



Joyce Owens is the principal architect at Studio AJO. She oversees all the design work for her clients here in the US as well as in the United Kingdom and Italy. She designed this home in Sanibel.

BUILDING A *Better* FUTURE

Renowned sustainable-living architect Joyce Owens is reshaping the region at the helm of the Florida Chapter of the American Institute of Architects

grand | FACES

STORY BY CATHY CHESTNUT | PHOTOS BY RICARDO ROLON

It's no secret to her clients that architect Joyce Owens is a practitioner of modern and sustainable design — spare, uncluttered forms that work in sync with Southwest Florida's unique climate. Cookie-cutter Mediterranean motif was in vogue and innovative projects were sparse when Owens returned to Fort Myers after an award-winning career in London. However, sticking to her passion and expertise paid off.

Principal architect at Studio AJO, Joyce advocates for sustainable design. She spent two years voluntarily curating a mid-century architecture exhibit that explored how designers in the post-war 1940s, '50s and '60s created energy-efficient, breathable homes and office buildings that maximized Southwest Florida's subtropical climate, rather than shut it out or ignore it. "Architects solve problems on every level and create better places to live and work in the community," she says. In January, Joyce landed a larger platform for stressing the importance of design when she began her year-long term as the president of the American Institute of Architects Florida chapter.

"We have to be proactive about talking about good design," she says. As president (the third female) of AIA Florida, Joyce aims to emphasize "communicating value" as her theme to raise awareness about how "architects build value, not just structures," because credentialed professionals are also "devising solutions and making places."

Born in Indiana, Joyce's parents had visited Sanibel since she was 6 years old, and they retired to Southwest Florida in 1985. While studying architecture at the University of Notre Dame, Joyce spent two semesters in Rome, and "my life was changed." Joyce followed her parents to Lee County but was selected for a Rotary International Scholarship to study in London. She fell in love with her former husband and the vibrant city, and stayed two years, but forced herself to return to Lee County in 1987 to fulfill two years of exams and internships to become professionally qualified.

In 1989, she dashed back to England, where she jumped through qualification hoops again, learning about its climate, zoning restrictions, contracts and codes, all the while working in metric measurements. "I got qualified in two countries within three or four months of each other," she says. "It was unbelievably different, but I was young and just did it."

In London, Joyce cofounded Azman Owens Architects with Turkish female partner Ferhan Azman. They picked up prestigious clients, including former London Mayor Boris Johnson and Swiss retailer TAGHeuer. They created the flagship store for British designer Alexander McQueen. Their published projects earned competitions and awards, including recognition from the United Kingdom's Royal Institute of British Architects.

After 15 years, she returned to Fort Myers in 2004 with her 8-year-old son, Benjamin, and had to readjust again. "I would write something on a drawing and people would say, 'What does that mean?' My professional English was British."

Joyce, 57, still catches herself calling baseboards "skirtings." But it would be a bigger adjustment than she had planned. "I thought when I left London, it had been so easy to be successful, and it would be easy in Fort Myers. People loved what we did and came to us because that's what they wanted," she recalls. "It was a different ballgame here. Nobody cared about modern design. I was shocked."

She was a design architect with BSSW Architects for three years before striking out on her own 10 years ago. Her new office at Main and Jackson streets in downtown Fort Myers is a former hair salon that she stripped bare and furnished with Herman Miller, modernly staffed with onsite and remote employees. She is planning to place exhibits, "fun art things," in its large storefront window.

Joyce's indelible mark has been left on the campuses of Canterbury, St. Cecilia and Bishop Verot. She transformed an abandoned restaurant on Cleveland Avenue into the stylish Rascals bar. Other projects have included the Madden Law Firm, Sanibel-Captiva Trust Company and the Watson McCrae Gallery. A private painting studio she designed for Captiva artist Hollis Jeffcoat won an AIA-Southwest Florida award in December.

She has been working with the same clients for 20 years on projects in London, Dublin and now Italy on a remote farmhouse with an unstable foundation that had to be completely rebuilt. "It was very complicated to do it long distance. I went there this summer and finally saw it finished after a few years," she says. "Two days ago, we were doing the pool, garden and courtyard." Original timber roof rafters were incorporated into the garden design.

Joyce, a consultant to the Edison & Ford Winter Estates, has developed an approach to renovating historic buildings into modern edifices while maintaining their original charm. Years of interior tinkering often blots the initial design intent, so she strips the interior down to the wires, and incorporates "modern assertions," such as glass panel walls and modern electrical systems that can be gutted in the future.

She did the same thing to her modest two-bedroom, 1959 ranch in an established neighborhood off McGregor Boulevard. On hands and knees, she ripped out the old carpet, Pergo and linoleum. She turned her muddy backyard into a verdant, private oasis with pavers, lush foliage and architectural screening she designed. That's where her office party was held because her 1,300-square-foot Michigan Home is a bit tight. But it suits her just fine. "It's calming and simple," she says. **G**