

- [Home](#)
- [DESIGN GUIDE: JULY IN NEW YORK CITY](#)
- [dob2010](#)



[Entries RSS](#) | [Comments RSS](#)

• categories

- [Architecture](#) (3)
- [Art](#) (6)
- [Design](#) (15)
- [New York City](#) (16)
- [Prague](#) (8)
- [World](#) (4)

• [we tweet](#)

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- [DESIGN GUIDE: JULY IN NEW YORK CITY](#)
- [Architect Greg Karn on the W Hoboken, and design as resolution](#)
- [Andy Warhol, More Than Fifteen Minutes](#)

• search

• archives

 ▾

[Architect Greg Karn on the W Hoboken, and design as resolution](#)

Posted on May 11, 2010 by dob2010



[by Katerina Kyselica] W Hoboken, W Downtown and 400 Fifth Avenue.

Three complex, luxurious multi-use buildings located on the shores of the Hudson River prove that Gwathmey Siegel Associate Architects' second generation of architects can facilitate the firm's undergoing transition.

Over 41 years, architects Charles Gwathmey and Robert Siegel managed to build an award winning firm, [Gwathmey Siegel Associates Architects \(GSAA\)](#), nationally recognized for architecture of [complex geometry true to 20th](#) century modernism. When Mr. Gwathmey passed away in 2009, it was one of the 'breakers or makers' in the life of a firm that has evolved around the close relationship of the two partners. Mr. Siegel made an important decision to reposition the firm of 45 architects and go on without its most charismatic spokesperson. "The whole idea is: How do we remake the world's perception of what we are?", asks Mr. Siegel in [the interview for the Wall Street Journal](#).

While Mr. Siegel is busy focusing on what may end up being a new direction for the firm, Greg Karn, one of the nine associate architects who form the core of GSAA, has stepped in and taken on the heavy load of managerial tasks. As a Senior Associate, Greg recently led the design of the two W Hotels and the new luxury hotel 400 Fifth Avenue. The W Hotel in Hoboken opened in 2008, the W New York – Downtown and 400 Fifth Avenue are scheduled to open this year. **Greg not only managed to coordinate internally the four teams responsible for delivering the design of the exterior and interior of the high-end hotels, he also found a balance in communicating with a challenging client. All that on the wings of economic crisis and the loss of one of his mentors.** Talk about heavy lifting. When I met with Greg to discuss his experience with the W Hoboken and the complexities of multi-use building projects, he surprisingly opened up our conversation with a short, warm note on Mr. Gwathmey's legacy.



How are you, Greg?

We are busy. Our office is going through a little bit of a transition right now. You're probably aware that one of our founding partners passed away. It's a big change. He was not only important in term of design in the office but in term of the spirit of the office. I mean, he was a very charismatic guy, a sweet guy. I think we all miss him. It's a matter of getting used to going on without him. We learned from him, and we all have what he had to offer. Now it's a matter of figuring out how it is we go forward because it's a different firm, there is no question about it.

Both Mr. Gwathmey and Mr. Siegel represent, Mr. Gwathmey represented, in architectural circles values true to modernist philosophy. History proves that it's not always easy and comfortable to work with prominent architects. How did it all happen at GSAA?

They [*Mr. Gwathmey and Siegel*] ran the office a little bit like a design studio. They were both academically inclined anyway. They both taught and lectured, Charles more than Bob... "He [*Mr. Gwathmey*] would always be interested in knowing what you thought. When the projects started, although he and Bob would set the design concept, he would always ask you to do something too. **He would treat it like a professor treats a design crit – very much like a mentor. I think it has to do with a kind of confidence.** He never felt like it had to be his design. He was confident enough that he understood what good design was. He could look at what he drew, what you drew or what Bob drew, and he'd be as likely to pick any of the others over his own.

W Hotels is a high-end global chain of boutique hotels. How did GSAA become their architect?

We got involved with W Hoboken, the first 'W' we got involved with, **through a competition that we had done for W Hotels down in Atlanta in Buckhead** a year and half ago. It was an invited competition. Although we didn't win the competition, the W, or Starwood Hotels, were very appreciative of the design that we came up with. They felt bad that we didn't get it because they felt that our design was really strong. So, when Applied Development – the builder of W Hotel Hoboken, began negotiating with Starwood to get them involved in the project to operate the hotel, Starwood said 'listen, in order to do this hotel and do it well you need a name architect, and we really think you should look at Gwathmey Siegel'. The two brothers David and Michael Berry, who run Applied Development, called us. They had a beautiful site, Starwood behind them and W Hotels as a brand, which is a great hotel, very design conscious. We were excited to get involved. That's how it all started.



W Hotel Hoboken / photo and courtesy of Gwathmey Siegel Associate Architects

For the design of W Hotels, the owners typically commission architects for exterior and designers specializing in hospitality for interiors. GSAA designed both the exterior and interiors of the W Hotel in Hoboken. What do you think drove the decision to commission GSAA to design the interiors?

You know, GSAA grew out of residential design. At the onset well before my time, 40 years ago, the houses the firm built were relatively modest but architectural, very sculptural – kind of a fine modernism. Over the years, as our reputation grew, the houses became bigger, complex, with higher level finishes. We developed a form or traditional luxurious product. And that was something that the W particularly appreciated. **Because we had that strong experience in high end residential design, they thought we can bring the advantage of being the architect of the building and blend seamlessly the interior design and the architecture.**

How does residential design compare to hospitality design?

As architects, we are so much more organized and consistent and disciplined about the way we make decisions. Hospitality design is different than residential design. When you're staying in a hotel, you're staying for a night, a week. So, **when you design a hotel, you don't think so much about long term affects of design decisions. You think about short term impact. It was a little unnatural to us because it led us to decisions that we would never do in a private residence.** You know, a fur pillow cover or a velour sofa setting is cute when you see it for a day or week. Over the long term it's too much. We wouldn't do that. We would do something a little more conservative – timeless, classic. So, the W was always pushing us to be a little progressive and

to design for a 'wow factor'. That was a transition, an adjustment for us.



rendering of the W Hoboken lobby lounge - alternative design / courtesy Gwathmey Siegel Associate Architects



view of the W Hoboken lobby lounge area / photo and courtesy Gwathmey Siegel Associate Architects

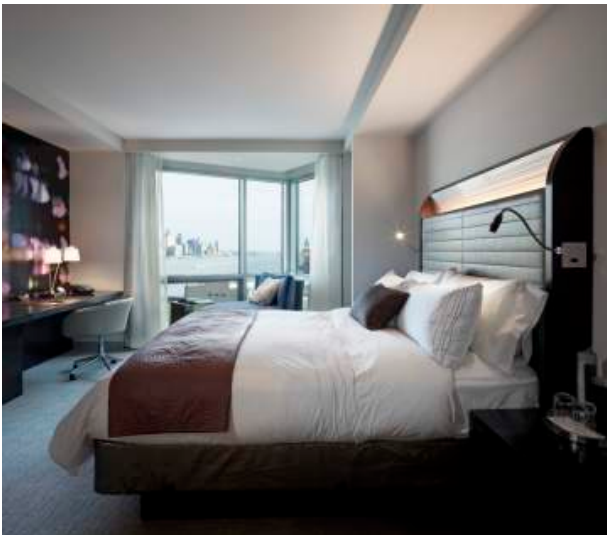
The W Hotels' brand is about luxury expressed through stylish, often flamboyant design. Do you think luxury could be expressed through exteriors? What does an architect bring to a luxury hotel?

I guess I would have to say that the environment of the hotel is what an architect brings. **The way the W looks at luxury, it's not even about design,**

it's about service and anticipation of needs. I think architecture can respond to that. When we started talking about the entrance into the building, they were very interested in talking about the separation of exterior and interior. **As architects designing houses, we don't see a separation. We always see exterior and interior as one. For the W, there was a difference between the outside and inside of the building.** We spent a long time talking and thinking about the threshold, as the entry to the building. It became not only a design element but a metaphor of crossing over, of entering into the womb of the W. I think from their perspective, the luxury really starts at the door.



entrance into W Hoboken - the threshold separating exterior from interior / photo and courtesy of Gwathmey Siegel Associate Architects



view of one of the guest rooms with bay window / photo and courtesy of Gwathmey Siegel Associate Architects

What was the most challenging thing about the design of W Hoboken?

It was very challenging. In addition to designing the exterior and interior, W Hoboken is a multi-use building. It's almost like you design six different design projects in one. The way we did it, we combined teams of four associates, and we only have nine. But it was rewarding at the same time.

A multi-use building is a rich building type. When you combine residences with a full service hotel, it gets complicated. At the same time, there are lots of great opportunities for architects – a full service restaurant, meeting rooms, spa, lounge, and bar. It was really good for us. It also led to another project at 400 Fifth Avenue, which is bigger than either of these two. It's going to be a five star hotel, also with condominiums on the top.

What did you personally learn on these projects?

What I learned is to see the project from the owner and operator point of view. **We all go to school and we think that design is just whatever we think it wants to be. We tend to lose sight of the fact that design is about the resolution of the program statement which involves and entails all the needs and desires and aspirations of the owner and the site.** You realize that you have to take into account the owner's participation and needs as part of the program statement. It's not just about square footage. It's much more than that. For me, that was the biggest thing I learned on these projects. And I think it's helped me. I'm working on a couple of private apartments now. I see them a little bit differently now. I think much more about the owner, much more about their perspective. And it doesn't limit you design-wise. It just means that you approach the project with a little different perspective.

Thank you for your time, Greg, and good luck with your projects.

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After speaking with Greg, one thing seems clear to me: Mr. Gwathmey and Mr. Siegel managed to raise a team of young architects who learned from their mentorship. Judging from the average experience of associates at GSAA ranging from 22 to 24 years, they seem more than capable of carrying on the tradition and culture of the founders. It is always difficult for any successful firm founded by strong, iconic personalities to survive the unfortunate passing of one of the founders. But if any firm is poised to do so it is GSAA, as the transmission of the values and principles of the founders will remain alive and indeed grow with the second generation of architects and designers now at the helm. I for one look forward to seeing how this firm evolves in the years ahead, and even more so look forward to seeing the great designs they keep turning out along the way.

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