

Portsmouth New Hampshire Architectural Services Providing Design, Drawings and Construction and Oversight for Residential and Commercial Projects



Lisa DeStefano
Owner

DeStefano Architects

CEOCFO: *Ms. DeStefano, would you tell us about DeStefano Architects?*

Ms. DeStefano: DeStefano Architects is an architectural firm in Portsmouth, NH. We specialize 50% of our work in residential work and 50% in commercial work. No matter what our project, whether an addition/renovation, a retail establishment or a ground-up mixed project, we do more than what one would typically think of as providing architectural services in addition to meeting the needs and wishes of the client. We are advocates for a client. What we find in the business currently is there are many additional layers that we keep our eye out for. Advocacy for a homeowner could be to make sure material selection decisions or settings are ones that are environmentally conscious or we may find we are making sure that decisions are best for the longevity of the material. They may need advocacy for local approvals whether it is associations, historic commissions or other zoning. For commercial clients we provide a unique perspective to projects that understands planning objectives and reflects care and pride in the growth and development of the community. We assist commercial property owners in expansion or renovation efforts as well as updates to meet current building codes. We are involved with local and state agencies on an ongoing basis and we keep abreast of the regulatory requirements and building codes governing today's construction industry.

CEOCFO: *Are there typical issues that most clients do not recognize and you add value by pointing out the situation?*

Ms. DeStefano: I think it would be different for residential versus a commercial client. For residential clients, this may be the first time that they use an architect. Part of our job is to expose them to different opportunities to think about. A homeowner might come to us and know what they want for rooms, they have an idea what they want for style but they do not know about opportunities that might benefit them in the long-run, so we bring that to the forefront. For commercial projects, there may be a lot of building code, life safety, zoning restrictions that they may not know about and we would bring those things to light to assist in decision-making in moving a project forward.

CEOCFO: *Is the 50/50 between commercial and residential a deliberate strategy?*

Ms. DeStefano: Yes it is.

CEOCFO: *How do you attract clients in both arenas?*

Ms. DeStefano: Many of our clients for residential are word-of-mouth referrals from previous clients who speak highly of us as well as people who have seen our work. We are finding that people who are moving to the area will be savvy enough to do web searches and we get many inquiries through our website. One of the benefits that we have in being able to communicate electronically is that if we have a homeowner who may be moving to New England it does not matter where they are coming from because we can ship drawings electronically and work remotely until they are into their new home. For commercial projects, we have the good fortune of repeat clientele, which is wonderful. Additionally we find with our niche markets that there is a focus that we can bring benefits to for the end-user. Was it deliberate 50/50? I would say it is definitely deliberate to have a variety of mix of product type here - whether it is 50/50 or 60/40 ebbs and flows with the economy.

CEOCFO: *Your site indicates "commercial design on the human scale." Would you explain?*

Ms. DeStefano: An example of design in human scale would be a design that is of the size and proportion where the materials, the feeling of the approach and the hierarchy of spaces is inviting and is carried all the way through the building. Therefore when the users are experiencing the architecture, it is comfortable.

CEOCFO: *How integral to your success is having grown up in Portsmouth?*

Ms. DeStefano: That was helpful in the beginning of my career and the growing of the foundation. Because I had roots in the community, I was able to have many great connections and therefore when starting out, I was a known entity. The more I was in business, the more I was getting involved with either volunteerism on boards, being more active in the community and that led to more recognition and assisted with people coming to know me and my reputation. Once that nucleus was formed, I was able to then expand the circle further up in New Hampshire and other New England states. Right now we have a presence in all New England states.

CEOCFO: *Can you ramp up as needed for new projects?*

Mr. DeStefano: Right now, we have fifteen employees and we are able to manage opportunities with projects and staff them appropriately. We hire staff knowing the expertise that we have in place and assuring that it is a good mix for the business. We typically do not hire specifically for a project. We like having the good stability of the staff that we have, and the camaraderie that it brings. When we have the opportunity to investigate a new project and adding it into the mix, we analyze if it is a project type that we have expertise in and what is the requirement for producing the project to make sure we can service our existing clientele and services when appropriate. That is our philosophy on taking projects in. That being said, there could be a spectacular project that presents itself and an exciting project that we would definitely want to entertain. It is a decision among the managers how we would navigate that through our production schedule.

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CEOCFO: *How do you evaluate newer products or materials, particularly on the environmentally friendly side?*

Ms. DeStefano: We promote almost weekly lunch meetings where we have product representatives come in and present new information to us so that we can analyze what that is and if we have a use for it. Secondly, the American Institute of Architects requires educational efforts annually so we can keep up to date with those things, whether it is a product or a system or even information that deals with health, safety and welfare. We have peers that we will speak with and we have a vast amount of respect for the people that are actually implementing some of these systems. Whether it is a consultant, a contractor or a subcontractor that is installing some of these new things, we actually will spend the time to chat with them about their experience before we would specify a new product.

CEOCFO: *What have you learned along the way?*

Ms. DeStefano: The thing I learned early on and is reinforced daily is that we do what we do as architects but the support that we get with the right people around us to bring a project to a successful completion is equally as important as knowing what our business is. Surrounding the business and ourselves with knowledgeable consultants is very important for future projects as well as for the business in general. In the industry, we have a wonderful group that we can pick from for our consultants whether it is a spec writer or a landscape architect or mechanical or structural engineer or interior designer. There is a myriad of support and consultants that help bring a project to completion. We have the good fortune, no matter where we are working in the New England area, of being able to pull in resources and appropriately work together as a team with the end goal in the same vision.

CEOCFO: *If we speak a year from now, what might be different for DeStefano Architects?*

Ms. DeStefano: DeStefano Architects has rallied post recession. We have gone through a growth spurt - we have doubled the size of our office space and added staff. We have upgraded all of our computer and software systems. Right now, we are enjoying the benefits of our recent growth and security that comes with all of those things. I think in the next year, we are going to spend time on looking at what our business focus is. We have a certain type of project mix now and look at future trends and decide if they are a market that we should be shifting more towards. That is probably the same thing we would have done ten years ago as we might do in another ten years. We want to make sure that we do not stay stagnant with assumptions and to continue the success of the company.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

For more information visit: www.DeStefanoArchitects.com

Contact: Lisa DeStefano 603.431.8701 info@destefanoarchitects.com