

KidsPost



The Sky's the Limit

When Designing a Building, Architects Consider All Sorts of Creative and Crazy Ideas

The next time you sit down with paper and markers, a box of art supplies or a block of clay, try this: Let your mind go, and don't worry about what you're making. The result might surprise you.

That's how the new building on 15th Street in Northwest Washington, next door to KidsPost, got its start a few years ago. Designers with the architecture firm Hickok Cole put on paper whatever crazy ideas came to mind.

The list was then narrowed by lead architects Atsushi Ishizaki and Chuong Cao. Along the way, each of them created an important drawing that contributed greatly to the final look of the building. You can see the

progress in the sketches and photo on this page. "Being an architect is similar to being an artist," said Cao. "You get a canvas — except our canvas is seldom ever blank."

That's because most architects try to make their new buildings fit in with the existing environment. As Cao puts it: "Every site has its uniqueness." In the case of the 15th Street building, called Columbia Center, the two architects wanted to make the block more open and welcoming. Several nearby buildings have dark glass and lots of concrete, which makes the area feel like a canyon, they said.

Ishizaki wanted to break up the narrow corridor

of buildings. "I grew up in a house with a long, dark corridor and one dim light — and the bathroom at the end," he said. "It always scared me."

He and Cao used a lot of clear glass to give the building a lighter, more inviting feel. They also angled the outside walls so that there isn't one long, flat side. "The shape of it, it's like an embrace," Cao explained. The glass, meanwhile, creates an open, welcoming feel.

Cao and Ishizaki say the owner of the \$44 million building, a company called Monument Realty, paid extra to allow the architects time to be so creative. It's not always like that, but for these two architects, it's always fun to build buildings, no matter what.

"There's potential in anything," said Ishizaki. "You just have to take it and make the best of it. That's where the joy is."

— Margaret Webb Pressler

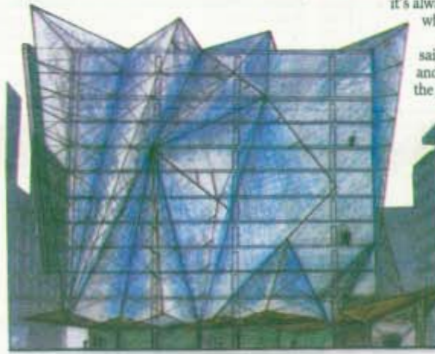
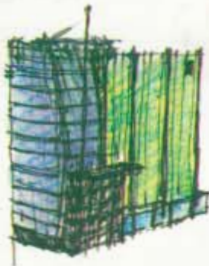


According to Plan

Architects Atsushi Ishizaki, left, and Chuong Cao have four goals when they design a building. It must:

- Function properly. The building has to be solid and safe.
- Look good in its surroundings. They don't want the building to seem out of place.
- Have a "big idea." This is the message that the building communicates — such as the welcoming, light feel of Columbia Center.
- Please the client, because it's the site owner who is paying the bill.

1. Nice, but too orderly.



2. Oooh, very creative, but too daring.

From design to reality: The building will be ready to open at the end of next month.

Working Together

Sometimes architects are paid to come up with crazy ideas for designing a building. One process that encourages this is called a charrette (pronounced shuh-RET). That's when several designers get together to brainstorm about a project. No idea is considered too far out. The designers can build on the work of others or think of something new.

Columbia Center, the new building next door to KidsPost, started with a charrette that went on for months. This extra work was paid for by Monument Realty, which owns the building and hired the architects.

Once a charrette is over, "you have to go back and apply reality and apply budgets and apply constraints," said Michael Cole, one of the architects on this project. The benefit is that the final design usually is more creative than if the architects had worked alone.

Monument Realty chose two drawings from the charrette as inspiration for Columbia Center. The architects used elements of both in the final design.



3. That's it! It's the perfect combination.

Must Have

Architects use a lot of tracing paper. They draw an idea for a building, then layer another idea on top of it with tracing paper to see if the concept works. If it doesn't, they just toss the tracing paper away. Try it with your drawings!