

Though Michelle Todd, Principal and Owner of M. Todd Architect, LLC, may now be a well-established African-American architect, her journey began with an empty lot and a desire to change the world.

Todd grew up in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in the 1970s, in one of Mayor John Lindsay's housing developments. "It wasn't the Bedford-Stuyvesant that we know presently, where everybody thinks Brooklyn is a hip place to live," Michelle says. "Back then, it was really dilapidated, and there was a vacant lot across the street from where I lived." As a young girl with a keen imagination, Michelle had big plans for that empty lot. Where most saw a patch of dirt and weeds, she saw something more—a place for kids to play. "I knew that I wanted to be an architect and do something positive for people and the environment," Michelle says.

That young girl would go on to do just that. Today, the Principal and Owner of M. Todd Architect, LLC, provides design services for residential, commercial and public spaces throughout New York. Established in 2008, the certified Minority- and Women-Owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) delivers architecture that is modern, expressive and uniquely reflective of a company or individual's values and character, according to Michelle. "We work closely with clients to delineate, communicate, educate and engage the spirit and personality of the client within each design," she says.

Immersive Learning

In 1993, while completing her undergraduate degree at The City College of New York, Michelle's architecture portfolio was selected as one of the best in her class. This honor paid for her ticket to study at École des Beaux-Arts in Fontainebleau, France. While there, she studied photography, sculpture, color renderings and nude sketching.

The students stayed in a chateau, but this was no luxury study abroad program. "They had us working so hard," Michelle says. "One weekend, several students and I cut class and went to see the Eiffel Tower." After that, it was back to work. She finished the program and graduated from college, then completed her graduate degree at Columbia University.

Essence, Space, Design

Michelle is a strong advocate for her clients and for the environment and works to design spaces that she calls socially responsive. That's where her mantra comes in: Essence, Space, Design. She's adamant about capturing the essence of her clients. "I really work to learn about your style and what you want to bring to the table. I'll show you ideas and help you bring them to reality."

As far as the "space" element of her mantra, it's whatever space she's working with. "It could be an empty box," she says. "But then with that empty box, I work to bring the essence of the client and the design itself to fruition."

The design process involves getting to the level where the client is very satisfied and given even more than what they expected. "But it's also about educating them on what we're creating," she explains. "I really take them through the process, so they understand how we came to this and why we have to do that."

The Power of One

"I know some people don't want to believe it, but the global climate is changing," Michelle says. It's for this reason she believes it's more important than ever to treat the environment with respect.

Michelle does her part through education and helping clients understand what products are good for the environment as well as for health and wellness.

A story told by Nobel Prize winner and Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai stays with Michelle to this day. “At a lecture I went to years ago in New York, Maathai told a story about a hummingbird. There was a fire in the forest, and a little hummingbird was trying his best to put that fire out with the tiny bit of water that he carried with him. It was a small amount, but it still made an impact,” Michelle says. “Even though I’m only one person, I can still make a difference that helps people and communities, as well as future generations.”

Happiness Is a Job Well Done

For Michelle, it all goes back to doing what you can to make a difference where you can. Once, after she returned to a bakery where she had redesigned the interior, she overheard customers talking. “These people from the community were saying, ‘Oh wow, this space feels so nice and warm and charming.’ I appreciate that I’ve made an impact, even though it’s small. At the bakery, I created a place where somebody can just come, get a croissant and be happy.”

Michelle has put her creativity to work with agencies like New York City Emergency Management. “They had a small bathroom and they needed it to be ADA-compliant so that someone with a wheelchair could use it,” Michelle says. She worked closely with the client, creating sketches until she came up with a solution. “That was one of my favorite designs. It’s not that fancy, but because the office is in use 24 hours a day, the design accommodates all the client’s needs.”

Building a Successful Community

Michelle is an advocate for her clients, as well as for those in need. That’s why she works with Habitat for Humanity, a nonprofit that helps people build or improve the place they call home. “I believe in their principles, because people should not live out in the street. They should have a nice, safe, clean, healthy place to live,” she says.

She also volunteers with God’s Love We Deliver, an organization that provides healthy, nutritious meals to people who suffer from HIV, cancer and Alzheimer’s disease. Michelle helps prepare and deliver meals. “It does my heart good because it’s giving back, but you also see how much you’re blessed,” she says. “There are so many sick people, and some people don’t have anybody. When I come through the door, I might be the only visitor for that day or even that week.”

Planning for the Future, Honoring the Past

Right now, Michelle is licensed in the New York City area, but she’s working to get reciprocity to work in New Jersey, Connecticut, North Carolina and South Carolina. “My mother is from South Carolina, and there are a lot of things going on down there where I’d like to help,” she says.

Though her plate is full, if not overflowing, Michelle still finds time to serve on the Bedford Stuyvesant Landmark Committee. It’s the same community where she envisioned her future as a little girl. “I’ve been on the committee for about 10 years. There are a lot of developers coming in and they want to do this or do that. The character of the community is being lost,” she says. “I want to do my part to preserve the character of this neighborhood.” It all goes back to her belief that everything you do to give back—no matter how big or small—absolutely matters.