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## Buzz Talk with Ralph Giannone [INTERVIEW]



In this edition of Buzz Talk we're getting our buzz on with Ralph Giannone of the acclaimed architecture firm, [Giannone Petricone Associates](#).

Ralph is a veteran of the architecture industry, getting his start in the business right when he was fresh out of school in 1987. Since then he's worked on condos, hotels, restaurants, offices and is even a member of the City of Toronto's Design Review Panel.

Read on to learn more about Ralph's involvement in the design of [Flaire Condos](#), the ins and outs of architecture school and where Jason Schwartzman likes to stay when he's in Italy.

Enjoy!

**BuzzBuzzHome: We hear architecture is one of the toughest undergraduate degrees to obtain, especially at U of T. Is it true?**

**Ralph Giannone:** It was quite the experience. It was a full immersion, life experience. I did a five year, Bachelor of Architecture degree and graduated in 1987. It was a great time to study at the School of Architecture at U of T. There was a lot of discourse and pedagogical difference. You were kind of in this battleground trying to deal with your own work and the direction you wanted to go. It was pretty exciting and I had some great people teaching me.

It was like a full contact sport though.

**BBH: A lot of late nights?**

**RG:** You had to completely commit to it. Professors expected a lot from us and you had to work really hard. You don't realize it at the time but it becomes such a great foundation for you. It really was a catapult for me. I had three great teachers. Bruce Kuwabara, the principal of [KPMB Architects](#), was an incredible influence on me both academically and professionally. I also had Michael Kirkland, who was one of the architects of Mississauga City Hall. I went on to work for Jones and Kirkland and Edward Jones was an incredible influence on me as well. To work with your thesis mentor right after school was a huge advantage for me. Those experiences are still there.

You don't stop learning when you graduate. You need to work under somebody and if you get to work for the best, then you learn the best.

**BBH: What drew you to architecture initially?**

**RG:** It was always a number of influences. Part of it had to do with a family that was in construction — there are four generations of contractors in my family. There were always dinner table discussions about buildings. My brother, [Frank](#) [Giannone of [FRAM](#)], was also genetically created to take over my father's company so that kind of freed me up to do something else. I didn't have to be a developer but I loved the idea of construction.

My mom's side of the family have a strong tailoring and fashion background, so that interested me as well. I was always very interested in art and architecture was the perfect marriage of art and building. There's a wonderful creative side and a wonderful practical side.

**BBH: You mentioned that architecture is a continuous learning experience. What's something you learned from experience that they didn't teach you at U of T?**

**RG:** There are a couple of things. At school they teach you a way of thinking. They clean your hard drive and then set you up again. Any preconceptions that people have, they try to start them over again. It opens your eyes to the landscape of ideas and the critical thought that's required in the design process.

From the construction side of my life, I learned about the culture of construction. What it means to build something. There's a lot of people involved in the construction of something. In the summers working for my fathers I learned how complicated things are to build. I learned how you work on a site, how you get the people who are building your design excited and how to earn their respect.

From the architecture side of my life, I had amazing luck working with my thesis adviser. The discussion of architecture didn't end at school, it just became more rigorous and applied. The discussions that we were having were so exciting because there was actually something that was going to be built. The idea of what a drawing was for started in school but matured in an office studio. The rigor of execution is something you end up learning in the real world. It was a very fluid transition for me though.

**BBH: [Flaire Condos](#) and Shops at Don Mills, where did the inspiration come from for the design of these buildings?**

**RG:** We've been there since day one on that project. We worked on both the commercial and office component and then the mixed use residential component.

With Flaire we were riffing on this duality of the 50s, incredibly important neighbourhood that is Don Mills and the new Don Mills that we're trying to create. They're not opposites, but they're very different.

The Shops at Don Mills is all about positive street experience and active spaces. But the west side of Flaire's site was all about the curvy roads and landscape where you have a city within a carpet of trees. So you have this retro suburban experience and you have this new idea of positive pedestrian community space.

With Flaire, the idea was why not take those two apparent opposites and create something new. We wanted to create something sinuous and curvy that was kind of a looser, landscape driven idea of an architectural building that transforms itself at the base to relate to the new Shops at Don Mills. The base houses a little bit of retail, but also communal space. It also riffs a little bit on strong horizontality with very clean simple detail.

**BBH: Do you have any upcoming projects you're very excited about? Can you give us the inside scoop?**

**RG:** Our firm does a lot of restaurant design. We're working the new Teroni in Summerhill which is 11,000 square feet — a very large restaurant. The first two phases of the three phases are open. We're just finishing up a rooftop patio with 150 seats that will open in the Spring. We call it the Beach Bar.

We're also working with The Keg, trying to take them to the next level. They really want to improve and distill their restaurants in terms of their designs. We're working on a number of projects in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal.

We're working on some great custom homes for various clients. We don't do that many clients, but these are some of the clients we have and they're now hiring us to do their houses. We're doing a great condo that's just launched for [Menkes](#) at Spadina and Richmond that we're really excited about because it's right around the corner from our office. We have a condo by [Streetcar Development](#) called 2 Eastern Avenue in Corktown. It's just getting topped up now and is pretty well sold.

**BBH: You're a member of the City of Toronto's Design Review Panel, tell us more about what that involves.**

**RG:** I was one of the charter members of it. I've been on it for four years now. It's one of the most important professional endeavours that I've ever been a part of. In the few years leading up to the creation of the Design Review Panel, there was a lot of criticism related to the quality of the design of the buildings in the City of Toronto. The idea for the Panel came out of a large amount of research that the City did and they decided their should be a peer review process within the approvals process. Unless we have discourse amongst ourselves as landscape architects and planners and engineers, someone else is going to have it without us.

I think that the quality of work suffers from not having the discourse. So much of the creation of the building is out of the control of the architect. But there's always ways to improve it and support our fellow professionals. It's an effort to try to help rather than hinder the professionals that present. It's about lifting the bar in terms of quality and discourse.

**BBH: Do you get to schmooze with any big shot city councilors?**

**RG:** I'm not a good schmoozer! Within the Design Review Panel it's incredibly well run. The City of Toronto Planning and Urban Design staff do an amazing job running that program. What's very interesting about the Panel is it's pretty unhindered and unencumbered by the politics or the legal component of development. It truly is a discussion about design. It's a hands-off review panel. It's a professional, straightforward process.

**BBH: We've already heard about the family hotel in Torre Fiore from your brother Frank, but could you give us an architect's perspective on it? What was it like working on such an old building?**

**RG:** Clearly it's a really special family project. My brother financed it, my father built it, my sister's running it and we got to design it. It's kind of a gift back to my parent's heritage. It's near their hometown where my mother and father were born. Building it was one hell of an experience to say the least.

The kernel of the idea was to build a place to bring our friends to. That was the architectural ambition. But understanding the area and the heritage of the buildings we were working in was very important.

The idea was also to create this kind of relaxed, informal luxury. People want a kind of farm experience but they also want this spoiled traveler element as well. We created large suites. They're 600 square feet and have king sized beds. However, we didn't want this to clash with the original modest spaces.

We actually had Jason Schwartzman stay there for a couple night and his cousin, Sophia Coppola got married in the next town. Francis Ford Coppola's family is from the next town over and you can actually see it from the hotel.

*Thanks for buzzing with us Ralph!*

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