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Four widely regarded area architects to watch: from left, Christopher Guerra, Laura A. Overturf, Kathleen M. Kinan and Joseph M. Sfeir

Dreamers and schemers

FOUR YOUNG BUFFALO ARCHITECTS WHO HAVE THEIR SIGHTS SET ON THE WRIGHT STUFF

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Try to find the best and brightest young architects in Buffalo, and the first thing you discover is that there are no 21-year-old superstars. Not here, not anywhere.

That's because architecture is not like any other art form. You can't be a child prodigy architect -- someone who, through the sheer gift of supreme talent, simply goes out and, guided by the muses, creates great art for art's sake and maybe sets the world on fire in the process.

Musicians can do that. Painters. Actors. Authors. Dancers. Composers. But architecture is the art of compromise. A writer wanna-be with the great American novel inside him can -- in theory, anyway -- just lock himself in a room and write. An architect who happens to have a

great cathedral inside her is pretty much stuck with it. Even if you're supremely talented as a designer and the muses pay regular visits, you still have to get your university degrees, serve your apprenticeship, get yourself licensed by the state and find a respectable firm willing to hire you before anyone will let you take a crack at showing the world what you can do. Then you have to wait for a customer with lots of money to come along and tell you what kind of building he wants you to design.

On the other hand, architects usually don't have to face the troubles of other artists -- like dancers and rock musicians -- whose bodies start to tell them they're washed up as they approach 30. All of which helps to explain why, if you ask people who know architecture to name its rising stars here, all the nominees are in their mid-30s. Even then, all the nominations are based mostly on speculation, because architects that age generally don't have many brilliant buildings in their portfolios. Yet.

No matter. Even Frank Lloyd Wright, by the time he got around to making a name for himself with masterful creations like the Darwin Martin House in Buffalo, was already 36 years old. (Then his career lasted another 55 years.)

Here are four young architects widely regarded to be among the best and brightest working in Buffalo today. Will any of them be the next Wright? Who knows? But 10 or 20 years down the road, they're likely to be the leading designers of Buffalo's urban landscape -- and influential figures in shaping our world.

These four are -- for the moment, anyway -- the next big thing in Buffalo architecture. Listen as they talk about the ups and downs they face -- the bits of magic and large helpings of frustration -- as they try to practice their craft.

Joseph M. Sfeir

Sfeir, a designer at Kideney Architects, is responsible for one of the best-looking small buildings to go up downtown in recent years: the offices for Home Care Support Services that opened recently along Buffalo's medical corridor next to Buffalo General Hospital and Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

The office building manages to be high-tech and playful at the same time, with a facade he calls "broken into a matrix, like layers of paper."

But Sfeir said the more experience he gets, the more he learns a building's look is just part of an architect's job.

"When I first graduated from school, the only thing I would concentrate on is design -- try to create something that has not existed before," he said. "And as you grow, you start to learn about all the other forces that shape a building: the client, the site, the contractor, the budget, building codes."

Like so much else in a young architect's education, it is a recipe for frustration.

"But as you go on, that becomes the art of putting a building together: to deal with all these forces -- and come up with something nice."

Sfeir, a native of Lebanon, was sent to study in France when the 1975 civil war broke out at home. He later completed architecture school at the University of Southern Louisiana before ending up in Buffalo in 1986.