

Photo by Frank Wojciechowski

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Architect Frank Moya is breathing life into Trenton's infrastructure

BY LOUISE HANDELMAN

Frank Moya, an architect with offices in Trenton, frequently has breakfast at 6:30 a.m. with his neighbors on South Warren Street. "They're a good group of merchants and a good example of the vitality that attracts me to an urban center," he said.

On South Warren Street alone, five buildings have been refurbished under Mr. Moya's direction — including his favorite early morning haunt, Café Olé. And the impact of his firm is felt elsewhere in the city — especially in commercial, institutional and healthcare projects — where he has developed a reputation for successfully maneuvering the rocky shoals of government financing and creatively breathing new life into derelict buildings.

Mr. Moya calls his particular expertise — which he is also implementing in run-down areas of Puerto Rico — "urban recycling."

"This idea of urban recycling is to rehabilitate a dead urban area and find ways to impart it with an economic logic," he said. In other words, generate community support, put together an urban design package that fits the guidelines of funding sources, aesthetically improve city structures, and, importantly, ensure that the buildings have a viable function — like providing that well-needed daily cup of coffee.

So how did Mr. Moya become an architect with an urban bent? Originally from San Juan, Puerto Rico, he grew up in a family that was both socially oriented and creative. His father was a restaurateur and bar owner, and his brother was a paint-

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er. Mr. Moya also had a strong interest in graphics, but, as he said, "I decided early on I didn't want to be known as Roberto Moya's brother."

With the encouragement of friends, he decided to come to the United States and study architecture at Princeton University, where he received both undergraduate and master's degrees at a time when the program still emphasized urban design. After graduating, he worked for the Princeton-based firm of Henry Horowitz and Associates for 2½ years before joining The Hillier Group. Mr. Moya remained at Hillier, the third largest architectural firm in the country, for more than nine years and was in charge of the healthcare design studio. In 1993, desirous of applying his talents to his strong interest in urban projects, he decided to go out on his own.

Mr. Moya has nothing but praise for his early supporters, teachers and subsequent employers. "You owe a lot to people who encourage you," he said, and he singled out the influence several Princeton faculty members, including his thesis advisor, Michael Graves; the Spanish architect, Raphael Moneo; and Robert Gutman, who championed the importance of urban issues in architecture. Mr. Moya still has close connections with Robert Hillier and annually serves as a guest lecturer at Mr. Hillier's professional practice course at the university.

Although Mr. Moya feels close ties to his pedagogical and professional roots, he professes to be more interested in achieving what he calls "appropriateness" in architecture rather than championing the aesthetic guidelines of a particular school of thought. "It's a matter of scale," he said. "If your scale fits, you can use all different architectures."

And a perfect example of the happy mix of styles can be found in Mr. Moya's work on South Warren Street. Take CaféOlé. Mr. Moya explained that the site had housed numerous restaurants and had undergone various transformations, the last of which was a pizzeria. "It had cheap paneling and what I call pizza-shop gray tiling on the floor," he said.

On a modest \$25,000 budget, Mr. Moya transformed the 2,000 square-foot interior space and front facade. "Our priorities were to create a new space—this was to be Trenton's first coffee bar — and to work within a tight budget. This was a real challenge, and we tried to use as much existing materials as possible, and the owners — Jamie and Karen Griswald — also scoured the auctions."

Inside, Mr. Moya wanted to create a sense of casual elegance, along the lines of the debonair Raffles Club in Cairo. "We wanted a comfortable, classy hang-out," he said. And he achieved this feeling first off by using a curved wall to unify the long, narrow space. "We moved the service area from the rear of the location to the middle because people like to see busy areas — that feeling of excitement. But we also borrowed a trick from Alvar Aalto," he added, alluding to the influential Finnish architect, "and put comfortable chairs in the front, thus inviting you in and relax."

For those customers who like the feel of sitting at a bar, Mr. Moya created an espresso bar with stools adjoin-

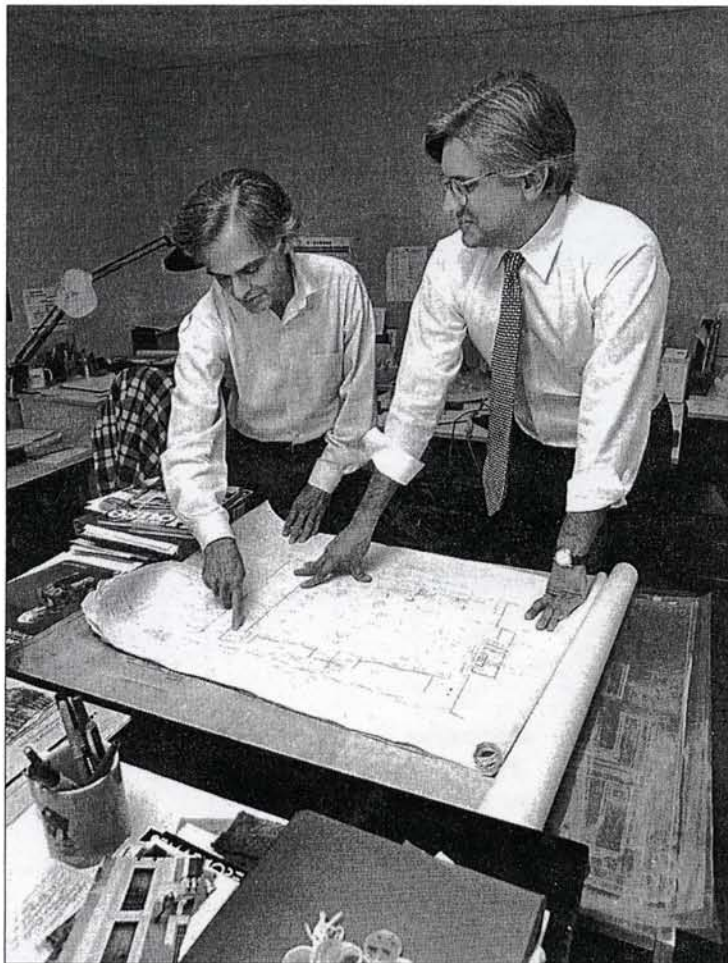


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Project Manager Arthur Owen, left, works with Frank Moya in his Trenton office.

ing the service area. Then in the back, there is regular seating with skylights that open up the space and add natural light. To accent the logical progression of space from the front sitting area to rear restaurant seating, Mr. Moya added an ever-expanding matrix of darker-gray tiles to the existing flooring.

The result is a hip, friendly place, whose earth-tone furnishings, rich carpeting with a bold, interlace pattern, and texture-painted walls convey a slightly exotic Moorish feel. And all this on a strict budget, Mr. Moya said, pointing out such bargains at the granite counter tops bought at auction, the use of left-over remnants for the carpeting, the judicious mixing of paint, and the special carpentry to make the sides of the second-hand counter appear more abstract. "We ended up extremely satisfied with the job in spite of the budget," he said. "In fact, it enforced discipline and shows what kind of moves you can make with a space as long as you prioritize your goals."

Mr. Moya's moves didn't stop with the interior either. The street-front of the building had, in its pizzeria incarnation, been angled out into the sidewalk and jarred with the other buildings on the block — 19th-century brick commercial structures that comfortably march in a straight line down the sidewalk. Mr. Moya's solution was to replace the solid angled facade with a lattice of wood and glass so that the frontage is now parallel to the sidewalk. Beside letting in natural light, the overall effect, according to Mr. Moya, is to "reclaim the street." He then added a smart sign over the window, which uses the same color scheme as the interior and cleverly hides awkward structural supports. As a result, the swank feel of old Cairo fits in nicely with the Eastern-seaboard commercial-look of the buildings on the street.

Café Olé is not the only Moya contribution to the architectural melting pot of South Warren Street. He was also involved with the interior design and renovation of Maxine's, a restaurant and jazz club. Formerly the land-

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mark restaurant Casa Lido, Mr. Moya was called in to convert the Art Deco space — to make it less cold and also to increase the seating to 400.

The solution? What started out as strictly an interior design job, soon turned into a major reconstruction project due to flooding in the basement and ensuing structural complications. Mr. Moya also had deal with a kitchen that was much too small. "Usually, it's a 50-50 ratio between the kitchen and seating," he explained.

Building on his experience of working on Princeton University's Charter eating club and heeding the requests of the chefs, Mr. Moya grew the kitchen into three floors: food preparation and cleaning in the basement, cooking on the main floor and serving above.

To achieve a warmer ambiance, Mr. Moya made liberal use of cherry and birch. He then accented the richness of the natural wood with the slick use of stainless steel railings, creating a comfortable balance of textures that, as he says, "is both sweet and sour."

Topping off this glorious Art Deco ambiance are the Murano glass lighting fixtures, which, according to Mr. Moya, give the ceiling the look of "firmament of stars." Add the custom-designed carpeting that is echoed in the upholstered cherry furniture, and the total look is one of a grand old theater. And again, the renovation was achieved within a strict budget. "In cities like Trenton, we're asked to do more with less money," he said.

Nowhere is this sense of wanting to maintain high standards at a low cost more evident than in Mr. Moya's work with affordable housing. "I am a firm believer in decent housing. Affordable housing shouldn't look like you're living in a project — you should feel good about living in it."

One of Mr. Moya's projects that fits this humanist criterion is the Circle-F Senior Housing in Trenton. Here, his solution encapsulates his urban recycling philosophy of taking an abandoned building and turning it into a functioning structure that is compatible with the dynamic and scale of the neighborhood.

In the case of Circle-F, Mr. Moya turned an old factory complex into senior citizen housing. He maintained the Victorian style of the original factory and retained the front porch, thus allowing the structure to blend into the architectural mix of the neighborhood and afford the residents a locale for talking to their neighbors. He covered the narrow alleyway between two factory buildings, making an atrium where residents can also gather. Floor space was simplified — a double-sided elevator was used instead of an intrusive ramp. Stairs were minimized. Each floor has a different color so that residents can more easily identify where they are. "There's the whole issue of fostering independence with seniors. Our objective was to make the space simpler and friendlier," he said.

Not only are the residents pleased, the neighborhood is as well. "At the first planning board hearing, when the whole neighborhood showed up — everybody spoke for the design. And believe me, I've been to enough planning board meetings to know how rare that is. But we had really worked on interacting with everybody, and as a result, we turned the biggest eyesore of the area into a real asset."

The list of Mr. Moya's efforts to create functional, aesthetically-pleasing urban environments goes on — not only in Trenton and the rest of New Jersey, but also in Puerto Rico, where he opened up an office three years ago. There, too, his work at establishing community awareness, clarifying design priorities, coordinating funding, and establishing attractive and economically viable environments is beginning to be realized.

For example, he is helping to direct the Calle Cerra Redevelopment in San Juan. This project is recycling what had become a dead city street and replacing it with senior citizen housing, commercial structures and the headquarters for the local recording industry. "After working with the people of the neighborhood to develop ideas, we began by bringing in clean-up brigades. Then we made facade improvements. We helped our clients qualify for government funding for infrastructure improvements and the development of open spaces. We raised money for a festival. Recording stars attended, and the street came alive. The whole place got a new spirit," he said.

Indeed, Mr. Moya's final words on Calle Cerra could also apply to the thinking that underlies all his architectural projects: "It's a question of looking beyond pure architecture. It's commercial development. It's a matter of creating a sense of place and convincing people to invest money in positive change. It's the need to have everybody involved — merchants, property owners and unions. It's a matter of taking control."