

On May 4th 2015 the LAI PathFinders Club took an exclusive tour of the Disability Empowerment Center of Arizona which was designed by one of our members and sponsors, Ilan Baldinger of Baldinger Studio. What follows is a synopsis of the event.

LAI PATHFINDERS CLUB TOUR THE ARIZONA DISABILITY EMPOWERMENT CENTER

June 25, 2015

We, as humans, strive to leave a legacy in this world. Some say it is how we attain significance. For Ilan Baldinger of Baldinger Studio, the greatest satisfaction he has achieved is when he enters the Disability Empowerment Center (DEC) that he and his team designed. His legacy is not the multiple awards that the campus has won, but the “Thank You’s he receives from the people with disabilities who benefit from his insights and attention to detail for individuals with special needs. His highest compliment is when he sees the iron warriors of the Olympic Wheelchair Rugby team literally mopping the floors after their use of the courts. On May 4th, 2015, the Pathfinders, and a few select LAI full members, had the opportunity to go on an exclusive tour of the site and hear the inside story of how the \$32 million dollar complex was designed.



Baldinger has a quest for design excellence that he and his team strive to achieve on every project. He is an unrepentant “Generalist” in an age of specialization. When pushed on the issue, he is hesitant to be put into a box when he is asked what his specialty is. While he has much experience in many commercial building types such as industrial, retail, and multifamily projects, his answer is typically “anything that is a design challenge.” He humbly proclaims himself as a problem solver and an outside-the-box thinker. It was with this mindset that Baldinger approached the DEC design criteria that had no precedence in the U.S. at the time.



The government, through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), addresses the needs of individuals with disabilities. However, while the ADA mandates accessibility through measurements of feet and inches, it does not mandate design excellence with a focus on inclusiveness of all individuals. Inclusiveness is measured in thoughtfulness and consideration of individuals and how they relate to their environment. This 5.2 acre campus is designed to draw attendees into the mix of activities that the center provides. The activities are never lacking, with the DEC tenant roster of over 10 agencies that specialize in disability related organizations. Individuals with disabilities are often excluded from activities due to their physical limitations. Baldinger wanted this project to be the standard for the rule and not the exception.



QUEST FOR DESIGN EXCELLENCE

Baldinger gave multiple examples of the inclusiveness that is achieved in the DEC:

- Multiple means of access to venues to encourage physical activity that may be difficult in other venues.
- Multiple gathering spaces to encourage group activities
- Enhanced way-finding using light and color to reduce unnecessary loss
- Multiple activities within sight so potential participants can see the possibilities



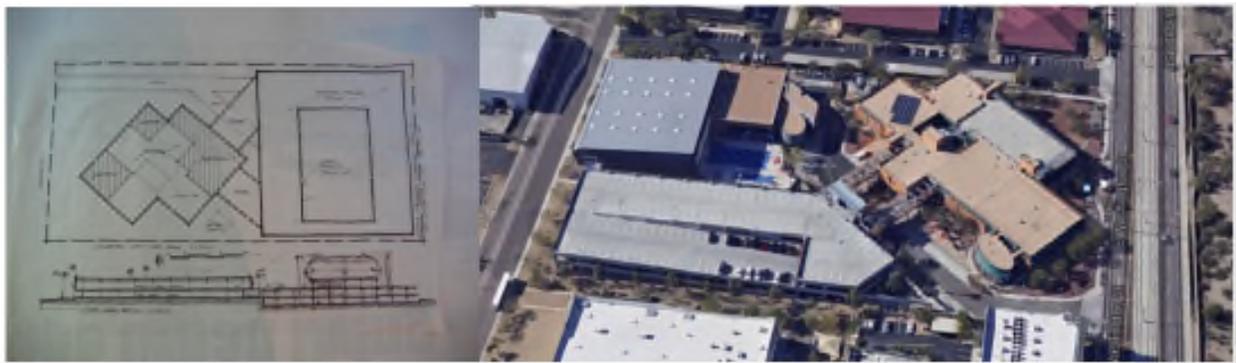
The success of the DEC did not happen in a vacuum. As with most projects, it was a team effort. In this case, the team was comprised of an outstanding visionary owner, a value added contractor, and Baldinger's small but mighty team. Phil Pangrazio is the President and CEO of the Arizona Bridge for Independent living (ABIL). Pangrazio, a paraplegic himself, is a force of nature who had the vision of the DEC. He had enlisted Caliber Construction to assist in his vision. Jim Rike, President of Caliber, has a long history of successful design/build projects with Baldinger. Together they formed a collaborative alliance with a sole mission to achieve the exceptional results at less than \$200 per square foot. An amazing feat in itself, if one is in tune with commercial construction costs.



The full story of the DEC campus design is a complex one. The original site of the campus was a functionally obsolete office building that had been the former headquarters of the Cattlemen's Association of Arizona. The original steel superstructure was utilized for the core of the construction of the office building. While this saved the project an estimated \$1.5 million dollars, it added a level of complexity that an adaptive reuse project always does. Use of tasteful, yet economical, structural components and building finishes give the feeling of high-end environment on a conservative budget per square foot. Economy and sustainability are also achieved through a common parking structure and central plant used to heat and cool the complex.

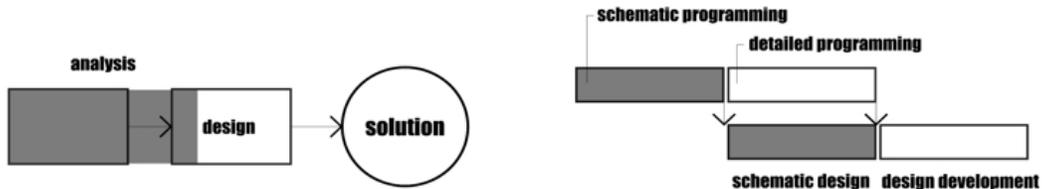
LESSONS LEARNED

Lesson one is what Baldinger called "the power of the sketch." Baldinger repeatedly stressed the importance of securing the project was from the initial sketch and site plan that he had conceived. The irony is that the initial sketch had little resemblance to the complex's final finished design. However, Baldinger does believe that in that meeting he demonstrated his vision, skills, and out-of-the-box thinking that ultimately secured him the assignment.



June 25, 2015 LAI PATHFINDERS Tour the Disability Empowerment Center of Arizona

The second lesson was the power associated with preparation and research. As the design/build team had little precedence regarding design of a disability center, they were forced to repeatedly research and think through design challenges. While this is extremely challenging and rewarding, it is also time consuming. Baldinger believes that the compound is so successful due to a culmination of factors including the design that was born out of this constant research and refinement.



The Last lesson learned by Baldinger on the project is the power of a team. He stated that the free flowing fluidity of ideas were extremely impactful on the end product and its completion within the allotted budget. Baldinger repeatedly stated that the alignment between owner, contractor, and designer creates a synergy that produced a superior product.



In conclusion, finding niche markets that do not have significant precedence in the marketplace may be a strategy for those of us who refuse to be confined to a “Box”. We all strive to achieve significance through helping others accomplish their goals which can be very rewarding for participants and ultimately leave a legacy in our path. Proper alignment with all parties in a project can substantially improve the end result. After touring the complex, one is humbled by what we, as able-bodied humans, take for granted. One thing is for sure—the individuals who use the Disability Empowerment Center take nothing for granted about its existence.

For more information about the Pathfinders please contact:

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Disability Empowerment Center Fast Facts

The Virginia G. Piper Sport and Fitness Center for Persons with Disabilities, Phoenix Arizona, USA



Architects:	Baldinger Architectural Studio
Location:	5025 E. Washington Street, Phoenix, Arizona 85034
Principal Architects:	Ilan Baldinger, Aaron Reddy, Greg Wedge
Contractor:	Caliber Construction
Cost:	\$32,000,000.00
Project Area:	Indoor Sport Center 45,000 Square Feet Disability Offices, Training Rooms, Labs and Conference center 62,000 square feet Aquatic Center: Three accessible outdoor swimming pools Parking Garage: Multi Level 375 cars with bridge connection
Year Completed:	2012