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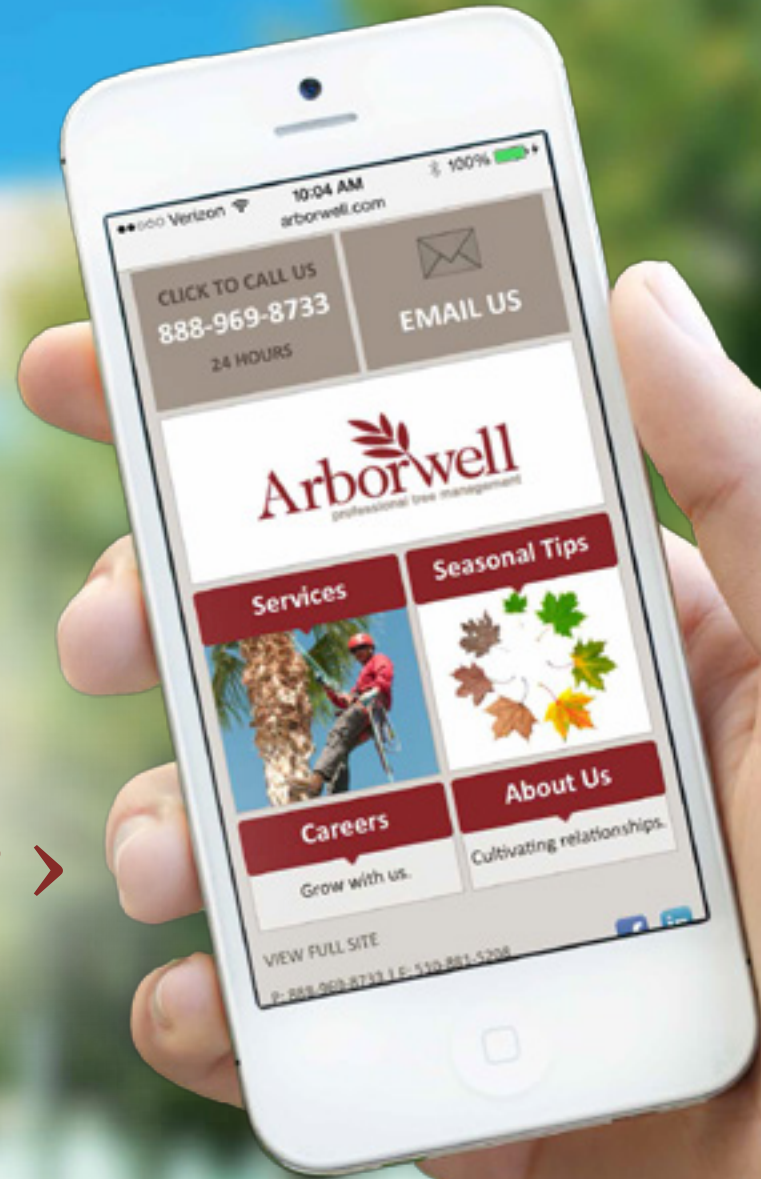
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TWENTY-FIVE AND COUNTING

AS INTERVIEWED BY
ROBERT CELASCHI

BROOKS WALKER AND GREG WARNER are celebrating 25 years since they started their namesake architectural firm in 1989. The firm is planning project tours throughout the year for their staff as well as an open house for collaborators in the fall.

At the onset of their business, the San Francisco-based architects did a lot of residential remodels and additions, scrambling for whatever work they could find. “Ultimately you find your comfort zone, and in our case it was residential design,” Warner said. “[Early on] we likened ourselves to a wedding band that we could play the songs of many others and do them well. Now we describe ourselves more as the songwriter. We compose our own music.”

You’ve said that architecture should be “expressive, timeless and always in unity with the natural beauty of the site.” But you also say that thoughtful designs emerge through listening to and learning from clients. How do you deal with clients who want trendy features?

WARNER: If they feel strongly about something we try to accommodate it. Sometimes we get through it, and they see why we don’t think their specific idea may be appropriate, but sometimes the other way around would happen. We have a client with beautiful beachfront property, and he wants a fireplace in the bedroom. The dialogue was more about, “Why do you want fire in your room? What about fire is appealing?” If we can solve for that, rather than the utility aspect, we can come up with a solution. That happens a lot.

Are there any trends in architecture that you find especially pleasing or annoying?

WALKER: I find something both pleasing and annoying. That is architecture as sculpture. I think this was started in a big way by Frank Gehry and [the Guggenheim Museum] Bilbao. Used judiciously, it is a powerful aesthetic and pleasing. But when that becomes the trend, where everybody has to do their own screaming, “Look at me,” it starts to become kind of annoying



< Greg Warner
Brooks Walker >

BRUCE DAMONTE

Brooks Walker and Greg Warner look back on a quarter-century in business

and silly. More closely related to our work, which is primarily residential, I see a trend that is positive—the building codes and people’s own values are really pushing for sustainability. The most important thing in sustainability is to build enduring architecture. You are much better off doing design that lasts than doing trendy design that gets ripped out in 10 years even though the materials are the most sustainable stuff.

What has been your most challenging project?

WARNER: As a partner in charge I’d say the Quintessa winery, because we had never done a winery, and this was of significant scope. We were out over our skis. We were given a chance, and we took it very seriously. But we didn’t try to fake it. We had some very honest and authentic ideas, but knew what we didn’t know and expressed those things and made sure the client knew we needed help in terms of understanding the process of winemaking.

WALKER: Probably one of the most challenging was also one of the most

sophisticated. It was a residential project. It was in an area of very high seismic activity in California. The client basically wanted to self-insure by making the house earthquake proof. The whole house is a steel frame, steel wall sheer plate system. It is a total red-iron structural frame. We designed the window extrusions made out of bronze. It was a highly customized house. I think the results turned out very beautifully.

Are clients any more sophisticated than they were 25 years ago?

WARNER: I think they are certainly more educated or aware of things, by the nature of the media and what is out there. I joke about it, but it is the Pottery Barn effect, the retail-ization of architecture.

WALKER: Twenty-five years ago you had clients tearing stuff out of a handful of magazines and bringing it to our offices in a manila folder. With websites like Pinterest and Houzz, where global ideas can spread quickly, clients are much more informed and aesthetically sophisticated. 📷

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