#10: Never Start a Project with an Unresolved Budget and Scope

I was successful going to clients and saying, “I want to sell you a cheap insurance policy for a very small fee. I’m going to validate that you have a scope and budget that’s in place. We’re going to hire a conceptual estimator, a cost consultant, to verify that you can do the project.” When they bought it, it was damn good insurance, and the project usually proceeded. If they didn’t, we usually got in trouble. It is better to lose a project that isn’t possible to do. Unfortunately, clients are guilty of wishful thinking . . . and also lying. I had an experience (I won’t say at which university) where they advertised a project as being a $38 million project. It was a very complicated research building. We said, “There’s no way they could do it for $38 million.” I came upon a document, which I wasn’t supposed to have, which said the budget was $50 million. And I went to the campus architect, and he apologized. He said, “Yeah, it’s 50. We’re sorry we did that. We just thought we’d get a better deal.”

I won a project for the Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, Florida, which was an international competition, and it was advertised as a $100 million construction budget, which was paid for by tobacco money. Before I started the project, I asked to see their project budget. They said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, there are costs beyond construction. Do you have those covered?” And they said, “Well, no, the $100 million is for building it.” So, I gave them a one-page list of things they might consider as expenses, like legal expenses, inspection and testing and so forth. And, sure enough, they were $20 million short. So, we had to start over, reprogram the building, and we got paid for doing that . . . and started with a better relationship with the client, because they saw us as being realistic and helping them. Just never, ever start unless you validate the budget and work together.

#9: Distinguish Between “Want” and “Need”

Another lesson is to distinguish between want and need. Clients are very good at describing what they want. They’re not very good at describing what they need. It always makes me think, if you went to a doctor and said, “I want an appendectomy,” and he said, “No, what you need is knee surgery,” I don’t think he’d give in and give you an appendectomy, but architects do it all the time. I have friends who I respect as designers. I’ll see a new building of theirs, and it’s like, “George, why the hell did you do that building? It’s terrible for you.” “Well, that’s what the client wanted.” That’s no excuse. I don’t care what the client wants. If you don’t give them what they need, you’re not an architect, in my opinion.

I’ll give you an example of how one should behave. You may remember a British architect named Peter Blake who once was hired by a small resort town on the South Coast of England to design an amusement pier, because their tourist trade was going down over the years, to where businesses were going out of business, and nobody was visiting their town. They felt the solution was to build an amusement pier, like some other places. Peter said, “Well, before I start, I’m going to go down and spend a long weekend down there and get to know it.” So, he did. He came back, and they said, “Well, when can you get started on the pier?” y. And he said, “You don’t need a pier. All you need to do is clean your beaches. They’re filthy. That’s why people don’t go there anymore.” So, he talked himself out of the job—and they did clean the beaches, and the people came back, by the way.

#8: Do Not Assume that Staff Is Committed to Firm Goals & Values

During the five years that I worked with Mark Cameron, I interviewed a lot of firms, trying to help them improve their practices, and some of these were the best firms in the United States. I learned as much as they learned from me. I always did vertical interviews, starting with the leadership, but also going all the way down through the firm to lower level employees and interns, to understand what the culture
of the firm was and whether it was widely understood. In working with the partners, I always asked them if the culture was understood by everyone, and if everybody was committed to it. And, of course, they always said, “Absolutely. We communicate strongly. We do it frequently, and everybody gets it.”

Then I’d get down to the lower half and I’d ask them, and they would say, “We don’t have a goddamn clue what the culture is.” There was always a disconnect. Partly, that’s because they had never participated in defining what the goals of the firm were, so they had no ownership of it. To be told what it was wasn’t the same as living it and being a part of it. It’s important that people—a wide range of people in the firm—participate not just in creating a culture and set of values, but also in reviewing them periodically and updating them.

#7: Challenge Conventional Wisdom

Conventional wisdom opposes the introduction of contrary belief and new information. It limits creativity and progress. And conventional wisdom is, unfortunately, what we get from most of our consultants. Unless you press them and you make them understand that you want to innovate and you want to be on the cutting edge of what you do, they’ll give you conventional wisdom and then feel that they’ve done their job. My earliest example of conventional wisdom was when we started Salk. All laboratories were built with walls between each and every lab, and we were told that that is necessary to prevent cross-contamination between experiments. It wasn’t until years later that I found that had nothing to do with it at all. It was territoriality. It was the scientists protecting how many benches they had and making sure in perpetuity that the next scientist over wouldn’t take over one of their benches. And so, from then on, I never put walls between labs again, and they’re open and much more flexible, and people got used to it and preferred them, and Salk had been done that way.

The same thing is true of the idea of natural ventilation in laboratories and hospitals—that you could not have operable windows for a variety of reasons, including germs and so forth, disease control. There are two examples that disprove that. One is the New Karolinska Hospital in Stockholm, which has had operable windows for almost a decade now, with never a problem. The whole hospital is day lit, naturally ventilated. It’s an atmosphere, an environment in a hospital you never see in the United States because of the kind of restrictions we have.

And the other example is the Sanger Institute at the Wellcome Trust Genome Campus outside of Cambridge, England, where they’ve had operable windows in that lab for about ten years now, and never had a problem. All they had to do was move the fume hoods from the labs into the core, and from then on there was not a problem with having operable windows. I’ve interviewed the scientists there. They said they would never go back to sealed buildings because, on nice days, being able to open the windows means so much to them.

#6: Empower Younger Architects

I am an example of this. We limit what young architects can do, and more and more make them computer jockeys, and that’s a tremendous loss, because they’re an important resource that we don’t use well. When you think of it, grey-haired Nobel scientists we see receiving their awards mostly did that work in their late 20s and their early 30s. It’s when everyone has more energy and ambition, the highest level it will be in their life, and they have fewer non-professional responsibilities, such as children and other interests.

So, it’s a terrific time to do it, to give advice and to give access to a person like I had in Lou Kahn’s office, David Wisdom—who was a very well named Quaker—who knew everything about architecture. When we were given an assignment to design something or detail something like a window or doorframe, we’d go to Dave, and he’d say, “Well, here’s the problem. You write a program for it.” He’d say, “In the 18th Century, this is how they solved the problem. This is what the various pieces did, and now go do that in stainless steel.” You’d do research and so forth. You’d come back to him with your ideas. He’d give you a criticism of it, but he’d never show you how to do it. Every time I’ve given massive responsibility to an architect who most people would say was not yet ready for it, they performed beyond my expectations. And it makes them grow very quickly.

I often say that the hours we worked in Kahn’s office were absurd. We told newcomers that you got overtime at 81 hours, which you did. It’s just a wonderful way to kick start your life and your career, to be
loaded with responsibility, as long as you have people around you you can go to, who can guide you.

#5: Use Experienced Staff to Teach & Mentor

Another lesson I learned is that we misuse the most experienced people on staff. Years ago, I stole from SOM a wonderful technical architect named Brad Zyistra, who I thought was the best I’d ever known. Instead of putting him on specific projects at Anshen and Allen, I asked him to be a butterfly and float from desk to desk, and just sit down with young people and say, “What are you working on? Can I make a suggestion? Can I help you?” It made an enormous change in the overall quality of technical architecture in the office. It was a much better use of him than sticking him in a job where he could not have that wider influence.

#4: Exceed “State-Of-The-Art” Solutions

Very often, clients say they want a state-of-the-art facility. Well, state-of-the-art is what we know now. It’s not what’s tomorrow. If you want to design buildings for institutions that will last far into the future, you must go beyond state-of-the-art. We, as architects, owe our clients much more than state-of-the-art. I like to think of what Wayne Gretzky said: “A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be.” That’s what we as architects should be doing, as well, even though we may not be Wayne Gretzkys.

#3: Support Women in Architecture

A favorite beef of mine is the lack of support for women in architecture. Fifty percent of architectural students in the United States and the UK and Europe, as well, are women. Thirteen percent of firm partners and principals are women. That’s a disgrace. It’s a waste of a very powerful resource, because women are damn good as architects. They’re temperamentally, in many cases, much more fitted to architecture than men.

I had an experience when I taught at USC. David Rinehart and I were hired by the dean to write a fifth-year program, because it was a four-plus-two school, and they wanted to go to five-plus-one. So, we wrote the fifth-year program and then stayed to teach, and I spent a few years as a thesis critic. One year, around 1979, I had a very talented young woman from Mexico as a thesis student of mine, who was just a terrifically poetic designer. About three weeks before her thesis was due—and the thesis was almost completely construction documents; it was a huge amount of documentation—she came to me and said, “I’m throwing out my scheme and I’m starting over.” I said, “You can’t do that. You’ve only got three weeks.” She said, “I don’t care. It’s a better scheme, and I can’t do anything but the better scheme.” So, she did, and she finished it, and it was the best thesis of the year. I learned a great deal about women from that experience. They can do more than we can in many cases.

#2: Work With Clients at Highest Level of Leadership

One of the lessons I learned in working with many institutional clients is that, if you really want to work in an effective way, a meaningful way, you need to work above the project manager. You need to work directly with the person whose dream it is to do the project. And there always is a person who has the dream. Whether it’s the dean or the president of the university or the president of the corporation, there’s someone who’s putting everything on the line to do that project. If you’re not in direct contact with them, it makes it very difficult to work. And, too often, the project managers are charged with monitoring budget and schedule and nothing else. But also, they protect the leader from you, the architect, by denying access.

When we won the project for the cancer center in Tampa, Florida, Jack Ruckdeschel, who is a tough old football player, was the president and was at the interview. For some reason, he was impressed with me, and he said, “Jack, how many meetings will you come to?” And I said, “Jack, I’ll be at every meeting you’re at.” And he said, “Okay, it’s a deal.” So, I started going to board meetings. I would fly into Tampa the night before, and have dinner with Jack, and he’d say, “Well, what do you want me to accomplish at the board meeting tomorrow?” I’d give him a list of what he had to get done, and I’d go to the board meeting and watch. He’d come over afterwards, and say, “How’d I do?” We had a working relationship where I could see to it...
that the right things were being addressed, that the budget was being addressed, that everything that was necessary for it to be a successful project would happen, because Jack was going to make sure the board approved it. When we got the project, the Moffitt Cancer Center ranked number 87 out of 100 designated cancer centers in the United States. It’s now ranked number four. And it was mostly because of Jack, but also the building, and the way the building allowed them to practice medicine, which is a whole new way with teams of people seeing patients, rather than individuals.

So, I made a point always of doing whatever I could to make that connection, and I found that one of the things that’s necessary to make it and maintain it is you have to become an interesting person. You can’t talk to those people over dinner about the latest wall section. They’re not interested in that. So, you need—this is advice to young architects—you really need to make your life rich, so that people want to be with you. That means doing as many things as you can, having as many experiences in travel and other interests, to make yourself interesting. When you do, you’ll find that you have access to those people.

#1: Practice with Integrated Collaborative Teams

I guess this is a dead obvious one, but when we started Anshen and Allen Los Angeles, it certainly was not dead obvious when we rented the old See’s Candy Factory in Beverly Hills and moved in with ARUP and Peter Budd. We started traveling every day. We would meet at six in the morning and drive for twelve hours through Southern California, stopping at every college and university, every institution we could find, and introducing ourselves till we could get a client.

We started getting clients, and then we interviewed for the Molecular Biology Building at UCLA. We took to the interview a computer disk. I can’t remember what kind of disk that would have been in 1985, a floppy disk or what, but we held it up and we said, “All 900 of your drawings will be on this disk.” They looked at us like we were crazy, but at that time we were doing all of our work, 100 percent, on computers, 1985. I had started working on computers in architecture in 1967 in Cambridge, England, with Sandy Wilson. The three people who wrote GDS, which was the prime software, were all teachers at Cambridge, and two worked with me at Sandy’s office. So, I was an advocate from day one on doing work on computers.