

EXECUTIVE PROFILE WILLIAM BICKFORD

A keen eye for quality

Architect's Imprint seen at restaurants, homes, cemetery

BY MARY ELLEN POMOLIK
Tribune reporter

While a student at Trinity College, William Bickford and his roommate spent many nights talking about their passion for architecture and how to best forge a path to professional success and personal happiness.

Bickford wanted to be married by age 30. He wanted to have his own architecture practice when he married. And he wanted to have children in his 30s.

Check. Check. Check. About 20 years after those lofty what-if discussions, the 38-year-old Bickford is married. He is the father to two daughters under the age of 3. And, he is partners with college roommate Austin DePree in a growing Chicago architectural practice, Northworks Architects and Planners LLC, whose wide-ranging portfolio, which includes restoration work at Chicago's Graceland Cemetery, high-priced homes and most recently restaurants, is getting noticed.

It was Bickford's residential work that led restaurateur Keene Addington to contact him. Addington, the former owner of Flat Top Grill, sought to open a restaurant in a former Crunch Fitness space along State Street in River North. A friend whose Colorado home Bickford had designed "ranted and raved about how talented and fabulous he was," Addington said, so he called Bickford to talk about his idea for the Tortoise Club.

"I didn't want it to feel like a typical restaurant environment," Addington said. "I wanted it to feel like a home, like you were sitting down for drinks. Bill had a lot of experience in that arena but also understood restaurants."

The two went to restaurants, a lot of restaurants, including eight in one day in New York City, and watched how employees and customers moved around spaces, pinpointing what worked and what didn't. Then Bickford tackled the design process, which took five months and had him involved with everything from the dining room and the kitchen's setup to the shape of seat cushions and the nailheads used on chairs in the lounge. The goal was to create a space that hearkened back to a bygone era, a space that was clubby and sophisticated yet approachable.

The result? "The restaurant is absolutely jaw dropping," said Eater Chicago in a post when Tortoise Club opened late last year.

"Bill took my vision — I had no idea how to put it on paper — and then listened closely, and he created this beautiful space," Addington said. "I got everything on this baby with Mr. Bickford."

From the ground up

That restaurant, along with another, Ada Street, serves as a calling card of sorts for Bickford, as does the 153-year-old Graceland Cemetery, known as the cemetery of architects, including Louis Sullivan, Daniel Burnham and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Northworks has been the cemetery's architectural consultant since 2006, a relationship that began after Bickford completed a kitchen remodel for one of the cemetery's trustees.

"We started off on one small, family monument project for them to test us out," Bickford said. "After about 16 months, we proved ourself."

In 2009, Bickford led a team that completed a renovation and restoration of the cemetery's 1888 Holabird & Roche-designed chapel, gutting the interior, demolishing two additions and re-creating its Arts and Crafts style. The only original material remaining is the red granite exterior.

"It was the perfect test of what we could do and what kind of team we could assemble, and working with a client who was not a husband and wife," he said.



William T. Bickford is a founding principal of Northworks Architects & Planners. (Rick Tuma / October 16, 2013)

Other projects in the cemetery have included a new footbridge to Burnham Island and restoration of the Palmer Mausoleum.

Now Bickford is broadening his commercial portfolio, working on two new restaurants, one on East Randolph Street and another on West Randolph, and he's approaching that work in the same way he does the residential projects that have taken shape here and across the country.

"I always thought that scale was the most fitting for an architect," Bickford said. "The personal part of the project and the privacy of the project was always intriguing to me. It was someone's home, someone's dream home, and they were always involved."

Kim Feil's search to find an architect who could navigate that relationship and give her something other than a cookie-cutter house led to her Bickford. Feil, an executive vice president at OfficeMax, had a few requirements for the 4,000-square-foot home she wanted to build on a standard city lot in Lincoln Park. She wanted plenty of natural light. She didn't want to lose the backyard. And each of the four bedrooms had to be able to fit at least a queen-size bed.

She vetted Bickford by calling references in three states.

The home that she'll move into by Christmas is an urban take on an Aspen ski lodge, with a multistory window that brings in light across a staircase, and a third-floor master bedroom cantilevered over a second-floor deck, so the room sizes are adequate without sacrificing the outdoor space.

"He has this process of asking you questions about what you want," Feil said. "He's my ultimate quality control. I count on his eye. He doesn't mollycoddle me."

That methodical approach to design, as well as to building a business, is something DePree saw in his college roommate.

"There's a good, quiet confidence," DePree said of his partner. "Bill and I have been friends for a good, long time, and one of the things I admire about his character is his ability to be very thoughtful about decisions. He doesn't make rash decisions. It helps create a stable foundation for business."

On some days Bickford says he feels he's working as an artist, and other times he's much more business-minded. A typical day's juggle includes emails, lunch with a client or builder, internal meetings and, frequently, after-work social events like cocktail parties or gallery openings to meet prospective clients. He and DePree attend different events.

"We're not going there with business cards," he said. "It's more to meet and greet. I don't like to pass out a card and say give me a call. It seems less personal. Half of my job, my partner's job, is to go out and get the next project."

Northworks, with 16 employees, is working on 40 projects. Since November, it has had to turn down work, Bickford said.

Legos on the floor

Bickford's interest in designing and building started early, as a child with a pile of Legos spread over a bedsheet on the floor of his family's home in Sherborn, Mass. Nothing he built, he recalls, ever lasted more than 24 hours. By the third grade, he knew he wanted to be an architect.

That ability to go from one project to another is among the profession's attractions. "Every six months is a totally different job," he said. "You come to work with a great variety, and you'll never know what you'll face the next week. That gives you a great spontaneity.

"There's also the artistic component," he continued. "(Architecture) is probably the only profession I can ever imagine where it's a combination of hobby, passion and profession. Even in downtime on the weekends, I'll still do a sketch, just to see where it goes."

At Trinity College, Bickford earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in art history. Following the advice of an architect he worked for while in high school, he also took classes in psychology and human behavior because of the large role that client relationships play in architecture.

After Trinity, Bickford and DePree parted ways temporarily, and Bickford earned a Master of Architecture degree from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Design. He then went to work, first for a 100-person practice in Connecticut and then a small firm, Frederick Phillips and Associates in Chicago, to gain different perspectives on the business.

Early on, Phillips sensed that Bickford had a knack for gaining a client's trust. Soon after joining the firm, Phillips let Bickford help him work with a client who wanted to design a studio gallery in Sawyer, Mich. Although the design was fairly complete, the client let Bickford alter it.

"He's very modest but a very strong person beneath all that low-key presentation," Phillips said. "He would communicate his intentions through asking the right questions. He has a very good way of convincing a client what the right path is."

While working for different Chicago firms, Bickford and DePree started moonlighting together on weekends. The pair started with small jobs like kitchen and bathroom remodels, and began to establish contacts in the industry.

Building a business

In 2005, itching to go off together on their own, the two ignored the advice of friends who told them to wait a few more years. They rented a 400-square-foot space in Chicago's Old Town neighborhood that had once been an ice cream shop, named it DePree Bickford Associates LLC and started taking on more remodeling projects. Satisfied customers referred them to friends, as did interior designers, landscape architects and contractors.

"It was a lot of little jobs," Bickford recalled. "It progressed much faster than we thought it would. We thought it'd be 10 years of remodels, additions and renovations. By the first three years, we had some professional work that firms 25 years in the making would like to have.

"We thought about where," he said. "We thought about Boston; we thought about Seattle. We thought Chicago is such the epicenter of architecture. So many great firms have come to Chicago, and you can work around the country from Chicago."

In 2007, they bought a building tucked away on a street in Lincoln Park that was once a foundry for mechanical parts and made it their office. After finding a 1912 map of the street that showed the north works division of a steel company had once been across the street, the pair renamed the firm Northworks Architects & Planners LLC.

"You're not working for your bosses' name," Bickford said of the name change. "It's more collaborative, and everyone has the same sense of company pride."

The firm, while always profitable, saw revenues dip under \$1 million in 2009 during the economic downturn. Since then, revenues have increased by 40 to 50 percent annually.

Bickford and DePree each bring their own clients to the firm, but the projects are then considered Northworks' projects. The two meet once a week for a long lunch to talk about projects, client leads and interesting work they may have seen. There also is some of the same sort of discussion they had in their dorm rooms 20 years ago.

Four times a year, they go on fact-finding trips to other cities to, as Bickford puts it, focus on the company with a fresh perspective.

Most recently, they took a 7:30 a.m. flight to New York City, walked around midtown Manhattan, visited the dining options at the Museum of Modern Art, ate at a recently opened steakhouse, walked through Grand Central Terminal and were back on a flight to Chicago at 4 p.m.

"One of the things we've really focused on is to maintain our friendship first," DePree said. "Instead of talking about architecture and business structure all the time, we focus most of the time together on life and our views on life and making sure our views on life are still parallel."

They are still in sync. Northworks' aspirations are grounded in quality, not quantity, and becoming a leading architectural design firm.

"The better our friendship gets, the better our business gets," Bickford said. "The competition is really what makes the practice successful. It's almost like a brotherly competition. We know it's not going to fall apart. It's just one of those things that you have incredible confidence in. Even when our lawyer established our LLC, our lawyer said, 'You have to have a breakup clause.' We said no. He said we had to."

Title: Founding partner, Northworks Architects and Planners LLC.

Memberships: Foundation board member at Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, member of University of Pennsylvania School of Design's alumni board, chairman of the residential design committee of American Institute of Architects' Chicago chapter.

Family: Wife, Lucy, is a lawyer at Schiff Hardin LLP. Two daughters.

Quote: "We certainly have confidence, but it's a big difference from ego. We know that as soon as we start making ourselves the star-architect, we're going to go out of business."

If not architecture: Bickford "fairly seriously" considered joining the ministry but didn't like the "limitations" of the profession.

Hobbies: Fly-fishing, golf.