



A Conversation with Bob West



After a long and successful career with OZ, Bob West is riding into the sunset (literally) this October. A third generation Colorado native, Bob has always found ways to combine his interests as both architect and rancher. His built work is an impressive range of project types, sizes, and styles. From high tech to headquarters to hospitality, Bob has designed great projects for clients ranging from Celestial Seasonings to The Broadmoor. He is retiring to his ranch in northern Colorado where he'll raise Highland Cattle and cutting horses, and entertain an occasional guest at his planned B&B at the Whiskey Belle Ranch. Before he goes, we asked him to sit down and talk about his 35-year career.

Q: What led you to become an architect? Did you have an alternative career choice, just in case?

My interest in becoming an architect really started in high school. My Industrial Arts teacher had a background in architecture, and one of his assignments was to draw a house and build a model of it in balsa wood. The local Rotary club wanted the best student to present their project at a Rotary lunch, and the teacher sent me. There was an 80-year-old architect in the audience, William C. Young, who hired me to become a part-time draftsman in his office where I worked with two architects just starting out. I was all of 17.

One of these architects went on to design and build a series of car tire shops throughout Pennsylvania. I interned for him and worked on those stores during the summer for my first couple years of college. I got to build what I drew – I did masonry work from 5 am until 11 pm, when the crew would finish the day with a huge steak dinner. I loved it – I was hooked.

I never had a Plan B. I was licensed at the age of 23 because of all the experience I gained in both high school and early college years. I knew in high school that I had found the right spot.





Q: What should they have taught you in school as you got your Bachelor's and Master's degrees that would have been most useful in real life?

When I started studying architecture, they were switching the school of architecture at CU Boulder to environmental design. I was frustrated that it wasn't pure architectural design, but I managed to tilt each of my projects there toward architecture. I learned something that I've used throughout my architectural career: the scientific method of problem solving. Start with stating the objective, then hypothesis, parameters, solution. I've used this in every charrette I've ever led, no matter what the project was. It has been incredibly valuable, which I never would have guessed in college. Bob Utzinger, who was head of the CU Architectural Department at the time, was also a great mentor and I learned a lot from him.

Q: When did you know you could make a go of this as a career?

The first project I got to actually design was the Hickey residence in Boulder. I'm a long-time admirer of Hugh Newell Jacobsen, FAIA, and I used some of his ideas about proportion and volume to design the house. It turned out to be one of my favorite and best projects, and won a design award. When I saw the Hickey residence finally take shape, I knew I could succeed.

Hugh has a great quote that I've returned to quite a bit over the course of my career: "Doing good architecture is like giving birth to a barbed wire fence". That project was the first time I realized how right he was – and still is.

Q: What was it about OZ that led you to spend your whole career here?

When I interviewed at Everett Zeigel, I saw a firm where one person could have an impact on the company because of the flexibility of the system. There were no barriers, people had autonomy, and it was a relaxed workplace where creativity was encouraged and opportunity was everywhere. Art Everett was also a very classy guy, and I wanted to learn as much as I could from him – he was a great role model. Alan Zeigel was really important, too – he could have taken the easy way out and closed down the firm in the severe recession of 1985. Instead, he believed in us (the young guns) and formed OZ with his friend Tom Obermeier, which turned into an incredible success.



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Q: What's changed in the architectural profession from the late 1970s to now?

The biggest change is the impact that computers have had. There's also been a big shift in how much more architects have to draw and design now – you have to draw exactly what you want, exactly how you want it to be built. Drawing sets are totally different today than they were in the 1970s, incredibly detailed.

Q: Favorite project(s) that you've designed?

I have a lot of them, but here are three in particular:

- The Insectary at Palisade – this was a building for the Department of Agriculture where they raise beneficial bugs used in lieu of pesticides. It was a fascinating design project that responded to the extremely specialized work they do there. It's come full circle for me: I just got my first box of bugs from them to battle bindweed on my ranch.
- The Fort Collins Municipal Office Building was a challenge to design but turned out to be a beautiful example of civic architecture for a very cost-effective price per square foot.
- The Emerald Valley Ranch renovation at The Broadmoor was a kick to design from a historical perspective and the uniqueness of the site. We've done a lot of work at The Broadmoor and that was one of the most rewarding projects to walk through at the end and see how it was transformed.

Q: Is there a building or project that you wish you could have designed?

There are two: the NREL parking structure and the Boulder Daily Camera site. I think our design solutions for both were outstanding.

Q: What's your best piece of advice to an architect just starting out today?

You'll need to work harder than you can ever imagine to succeed. This is not a 40 hour a week business.

Q: Anything you would have done differently?

When I started at Everett Zeigel, they were designing buildings unlike any that I'd ever seen before. Case in point: their office building was one of the first in the country to use exposed structure and ductwork, an aesthetic that has lasted 40 years. I would have liked to have been more innovative and a path breaker in terms of design.

Q: What will you remember most about your time at OZ?

I'll remember three things:

- I was able to do things my way.
- The consistent high quality of our buildings throughout the years.
- That I never once looked at the clock.

