



INTERVIEW: The founders of DXA Studio talk design, history, and the future of architecture



By [Dana Schulz](#)
Today, June 12, 2019



Wayne Norbeck (L) and Jordan Rogrove (R); Photo by Florian Holzherr

Since 2011, the architects at [DXA Studio](#) have been, as they like to put it, providing "a rare balance of expertly crafted design with technical proficiency." From a prismatic glass topper on a historic loft in the Village to the interiors at one of Essex Crossing's most notable new buildings, DXA doesn't shy away from a challenge or a historic retrofit. To hear more about their process and how the unique firm came to be, CityRealty recently sat down for an interview with co-founders Wayne Norbeck and Jordan Rogrove.

Can you tell us a bit about your backgrounds?

Wayne: Since early on I had a very strong interest in both [art and architecture] I grew up with my parents renovating houses, so it was a perfect combination of both of those interests. After college, I ended up in Baltimore for about seven years, working for a really great firm there. I went back to school in Philly, and then ended up in New York working for TEN Arquitectos and then Gluckman Mayner Architects. I was doing a lot of cultural-related work like art museums and single-family residential.

Jordan: Similarly, I knew I wanted to be an architect when I was seven or eight years old. I committed to architecture school, but during the summers, I started working for a set designer. I had gone to Woodstock '94, and I saw this really intricate set that they created. I thought it was very architectural. It was this spinning stage that one band would perform on while the other band was setting up, and so it was continuous music. I forced myself upon that set designer and did internships, and then right of school, I worked with them and did a bunch of MTV shows and A&E Live by Request. In a lot of ways, it was the exact opposite of architecture – it's these unlimited budgets, and it would go from your desk sketching to being on television within a week or two.

But ultimately, I missed a lot of what architecture had offered when I was studying, and I quickly came back to it. I lived in France for a little while and worked for a company there. Then I came back and worked in Chicago with Lucien Lagrange Architects, which is a break-off of SOM. I then came back to New York to work with Morris Adjmi Architects, and I worked with Morris for about eight-and-a-half years.

How did you two decide to open a studio together?

Wayne: Jordan and I went to undergrad together at Virginia Tech. That's how we met. We spent many years together there learning about architecture, which really created a foundation for a lot of what we do today, including how the studio is set up and our whole mentality about design.

[When I was working in NYC], I bumped into Jordan on the street. We hadn't been in touch for a little while, and then we started hanging out again and doing competitions together.

Jordan: We started winning them; a number of clients said, "break away, we're going to throw you more work." And so, sure enough, we opened our doors, and they followed. We immediately had a great client base. We were really fortunate.



Views of 7 Harrison Street, courtesy of DXA. Photos by Ari Burling and Scott Frances.

What was your first project?

Jordan: Our first project was [Seven Harrison Street](#). [We worked with] the well-known architect and interior specialist Steven Harris, [who had been a tenant in the building]. It was such a great collaboration; he taught us a lot. He controlled the interiors, and we did the layouts, the building restoration, and a penthouse up on the rooftop that got approved at the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Would you say that people have come to recognize the firm for your work adapting historic buildings?

Jordan: I think some clients do. I'd say about a third of our projects are landmark related. We've had a lot of success at LPC getting ground-up and major renovations with vertical enlargements on historic buildings. I think that's difficult for a lot of architects. There's tremendous value in an architect who can help deliver all the FAR.



Views of 827-831 Broadway, courtesy of DXA. Renderings by Ben Olschner

Speaking of the LPC, the project at 827-831 Broadway has made a lot of headlines. What was that process like?

Jordan: All the years I've been doing architecture, that was [the most difficult project](#) I've ever been part of. But at the same time, it was so rewarding. The client purchased this building and did not know the history. It was not landmarked, and he didn't really have an affinity for the historic building, he was just going to tear it down and put up a tower. There was a lot of activism, and rightfully, Landmarks said okay, this is an important building, less so for the architecture, than what happened inside. So part of the conversation we had was, "are you only preserving the architecture, or are you preserving the legacy of a seminal event?" When we started with LPC, it was clear it was what happened inside that was the big deal, but that morphed. An affinity started to develop on the part of a few of the commissioners.

Initially, we felt it was the painters and the Abstract Expressionist movement, which really happened in this concentrated area. This building was so awesome because the fourth floor had these big skylights and soaring ceilings, so it was perfect for de Kooning and Paul Jenkins and Larry Poons. Our first thought was, how do you [look at work from] a group of artists whose work is so disparate?

We reached out to a number of Abstract Expressionist experts and authors. We talked to NYU, we reached out to the Whitney, MOMA, the de Kooning Foundation. We found that the commonalities were really taking the way things were done previously and throwing that out the window, as well as taking perspective and still life and exploding, reassembling, and re-presenting them. Another tenet was this super emotional and super dynamic presentation.

And then we found that over the course of his tenure in this space, de Kooning went from doing urban landscapes to rural landscapes. So we thought that moment of innovation, where an artist shoots in another direction, should be celebrated. So we put all this together, and we first landed on this glass façade that was highly reflective that would essentially curate the reflected views from around, so you would have portions of buildings reflected, mixed with the sky, and then mixed with this landscape component on the terrace. You're basically taking this really kinetic space around Union Square and reflecting it, and you're able to see it in a different light. We thought that was true to the painters' ethos at the time.



West End Residences, courtesy of DXA. Renderings by Redundant Pixel Studios.

You're also working on the [West End Residences](#), another set of historic buildings. Have you also thought here about the relationship between the historic and the new?

Jordan: The projects that really interest us are the ones that present the challenges, and there were some inherent challenges in this project. The potential buyers are looking for different things, and I think that pushed us to the edge of our comfort zone in doing what you would call almost transitional architecture; that we go contemporary in the inside.

Wayne: I think one of the best details in that one is a reinterpretation of a traditional Shaker kitchen cabinet. [So], instead of the wide band, it's a very thin projection, just at the edge that creates a shadow and gives a sense of detail, but it's detail you've never seen before, so it's a totally contemporary interpretation.



The interiors of 100 Barclay, courtesy of DXA. Photos by Ari Burling.

In terms of historic architecture, working on the exterior and lobby renovation at [100 Barclay](#) must have been very exciting to work on.

Jordan: Yeah, we got really deep into it. In all honesty, I didn't know much about Ralph Walker. So to learn that he was the "architect of the century" and considered one of the greatest American architects of all time, just goes to show you. We read a bunch of books about him and reached out to the author of the most recent and thorough review of his work. I think it was the beginning of really modernist architecture. You had the Art Deco, but then these representations of grapevines as symbols of communication and connection and this beautiful mural that tells the history of telecommunications.

Then we got into lighting the building. It had never been lit before; it had been a utility building. At night now it has a presence in the skyline, which is exciting. And then, working with the lighting designer on the interior, it was illuminating all that beautiful bronze work. And then we created that partition and those very cool pendant lights in the arcade.



Amenity space (top) and residence (bottom) at 242 Broome Street, courtesy of DXA. Renderings by Florian Holzer and Qualls Benson.

You did the interiors for [242 Broome](#) at Essex Crossing. I'm imagining you thought about the history of the site, but you were also working within SHoP's building. How did you balance this?

Wayne: It was exactly that. We knew in the residential portion, it was going to be high-end, luxury materials. And at the same time, looking at the renderings of SHoP's building, it sort of looked like a UFO to us. So it was trying to pick up on the kind of metal work that you see all over the Lower East Side, with a little more gritty character, and really strike a balance between those two things. We always look for ways to integrate the façade design in the way that patterns start to emerge within the interior design.

The way the backdrop for the reception desk was handled with a grid of metal relates specifically to the façade. And then we did that in the elevator, and also in the residential lounge with the free-standing bookshelf piece. It's very important to us that when you experience one of these projects, it feels totally integrated.

[For the residences], we wanted to make something that felt really good, and the bones that SHoP gave us and those huge windows made it pretty easy. The palette is about luminosity and reflection and getting light in there. And then we tried to accentuate that by going pretty dark in some areas, so when you come into the space, it just amplifies it.

If you could, hypothetically work with any architect who is not living today, who would it be?

Jordan: Oh, Corbusier. And Louis Kahn. They are just geniuses. You know, it's a humbling thing, measuring your own success as an architect or the ability of an architect up against those two. It just makes me want to cry.

Wayne: I think Louis Kahn is a perfect choice. It's also interesting how it relates to the work we're doing, because there was a lot of historic context he was working within. And one of the things that is really important to us is bringing light into projects, and he was just an absolute master of that. And he was also a teacher, which is what we're doing, as well as a student, so really a complete architect.

You mention teaching. You both teach at Virginia Tech. What would you say is the biggest challenge facing students today?

Wayne: We've noticed that the architectural education has moved a little bit further from practice than it was historically. Especially with digital technology and that whole world. There's a lot to learn from that, but there's been a lot of schools that have become sort of enchanted with it. That's one of the nice things about our involvement in academics—we have a strong position that we want to build, and we want to be involved with the very early stages of design all the way through construction.

You now have 33 staff members. What makes DXA unique?

Jordan: I think what sets us apart is that it's like a right brain, left brain office. You have designer offices that always have executives doing their stuff, and then you have some firms that are trapped in realizing other people's vision. But they're hyper-technical. We strive to be awesome at both sides of it so that we can be a one-stop shop for our clients. They know they can come to us for a zoning study or some complex ULURP process or the LPC approval. But then we're also really good designers. For the most part, our staff have been in other offices around the city, and they've been either just in the design side or just the technical side. And the technical guys are like man, I just want to learn about how to design and be involved in this, and they get drawn here. And then you've got people that like "I've been doing SDs and competition proposals for all of these upper echelon firms in the city, but I want to build something, I want to see it done."