

Angels of Architecture

Winners of Sussex **Best Small Business 2013**, ARCH-angels talk us through the holistic approach to architecture

Profile

ARCH-angels Architects (AaA), founded by Nicola Thomas and Richard Zinzan in 2009, are passionately committed to

providing cost-effective, creative, low energy buildings. Based in Brighton, the company have experienced year on year growth since their launch and have just taken home the title of 2013's Best Small Business at the Sussex Business Awards.

A welcoming, friendly practice, AaA focuses on a holistic, people-centric approach – a world away from the clichéd perception of architecture. The work ARCH-angels do is ecologically

conscious, approaching each build as a lasting project that will have a lifespan of its own and considering its environmental impact as a whole throughout that time. The team put the client at the very centre of each design, using the best possible balance of their ideas, dreams and wishes with the space and structures at hand to craft unique, beautiful buildings that are in harmony with their environment whilst meeting the client's individual requirements.

ARCH-angels dispel the myth that successful businesses must be ruthless. It's clear from the moment you step inside their open plan shopfront that the team is a close knit one, and this feeling is backed up by AaA's investment in

staff development. "Our commitment to our customers extends to the support and continual enrichment of the whole of the team," says Richard as he explains their culture of frequent meetings with an open forum to discuss projects and 'WIFLE' (What I Feel Like Expressing) opportunities. "Each member of staff is encouraged to attend training for both personal and business development. The practice promotes flexible part-time working and job sharing; understanding the demands of working parents resulting in a very committed experienced team who are able to flourish in their work because there is a balance with their home life." AaA have regular team gatherings and a couple of annual parties; indeed, those present at the Sussex Business Awards would have had the opportunity to meet most of the team as they celebrated their win. However, it's not just fun and games, of course: ARCH-angels understand that fulfilled individuals make a great team, resulting in the best possible end product for their clients.

In the four years since the business' inception, ARCH-angels have weathered some of the worst economic lows in living memory. The balance sheet and expansion of the team both show consistent growth, even throughout the recession. Of particular note as a challenge is the greater number of local small companies and sole practitioners competing for the business, but as front runners of the new school of architectural business,



ARCH-angels are simply remaining focused, positive and confident in their investments and ethos.

"Educating people on the benefits of low energy architecture has allowed us to flourish in a competitive marketplace with creative and resourceful design, we have encouraged it as an affordable option." Nicola is keen to point out that the company's eco-friendly approach is not a business decision but an ideological one: she stresses that the building process and the premises that result from it have an enormous impact on the environment, and that we have a responsibility to make this influence as positive as possible.

As a new business, ARCH-angels have had to build their reputation from

scratch in a tough time for businesses of all sizes. "We did this by taking part in shows and exhibitions, writing for local publications, attending networking events, speaking at conferences and, of course, having a shop window," explains Richard. "This worked well for us in establishing our name, but in the last year in particular we have found that the exhibition strategy is one that needs reworking, due to the additional competition we mentioned earlier. It used to be that we stood out as one of a handful of architecture firms, but at the last exhibition we attended, there were twenty. It no longer represents a good return on investment, so we are now placing greater emphasis on referrals and enhancing the website.

"AaA prides itself on this open, flexible approach towards clients, employees, and suppliers: building lasting relationships on all levels"



“Our holistic approach to managing extends into a clear strategic vision for developing our business. Consistency is a primary focus in terms of customer services whilst our client satisfaction survey maintains our effort towards customers, in order to assess performance and more importantly; understand the successes, failures and ways of improving the service. This is reflected by our referrals: 50% of our work comes in from recommendations from past clients.”

Whilst ARCH-angels stress that they are expanding with caution, their caution is optimistic and reasonable. They take a pragmatic approach to both exposure and risk, are confident in our planning and delivery when it comes to each project in its own right and on the whole when it comes to investment in their growth. The team, whilst predominantly from architectural backgrounds, are all business-focused and work with a Business Coach on a regular basis to develop their strengths and turn their skills-based offering into a successful, stable and growing business. The team spend at least half a day on business development each week, in addition to individual training and enrichment projects.

AaA prides itself on this open, flexible approach towards clients, employees, and suppliers: building lasting relationships on all levels. The practice fosters an ethos of collaboration and sustainability not just environmental but in its wider sense of social and economic responsibility. They are part of the Architect in the House scheme which supports Shelter, they take part in the local Eco Technology Show and the annual RIBA Threshold event. Richard is a mentor on the undergraduate course at Brighton University School of Architecture and actively supports work experience programmes with secondary school pupils.

Through this holistic and widely beneficial approach, ARCH-Angels hope to continue to grow their business, and with new sister company ZSTa, the practice has diversified into the high end luxury residential, education, commercial and leisure sectors. Conservatively, they hope that this new venture – which offers the same client-focused service and rounded approach to business as AaA, under different



branding that aims it more squarely at large business customers rather than individuals – will become profitable within its first year. “We do not take unnecessary risks, but always aim high and are positive and ambitious,” says Richard. The separation of this enterprise allows the team, plus additional skilled partners, to begin to expand and replicate the success of ARCH-angels without posing unnecessary risk to the existing business and the happy stability of the team. “We’ve seen businesses expand too far, too quickly, only to have the bubble burst from under them,” adds Richard, showing some of the humility that makes ARCH-angels so approachable and so popular with their clients. “We know our capabilities, but we’re not the type to draw off all our profits in dividends and take risks in that sense. We budget so that we can make careful, measured investments for the benefit of our staff and customers.”

As economic recovery takes hold, clients - including that 50% that come to ARCH-angels based on glowing recommendations from their friends and colleagues – are investing in improving their properties for better hopes on the housing market; to improve on conversions and extensions made in haste at the market’s worst, but also when they’re planning to stay in the house they already have. “Many people

are finding that, for what it would cost in an increased mortgage, fees and costs to move, they could turn their existing property into the home they’ve always dreamed of. We are confident when it comes to crafting people’s dream houses... their ‘forever’ homes,” says Nicola. “We may be architects, but we’re homeowners with families ourselves so we truly understand how important this process is, and how crucial it is that they have the experience and results they want from it. For many, this may be the largest lump sum they ever spend, and we make sure they are confident that they have made the right decision in spending it with us.” It’s not a responsibility ARCH-angels take lightly.

“Through ingenuity, determination and aided by an expert business coach whom we meet regularly; we have seen the company grow from two to seven team members and now commissions are growing from small to medium scale whilst thinking of the bigger picture,” concludes Richard. The team are primarily architects first, who have learned to be business people and sales people but remain most importantly people – people who will sit with clients and help them realise their dreams from imagination to bricks and mortar, via ARCH-angels.

WHAT EVERYONE IS SAYING

What the Clients Say...

“ARCH-angels’ knowledge and expertise took our project from ordinary to exceptional. Added to this, their friendliness and clear explanations gave us great confidence throughout the process – we are absolutely delighted with the results and would thoroughly recommend them to anyone.”

Emma Dunstan, Hove

What the Staff Say

“Nicola and Richard give us the opportunity to expand our knowledge through training schemes offered by The Green Register amongst many. On a personal level, they encourage us to look after our wellbeing by attending life coaching sessions. Overall the partners are very open, approachable and constructive in difficult situations; there is a great sense of camaraderie and professionalism within the team.”

Pete Sonntag, Project Architect

What the Suppliers Say

“We have worked with ARCH-Angels Architects for the last 2 years and have a great working relationship with them, both Nicola and Richard and the rest of the team there are highly professional and always accommodating and efficient when issues arise. Our invoices are always paid on time which is essential for a small business like ours, I would recommend working with them to anyone.

Chris Penn - Director - Peceptum Design Ltd

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