

## VISUAL ARTS

# Bright lights on the local architecture scene

By Steve Bennett | February 6, 2015 | Updated: February 7, 2015 11:29pm



Photo: Kin Man Hui, San Antonio Express-News

Architects Brantley Hightower (from left), Tenna Florian, Tobin Smith, Patrick Winn, Siboney Diaz-Sanchez, Nicki Marrone and Jonathan Card of the Seven to Watch pose for a portrait at Cured on Tuesday, Feb. 3, 2015.

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Low budgets preordain a lot of buildings to banality, and much of the work that architects do is tedious — dealing with mechanical systems and city permit offices, not to mention demanding clients.

It takes a lot of commitment to call yourself an architect: at least five to seven years of higher education, internships and junior positions at firms where you are a face in a very competitive crowd, and a rigorous gantlet of testing that can discourage the best and the brightest.

So it's pretty common for architects to be in their mid- to late 30s before they are doing work that is exciting to them — and us — and seeing it actually built.

Oh, and there's one other thing: "To the degree that architecture is an art, it takes a while to do things that aren't really *bad*," said Brantley Hightower, who formed HiWorks Architecture a couple of years ago and is considered one of the bright lights of the local architecture community.

"You can develop a discerning taste — you know what's not bad — but to create something you can be proud of, well, that just takes time," Hightower said.

Here are seven young(ish) architects and designers in San Antonio who are changing the cityscape for the better.

### **Jonathan Card**

Jonathan Card founded Urbanist Design in 2008 after 10 years with Lake | Flato Architects, a generous proving ground for many young architects. Card worked on the Pearl Brewery master plan with Lake | Flato, and he has been able to build on that experience from his office in the Full Goods Building.

The name of Card's firm is perfectly pitched: He is committed to the urban core, having designed several restaurants and retail spaces at The Pearl, including what may be his masterpiece, Cured. Card, 43, currently is building a house he designed — he and his wife, Heather, have four young children — just a stone's throw away on Locust Street, and it promises to strike a balance between being a showpiece and integrating well into the old neighborhood.

Anyone who visits The Pearl can see Card's hand in the attention to the old brewery's history and the adaptive reuse of objects, tools and materials from the site. In Cured, for example, he adapted old hand-washing stations into coolers for bottled water.

"I definitely like old things, the aesthetics of it," said Card, who's also a musician and cofounder of South Texas Jazz. "Most architects want to work with a blank slate, but I respond better to existing buildings. The idea of fixing and stitching and mending the urban fabric is exciting to me."

Card produces "congenial, gregarious" places, said Ford, Powell & Carson's Michael Guarino, who is vice chairman of the city's Historic Design and Review Commission.

"Jonathan has perfect pitch, whether he's singing or designing," he said. "I think he's the avatar of a new San Antonio school of designers who can balance the preservation of the center city with careful interventions that are going to define a really urbane future for the city. He has an unusually light touch with existing structures and always seems to understand what's best about them. While he's an unequivocally contemporary designer, his work has warmth and humanity."

### **Siboney Díaz-Sánchez**

Siboney Díaz-Sánchez has friends from college at Cornell who joined big firms and have worked on the same project — say, a hospital — for years. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

It's just that her career has taken a much different tack — and she couldn't be happier. At Poteet Architects, a small Southtown firm, she does "a little bit of everything," from participating in the design process to marketing.

"I *am* the marketing department," the 28-year-old designer said.

Díaz-Sánchez also has done some project management, such as a current 6,000-square-foot home renovation in Terrell Hills, which she says can be intimidating because of her youth, gender and ethnicity.

"It's hard to go up to a plumbing contractor and say, 'I know you've been doing this for 35 years, but that pipe is wrong,'" she said with a laugh.

Growing up in San Antonio, what Díaz-Sánchez really wanted to be was a flamenco dancer. She studied the art form for years. But while she was a student at Brackenridge High School, she attended an architecture camp at the University of Texas at Austin. She was hooked.

"It really challenged me," she said. "It was hard, but I liked it. And the other students had such energy, and the only thing that had made me feel that way was flamenco. One day my dad told me that I could be an architect who dances flamenco, but I couldn't be a flamenco dancer who sometimes practices architecture."

Nevertheless, Díaz-Sánchez sees a real-life correlation between architecture and flamenco.

"I see it in terms of the way you occupy space and pay attention to what's around you," she said.

Her boss, Jim Poteet, calls Díaz-Sánchez "a natural leader with a deep affinity for the culture of her home city."

"I have the highest expectations for her," he added, "especially in the important areas where community involvement and architecture overlap. It's crucial that more architects employ the skills they've developed in school and in practice for the benefit of their community. Siboney is already doing that."

### **Tenna Florian**

Tenna Florian has wanted to be an architect for as far back as she can recall.

"I remember in middle school I started drawing house designs and floor plans on church bulletins during church," said the 40-year-old native of Decatur, Texas, northwest of Fort Worth. "I still have some of those old bulletins with sketches. I was good at math and science, but I was also good at art, so a teacher said I should be an architect."

Florian got her education at Tulane University and was working at a Tucson firm making adobe and straw-bale houses when Lake | Flato Architects called from San Antonio.

"I came to Lake | Flato because of their understanding of place and climate and the importance of sustainability in their projects," she said.

Florian, who is now a Lake | Flato associate, is a leader on sustainability at the firm, said Lake | Flato partner Greg Papay. "Tenna is great," Papay said. "She's lead some of our most environmentally sustainable projects, and she is or has been very involved in the local AIA and neighborhood issues and has lectured at national conventions and universities."

Last year was a good year for Florian; because she had several projects built, including a San Antonio net-zero house, which produces more energy than it uses, and Texas' first "living" building in her home town of Decatur. The Betty and Clint Josey Pavilion, a demonstration site for the Dixon Water Foundation, is net-zero for energy and water, was constructed from local materials (no energy needed to ship them long- distance) and contains no toxic materials.

"We make sure all our buildings are highly sustainable," Florian said. "Sustainability is now so widespread because in order to be seen as a leader in this field, you have to constantly evolve and understand the next step."

Buildings, Florian noted, contribute more to greenhouse gasses than anything else — including that gas guzzler you're driving.

"So architects have a great opportunity to make a difference," she said.

### **Brantley Hightower**

Since he formed HiWorks in 2012, Brantley Hightower has worked on homes of various shapes and sizes: an office for an Internet company in an old metal building, a homeless shelter that was a former cotton gin and a pavilion for a '30s Hill Country hunting lodge.

"My marketing strategy is just not to be a jerk so that clients will enjoy working with me and tell their friends," he said. The pavilion project is his favorite: "It had all the elemental pieces of architecture without all the mechanical systems. The owners of the ranch wanted a more direct way to experience the landscape, and the house had small windows and was dark inside. So I opened it up to the views and the breeze. There is light and openness, but I juxtaposed that with the heavy stone from the house."

Hightower, a University of Texas at Austin and Princeton graduate, is another of the many alumni of the Lake | Flato firm, which preaches a deep respect for the relationship between land, climate and building space.

"I try to find a big idea behind a project that comes as a result of the primary problem the project is trying to solve," said Hightower, 38. "I want to create something that is unique to the client and unique to the landscape."

Hightower, said Rachel Brehm of Overland Partners, “has a clear passion for his profession — one that he instills in those around him.”

“He is also very humble,” she said. “He was awarded a project that we had done some background work on, and he sought our advice to help improve his knowledge of the client and project, but also to make sure he was respectful of what we had done. He is just one of those people that elevate you whenever you are around him.”

In April, the University of Texas Press will publish Hightower’s book “The Courthouses of Central Texas.”

“Everyone loves courthouses,” he said. “They embody our best dreams about society and make a statement to the outside world that this is who we are. The fact that architecture is this optimistic act is very compelling to me.”

### **Nicole Marrone**

During her 14 years at Alamo Architects — which won the 2014 Texas Society of Architects Firm of the Year Award — Nicole Marrone has distinguished herself on two major fronts: sustainability and “school work.”

“Nicki has been the project architect/manager on several significant public school projects that have incorporated sustainability and design as integral to the education process,” said Mike McGlone, Alamo Architects principal. Martin Elementary School in the Northside ISD, which opened in 2010, is a good place to start. Marrone was project manager, as she is currently on a renovation and building addition at Windcrest Elementary in the North East ISD. Martin also was certified LEED silver for energy efficiency.

“She’s super strong on sustainability,” said architect Jonathan Card.

At Martin, Marrone’s team returned to teach the kids about energy-efficient buildings and helped them plant a butterfly garden.

“We found out later that they expanded the garden and planted vegetables as well,” Marrone said. “They got it. That’s really gratifying.

“As architects, it’s our duty to do what we can to achieve energy efficiency.”

Designing schools has become even more gratifying in recent years for the 38-year-old Rice University graduate. “I have a young child now, and that makes me think more about the true occupants of a school and how students think about the space around them,” she said.

“I love going to a project and seeing the kids walking down the halls and how they relate to the space.” Marrone’s interest in sustainability — which encompasses everything from the positioning of a building to the materials used — led to a greater involvement in the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects. She was elected president this year and plans to make mentoring young professionals one of her hot topics.

“Nicki is confident and professional, with great abilities to lead and direct complex projects,” McGlone said. “And most importantly, she is a terrific role model for younger staff both in and out of the office.”

### **Tobin Smith**

Tobin Smith says architecture is about “listening and responding.”

And whether the project is a million-dollar home in Alamo Heights or a concrete company’s offices on West Poplar Street, Smith listens and then responds with an elegant solution.

“It’s really stripping a space clean so it’s all about the space and not about what’s put on — the adornment,” he said. The 35-year-old Smith, an alumni of the Lake | Flato firm, has focused mostly on private homes since going on his own in 2007; his projects include a couple of summer homes in Michigan, the award-winning Big Tree Camp in Gonzales County, a couple of O’Neil Ford “face-lifts” and a drastic home transformation on Alta Avenue in Alamo Heights that won a Merit Award in this year’s American Institute of Architects award cycle.

His Ravine House, also in Alamo Heights, is a lesson in problem-solving, built on a drastically sloping site that becomes a raging river in back every time it rains. The L-shaped home seems to hover over the lot.

“Residences are a great way to start,” said Smith, who bears a resemblance to his dad, U.S. Congressman Lamar Smith.

“Tobin was a great talent at Lake | Flato, and I very much enjoyed his easygoing and collaborative spirit,” said Ted Flato, principal at Lake | Flato. “We had fun working together, and though I would certainly have loved it if he was still practicing alongside us, it is equally enjoyable to watch what he and his team are now doing on their own.”

“Making architecture, getting ‘good things’ built, requires more than ideas and vision; it takes finesse and a sense of joy and interest in people, and Tobin has all of these skills and more. Stretching and expanding the quality of our built environment is our goal, and it is exciting to see others like Tobin doing just that, making this city and region a better place through thoughtful and enduring design.”

### **Patrick Winn**

In a back corner of Overland Partners headquarters — a converted 1918 warehouse in the Museum Reach area — is something you don’t find in many professional offices: a workshop, complete with a table saw, a compound miter saw and a wall of hand tools. Here is where some of the architectural firm’s ideas literally take shape.

“We want to promote craft and take our ideas to another level,” said Patrick Winn, senior designer at Overland and overseer of the workshop. “There’s something that happens when an architect knows how to build what he is designing. And it empowers you to dream up more interesting things. It’s all about promoting craft and how that enhances design.” One of the things the Overland staff built is known as “The Gourd,” a human-sized steel-and-glass birdhouse that was part of an American Institute of Architects project at the San Antonio Botanical Garden last spring. Inspired by American Indian purple martin houses, Winn designed the piece and recruited more than 40 staff members to work on the project. It won a 2014 Honor Award from the San Antonio chapter of the AIA. The gourd, which also won a fabrication award from The Architect’s Newspaper, is disassembled now, but the crew plans to enter it in the prestigious Miami Art Basel show in December.

“It really promoted a great team atmosphere,” said Winn, 35. “And what it’s done for us from a marketing standpoint is just enormous.”

Overland’s office renovation — another Winn-managed project — also won a 2014 AIA Award for adaptive reuse. “We’re more engaged in the core of San Antonio here,” Winn said. “And that has really changed the culture at Overland.” Overland partner Tim Blonkvist calls Winn “a remarkable young man.”

“He’s had a great impact on design in our office,” Blonkvist said. “He’s just a remarkable innovator and a joy to work with. Clients love him because he’s like the kid that never grew up but at the same time is very serious about the job at hand.”