

## TWO MINUTES

# BLUEPRINT FOR LONGEVITY

Richard W.  
Wiedersum

steers a  
fourth-generation  
architectural firm



**B**est known for designing educational facilities since 1926, Hauppauge-based Wiedersum Associates Architects is touted as one of the oldest family-owned and managed architectural firms in the nation. WWA's projects on Long Island include the Cradle of Aviation Museum in Garden City, Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youth and Adults in Sands Point and the National Aviation & Transportation Center at Dowling College in Oakdale. Managing Partner Richard W. Wiedersum took the helm of the firm after his father, Richard C. Wiedersum, retired last year. LIBN recently spoke with him about everything from the direction of the firm without his dad to his favorite architect.

**Your great-grandfather, Frederic Wiedersum, founded your firm and initially designed many schools. Tell us more about WAA's projects during its early years.** My great-grandfather founded the firm in 1926 and since then the Wiedersum organization has designed over 1,000 new educational facilities throughout Long Island, Westchester County, the lower Hudson Valley and New Jersey, as well as over 1,000 additions and/or alteration projects. In the 1950s and '60s, Long Island housing boomed in a way that required multiple school buildings in most school districts due to the student population increases. The first school he designed was Valley Stream Central High School in 1929. He also designed the Hall of Education for the 1964 World's Fair.

**Can you name some prominent high schools the firm has designed through the years?** In 1929, the Valley Stream Central High School was the first contemporary high school in America. In 1936, Wellington C. Mepham High School set the pattern for school design in both Europe and America and was 15 years ahead of its time. Honestly, there are just too many schools to list. Suffice to say, there should be a plaque on at least one school in every district across Long Island.

**Your father, Richard C. Wiedersum, retired last year after nearly 50 years at the firm, during which he worked on more than 2,000 public- and private-sector projects. How has his departure impacted the firm?** My father and I worked together for close to 30 years and during that time I was like a sponge, wanting to learn and absorb all of his knowledge. In the end, his basic belief, which he consistently instilled in me and which he followed as well, was to listen to the client and deliver what they are asking for. The biggest impact of his retirement on

the firm and myself is no longer having him here to bounce ideas back and forth with.

**Under his leadership, WAA launched a healthcare division. How has the growth in that division helped the firm?** During the 1960s Wiedersum Associates started working for Good Samaritan Hospital Medical Center. This later grew to include Mercy Medical Center, St. Charles Hospital, St. Francis Hospital and others into the early years of 2000. Ed Casper (principal) came on board and elevated our healthcare division to include many other healthcare facilities throughout Long Island, Staten Island and Westchester County.

**The Americans with Disabilities Act has been law for 25 years. What effect has it had on business and architectural design, especially for the many schools that WAA designed?** In my opinion, the biggest challenge with the Americans with Disabilities Act is bringing an existing building designed in the 1920s through the 1970s into compliance. Where do you locate the elevator? How do you install ramps inside a building where there are steps? How do you take a bathroom that may or may not have enough space and create [one that is wheelchair-accessible]? These are just some of the issues we face.

**How have changes in school safety changed the industry, especially after the Coldenham disaster in Newburgh, New York, in 1989, when several children were killed by a wind-collapsed wall? Did it change how schools were designed on Long Island?** The Coldenham disaster has led to sweeping changes that have been adopted by code or passed down from the New York State Education Department. All school buildings are now required to have inspections that review the conditions of the existing building

and all of its systems; part of this inspection is to review the structural integrity of each building. Buildings are designed meeting all codes and regulations, which are constantly changing or evolving to protect the people who occupy them.

**What is the next generation in school design?** The next generation in school design will incorporate extensive amounts of glass on the exterior, to bring in natural light. Spaces within the school will be flexible. They will be fully air-conditioned and will utilize the most updated technology. This technology, some of which is in use now, will secure the buildings during a crisis and identify where staff and students can go and take attendance. The technology will run the mechanical and lighting systems throughout the building. Photovoltaic systems mounted on the roof will reduce the electric load, and, along with solar for hot water, will be the standard. Geothermal systems, fuel cell and cogeneration will be incorporated into the mechanical systems.

**Where do you expect business to go in the next five to 10 years?** We see continued growth in both healthcare and education, grades K-12 as well as higher education.

**Is there a particular architect that you admire and why?** Frank Lloyd Wright would be one of my favorite architects. His designs had very well-defined horizontal and vertical lines with pronounced cantilevers that created open spaces both in the interior and exterior. The interior spaces were free-flowing, allowing for bright rooms that were well-ventilated. The cantilevers also created amazing exterior terraces.

— JOSEPH KELLARD