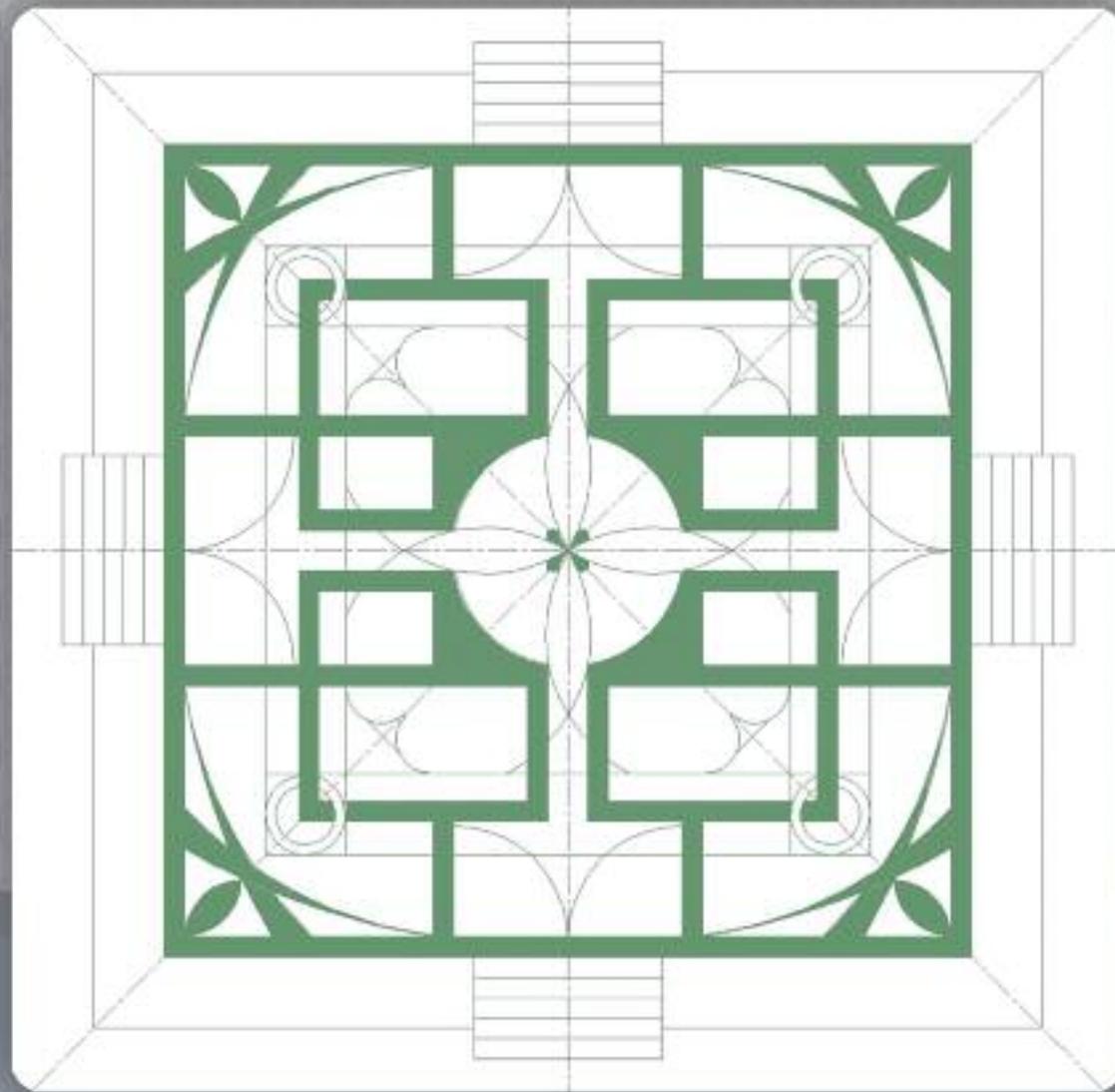


# Symmetry First Architects



**A Decade of Commitment  
to Client and Community**

# SYMMETRY FIRST ARCHITECTS

It stands to reason that the most successful people, regardless of profession, are those who have a passion for what they do. Yet if one were to ask any random successful architect what is the ultimate goal of their business, it is safe to say profit would be the unanimous answer. After all, businesses would not be in business for long if they did not chase the almighty dollar. When Kate McCullough, owner and principal of Symmetry First Architects was asked that exact question, the answer was as refreshing as it was astonishing. The focus of Symmetry First is not profit, but rather client satisfaction. "We've learned that 'word-of-mouth' is about all the marketing plan we need to have, so focusing on client satisfaction is the best path to long-term profitability. Most of our clients are repeat clients, and those who come to us for the first time, come on the recommendation of someone we've worked

with ...another client, a contractor, one of our engineers..." For Kate and her team, the passion runs deep to make each project a positive and successful experience for every client, from large institutional clients to small-business owners and community-based groups. At Symmetry First Architects, it is goal number one to put the client's best interest as paramount in everything that they do from start to finish.

The history of Symmetry First started after Kate graduated college and was hired by a small Baltimore firm, John Brunnett Architect, P.A. – the perfect job for her internship phase – with a great mentor who gave her exposure to all tasks required to be a well-rounded architect. Becoming licensed in the early 1990's, Kate worked as an 'independent contractor' for several different architectural firms for about 10 years. In 2002, she was consulting for GMA&D, Inc. when the principal, Greg Mitchell, became ill and passed away. His family asked Kate to step in and run the firm, and she brought in a partner and negotiated purchase of the

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## FLORENCE BAIN SENIOR CENTER , Columbia, MD

Symmetry First designed a comprehensive interior and building envelope renovation, and an addition, for the Center. Work was completed in 2005. Final construction costs came to \$52/square foot.



**Main Lounge Before**



**Main Lounge After**

# SYMMETRY FIRST ARCHITECTS

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business assets. Symmetry First Architects was launched in July 2003. Jeanne Green, who Kate affectionately refers to as her “chief of staff”, came along from GMA&D, and

has been an integral part of the firm as a one-woman accounting/marketing/human resources department. Partner Karen Pitsley left the firm in 2008 to start a residential architecture practice -

Transforming Architecture.

Since its inception, Symmetry First has been providing commercial architectural design and project management services throughout Maryland.

Their clients are primarily in the public sector (Howard, Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties, as well as the State of Maryland) but they also serve local small business

owners and non-profit groups. Project types include any low-rise commercial building type such as offices, warehouses, retail, schools, fire stations, etc., ranging up to 5

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Alley Before



Alley After

## ANNAPOLIS/ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY CONFERENCE AND VISITOR'S BUREAU, Annapolis, MD

In partnership with T. Averill Architects, Symmetry First designed the expansion of the Visitors Center, completed in 2008 by Tuckman Barbee Construction Co., Inc. The center faces West Street, but many visitors arrive via shuttle buses and the Gotts Court Garage at the rear of the Center on Northwest Street. The Center renovation included a major refurbishment of the alley between West and Northwest, which led to a wonderful re-making of the rear parking lot in 2010 by the O'Doherty Group. Within its recently evolved context, the Visitor's Center serves as a beacon for tourism and visitor information.



Façade facing Northwest Street and Gotts Court Parking Garage

# SYMMETRY FIRST ARCHITECTS

posals and gotten 178 jobs, with each one deepening their understanding of client service and construction realities.

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or 6 million dollars in construction costs. About 75% of their projects are renovations to existing buildings and 25% are new construction. Since 2003, Symmetry First has sent out 329 pro-

There are several reasons Symmetry First Architects has been a leader in client satisfaction for almost a decade. Perhaps the most important is Kate's knowledge of the construction process. Earlier in her career, she had several

*Continued on page B18*

## GLENWOOD FIRE STATION, Glenwood, MD

Symmetry First designed a new fire and rescue station situated on a scenic roadway in rural Glenwood, currently being built by Mullan Construction, Inc.. The building layout is arranged for maximum speed of departure, but also for occasional moments of peaceful enjoyment.



Rendering



Under Construction



View From Dining Room



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# SYMMETRY FIRST ARCHITECTS

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opportunities to work on construction sites for extended periods of time. She gained a critical understanding of materials, construction processes, how the subcontractors interact with each other and the general contractor, as well as scheduling and lead time. Jeanne explains why this is so important, “This really improved Kate’s ability to design as well as the overall constructability of a project. She is very hands on, very accessible to the client, and her experience translates to every project in a very positive way.” As an architect, Kate understands how her real world experience on construction sites has been so beneficial, “Architects are often viewed as idealistic and sometimes that is translated as unrealistic and removed from the constraints of budgets and schedules. We believe that the client, architect and contractor are one team, and that means we want to be in tune with what

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## **CARROLL BALDWIN MEMORIAL HALL, Savage MD**

Savage residents volunteered hundreds of hours to restore the interior of the historic community meeting hall – Symmetry First designed the ongoing renovation of the lower level offices, which includes installation of air-conditioning for the community hall, thereby expanding it to a year-round event venue. Construction by Albrecht Construction, Inc., will be completed in September (but the air-conditioning is up and running now!)



**Exterior**



**Community Meeting Hall**

# SYMMETRY FIRST ARCHITECTS

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the client's needs are, what the contractor's needs are, and what

they expect from us. Communication is key, and our clients will always have that with Symmetry First."

The inevitable outcome is strong relationships formed from a commitment to the project right from the beginning. "Kate has been able to build

strong relationships and gain people's trust by having a passion for their project and being able to tell them what they need to hear versus what they want to hear," explains Jeanne. Many of these relationships have been formed in the public sector. "I like public

work because I see the challenge of designing in a very cost-effective and efficient manner. We understand that people take pride in their community, and we want to design so that people are pleased with the way their tax dollars have been spent. It is a real chal-

lenge to design economically, and still deliver a project that gives the gift of going beyond functional needs into the realm of emotion" states Kate.

In their private sector work, listening to the client is a major first step. "We listen carefully, we question

thoroughly and then we educate our clients on the design/ construction process and what is realistic for them in terms of time and budget," says Kate. "To make sure they are aware of the financial needs of the project, we do an

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## **WATERLOO SHELL STATION, CAR WASH AND CARRY-OUT, Elkridge, MD**

Symmetry First designed a comprehensive interior and exterior renovation, and additions for a carwash and a carry-out restaurant, at the junction of Route 1 and 175 in Elkridge. Construction by Kindred Builders, Inc., was completed in 2008.



**View From Route 1**

# SYMMETRY FIRST ARCHITECTS

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itemized estimate of construction cost. This saves the client the cost of hiring an estimator and some of the suspense of waiting for bids to come in.”

Describing Symmetry First’s philosophy towards its work and how they approach each project/client, Kate was certain in her answer. “We work on projects that must function from a logistical and aesthetic standpoint (GOOD), they must be completed yesterday (FAST), and they must come in within budget (CHEAP.) The budgets and time schedules for many projects require us to design with standard, rather than custom, products and materials. Ask any architect who has specified a custom, or even a ‘special’ brick shape, what the impact of that can be on cost and schedule, and you’ll get a sense of bounds within which we are trying to produce GOOD design. Common sense says you can get two of the three. We shoot for

three out of three, and apparently we’re going to die trying. Our strength is our dedication to getting the project right – right in terms of functionality and cost for the client, right in terms of constructability for the contractor, and right in terms of its contribution to the built environment.”

With such high standards imposed on themselves, it becomes clear what makes Symmetry First Architects so unique. Kate summed it up best, “We want to excel in both design and client service. All of our architectural education and most of our professional groups focus on design: the history of..., the rationale for..., the trendy issues related to..., and in our day-to-day work we certainly are focused on the macro and micro aspects of design. But as I continue working, I see that clients look to us to ‘manage’ the entire design and construction process from start to finish. This is equally important to them – to have a single mind holding all of the facts and having clarity about how to move through each phase of a project.”

So when asked what

customers like about Symmetry First Architects, Kate was humble yet confident in her answer. “Our public clients appreciate our focus on coordination of all engineering disciplines and constant attention during construction. Our private sector clients are usually small businesses or non-profit groups, and they appreciate our guiding them through a maze of regulatory requirements and unfamiliar financial or contractual territory. All of our clients like Jeanne Green, my chief-of-staff. She’s been with me since the beginning and has promised to give me at least five years notice before she retires.”

Talking about the future of Symmetry First Architects and the goals of the firm, there is definitely a lot of optimism coupled with confidence in the direction they are going. “Our goal for the future is to keep improving on what we can contribute to the construction process and the built environment. That takes practice. I had a studio professor who told me that he thought it took twenty years of work experience for an architect to fully develop their knowledge and skills

(which I did not want

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to believe). Now that I have twenty-five years of experience, I know that held true for me. So, practice, practice, practice,” says Kate. From an archi-

tect who has set the bar for client satisfaction so high, Kate McCullough and Symmetry First Architects can take pride in the fact that

with a reputation for excellence and commitment to client service before profit, they will be practicing what they preach for a very, very long time.

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