process change for this project?*

**RK:** For Elevation 314, there was no compromise for environmental issues, business or design – all three had to be successful for the building to be a success. Collaboration became a huge component of the project, because there's no way one person can wear all those hats and still do the drawings. The model I used was to find really good professionals to essentially guard their turf: a project designer, to make sure the design was never compromised by environmental or budget constraints, an environmental expert to make

sure sustainability was never compromised, and I myself managed the proforma of the project – because no one can care for one's own investment like oneself. The whole process is a bit like being an orchestra leader – it's exciting. There were close to a dozen different consultants, all very good at what they were asked to do. Being able to collaborate, and knowing who to bring in where and when is profoundly important to getting a project built. There's as much design to the building as to the collaborative process itself.

**KK:** *What sort of compromises were made within the collaborative team?*

**RK:** Well, no matter what you do, no building is perfect environmentally. Everything has a drawback. For example, if you want a good flooring material, bamboo is great - but the only reasonably priced bamboo is coming from China, so there's an embodied energy cost. We looked into local hardwood yet decided on bamboo... these sorts of decisions are constantly being made. What I wanted from the project was for every system and material to satisfy all three of the project priorities. To put a green roof on the building's parking garage, we added the Department of Health to the collaborative team to help them come up with the requirements needed to approve the roof, because our green roof needed to be permitted as a part of the stormwater management system. This had never been done in D.C. before. The calculations we suggested are now what they use to evaluate and permit green roof systems... I think this collaboration between the public and private sector is an essential and powerful tool both for a project and for initiating change on a larger scale.

**KK:** *As green building enters public consciousness, it's becoming a highly marketable component of development. Is there a danger of developers manipulating sustainable building for profit?*

**RK:** Green is a very fluid issue: as the movement grows, it changes. The USGBC LEED system has pretty much become the benchmark for evaluating whether a project is green or not. As green building becomes more mainstream, LEED will become more mainstream. Renters are suspicious and savvy, especially those who care about environmental issues and green building. I



interior, Elevation 314



downspout detail, Elevation 314



view from adjacent metro stop, Elevation 314

know there are already people who are trying to paint their work green in order to capitalize on the movement, but I believe the market, meaning the green community, renters, buyers, press, etc., is too savvy to fall for a fake.

I didn't seek LEED certification for Elevation 314 because they weren't set up to do multi-family residences in 2001, and it would have cost at least \$80,000 to do it – money that was better spent on geo-thermal HVAC for the building. That said, smart green building is good business. With geo-thermal heating, for example, tenants get the financial benefit of lower utility costs, developers get the benefit of geothermal loop heating pumps that will last 30 years, and higher tenant retention that results from their utility bill.

**KK:** *After 12 years of practice, how has your perspective on architectural education changed?*

**RK:** Architectural education stops short in addressing the importance of collaboration. For example, American students are the sole authors of their studio projects – which makes them think in broad terms and develop a comprehensive idea, but doesn't contribute toward working as a team. A comparable architectural program in Vienna, Austria, has students lead their entire studio for a number of weeks, if not a month, to complete their diploma project. There's a challenge of communication, scheduling and managing personalities and abilities – all of the things that have to be done as an architect, and especially as a developer. In terms of collaborating at an educational level, I think it's very important to cross-pollinate with students and faculty from different disciplines. In the public realm,

architecture touches everyone and everything – a fantastic place for collaboration.

**KK:** *How does this carry through to practice?*

**RK:** For one, there is an overemphasis on design talent and skill in schools, while collaboration and leadership are undervalued. I love designing, and I greatly enjoyed doing well in school and being recognized for my design work – but I think that every year too many students enter the field with their focus in the wrong place. They expect to be the next Koolhaas or Gehry...superstars that are as cross-cultural as politicians and athletes. But those guys don't have an influence on 90% of what gets built. Most buildings shouldn't be designed by people like that – instead, they should be an exquisitely designed background for life. There is a huge role to be filled if there is to be improvement in the environmental and design quality of most of the built world. Architecture's "piece of the pie" is shrinking every day – and the AIA seems to be more concerned with controlling and limiting its turf than expanding it. Too many architects have not found a way to maximize the value that they can bring to the world.

*Russell Katz continues to practice as a developer and architect in the Washington D.C. area. More information on Elevation 314 and other projects can be found on his website: <http://momidc.com/>*

*Karl Krause is a graduate student of landscape architecture at U.Va.*