



### **ROB BUDETTI OF AO: THE FUTURE OF TRAVEL IN THE POST COVID WORLD**

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*As part of my series about "developments in the travel industry over the next five years", I had the pleasure of interviewing Rob Budetti of AO.*

*After nearly three decades in the architecture and design industry, Rob Budetti enjoys and is liberated by the creativity that can be found in the chaos... the busy, hectic work that comes while managing complex, large-scale projects around the United States and internationally. In*

*addition to overseeing the hospitality design projects for AO, a full-service architecture and planning services firm with a national presence, Budetti is responsible for growing and developing AO's dynamic teams of architects and consultants across the retail, mixed-use, commercial, office and other studios. As an avid surfer himself, Budetti is currently working on four different surf-anchored resorts, all of which are miles from the ocean, but feature groundbreaking wave technology and barefoot luxury vibes to deliver an authentic surfing experience for beginners and experts alike.*

**Thank you so much for joining us! Can you tell us a story about what brought you to this specific career path?**

I have always had a passion for art and a natural aptitude for math, so the intersection of the two led me into architecture. I didn't begin my studies until college, so I had plenty of catching up to do but have found it to be such a rewarding career choice. A funny story is that I was actually waitlisted to attend Cal Poly Pomona for architecture and had already enrolled in the civil engineering program at the University of California, Irvine. Just a few weeks before school started, I was accepted into the architectural program, so I changed course and completed my architectural degree at Cal Poly Pomona.

**Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you started your career?**

What I've found most interesting is the personal relationships that I have formed with so many of my clients. When I started in my career, I assumed that I would have very separate business and personal relationships, but as years have gone by, I can say that some of my best friends started out as clients. These friendships have enriched my whole career and fueled the love I have for my job. And these relationships have also made their way to my entire family. One of my clients invited my family to go out to the desert to ride and camp with them, and my entire family was hooked. In subsequent years our families shared many great experiences together and our kids remain friends to this day. That's something special that travel can provide — a place to get away with friends and family for respite and relief from some of the difficulties in life.

**Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting?  
Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?**

When I first started working nationally, I had a project in Phoenix, Arizona, where I forgot to submit to planning and only submitted to the building department. I then promptly received a note from the city that I would have to first go through planning which could delay the project up to four months — not ideal. Making that call to share the news with my client was one of the toughest calls I had to make at that time in my career. Although my client was not happy with the news, he appreciated that I gave him the straight story and did not try to pass the blame off on someone else.

In the end I was able to reduce the delay to less than a month by working with the city very closely, explaining the situation and making them part of the solution. The main takeaway from this event is that everyone will make mistakes, but it is how they take responsibility for and then fix them that matters.

**None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are?  
Can you share a story?**

I have been fortunate to have been mentored by many great architects and leaders throughout my career. My first job out of college was with an architect named John Maple. Because of the small office, he involved me in every aspect of a project from the very first day and was always there to guide me behind the scenes. Later, when I joined AO in 2009, I worked with Jack Selman, the founding partner, who taught me how to run a successful architectural practice, which I will carry with me for the rest of my career. When I first started at AO, I had just landed a very large project, and I was super excited, so I went in to share the news with Jack. His first comment was, “So now you can lose a lot of money on that big job,” (which made me laugh) and then he proceeded to say, “You can plan your work, but can you work your plan?” That’s always stuck with me. He continues to be a great mentor to not only me, but everyone at AO.

**Can you share with our readers about the innovations that you are bringing to the travel and hospitality industries?**

One of the core beliefs I have when it comes to hospitality design is the need for flexibility and imparting a feeling of safety upon guests, regardless of where they are. Smart, flexible design solutions that will evolve as behaviors change are vital, especially with all we learned during the pandemic. On that note, operational and functional changes due to COVID-19 will continue to affect architectural planning of hotel design. We continue to focus more on the guest experience and creating memories and genuine experiences that allow for authentic connectivity. We're always trying to incorporate unique brand experiences into each property to create an experiential stay for travelers.

Another innovation we are excited by is the development of wave technology, which is leading the way for surf-anchored resorts to be developed in unexpected areas. In Palm Desert, California, DSRT Surf is going to cater to surfers at all levels with a 5.5. acre wave pool surrounded by hotel rooms, villas, a spa, fitness center, bars and retail. We are incorporating a "barefoot luxury" vibe drawing inspiration from Baja surf culture and the area's mid-century modern architecture to deliver an experience that upscale, but also authentic, even though we are miles from the ocean.

**Which "pain point" are you trying to address by introducing this innovation and how do you envision that this might disrupt the status quo?**

On the design/construction front, rising construction costs (labor and materials) is a continuing "pain point" that threatens both new builds and renovations. While architects can't change macro-economic forces, AO leads in modular design approaches, which tactically mitigate these external conditions. By instilling a modular mentality at a project's on-set, the opportunities to build 80% of a building in more favorable labor markets and save overall construction time offer huge advantages. In addition, early product sourcing, especially furniture, fixtures and equipment (FF&E), help to minimize cost increases. Selecting materials/furnishings that are less supply-chain dependent help ensure timely delivery and avoid project delays. The key is a fully committed owner-architect-interior designer team working at project inception to evaluate and capture these project advantages.

**As you know, COVID19 changed the world as we know it. Can you share a few examples of how travel and hospitality companies will be adjusting over the next five years to the new ways that consumers will prefer to travel?**

COVID-19 has created opportunities for innovation and a focus on health and wellness that have led to design innovations. The pandemic's ramifications impact our psyche and desire to feel safe. Hospitality consumers, both leisure and business, will continue to look for these elements in their travel, which are expressed primarily in operations, and some in facilities. Operationally, hoteliers are addressing this with better cleaning/sanitizing of guest rooms as well as public spaces, offering options to personally "sanitize," such as hand sanitizer stations, and more touchless access functionality with cell phones and voice actualization.

At the heart of travel, people will seek to engage with one another, albeit with an increased sense of safety. Therefore, attention to opening up public spaces to the outdoors, as well as designing higher volume spaces, provide a sense of "cleaner fresher air." Our firm AO leads this area by tasking related product communities to evolve commercial grade/hospitality designed products. Interior finishes will look to new generation antibacterial wall coverings and FF&E materials, without sacrificing comfort and design.

**You are a "travel insider", how would you describe your "perfect vacation experience?"**

For me, it's less about the destination and more about the experience. The ability to choose whether to relax or to engage in an activity, with both scenarios being equally amazing, is paramount. As I'm a very active person, I'm usually not very good at sitting around, but since every minute of my working life is scheduled, I try to let vacations be flexible and not defined by a specific schedule. Zero stress and living in the moment I'd say are the keys to a great vacation!

**Travel is not always about escaping, but about connecting. Have you made efforts to cultivate a more wellness driven experience?**

Yes, I agree wellness is about connecting, both with all the experience has to offer and with other guests in a safe manner. Personally, I've begun to seek healthier food options from quick and

specialty dining, knowing this enhances my wellness experience. A focus on fitness centers that can open to the exterior have been more attractive for guests, and the unique characteristics and activities of a hotel site play a factor into wellness. Indoor/outdoor design has taken a more important role as well to make people feel comfortable getting together in exterior spaces with all the services conveniently offered.

**Based on your experience and success, what are the five most important things one should know in order to create a travel experience that keeps bringing people back for more? Please share a story or an example for each.**

1. Mood equals margins: create evocative spaces where people gravitate and encourage human interaction; that's where people will go
2. Comfort in design: especially important in hospitality and interior guestrooms
3. Varied spaces according to program
4. Great food options
5. Great lighting

**Can you share with our readers how you have used your success to bring goodness to the world?**

During the course of my career, the vitality of our business has been of utmost importance to me. My partners and I have made sure to create a great work environment for our employees and have been diligent in growing the business to provide stability of employment. Today, we are at a place where I am able to focus some of my attention outside the firm. My family recently moved back to the San Diego area where I grew up and have started to engage with Encinitas 4 Equality (E4E), an organization that aims to create an equitable and safe community for all. Additionally, we hope to bring a few new programs to E4E, especially focused on sharing the surfing experience, which is a huge passion of mine.

**You are a person of great influence. If you could start a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be?**

I believe the “unhoused” epidemic is something that should be on everyone’s mind, and we should come together as a nation to develop a solution. As human beings we should all work toward helping people in need. Basic human necessities like a place to live, sleep, eat and bathe is a minimum necessity for everyone. We need to figure out how to remove the red tape and bureaucracy around creating safe places to live that continually drive the cost of these projects to a point they are no longer are feasible or affordable.

**How can our readers follow you on social media?**

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/architects-orange/>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/robertbudetti/>

**This was very inspiring. Thank you so much for joining us!**