

Women You Should Know: Bobbi Hepper Olson, Hepper Olson Architects

Written by: **Brady Drake** Last updated: May 10, 2024

Bobbi Hepper Olson knew she wanted to be an architect. Her passion for the profession started in fifth grade before she even knew what being an architect entailed.

“Architecture is problem-solving,” Olson said. “Working to create a building that’s safe, meets the needs of the client, and functions really well. I was always interested in buildings and their environment.”

Against the backdrop of the Red River Valley’s rural architectural history, Olson realized that the right built environment didn’t always mean new construction.

Over the last two decades, she has built a career that marries modern architectural practices with historic preservation to help revitalize rural communities in our region.

Good bones

The Dakotas are dotted with small, rural communities. A church or two, an old brick school, some houses, and that iconic Main Street that lives in our cultural memories. Growing up in one of these towns, Olson learned to appreciate the important part buildings played in her community. Architecture created a space for people to come together. When neighbors might be miles away from each other, churches and other buildings offered community and connection.

Looking back, the buildings that sparked her imagination weren’t flashy or ornate. Their usability gave them substance, though. They had good bones.

“I love to find new life in these little towns,” she said. “I was fortunate to be involved with the restoration of storefronts along Third Street in Grand Forks after the flood of 1997. I researched what some of those buildings looked like over the years and tried to take them back to a certain era.” Peeling back the façade and layers of paint like the pages in a book, was a fascinating and rewarding process. Olson decided these were the spaces she wanted to help create.

Building community

As her career progressed, Olson also realized the need to listen to herself and build an environment that she could thrive in. She’d joined a local architecture firm after college. What started as a small

team, grew over the years. Eventually, Olson found she wasn't able to oversee the whole project from start to finish, which was one of her greatest joys as an architect. She also had a young family, and it was important to be present as much as possible in her role as mother and wife. In order to design a practice that fit her professional and personal needs, Olson went out on her own as Hepper Olson Architects.

Housed in a renovated 1890s stone bank in Buxton, ND, the firm represents a marriage of history and innovation, the modern revitalization of our rural communities. The team's main focus is working with residents of small towns in North Dakota and Minnesota both for new construction and renovation.

"All across the Midwest, people are leaving the smaller rural communities," she said. "They're gravitating toward the bigger cities like Fargo and Grand Forks. We're losing some of that great craftsmanship. I always get excited if a small community calls me. They're trying to figure out what they can do with an old building they're afraid is going to be torn down. I really enjoy being part of those projects."

Beyond preservation

Pop culture views of architecture might be all drawing and math, but Olson argues that communication and the ability to synthesize information are far more important when creating usable spaces.

"You have to learn to listen," she said. "You have to ask a lot of questions. You have to be very curious. With modern technology, you can envision a lot of things without a piece of paper and pencil. Architects are able to put more time and effort into creating greater buildings and a better-built environment. Now we can design and illustrate a 3D building."

But while a computer can help bring a design to life, the architect is the one to take all the pieces into consideration and presents the ideal built environment. Something they've always done.

"Another interesting thing about examining old buildings is you also get to see where things fail, where they deteriorate," she said. "We learn the most from our mistakes. I always tell people that if you haven't made a mistake then you probably haven't learned much. At the end of the day, don't be afraid to take the opportunity in front of you."

Learning from the past, embracing the present, and looking toward the future, Olson sees great potential for the buildings, communities, and people of North Dakota.

Learn more about her most recent 3D the 130-year-old Grue Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church building at historicgruechurch.org. Better yet, stop by the fourth Sunday in June for fresh lefse, live music, and a tour of the historic grounds during the **4th Annual Lefse and Lemonade event**.



North Dakota architect looks to create timeless spaces

By Arlene Windham | Photo provided by Ladyboss Lifestyle

Bobbi Hepper Olson knew she wanted to be an architect. Her passion for the profession is rooted in high-grade timber. She even knew what being an architect entailed.

"Architecture is problem-solving," Olson said. "Wanting to create a building North Dakota, means the needs of the client, and functions really well. I was always interested in building, and that environment."

Against the backdrop of the West Coast Valley, a lot of architectural history, Olson realized that the right trade environment didn't always mean new construction.

Over the last two decades, she has built a career that focuses on modern architectural practices with historic preservation to help establish local communities in our region.

Good bones
The cabins are dotted with small, rural communities. A church or two, an art store, a school, some houses, and that iconic Alan Crest that lives in our cultural memories. Coming up in one of these towns, Olson wanted to approach the important part of building: helping in her community. Architects created a space for the people to come together. When neighbors might be missing each other, churches, and other building-oriented community and connection.

Looking back, the buildings that sparked her imagination weren't built of granite. Their stability gave them substance, though. They had good bones.

"How to find new life in these little towns," she said. "It was fortunate to be involved with the restoration of government buildings. That's where I can take care of the needs of the community and the needs of the individual who come of those

buildings looked like over the years and tried to take them back to a certain era." Finding that the right grade and level of pain like the pages in a book, was a challenging and rewarding process. Olson decided these were the spaces she wanted to help create.

Building community

As her career progressed, Olson also realized the need to build a network and build an environment that she could thrive in. She joined a local architecture firm and college. What started as a small team, grew over the years. Eventually, Olson found a job that allowed her to see the whole project from start to finish, which was one of her greatest joys as an architect.

She also had a young family, and it was important to her to be as much as possible in her role as mother and wife. Olson is grateful for the flexibility in her professional and personal needs. Olson went out on her own as Hepper Olson Architects.

Headed in a renewed direction, Olson took on a new role in a new town. In a town of 100 people, she represents a change of history and innovation, the modern revitalization of our rural communities. The newly built houses, working with residents of small towns in her of Dakota and Minnesota both for new construction and renovation.

"In architecture, people are leaving the smaller rural communities," she said. "They're generally toward the bigger cities like Fargo and Grand Forks. When looking some of our great craftsmanship, I always get excited if a small community calls on. They're trying to figure out what they can do with an old building they already, trying to be seen down. I really enjoy being part of those projects."

Beyond preservation

Any culture revival or architecture might be all about the past, but Olson argues that construction and the ability to synthesize information are far more important when creating usable spaces.

"You have to learn to listen," she said. "You have to ask a lot of questions. You have to be very curious. With modern technology, you can envision a lot of things without a pen or paper and pencil. Architects are able to put more time and effort into creating greater buildings and a better built environment. How we can design and illustrate a 3D building."

But while a computer can help bring a design to life, the architect is the one to take all the pieces into consideration. Olson practices the best built environments. Something they've always done.

"Another interesting thing about learning and building is you also get to see where things fail, where they don't work," she said. "The more the more we see our mistakes. I always tell people that if you haven't made a mistake then you probably haven't been successful. At the end of the day, start to build to take the opportunity in front of you."

Learning from the past, embracing the present, and looking toward the future, Olson sees great potential for the building, communities, and people of North Dakota.

Learn more about her most recent 20-year-old one-Herzog and Paulsen Evangelical Lutheran Church building at [buildingpractice.org](#). Join us on May 14th at the South Dakota State Fair for the North Dakota Building the South Dakota Lutheran and Limestone event.

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