

// By Naomi Goldberg

Did you know that when you play with LEGO and Magnatiles, envisioning and planning what to build, you're practicing the skills of an architect? That's where the fun begins. Architects use those skills to turn ideas — such as how someone wants their house to look — into reality.

Some architects build houses, while others build office buildings or skyscrapers, bridges or runways.

Today, we're meeting with a modern-day architect who specializes in making the world more accessible for people with disabilities. Marcy Rhoads is the owner of Abadi Accessibility, an architecture firm in Dallas, Texas.

The

Art of

Architecture

Hi, Marcy. How does what you do make the world a better place for people with disabilities?

I make sure that buildings and stores are accessible to people with handicaps.

I review plans of properties to make sure that they are properly designed so people with various disabilities can enter and function in them. I also sometimes get a sprinkling of other types of jobs, such as designing homes for people who are disabled or have a disabled child.

Once a week, I visit sites to do inspections. I walk around with a tape measure and check that the building meets the legal requirements. I look at things such as the entrances to a building and making sure there is a ramp for wheelchairs, if necessary, and I measure the height of bathroom sinks.

Bigger facilities, such as hospitals, can take me four hours to inspect, and writing up a report usually takes another four hours. I can inspect a small store in just 10 minutes.

Can you give us some examples of how your work helps people with disabilities?

According to law, any building that's not a residence must be accessible to people with disabilities. If someone with disabilities wants to shop in a store or go to a hotel, they have to be able to get in, they have to be able to use the facilities. If they use a wheelchair, there needs to be an entrance without stairs. If there's an elevator, it should have braille buttons so a blind person can use it.

Every month, I send out a newsletter on this topic, sharing information that companies can use, like how to design an accessible playground, or bathroom, or baby-changing station.

I've been sending out these newsletters for several years, and each time I send one out, I get new customers.

What are some of the things you like most about your job?

Some of what I do can get tedious, but there's a purpose to the repetition and the dryness. At the end of the day, I'm making things easier for a person with a disability. I don't see the user — I don't see the person in a wheelchair in the finished building, but I know that they benefit.

I also really enjoy some of the experiences I've had. A publisher approached me and asked me to write a book about accessibility laws. Writing the book was an interesting experience, and it helped establish me as an expert in this field.

I've also served as an expert witness in court cases. In one case, someone with disabilities sued because they were unable to enter a building. I was hired by his lawyer to write a report about the accessibility violations.

How did you build a successful business?

I feel that success depends on how much you put into things. You need patience, and you need to believe in your vision. In my case, I had no "Plan B" — no plan of what I would do if I failed. I'm stubborn, and I knew that I was going to be successful as an architect.

Despite this, once I became an architect, it took me eight months to find a job! I was sitting there, twiddling my thumbs, but I always knew this was what I was going to do.

Thirteen years ago, when I started my own architecture firm, I put a lot of effort into networking. I was very diligent about writing newsletters, and I scheduled speaking arrangements. These efforts helped me build a client base.

I also try to focus on what the client wants. Some architects want to design projects their own way; I always try to listen to clients.

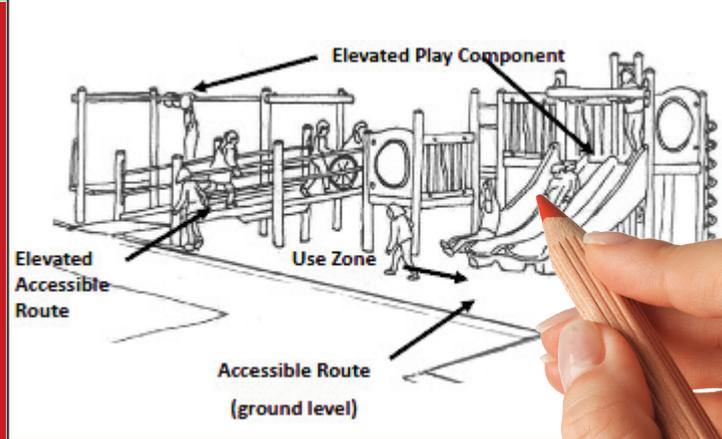
I'm also able to do a lot because I'm good at juggling. I compartmentalize, which helps me go back and forth between things. I often do some work, then some *chessed*. I also tend to be pretty organized — I make lists, and set deadlines for myself.

Of course, Hashem is the One responsible for my success. I did my part and put in the work, but Hashem did the rest.

Do you work alone?

Baruch Hashem, we have a lot of business and I've needed to hire another inspector and two architects. When I first started working, I had 25 projects a year; now, I have a minimum of 25 projects a month! Since I also travel to inspect properties, it's become important that I delegate some of my work.

I like being a manager, but it takes time to learn how to work with different personalities.



Drawing of a playground that is accessible for children with disabilities

What training did you need to become an architect?

I completed a five-year college program to become an architect.

Classes like geometry and trigonometry were an important part of the course. Other classes, like physics and calculus, are less important. Architects need to know enough about these topics to communicate with engineers, but that's it.

In school, we had to design crazy scenarios. I had to design a house for a beekeeper and an aviary. For one project, I designed an entire building shaped like the letter *aleph*.

We also had to listen to music and draw what we heard. These assignments encouraged us to be creative, since architects are really artists.

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The Art of Architecture

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Did you always want to be an architect?

I knew I wanted to be an architect since I was a kid. This was unusual, as no one in my immediate family worked as an architect. I did have some extended family members who worked in related fields, so maybe that inspired me.

As a kid, I was artistic. I liked to draw and paint with watercolors.

What advice would you give kids who are interested in architecture?

Learn how to look at your environment and put it on paper. Whatever you see, draw it.

An architect is an artist.

Take art classes — drawing, painting. Photography is good, too, because it will help you become more aware of your environment. Making mosaics using tiles and concrete is also a good project.

Visual communication is like a muscle. The more you work it, the stronger your skills will be.

Can you recommend some architecture projects for kids?

Architects like to fix the world, and there are a lot of ways kids can work together to help.

Kids can help build things, such as a ramp for someone who uses a wheelchair. They can repair things at home — broken handrails and other things that need to be fixed.

The idea is to find something in your environment that's a problem, and find a solution to fix it. You can organize your house so it's safer for a younger sibling, or organize the playroom so it's easier to find toys.

Landscape architects design things outdoors. Kids can plant flowers to make their yard look nicer. ■

Thanks! Any other ideas?

There's a competition called Canstruction, where people build something out of cans. This is a great creative experience. To start with, you need to decide what to build and make sure you have enough cans of the right size and color.

One year, I supervised a "CANnukah Challenge." We collected cans of food and kids at a local Jewish school built a *menorah* and a frying pan out of cans.

We used over 700 cans, and then all the cans were donated to a local *tzedakah*.

It was a great project idea for kids to work on together, and a nice way to contribute to the community, which is important.

INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT CANSTRUCTION:

Canstruction is an international competition where architects, engineers and students design and build giant structures made entirely from full cans of food. The food is later donated to charity.

With over 170 cities and 30,000 volunteers participating in canstruction competitions, canstruction is one of the largest supporters of food drives in the world.

Canstruction has helped donate over 40 million pounds of food for charity.

The largest canstruction project to date contained 308,448 cans of food.

CANnukah menorah



CANnukah frying pan



Canstruction boot

