

SPOTlight

May 29th

Tracy Tato

Director of Interior Design,
DBI Architects



1. Was your pursuit of an A&D degree and career the result of an aha moment or a gradual discovery? How did you decide to pursue a career in design?

I have always considered myself an artist, since I was a little girl. The description of “designer” didn’t come into my vocabulary until later; but, looking back, I was definitely a designer. The first space I ever designed was a massive dollhouse that my grandfather built for me when I was two-years old. It was big, but very simple; it didn’t come with any furniture or doors. So, I created my own. I would make furniture and objects to fill the house using miscellaneous materials, even cutting photos of framed art from magazines to hang inside the little rooms. (By the way, I still have that dollhouse.) I was also the little girl that would go to sleepovers and rearrange my friends’ bedroom furniture (weird, I know).

I guess you could say architecture and design are in my blood, as I come from a long line of architects and artists. My father is an architect, and my 2nd and 3rd great (maternal) grandfathers were both architects (C. Graham & Son) starting in New York City back in the mid-1800s.

2. Where do you look for inspiration these days?

Everywhere! It is very hard for me to “turn-off” the designer in me. I always look around (and up – because lighting is so important), taking note of the spaces and environments I visit. I love art and traveling; so, I really enjoy seeing how other spaces are designed, seeing what works and what doesn’t. I think it is really important to learn how people experience a space, both indoors and out. You can learn so much by observing the spaces you visit. I like to try things I haven’t seen before or put a twist on something that was successful in the past. Witnessing past and current design trends often inspires me to think of something different.

3. What passions or hobbies keep you going outside of work?

I am fascinated with wine. I love to learn about the history of viticulture and the chemistry of food pairings. Visiting vineyards and trying new wines is probably my biggest hobby. I also love traveling and going to art museums. In addition, I enjoy teaching a weekly art class.

4. What was one of the most memorable projects you have worked on in your career?

That would have to be AOL. It was early in my design career, and DBI pretty much gave me full control over the design of several projects at AOL’s then headquarters in Dulles, Virginia. It was almost all design-build, with crazy deadlines and no budget. It was so much fun! I worked one-on-one with the general contractor (HITT) and their millworker (Kearney & Assoc.) to create some really fun spaces. I don’t think I will ever have another client or project that will let me turn a real airplane fuselage into two sofas!

5. What playlist or podcast is helping you through this time?

Okay, so this is going to sound really nerdy... but, I’ve pretty much stopped listening to the radio/playlists, and all I mainly listen to are podcasts. I have two favorites. One is called “99% Invisible,” independently produced by Roman Mars. This podcast mostly focuses on design and architecture; however, they also branch off into a lot of other subjects, like urban planning, fashion, and various other science topics – I find all the episodes very interesting. So much so, even non-design folk would enjoy listening.

My second top podcast (which, admittedly, I listen to pretty much every day) is called “Wine for Normal People” (super nerdy – I know), but it is a really good podcast. Even if you know nothing about wine, you will find it interesting and informative.

You can reach Tracy on LinkedIn at:

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/tracy-tato-2399b41b/>

An interior view of AOL’s Dulles headquarters, one of Tracy’s favorite DBI projects she worked on. She turned an airplane fuselage into two sofas!

