

[Click Here To Print](#)

URL: <http://www.tbo.com/news/business/architects-firm-is-a-visionary-force-in-tampas-renaissance-20140726/>

Architect's firm is a visionary force in Tampa's renaissance

By [Richard Mullins](#)

Published: July 26, 2014



jason behnken/staff

Robert Ledford talks about the bar area inside the Aloft hotel in downtown Tampa. Ledford is the architect of the project, a principal of the firm Baker Barrios and one of the most vital people in making Aloft come to life.

When the champagne corks popped and the politicians reached for the giant scissors to cut the ribbon on the new Aloft hotel downtown Wednesday, there was one guy back in the shadows with every reason in the world to smile: Rob Ledford.

Ledford is the architect of the project, a principal of the firm Baker Barrios and one of the most vital people in making Aloft come to life, not to mention several other high-profile projects around downtown Tampa – including several in the city-backed Encore development area.

The Aloft hits all the right buttons for a project that people like Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn have wished for this city. It targets the young digerati niche. It's an adaptive reuse of an existing building. (On the Riverwalk, no less.) And perhaps above all else, it has that cool factor, with a sleek cocktail lounge, a modernistic pool overlooking the river and a nightclub scene all week long.

Like all sparkling projects, though, it didn't come about easily, and Ledford likes to say his job is only part architect. The other part is diplomat.

Unlike so-called "Starchitects" who belittle anyone who questions their vision, Ledford relishes a different accomplishment: Making things work.

"In a sense, we really had three customers with Aloft," Ledford said, and they all had to be pleased simultaneously.

◆ One master was his official client, the combination Liberty Group/Convergent Capital that was developing the project. They bought the building at a discount but had a very specific financial structure based on the number of rooms in the building and how much they could charge in room rental rates.

◆ A second master was Starwood, the company that holds the "Aloft" brand. Starwood has the official design book for how Aloft hotels must look. That includes the furniture, but also the sculptural ceiling elements, the lighting, the audio/music systems, and even how the cocktail bar shelves hold the liquor bottles. (There's a cool shelf setup that lets bartenders swing the shelves out for use, then back into place at the end of the night under lock and key.) Ledford's team had to match every one of those elements to a pre-existing building made of concrete walls and floors.

◆ A third master was the building itself. The structure was originally built decades ago as an IBM computer mainframe center, with immensely thick concrete floors and walls to support the heavy equipment. The good news was the structure was a grid held up by concrete pillars, meaning there were almost no load-bearing walls to work around. The bad news was that making any changes or installing any new systems meant cutting through concrete, without compromising the structure. That was especially dicey when the design called for installing a pool on the terrace overlooking the river. Ledford's team had to design new pillars to drive through two levels of parking garages below to support the pool, and finish off the work cleanly enough for an "infinity edge" that flows evenly – not all over the cocktail deck.

"Rob was a real peacemaker," said Punit Shah, president of Liberty Group, one of the two companies developing the Aloft hotel. "They weren't just the architect, they were the designer. And while most hotels have two or three room types, here we had 16 different types."

Even seemingly simple things took extra care.

"That sprinkler head right up there," Ledford said, pointing to the ceiling of the lobby. "It's exactly placed underneath a line in the concrete grid so it matches. You couldn't just throw that onto a mechanical plan and hope it landed in the right place." A "Starchitect" might just wave off details like that as too parochial for his attention. Ledford relishes them.

❖ ❖ ❖

Ledford's other major projects are apartment buildings, and on the surface, buildings like that don't seem to require such diplomacy.

However, the city-backed Encore development north of downtown proved anything but simple, and Baker Barrios won the contract to design the Trio apartment building and several others.

"The entire development was already master planned," he said. "The infrastructure was already set in place; the road curb cuts, where the utilities come in, where the solid waste pickup will be, where the ground-floor retail will be, etc. That has some great benefits in utility costs for the overall project, but it also means you have to fit a building into a plan that's already there."

Plus, there was the story of Encore.

“Before Jim Crow laws were abolished, this was the center of the African American community for Tampa,” Ledford said. “It dates back to the Cotton Club. Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Charles all played there, and it harkens back to America’s truly original music, jazz. That’s a great story to tell. A lot of time, you have to struggle with a project to find a story – placemaking is what we call it. Here, the story is fantastic.”

So Ledford incorporated music touches into the building, and the overall neighborhood uses elements of the music story, even in the names: Encore for the overall neighborhood, Trio for one building, Reed for another.

❖ ❖ ❖

It hasn’t been easy coming this far.

The Baker Barrios firm went from more than a dozen employees before the economic downturn to just four, and now it’s back to more than a dozen.

It’s working as something of a prospective site-hunter for developers. Ledford has been surveying the downtown area for sites, doing the research on zoning and design, and then sketching out possibilities that developers could use to move forward. He’s tinkered with ideas at what’s called the Trump Tower site, where Trump ended up not building a tower.

There are other possibilities for more boutique hotels in Ybor City, plus more “infill” housing projects in the Ybor area. There’s a lot of medical office building work to be had, too.

“There have been a lot of projects that were on life support,” Ledford said, “and now they’re coming back to life.” In a sense, that’s much the same story with the firm overall.

rmullins@tampatrib.com

(813) 259-7919

Twitter: @DailyDeadline