

The Dying Art of Creating a Home With Pen and Paper

In an age of AutoCAD and digitally produced designs, these architects collaborate with clients using hand-drawn plans

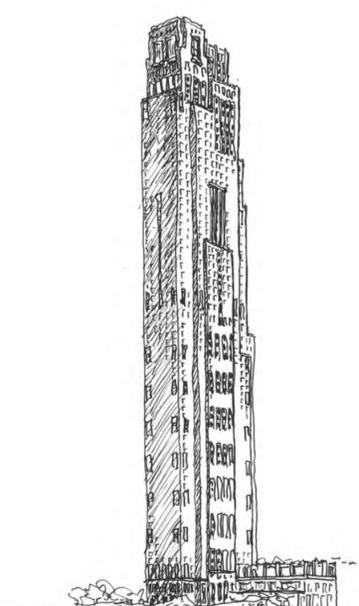
KTGY/MERIDIAN DEVELOPMENT

By Lisa Selin-Davis

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When developer Related Midwest was considering architectural firms to design its new luxury tower, One Bennett Park, in Chicago's Streeterville neighborhood, the decision largely came down to two simple things: pen and paper.

Daniel Lobitz, a partner at Robert A.M. Stern Architects, sat across the conference table from Related members with a sketch of the Chicago skyline. Then, with a pen and tracing paper, he drew different sizes and shapes of skyscrapers within it.



Chicago's One Bennett Park in sketch by Daniel Lobitz. PHOTO: DANIEL LOBITZ/RAMSA

"He started sketching and talking about how introducing asymmetry and more setbacks would allow it to have a unique place in the skyline," says Ann Thompson, senior vice president of architecture and design at Related Midwest. "It changed the way we thought about the building."

As a result, "this building got much taller and more slender than what we had originally imagined," says Mr. Lobitz. The sketch-and-discuss collaboration took place with the interiors and other design details throughout the process.

These days, most architectural firms present designs created with digital-drawing programs, such as Sketch-Up or AutoCAD. But some architects insist on hand-drawing concepts early and throughout the process, saying they're faster and easier to change on the fly, allowing more collaboration with the client. The skill is an increasing rarity in today's computer-powered architecture world.

Stuck at an airport with a client once, architect Mark Candelaria sketched out the design of a 10,000-square-foot house on Alaska Airlines cocktail napkins; the finished project looked remarkably similar. "My client kept them all and had them framed," says Mr. Candelaria, who is based in Scottsdale, Ariz.



Stuck in an airport with a client, Mark Candelaria sketched a great room on a cocktail napkin. PHOTO: MARK CANDELARIA

"What I love about hand drawing is that it's immediate," he says. "Clients will start describing something and they'll go, 'I'm kind of thinking like this' or they'll pull out a picture and say, 'I love the look of this—how will that look in my house?'" Mr. Candelaria can whip out a piece of tracing paper and a pen and directly show how an additional turret or alcove might appear. Those without hand-drawing skills are more limited. "They'll say, 'We'll put that in CAD and we'll show that to you in two weeks.'"

He notes that hand drawing is also the fastest way to communicate with builders and contractors. "They don't want to wait two weeks to get a drawing, and the client wants to make sure the idea is conveyed," he says. "If I can just sketch on the back of a piece of plywood or a 2-by-4 or on my notepad, I can give it right to them and everybody walks away happy and excited."

"There's something immediately alluring about a hand-drawing," says David Obitz, principal of Irvine, Calif.-based KTGY Architecture + Planning. "If a client has a negative reaction to a feature, he says, 'You whip out a piece of trace right in the moment and you change it, and all of the sudden the design has become so much better.'"

Many architects note the psychological implications of hand-drawn designs. "Doing it digitally, it's so refined that there's not a lot left to your imagination," says Mr. Obitz. With hand-drawing, "they can still add their dreams to it, they can still have their creative force," he says. "It's a great way to engage your clients."



A sketch by Elissa Morgante of the lobby of E2, a 356-unit luxury apartment building in Evanston, Ill. PHOTO: ELISSA MORGANTE/MORGANTE WILSON ARCHITECTS



The finished lobby at E2. PHOTO: FIFIELD COS.

Ms. Thompson notes that for meetings with neighborhood groups or city officials, Stern architects may hand-craft renderings, even if a complete computer model is ready. "Those sketches often convey the spirit of a building more than a computer drawing," says Ms. Thompson. Computer renderings also imply that all the decisions have been made, but official plans and blueprints are almost always done digitally, often using the hand drawing as inspiration and guide.

Elissa Morgante, co-principal of Evanston, Ill.-based Morgante Wilson Architects, used hand drawings of E2, an Evanston luxury-apartment development, both to get the design gig and to share with the community. "We didn't want it to come across as crisp and cool. I felt like the hand-drawings gave a better feel of the kind of vibe we were trying to create."

And there's one other added bonus: hand-drawings can be used in marketing materials, as Mr. Lobitz's sketch of One Bennett Park is, and as gifts for clients. "These sketches really are pieces of art," says Ms. Thompson.