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Point Person: Meet the architect for Saints ballpark

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By Nancy Crotti

Tags: [AECOM](#), [HGA Architects and Engineers](#), [James Corner Field Operations](#), [James/Snow Architects](#), [Julie Snow Architects](#), [Julie Vandenberg Snow](#), [Louis Kahn](#), [Midway Stadium](#), [Mike Veeck](#), [Museum of Russian Art](#), [Phillips Plastics Corp.](#), [Robert Cervenka](#), [Ryan Cos. US Inc.](#), [Saints ballpark](#), [St. Paul Saints](#), [Vincent James](#)

Editor's note: "Point Person" is a new monthly feature about people who are making news as a result of their involvement in high-profile projects of interest to Finance & Commerce readers.



Julie Snow, who unveiled the design for the St. Paul Saints ballpark in December, has been involved in designing the 7,000-seat stadium for seven years, long before it came to the public's attention. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

Architect Julie VandenBerg Snow has designed homes and private office buildings, restaurants and federal customs stations.

She has also put her stamp on such divergent spaces as the [Museum of Russian Art](#) in Minneapolis and the new St. Paul Saints [ballpark](#).

The winner of numerous awards for her restrained and minimalist designs, Snow elicited this comment in 2011 from an American Academy of Arts and Letters awards jury: "She and her studio make the marvelous happen. Elegance balanced by pragmatism — she is a ballerina who can dance in work boots."

The founding principal of Minneapolis-based [Julie Snow Architects](#) likes to work collaboratively. It's a philosophy she adopted as a young woman studying architecture at the University of Michigan in the early 1970s.

"You're going to be hanging out with the guys and they're your colleagues," said the Grand Rapids, Mich., native. "The real challenge is whether or not there are really great talents in your studio."

"If you've got really talented, energetic people, I don't think who you are or where you came from (matters). You're getting pushed by other people with ideas. To me that was more interesting than gender issues."

Snow has spent her career in Minneapolis, working at [HGA Architects and Engineers](#) from 1974 through 1987, when she left to form James/Snow

Architects with architect Vincent James. In 1995, she formed her current firm, which also provides interior design services, custom furnishings and furniture specifications. Eighteen people work for the firm.



Julie Snow now employs 18 people in the namesake architecture firm she started in 1995. The firm's offices are in the Rand Tower, 527 Marquette Ave. in Minneapolis. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

Snow doesn't like to talk much about the past. She tells no grand stories about mentors or about how she developed her design aesthetic. She admired the monumental style of the late Philadelphia architect Louis Kahn, and appreciated working with Robert Cervenka, founder of Phillips Plastics Corp. in western Wisconsin, while she was at James/Snow.

Cervenka, an engineer, insisted that the three buildings Snow designed for his molded plastics company provide spaces that inspired teamwork. By using architecture as a catalyst for corporate change, Cervenka was way ahead of his time, according to Snow.

"It was really interesting and it was influential in developing a particular idea in how a building would work on both a pragmatic and an aspirational scale," she said.

Snow, who also teaches architecture at the college level, draws inspiration from the sites of her projects. They make her think about the context in which the buildings will stand and how they will operate.

Take the Saints ballpark, under construction at Fifth and Broadway streets in St. Paul's Lowertown neighborhood. Snow has been involved in designing the 7,000-seat stadium for seven years, long before it came to the public's attention.

While Minneapolis-based [Ryan Cos. US Inc.](#) is the architect of record and [AECOM](#) the ballpark architect, Snow's firm designed the areas that will most affect fans and the surrounding community.

Snow spent a lot of time at the Saints' funky home field, Midway Stadium, and she hung around the team's offices to get a feeling for how a new ballpark should suit the fans.

The team owners' main concern was the park's function. They had no preconceptions about how it should look, but part owner Mike Veeck said he didn't want another [Camden Yards](#), the Baltimore Orioles' old-fashioned stadium.

"She came to a lot of games and she got a real feel for what we're about and came back with this wonderful open-air (design) where the [Farmers' Market](#) is the star, where the skyline is the star, where the ([Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary](#)) is the star, and that's how it should be," Veeck said. "I believe that to my core, because the fans will determine once again the feel, the vibrancy, like any good ballpark."

Known for his zany promotions, Veeck also appreciates Snow's sense of humor. He has insisted on using Minnesota-sourced building materials for the park. "The other day she said there might be a little piece of bamboo," he said.

Satisfying the community wasn't the ballpark's only design challenge. Snow called it a quirky, tight site restricted by its proximity to the downtown St. Paul Airport, the Lafayette Bridge reconstruction project, a large sanitary main, the adjacent light rail operations and maintenance facility, and the Lowertown Historic District.

"It's a public project," said Snow, who wasn't expecting negative [feedback](#) about the ballpark not looking like its Lowertown neighbors, but doesn't mind it. "Every public project has vocal people around it."

Snow also enjoyed working on the U.S. Land Port of Entry buildings in [Warroad](#), Minn., and Van Buren, Maine, in spite of others' reactions.

"When we tell people that we're doing these federal projects they kind of look at us like, 'Things must be tough. Oh, you poor thing,' " she said.

That's hardly the case, said Snow, who belongs to a national peer group of architects that recommend one of their own to design these buildings to last 100 years.

"You really have to be at the top of your game to play in that sphere," Snow said. "It has to be collaborative. You have to demand the best from your engineers and your other colleagues and you get it."

The studio's workload has "just exploded" with projects that had been delayed, Snow said. She looks forward to working on more public projects,

such as the one to revitalize Nicollet Mall. Snow's firm is one of the four local companies that make up the team headed by New York City-based landscape architecture firm James Corner Field Operations, which the city of Minneapolis [selected](#) for the job.

"To me, there's something incredibly interesting about this expanding scope of architecture and design," she said.

"I think we're in an amazing time in Minnesota where we're seeing more and more public projects built."

Julie Vandenberg Snow

Title: Founding principal, Julie Snow Architects, Minneapolis

Hometown: Grand Rapids, Mich.

Education: Bachelor's degree in architecture, 1974, University of Michigan

Family: Husband, Jack; children, Ann, Kate and David

Spare time: Spending time with family



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