

ENGBERG ANDERSON ARCHITECTS

# COMMERCIAL

## A TALENTED TEAM

ENGBERG ANDERSON ARCHITECTS HAS BUILT A DIVERSE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PORTFOLIO BY ENCOURAGING PARTNERS AND DESIGNERS TO PURSUE THEIR PASSIONS.

by *kecia bal*



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**FOR NEARLY THREE DECADES**, Engberg Anderson Architects has fused the creative and technical capabilities of its team to help shape the built environment in its home base of Milwaukee and beyond.

Now with six partners and three principals leading the firm in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin; Chicago; and Tucson, Arizona, Engberg Anderson has solidified its reputation as a firm that listens, creating designs that exceed the needs of its clients and improving the community in the process.

The result is an expansive portfolio of public and private projects, including libraries, multifamily and student housing, aging in place, and corporate and cultural institutions.

### Creative Liberties

Much of the firm's success stems from its people and the ability to apply a diverse set of experiences to a wide array of project types, according to partner William Robison, who has been with the firm since 1990.

"We're sort of a flat organization," he says. "We have ownership who lead the firm, of course, but people aren't pigeonholed into one role. They might work on different kinds of projects. That's part of what makes our designs strong – people bringing what they've learned from one project type and applying it to another."

That doesn't apply solely to leadership, Robison says.

"One of the things that makes this place special – and why I'm still here after 26-plus years is – just like our work is a reflection of the interest of the partners, sometimes it's evolved because of the interests and skills and focus of our staff," he says. "They will often come to us with ideas about projects and connections we might pursue, and that extends to social aspects of the firm – charities, giving back. What we pursue is often the result of someone who heard about a project or a cause that caught their interest."

### Longevity and Adaptability

When Robison joined the firm, his first project was a public library – an arena where Engberg Anderson has become a go-to architect.

Over the years – and even within the past year – that library has brought the firm back to help them further enhance the modern library experience, a study in how people learn, gather and create.

"We develop long-term relationships," Robison says. "We've been going back over 20 years."

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WILLIAM ROBISON, PARTNER

Currently, the firm is working with Lemont Public Library in Lemont, Illinois, where leaders are developing a strategic facilities plan to include physical improvements and capital repairs – all with an eye toward enhancing patron experiences and creating a destination point for the community. That project aligns with nearly 150 public library projects the firm has designed for, carving out a niche in the market with four partners who have performed extensive work in the field.

"Libraries have transitioned," Robison says. "They have evolved from being warehouses of collective information – a job they no longer have to focus on because of the Internet – to community centers and places to collaborate and create content."

In fact, those content "creation" opportunities can often outpace spaces for content "consumption" in modern public library designs.

"That covers anything from the shapes and sizes of study and meeting spaces for students or community groups, to libraries with business incubator spaces in more tech-rich environments," Robison says.

The firm even designed one library in Barrington, Illinois, that features a space for green screen film creation and editing.

"Our focus is making the design as flexible as possible so it has the ability to adapt to new uses in the future," Robison says.

### External Collaborations

Part of a thoughtful approach to the design of libraries and other projects is to



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involve the people who will use the final outcomes of those designs. That's another area where Engberg Anderson excels.

The collaborative environment inside the firm that encourages crossing lines between markets and project types extends to outside the firm, gathering sources and inspiration from as many directions as possible to offer more creative, functional designs.

"We all enjoy projects that connect to, and directly involve, the community," Robison says. "We've developed workshop processes that bring the public into the

design process. That has a two-way benefit: bringing out ideas you might not have thought of before, more creative approaches to things, and in some cases, people will bring some history of the building they may have."

That approach often helps build critical buy-in, Robison adds, which is especially vital in projects created through public-private partnerships.

"You sometimes build stakeholders while you're doing that," he says. "People feel involved and part of the design process. Then if a project goes to a ref-

erendum or requires private fundraising, there are advocates out there. They feel connected."

The firm's strengths also make it ideal for mixed-use projects, especially those outside the expected. Robison says one of his favorite community partnership projects was the Milwaukee Public Library Villard Square Branch. That project blended a first-floor public library and housing in a city neighborhood struggling with poverty.

In the three stories above the 12,770-square-foot library are 47 apartments for families where grandparents are the pri-



mary caregivers for their grandchildren.

Outcomes like those are among the most rewarding for the team at Engberg Anderson, Robison says.

“Many of the projects we do have the potential to improve the community,” he says. “I think we get most excited about the ones that have a more tangible, obvious way of giving back.”

In addition to market-level housing projects, the firm has designed supportive housing for the homeless and for women leaving abusive situations.

Whether it's designing multiple phases

of new concourses for the aviation sector or incorporating careful historic restorations for a public or commercial space, the firm is uniquely positioned to offer fresh ideas, fueled by an attentiveness to use and functionality, as well as to how spaces evolve.

That will continue, Robison says, with the addition of new leadership. Two new partners – Alexandra Ramsey, who has a strong background in library and museum design, and Eric Ponto, experienced in multi-unit housing and urban design – joined the leadership of the firm in January.

Pictured above are designs for the North End, an 8-acre development intended to be the gateway between Milwaukee's downtown and northern east side neighborhoods.

“We are all looking forward to what having the two of them added to our ownership team will bring to the table – new and exciting possibilities,” Robison says.

At the same time, the team brought on three new principals: Tim Wolosz in the Milwaukee office, Jim Brown in the Madison office and Shaun Kelly, who is leading the firm's newest office in the Chicago area. **M**