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Q&A: Architecture's Early Riser

BySanette Tanaka



Courtney Brett

Courtney Brett, one of the country's youngest architects, founded her own firm.

Architecture moves slowly. Buildings take time, starchitects develop with age and simply landing the title of "architect" requires years and years of work.

The industry's plodding pace helps explain the [modest amount of buzz](#) surrounding 25-year-old Courtney Brett, one of the youngest architects in the industry and, until recently, the youngest member of the American Institute of Architects (read a [Q&A with Ms. Brett in AIArchitect](#), AIA's national e-newsletter). After graduating from the Auburn University School of Architecture at age 20, Ms. Brett worked at architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in New York.

Last May, she founded her own firm, Casburn Brett Architecture, in Daphne, Ala., on Alabama's Gulf Coast. Developments interviewed Ms. Brett about her current projects and what's in store for her next. The following is an edited version of that interview.

WSJ: What projects are you working on now?

Ms. Brett: The Gulf restaurant is a big hit. We have a master plan to renovate 9 acres in Orange Beach, Ala. We built a small outdoor restaurant, almost a glorified food stand, to bring people out to the area. Now we're expanding it. It'll have a big boardwalk, additional kitchen space, food service areas and a retail pavilion. We plan to start Phase 2 construction within the next few weeks, with phased milestones to avoid being under construction during peak summer dates, with final completion by the fall...

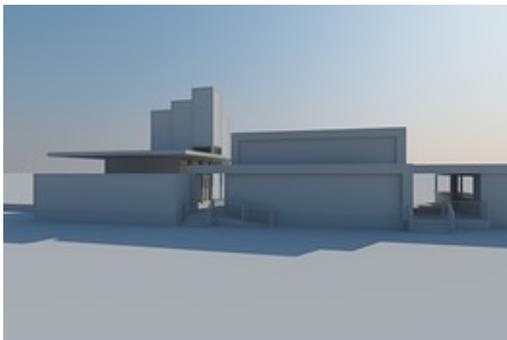
We have also been advising on the neighborhood plan for Battles Trace, [a neighborhood designed around a series of parks instead of streets], in Fairhope, Ala. The neighborhood is organized so the fronts of houses open to parks. We are also collaborating with the owner and a local artist on a natural playground for the neighborhood and working on a model home. Infrastructure construction is underway for the neighborhood. The model home will start construction this summer and be completed in the fall.

WSJ: You are 25 years old, and until recently, American Institute of Architects' youngest member. How has your age helped and hindered you?

Ms. Brett: To me, the fact that I've reached milestones earlier than some others is just a mark of my energy and drive. I try to take advantage of opportunities. It's less of a cause and more of an effect of how I'm living my life.

WSJ: Where do you draw inspiration?

Ms. Brett: I read and travel as much as I can squeeze into my schedule. This year, I've been to Denver and San Diego. I love exploring new areas. I'm also reading two [architectural] books: "Walkable City" [by Jeff Speck] and "A Pattern Language" [by Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa and Murray Silverstein.]



Courtney Brett

A model rendering of the Gulf boardwalk in Orange Beach, Ala.

WSJ: You have said in prior interviews that you wanted to be an architect since age 10. How has your idea of architecture and career plans shifted over the past 15 years?

Ms. Brett: Fifteen years ago, I didn't know about any architects other than what I read in books. I didn't have a concrete idea then of what it would be, but that's slowly changed over time. I'm fortunate that over the past 15 years, my love for this profession and field has just continued to grow with the new things I learn. One thing I learned is the complexity of the process involved, of taking a product from drawings to the finished project. Now, I also know architects of the community. I dreamed about being part of that as a kid, and to be part of that now is really rewarding.

WSJ: You said in 2012 that you were setting out to build a house for you and your husband, Daniel. How is that going?

Ms. Brett: We don't have any concrete plans yet, but we're hoping to buy land in 2014. Hopefully then our plans will become more concrete. [As far as design], I think about it all the time. A lot of it will depend on how the building relates to its site—if we can get good light, good shading. We have a stack of ideas ready to go. It's a dream come true to design your own house.

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