

features

scratch a niche: area architects find success in discipline-specific work

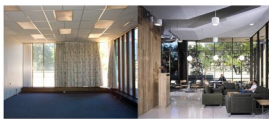
DOUGLAS J. GUTH | THURSDAY, JUNE 27, 2013



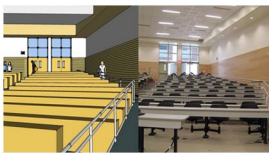
Frey Hall atrium, SUNY Stony Brook University



Before and After: Crawford Hall, Case Western Reserve University



Before and After: Crawford Hall, Case Western Reserve University



Rendering and Reality: Frey Hall, Stony Brook University



Charles Belson

KJ Building, Hamilton College

BDA is featured as one of Three Northeast Ohio architecture firms currently are working within the confines of niche industries like dining, education or healthcare. But far from staunching a designer's creativity, these disciplines are proving a playground where the imagination can run.

Going Back to School

During his younger years, Charles Belson took classes at New York University, Southampton College, Nassau Community College, Stony Brook University, Harvard and Yale. This academic gamut, one Belson jokingly compares to “the transcript of Sarah Palin,” inspired the designer side of him as much as it did the student.

Belson Design Architects is a general practice firm in Gates Mills that specializes in academic programming, planning, and design. Its clients include Case Western Reserve University, Hamilton College, Skidmore College, and the founder's former stomping grounds, Stony Brook University.

Belson's choice of architectural domain “was a natural fit,” he says. “College is a dream-like space that allows for so much more than the real world in terms of different styles.”

A signature project of his was the renovation of Crawford Hall at Case. The building, built in the late 60's, had underutilized areas on the first floor, while the ground level was more recently modified into an international ethics center.

The renovation initially was slated to be a complete tear-down, but instead the building was modernized with large-scale, flexible meeting spaces. First-floor dropped ceilings were removed and replaced with sloping acoustical panels and an integrated lighting system, while retractable sliding walls permitted easy transformation of seminar rooms into more open areas.

The Crawford project is reflective of how Belson's standards must roll with the changes in both architecture and academic programming. His educational odyssey as a young man revealed how each campus has its own unique design quirks. Even something as simple as a squash court must be redesigned to remain in compliance with ever-changing NCAA regulations, a permutation most architects will never encounter, he notes.

"We have a core design belief we're working from, but we're able to adapt the situation," explains Belson. "We find what's unique about each college, and embrace what makes that place different."