

Michael Nelson (MArch '83, BPS '81)



Michael Nelson's portfolio of more than 60 performing arts center projects includes the 385,000-square-foot Raymond F. Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in West Palm Beach, which he designed while working at the world-renowned Zeidler Partnership Architects. Photo by Christopher Fay

By Rebecca Rudell

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Michael Nelson (MArch '83, BPS '81) has worked on a wide variety of building types, from the Scripps Research Institute in Jupiter, Florida, to the Port of Palm Beach Cruise Terminal and office headquarters, but he is best known for his performing arts center (PAC) projects located throughout the U.S. and Canada.

His largest PAC project, the 385,000-square-foot Raymond F. Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in West Palm Beach, was designed and constructed while working at the world-renowned, Toronto-based Zeidler Partnership Architects, under the tutelage of Eberhard Zeidler, a Bauhaus-trained architect and Zeidler's owner/founder.

"I learned so much from Eb," says Nelson. "It was a tremendous experience."

Over his career, Nelson has designed and/or project managed more than 60 additional PAC structures, from the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center in Appleton, Wisconsin, to the Long Center for the Performing Arts in Austin, Texas, to the Nadine McGuire Theatre & Dance Pavilion in Gainesville, Florida. He's worked in nine states and five countries and his work has taken him as far afield as Beijing and Chengdu, China, and even Kurdistan in northern Iraq during the Iraq War.

Here Nelson shares his thoughts on designing PACs, provides advice for today's students, and reveals some additional talents, one of which he honed while attending UB.

What was your role at Zeidler?

I was one of their directors of architecture heading their office in Palm Beach. After we finished the first phase of the Kravis Center, Eb (Zeidler) told me I had done a great job, but now I had two options: move to the Baltimore office or be unemployed. Neither option was good for me because I had responsibilities in Florida, so I pitched the idea of an office in West Palm. He paused for a moment, then told me to look for some space. Over the next 18 or so years, I grew the Florida office I had established to 27 people and we were one of the largest architecture firms in Palm Beach County.

So why did you found designel?

2006-07 began a very difficult time for architects, especially in the Sun Belt where business slowed down mercilessly. Zeidler had to close five of its twelve locations, including ours. After being offered a position in the Toronto headquarters, I made the decision to stay in Florida. Shortly after that, I formed a partnership with another architect from Zeidler and together we founded designel and continued to design performing arts projects and other building types including numerous projects at the Palm Beach Zoo. This year, I decided to start my own firm MNArchitects. I'm currently working on a gate house for Breakers West, a high-end community in West Palm associated with the world-renowned Breakers Hotel on Palm Beach, a project for Vitas Healthcare, and a corporate headquarters/art gallery in a historic building in West Palm, as well as several arts projects.

How did your interest in designing architecture for the performing arts begin?

While I was working at ARCOP Architects in St. Petersburg, Florida, on a major performing arts project in the late 1980s, I attended summer courses at Harvard on the design of theatres and PACs, as well as an international conference in England on the acoustic design of PACs. It was then that I discovered my passion for performing arts design. They are incredibly challenging. Every building is unique, there's nothing repetitive about any aspect of them. As architects, we love to think we can design any building type, but you really do need to have experience to design theaters and PACs. Even then, you still don't know everything. People often ask me why I still need an acoustical consultant and a theatrical consultant for my PAC designs. I answer: Because I've done so many of them. At this point, I know what I don't know. Theatre architects can work more quickly, efficiently and creatively with good acoustic and theater consultants.

And of course none of what I've accomplished would be possible without the guidance of some great mentors (Eb Zeidler in particular) and the assistance and involvement of fantastic, talented teammates - architects, draftspersons and interior designers - who were with the firms I've been a part of, associate architectural firms with whom we've teamed, or creative engineers who've helped make these projects all possible.



As a director of architecture for Zeidler Partnership Architect's Palm Beach office, Nelson oversaw high-profile performing arts center projects across the country. The office would become one of the largest architecture firms in Palm Beach County before it closed in 2012 due to the effects of the national recession.

Is there a different thought process or set of design considerations when designing a building for performances?

There are heightened expectations in a community for excellent design of a PAC versus a spec office building, hospital or most any other building type. You need to satisfy the diverse challenges of sightlines, acoustics, large assembly codes, fire rating, exiting issues, etc., etc., while at the same time sculpting form and space. In the end, a PAC can and should become the living room of the community - its very heart - as they are experienced by a greater breath of the population seeking entertainment, education and inspiration.

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What inspires your designs?

I really want to make engaging and interesting environments. I enjoy the challenge of stretching budgets as far as they can go and consider it a great compliment when you befuddle the competition. Zeidler worked on numerous projects at the Kravis Center over the years and at one point I received a call saying that the entire César Pelli team wanted to tour the Kravis while they were designing a new center in Miami. So I took them through. César Pelli looked around and was really impressed. Then he asked me: How did you guys do this? How did you get this much building out of that small of a budget? It was the best compliment we could have received.

What do you hope to achieve through your work?

I hope to lift people’s spirits. I’ve had the great fortune of designing and working on buildings that a wide swath of the community experiences. When you see two dozen school buses in front of the Kravis unloading nearly two thousand kids who are excited to see a matinee that they never would have experienced without the generosity of a community and your creativity and hard work, you realize you are making an impact.

Do you have any advice for architecture students?

A few years ago, I ended up in Buffalo by way of a funeral in Canada. I missed my flight and ended up staying at a hotel near the airport. So, of course, I went to Third Base! It was during a summer session and I ran into a few UB architecture students. They asked for advice on how to achieve success in their careers, so I told them: If you don’t have a personality, get one. Because you can be the best designer in the world, but if you can’t sell your designs, you’ll be in the back room your whole life designing for those who can. They were a little shocked, but I still think it was sage advice. I recall Eb Zeidler offering a similar bit of wisdom: that the most important part of architecture is getting the job, so you’d better be good at it.

I also think that architects in general need to be smarter about pursuing work. They know in their guts what they’re qualified for and should not waste the time and money pursuing work they have no right pursuing. A major pursuit can cost \$50,000 to \$100,000, and at times into hundreds of thousands of dollars. It’s just not smart business allowing your ego to take over and kidding yourself about your chances of success.

Any stories from UB that you’d like to share?



Michael Nelson (second from right) as an architecture student at UB in the early 1980s.

My friends and I used to play foosball at the Ratskeller on Main Street and the Pub in Ellicott and were regularly badly beaten by Buffalonians and others from “upstate.” Well, we Brooklyn boys were not having any of that, so we swore to get better and actually used some of our student loan money at the beginning of sophomore year to buy our own table. I still play today, sometimes several times in a week. But now I only lose five to 10 percent of my games, thanks to Buffalo. It earns me a fairly regular \$20 bill from unsuspecting youth.

Any other hidden talents?

Singing. Apparently, I do a formidable Elvis at karaoke. My go-to anthem is “Hunka Hunka Burning Love.” But I also do Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Muddy Waters, some Sinatra, David Bowie, The Doors, etc. I have a fairly wide range. Someday, I’m going to go on tour as the singing architect at all the [performing arts] venues I’ve designed!