

Balancing the Grind with Frank Cunha III, CEO & Principal at FC3 Architecture + Design, LLC

May 18, 2020



Frank Cunha III is the University Architect at Montclair State University and is also the CEO & Principal at FC3 Architecture, a full-service architectural practice based in Hardyston, New Jersey.

Frank is married with 3 children, he is licensed as a Registered Architect in 9 states, and competes regularly in endurance sports.

We're looking to partner with companies that share our passion to promote healthy work-life balance around the world. Get in touch with us!

1. To kick things off, could you tell us a little about your career background and current role?

I graduated architecture school back in 1998. 20 years later I completed an executive masters in business administration. Since I was a little boy I always dreamed of becoming an architect. I was fascinated by old cathedrals, castles and fortifications.

Once I got into the real world I was able to work on all sorts of projects (everything from custom homes, fitness centers, offices, retail, mixed use, multi-family, elementary schools, and even a helicopter facility). But what I really fell into was working on projects that served the public.

Most of my architecture career has been in higher education. Pretty much everything you can imagine that goes into a college campus I have worked on as a planner, designer, manager, and builder.

In my current role as University Architect I am able to tackle complicated projects from the start. Sometimes, even before a formal need is identified, we start to plan ideas to make the campus better and accommodate the ever-changing landscape of what it means to go to college.

On a more formal basis, when a need is identified by the university's administration, our team works to begin planning and designing a project. There is always a programmatic need, financial and timeline constraints, and practicality of what we are trying to achieve.

Having an executive MBA on top of my architecture degree gives me an edge as an architect in a leadership role to look at problems more holistically and ask more questions from different angles.

I am more of a "master builder" than an ordinary architect since I am able to work on all phases of a project (from an earlier stage than most architects are able to see) and then work with our maintenance and operations team to maintain the facilities after they are built, unlike architects that are mostly focused on design and construction.

I need to think long term about what we are doing because I "own" the project and the potential threats that come along with being on the owner side. My knowledge and experience is broader, offering a wider perspective, therefore, my influence and value as an architect is increased.

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2) What does a day in the life look like for you? Can you take us through a recent workday?

Before the social distancing went into effect my average day looked like this:

After getting a good night's sleep I wake up early, have a solid healthy breakfast and commute to my college campus where I workout for about 45-60 minutes. After showering and getting ready for work (I am already at work) I start my day.

I break my “work” day into three main parts consisting of about 3 hours each. I try to have a plan in place on what I am going to focus on for the day (I try to limit it to three main priorities at a time, then move on to the next three – my wife taught me this trick and I use it with my team to help us focus on the top priorities).

As far as meetings go, if it’s not on my calendar it does not exist. By having a calendar in place, it is one less thing I have to think about.

I allocate 3 large blocks of time during the course of a typical week to work on creative architecture tasks which can be anything from research, strategy, planning, design thinking, old school sketching with trace or problem solving.

In between “work” blocks I try to do 30 minutes of walking and thinking during my lunch break. After the second block I commute home and work out for another 60 minutes.

After that workout I have my third block of “work” time to deal with urgent emails and administrative things and getting ready mentally for the next day ahead. I try to focus on each day as it comes but I also need to have a long view of what is coming so I can work towards those items as well so as not be overwhelmed.

In between all of this I try to spend some time with my family. Unless my children are at practice we all try to have dinner together and talk about the day. One trick I like to use is having my gym bag and lunch bag ready to go the night before, so I am ready to go the next day.

Now with social distancing I try to keep a similar schedule, but I try to walk more since I do not have a commute. I still break my day into 3 productive “work” blocks. I don’t miss the commute much since it takes up to 10 hours on a normal week, about 1 hour each way.

One trick I like to use to be more productive is having my gym bag and lunch bag ready to go the night before, so I am ready to go the next day.

The sunrises at home have become more powerful and significant in light of recent events and I use this routine to get me pumped up for the day. I feel ready to go once I get to my home office.

3) Does your current role allow for flexible or remote working? If so, how does that fit into your life and routine?

Although technically my current role could be more “flexible,” the culture has been more traditional when it comes to working from home.

Perhaps one of the positive things that come out of this situation is that organizations will see the benefit of having their employees work from home. As long as the work gets done does it matter whether you are situated in a work office or a home office?

Additionally, organizations can look at the savings of office spaces and potential healthcare savings by having employees rotate their schedules.

4) What does work-life balance mean to you and how do you work to achieve that goal?

This may not work for everyone. For me it's more about integration than balance.

What I mean by that is that if I have an urgent family matter I'm going to go deal with that situation without hesitation. It also means that if I have to get something out I will work nights and weekends to get it done no matter what.

It's "blended" more than balance. It does not always work as well as intended, but I am able to feel less remorse at work and home since I try my best to integrate the two parts of my life.

After all, I want to succeed in my work life as I want to succeed in my personal life. The two are interrelated.

One area I do try to balance regularly is taking a break away from the office during lunch time. This break is an opportunity for a mini-vacation to get away from co-workers, the noise of the open office, busy desks, offices, conference rooms, ringing phones, and problems.

I use this time to walk, connect with nature, listen to audiobooks, and call people when I have to. It's amazing to see how your mind shifts speaking to someone about an issue walking in nature than being stranded in the office.

These mini-vacations allow me to operate at a highly effective level because it prevents me from burning out (like over-training for an athlete).

Some of my best thinking comes during my morning or afternoon workouts, either while I am swimming, cycling or running or right afterwards when I am showering. You would be amazed if you knew how many problems have been solved by getting into a "peak" state of consciousness.

5) What do you think are some of the best habits or routines that you've developed over the years to help you achieve success in your life?

Starting and finishing my day with meditation and prayer has proven useful to me as a way to anchor my day. I am also trying to get into writing one sentence each day in my journal. I miss days here and there but keeping it to a minimum of one sentence has helped me get on track with journaling where in the past I have given up.

Breaking up my “work” day the same way I break up my triathlon training into smaller chunks makes the day more manageable. Instead of speed, I am worried about putting one foot in front of the other and making forward progress. I am in it for the long game.

Trying to do three physical activities every day is very important to me, whether it is strength training or my triathlon cardio workouts or just going for a hike during lunch these help flush out the stress and energize me to stay motivated.

Speaking of motivation, motivation is like brushing your teeth. You can listen to an excellent podcast or read an interesting article and get motivated but unless you do it every day your energy level will wane. You have to keep finding inspiration and motivation every day.

For me, motivating others motivates me. So besides helping people, being a friend, coach and mentor helps me stay motivated. I also look for positive people around me to give me strength, courage and energy to face tough challenges.

Persistence and passion have been two big drivers in my career. I am trying to focus passion on my creativity and not let it flow into my management style because I am trying to remain stoic. But in most cases being persistent is a trait that I admire about myself. Even when things seem dim if it is worth doing I will stick with it until the end, whether it is during a race or during a crisis where a solution or compromise is needed.

Finally, in terms of my physical pursuits which drive my spiritual and mental states, I use the cycle of the sun to guide the intensity of my battery level – I ramp down for the winter and ramp up for the summer. Working with the seasonal changes that occur in my part of the world connects me with nature and keeps me motivated and keeps me from burning out.

6) Are there any books that have helped you improve over the years?

There’s too many to name, but here’s a few that come to mind.

The Secret by Rhonda Byrne helped me visualize a better version of myself. I read this book and lost 60 lbs and started running ultra-races before starting a career in triathlon. I kept a vision board on my phone to remind me daily of what my goals were.

Can’t Hurt Me: Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds by David Goggins helped me appreciate that despite all the inconveniences and adversity in my life how “easy” my life has been compared to others.

I am grateful for how lucky I have been and find it amazing that someone like Goggins could overcome so much pain and suffering to accomplish so much in his life. He inspires me to live a balanced life and stretch what I think my mind and body are capable of. Reading this book while completing my executive MBA helped me stay focused and motivated.

The Obstacle Is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph by Ryan Holiday is a recent book I read. I heard about it while watching “Word on Fire” on YouTube.

I trust Bishop Barron who has published numerous books, essays, and articles on theology and spirituality. He spoke highly of this book which millennials are turning to in search of answers. He hopes that it is a gateway to Christianity and Christian views since many of the stoic’s values overlap with Jesus’ teachings about how to deal with adversity in our lives.

7) What is the number one thing you do to make sure you get the most out of your day?

After a short prayer and meditation, I need to start off the day with a sunrise workout. It does not have to be the same work out every day. Some days it may be an easy swim, other days it may be hill repeats or track repeats, other days it may be a brisk walk or a cycling workout.

The important thing is to get the blood flowing and the mental juices pumping. This daily habit makes me feel that I have accomplished something even before the work day begins. It helps train my mind to deal with surprise issues that come up.

Also, by breaking the day into smaller parts I know that there is relief coming and I can get the most out of each “work” block instead of dreading one long day that seems to never end.

8) If you could read an interview about work-life balance by anyone, who would that be?

- William J. Martin, Architect.
- Stacey R. Kliesch, Architect.

9) Do you have any last thoughts on work, life or balance that you’d like to share with our readers?

Don’t approach work and life separately. Keep one schedule to manage all your work and personal engagements. Try to live a single integrated life.

If you are able to have an occupation that you love this approach to life may be easier. If you are working at a job you hate that may be difficult or impossible. Even if you are unhappy try to find a way to use my “triathlete” strategy of taking on smaller bite size chunks of time to help you get through the day (like interval training).

Reading books, podcasts, and motivational videos and seminars will only take you so far. Ultimately, you need to experiment with different approaches and find happiness (meaning) in what you do.

If you are able to live with balance in all areas of your life you will feel fulfilled and will be able to succeed in all areas of your life mentally, spiritually, physically, emotionally, etc., since they are all connected to one another.

You need to train yourself to juggle all the areas at once and make small progress in each area to achieve complete balance.

Instead of trying to change the world, change yourself first.