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Joyce Owens disrupts architecture on both sides of the pond

Fort Myers architect has been a trendsetter in London and in Southwest Florida. Her modern approach to building design is reflected in her business model.

by: [Andrew Warfield](#) | Lee-Collier Editor

Throughout her career, architect Joyce Owens has been a disruptive force in residential and commercial design.

That's how she made a name for herself in the high-fashion circles of London, where she ran her own firm from 1989 to 2004 — she studied in London in 1986 on a Rotary Foundation scholarship after graduating from Notre Dame. After returning to Fort Myers in 2004 so she and her son could live closer to family, she continued to upset the architectural apple cart.

In London, Owens' speciality was in home designs featuring unobtrusive glass-enclosed spaces that allow residents to experience the outdoors despite the persistent cold, damp weather. Proving her nimble ability to adapt, in Fort Myers her focus is on eschewing the persistent trend toward Mediterranean design in favor of modern architecture that borrows influence from the midcentury style once dominant here.



Joyce Owens' design of this home on Sanibel Island maximizes the benefits of the natural environment while offering protection from sun and rain. Courtesy Joshua Colt Fisher

“My intention,” she says, “is not to do boxes.”

Her intentions, along with her business acumen — and, of course, work — has Owens in a prime spot: her firm, Studio AJO, recently garnered recognition as firm of the year by AIA Florida Southwest. The organization also bestowed the firm top honors in both the residential and commercial categories. Owens was the 2018 president of AIA Florida and currently sits on the American Institute of Architects Strategic Council.

Owens' management style could be considered as modern as her designs — a key to her success. She says her employees know if there is a function they can do better than she can, they can take it from her. The firm has four employees. Owens declines to disclose annual revenue.

“I can’t be the one steering the ship every day. I need help,” Owens says. “They’re good people and I want them to grow and to stay. I want to give them the best and to know that in my firm that opportunity exists to grow with me.”

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Joyce Owens

In London, her firm Azman Owen Architect worked with such high-profile clients as London Mayor Boris Johnson, fashion icon Alexander McQueen and luxury retailer TAG Heuer. “We were very lucky because I was a partner with another woman and we were the only female partnership there at the time,” says Owens. “We literally shot to stardom because once you’re in the circle, those people all knew each other so they keep hiring you because you come with a reference.”

And they came with a reputation for doing things differently. She calls much of her work in London “modern interventions.” The work preserved the historic nature of Victorian homes while allowing its inhabitants to experience the outdoors by incorporating glass-enclosed spaces. In tradition-rich England, it was a revolutionary idea.

By contrast, her Southwest Florida designs — most of Studio AJO’s residential work is on Sanibel and Captiva islands — maximize the elements of sun, wind and surf. Unlike Mediterranean style, modern architecture breaks all the rules, says Owens, allowing for extensive overhangs, cross-ventilation, strategically placed windows and glass and seamless flow from indoors to outdoors.

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It’s being done now, although Mediterranean remains dominant, primarily in large planned developments. But Mediterranean architecture, she says, results in

structures not conducive to the Florida lifestyle and climate.

“In Florida we love the sun. That’s why we’re here,” Owens says. “But we have to protect ourselves from the sun, too, so those big overhangs featured in modern design stop the direct sun from coming in but you still get the daylight. They also stop the rain from coming in, so it’s really important those elements aren’t forgotten. When we did that whole Mediterranean thing, all those things that were important to building in Florida were forgotten.”

Among Owens’ early works after returning to Fort Myers was contemporary design of Canterbury School while working for another firm. She opened Studio AJO in 2007, and plans to add one more employee, she says, to an as-yet unspecified title that will enable her to implement a growth strategy.

“I don’t know exactly what it is yet, but I am creating a position to make me more resilient as an architect and to make me more available to my clients,” says Owens. “I have a great staff, but I know for me to grow I need to be out there more with my clients and to spend time with them.”
