

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Industry in Youngstown Project

Hanahan, Strollo & Associates Inc.

O. H. 509

REBELL STROLLO

Interviewed

by

Janice Cafaro

on

July 23, 1986

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INTERVIEWEE: REBELL STROLLO

INTERVIEWER: Janice Cafaro

SUBJECT: Architectural business, architectural market in
Youngstown, fees, bidding

DATE: July 23, 1986

C: This is Janice Cafaro for the Ohio Historical Society and Youngstown State University Oral History Program. I am interviewing Mr. Rebell Strollo, at 127 Lincoln Avenue, in Youngstown, Ohio. He is with the firm of Hanahan/ Strollo & Associates/ Inc. Architecture, Engineering & Interior Design. Today's date is July 23, 1986 at 10:00 a.m.

Mr. Strollo, would you tell me a little bit about your background, where you were reared, who your parents were, how many brothers and sisters you had, what schools you went to, and these type of things?

S: I was born and reared in the city of Youngstown on the East Side, attended East High School. I went into the service for two years, during World War II, and served in the Navy. I came out of the service and attended Ohio State University. My degree is in architecture from Ohio State University and I graduated in 1952.

I came from a family of eight. I am the youngest of eight children.

C: Why did you choose to go into architecture?

S: It primarily came from my brother who was in the construction field at that time. He suggested that I get into architecture. I liked being around construction and therefore got into the field of architecture.

C: Did he work for another company? Did he have his own company?

S: He worked for another company.

C: Where was that?

S: In Youngstown.

C: And the name?

S: He worked for G. F. Howard Construction at one time. He also worked for the city of Youngstown and also for the Joseph Bucheit and Sons Company.

C: After you graduated from Ohio State, did you go into business for yourself right away or did you work for a company?

S: When I graduated from Ohio State, I worked for the DeBartolo Corporation for about a year and a half. Then I worked for the architectural firm of Kling & Frost. I worked with them for a couple of years. I worked a short period of time for Chet Long who was an architect and engineer. In 1956, I teamed up with Bob Hanahan and formed a partnership of Hanahan and Strollo. We have been in business since July 1, 1956.

C: You mentioned Mr. DeBartolo. I was wondering if you could remember what he was into at the time you were working for him?

S: He was doing mostly shopping centers and strip-type malls.

C: He was more of a mall developer or a plaza developer or both?

S: It was plaza developer at that time.

C: You helped him design plazas and things like that?

S: I worked on design and drawings for plazas.

C: How did you meet Mr. Hanahan?

S: We were about a year apart at Ohio State. We sort of knew each other on a speaking type of arrangement. We landed a job together. It was a little shopping center in Columbiana. We teamed up on that and we have been in business ever since. We formed an association with Paul Boucherle after a short period of time who was in business in Youngstown for many, many years. That partnership lasted maybe three or four years. At the time, Paul Boucherle was up in years and he just decided to retire.

C: He was also another architect?

S: Yes.

- C: There were three of you in the beginning and he was already established?
- S: Yes.
- C: When did you decide to go into business for yourself?
- S: We had enough confidence in our ability to perform architectural services and we had clients built up and continued to work on our own. We built up some clientele and continued to work together.
- C: You mentioned your first job on a little shopping center in Columbiana?
- S: Yes.
- C: How did you go about getting that job? What type of job was it?
- S: It was just a little shopping mall. Both Bob Hanahan and myself could handle it. He had been working for the Cafaro Corporation at the time. We figured that we knew how to do a little shopping center since we had some experience. We put the project together.
- C: During the late 1950's and into the 1960's, how competitive was the architectural field in Youngstown?
- S: It was fairly competitive. We were probably the youngest firm at the time. There were perhaps five or six well-established architectural firms in Youngstown. However, we probably were young enough and hungry enough to be able to go out on our own and still manage to pick up a certain amount of work.
- We ultimately got into some school design work. I had some experience in school architectural work with Kling & Frost. We felt that we had the experience and knowledge to put projects like that together.
- C: What schools have you designed and when have you designed them?
- S: You are taking me way back. We did a school for the Youngstown Board of Education, the Harrison Elementary School. That was probably one of our firsts. We also did Holy Family Church and School. Those were some of our early projects. We also did two schools for Liberty Township, the E. J. Blott School and William S. Guy School.
- C: These were municipal jobs?
- S: Yes. They were projects where public money was involved and

bond issue projects. From then on, we continued to do extensive remodeling and additions for the Youngstown Board of Education. We also did the Canfield High School and Hilltop Elementary School in Canfield. We also did Boardman High School. We also did the Choffin Vocational School for the Youngstown Board of Education.

C: Are you still doing schools? You are still into this?

S: Yes. In the 1960's.

C: Okay.

S: In the 1960's we were doing quite a number of schools.

C: What other projects were you involved in?

S: Also in the 1960's, we did work for Youngstown State University. We did Ward Beecher Science Hall, the Lincoln Project, and also remodeling work for Youngstown State University. It was during the time when Dr. Jones was president. Later on we did Bliss Hall. Our most recent job at Youngstown State was the Harry Meshel building.

From that point after the school project sort of simmered off, I should say, we got into the hospital work. The first project we did in hospital work was St. Elizabeth's Hospital. We did the south addition which was a pretty extensive addition to St. Elizabeth's. From that point on, we also established a pretty good working relationship with the Youngstown Hospital Association. We did a number of projects for Youngstown Hospital Association. From there we also did a pretty-good sized addition to Salem Hospital. We are also doing work for Ashtabula General Hospital.

C: Is that in progress now?

S: Yes. We are doing some extensive remodeling projects for those people right now. That has been the major impact with respect to specific types of jobs. Of course we have done other small jobs. We have done work for the federal government, post office, buildings, and that type of thing. We have done work for the city of Youngstown, such as a fire station, addition to the terminal building at the airport, and some remodeling in City Hall. We also did a fire station for Liberty Township.

C: You would say then as the 1960's progressed into the 1970's you shifted the focus because the school market was fairly well depleted?

S: That is correct. It was really in the 1970's that we got into the hospital construction. The 1960's I would say were primarily schools. The 1970's were primarily hospitals.

- C: For the schools, that would basically be government money?
- S: Schools are usually local bond issued projects. We did the school for the mentally retarded. I believe that was in the late 1960's. We did that for the county, Mahoning County.
- C: When you did these jobs and even now how many people are you bidding against?
- S: We really don't bid against each other on the basis of fees. Architects should be interviewed based on their qualifications. Once the client makes the decision with respect to an architect's qualifications, he then selects the architects. Fees are usually negotiated after the selection has been made by the client.
- C: I learned something. You are saying that architects more than anything else should be based upon qualifications and reputation.
- S: That is correct.
- C: That is interesting. Since the latter part of the 1970's the economy has taken a downturn and now might have leveled off and be on the rise a little bit. How has this affected your business? I know that architecture is very much dependent upon the economy.
- S: This is true. Probably the worst period we encountered was in the early 1980's, 1982, 1983. Those were probably the most depressed times with respect to our firm. There just didn't seem to be much work around. As a result, we just had to tighten our belts and watched where we made expenditures with respect to our office.
- C: When the economy was down, what types of jobs were available?
- S: It is difficult to say what variety of work was available. For instance, we also got into the banking field and did a number of branch banks and some remodeling of existing banks. We did the Farmer's National Bank in Canfield which was an extensive remodeling project where we brought two different buildings together to appear as one single building, which is the way it is now.
- Then we got into a lot of small branch banks, Metropolitan Savings and Loan, and Dollar Bank. Those were primarily . . . and Society Bank. I don't remember the name of the bank before it was Society. I can't remember the name of the bank.
- C: People's?
- S: People's, yes. We did a little bit of work for those people.

C: You mentioned tightening your belt. During 1982 and 1983, what did that entail?

S: That is where we did a lot of little jobs. It was just enough to keep our heads above water and try to keep the people we had in our organization even though we sort of took a loss from the standpoint of payroll and that type of thing. We tried to maintain the people that we had in our organization, because they were good people, on the strength that down the road we were looking at better things to happen. In the last year or so, things have improved considerably. We have been keeping rather busy. Most of it is with hospital-related structures.

Our most recent hospital-related structure is the Beeghly Medical Center on Market Street. It was just recently completed and we are now doing an office building in front of the Beeghly Medical center as rental space for doctors and medical type of facilities related to the Youngstown Hospital Association.

C: How many people do you employ?

S: We have in our organization about fifteen people. It will vary maybe to fifteen or fourteen. It is something in that range.

C: These people are, besides secretaries, architects?

S: Yes.

C: Are there any things that you look for when you are hiring an architect?

S: Well, we are looking for experience when we hire an architect. We like to hire somebody who has had extensive experience with respect to working drawings and knowing how a project goes together. This is not to say that we don't take recent graduates or often times we might even take a student who might be in his third year of architecture and we will have him or her come in and work during the summer. We have had pretty good success along those lines. As a matter of fact, one of the architects in our office now is really a student who worked with us during the summers and is now one of our top men in the organization. It has really worked out pretty good.

We have also branched out recently in developing interior design work as part of our organization. We have a young lady who is our interior designer. We are also branching out into bridge work. We are expanding our organization into a new field.

C: Why did you decide to expand into interior design? What is the market for that?

S: It is an all encompassing part of the profession of architecture, the fact that you not only do a building from the outside in and vice versa with respect to plans, but it also entails a complete project with respect to furnitures and furnishings, paintings and those types of things. They are part of a complete building. Our most recent successful venture is the Beeghly Medical Center on Market Street where we have incorporated interior design work as part of the overall project.

C: When did you first start to incorporate interior design?

S: We have had her on board now for two or three years.

Our bridge work has just been in the last few months. We brought a guy on board in March. He is a professional engineer, and is in our bridge work department of the organization.

C: What bridges do you have scheduled to build?

S: We don't. We are proposing some costs for a couple of bridges right now.

C: In the Youngstown area?

S: Yes, in Mahoning County. Since the citizens of Mahoning County have passed as issue, we felt that there was a need to get into that field.

C: They are a mess. Many bridges in Youngstown need repaired.

S: Right.

C: You are bidding right now, but you haven't anything firm yet?

S: That is correct.

C: Are there a lot of architects in the field?

S: There seems to be quite a few, yes, but not necessarily . . . With respect to the field of architecture, not all of them might get into the profession of providing architectural services. There are some allied or related type fields. A person might get into architecture and graduate with a degree and might get into some sales part of the field of architecture. It is not necessarily the nuts and bolts of putting the drawings and specifications together and putting something out for bid. It is varied from the standpoint of what they might get into. I'm not so sure at this point the field is saturated with architects. At times, we probably think so when we look at our competition, but I don't think it is any worse than it has been in the last ten or fifteen years.

- C: How would you describe the climate currently for architecture in Youngstown?
- S: It is very competitive.
- C: More so now than ten years ago or is it about the same?
- S: I would say it is pretty much about the same. I don't think it has changed that dramatically. Relatively the same number of firms are in this town as there were ten or fifteen years ago. They are just new names. There are those who dropped off and others moved into the field of architecture.
- C: Are there a lot of government jobs, state related, city or federal in Youngstown?
- S: There aren't a lot in Youngstown from the standpoint of state related jobs. There are a few projects that seem to be coming up that might be available for this area. They are mostly university type facilities. Youngstown State is probably the one that has enough work to keep a few firms busy. Kent State has work. Kent State Trumbull and Kent State Salem and those types of facilities have some work coming up. We get periodic inquiries from the state architect's office with respect to future jobs coming up that we apply for with respect to interest in those types of projects.
- C: How often are you notified by the state?
- S: We get a notification . . . This is a new approach to the selection of architects in the State of Ohio. We get an inquiry, it seems to me, once every one or two months on projects coming up. This is a new innovation the governor has come out with. I am assuming he has something to do with it. He runs the show down there.
- C: Do you feel that it is beneficial?
- S: We think it is fair at this point. Some of this remains to be seen.
- C: You receive a pamphlet that describes the proposed jobs?
- S: We receive a pamphlet with regard to jobs coming up and a specific job and a number attached to that job. We submit a form to the state architect's office. They will prepare what is called a short list. The short list will probably consist of three or four architectural firms. From that short list, you are interviewed by the various institutions whether it be Youngstown State, Kent State or whatever. The final selection is made by that institution. Then we work with the state of Ohio on negotiating a fee.

C: Have you done out-of-town work?

S: Yes. We have done work for Commercial Shearing out of town. We did a plant for them in North Carolina in Kings Point. We are doing an addition to one of their facilities in Hicksville, Ohio which is on the western side of Ohio. We are also doing work in Ashtabula. We are also doing work in Pennsylvania on a project for Villa Maria.

C: What percentage of out-of-town work comprises your business?

S: It is a rather low percentage. I would say between 3% to 4% is out-of-town work.

C: That is nice to know that there is enough work in Youngstown to sell and keep many firms operating.

What types of jobs do you prefer to take?

S: It is nice to have a new building where you can have the opportunity to express yourself from the standpoint of aesthetics and new and innovative ideas. That is where we can really express ourselves. I think a good example of this is the Beeghly Medical Center that we did for YHA.

We do a lot of remodeling work with respect to hospital facilities. We feel that we have the know-how that goes with that type of facility because hospital work is really sophisticated and involved in respect to mechanical, electrical, and a lot of sophisticated systems. This is particularly important with respect to codes and meeting the requirements of the medical profession which constantly changes from day to day. We could do a project one month and three months later the code changes in that specific area. That is the part that is rather interesting about doing work for the medical profession.

C: How do you keep abreast of these changes?

S: We keep abreast of these changes through update on codes and we try to attend seminars on changes in the codes. This is where it all is with respect to the medical profession and code requirements.

C: What type of jobs won't you do? The firm just does not do them or doesn't like to?

S: There isn't any that I can think of. Every job is a challenge as far as we're concerned. Our profession is the field of architecture and we feel that we should provide clients with the best of the style of architecture that we can provide them with. I can think of no jobs that we would refuse. The only thing that I can probably say that we don't get involved to any great extent is residential type facilities. That is

probably the one area. We do once in awhile. We may take on a residence as long as it is a pretty good size. Normally, we just don't get involved with that type of project.

C: Right now, what are you basically doing? Are you doing remodeling or are you doing new construction?

S: We are doing mostly remodeling. We have on the boards now a new Naval Marine Training Center for the federal government that is going to be built at the Youngstown Airbase. It is an interesting and challenging job. It is about a \$3 to \$4 million project that is on the boards at this particular time. We have a little job that we are doing for Ohio Bell Telephone that we have had as a client for a number of years. We are doing work for Trumbull Memorial Hospital, also St. Elizabeth's Hospital and YHA. Those are the type of projects that we have on the boards right now.

C: Right now you employ fifteen people. When you began, how many did you employ and then how have you grown?

S: When we began it was just two of us, Bob Hanahan and myself.

C: When did you first start hiring?

S: Then we took on Chuck Schafer who has probably been with us for twenty-five years. We have grown. This building, for instance, we only occupied the top floor. Now we occupy both floors. We like to think that we are going to continue to grow. We think even at this point, we are running out of space in this building.

C: When were your periods of greatest growth?

S: When were they? I would say in the last year and a half. That has been the biggest growth since we have taken on an interior designer and also a person involved with the bridge work.

C: How political is the architectural field?

S: Our business is built up on contacts. Whether you call that political or not, I am not sure. The only way we get jobs is knowing people and the fact that we have participated in a type of project that might be upcoming that we could go to that client and say, "Look, we have experience along these lines. We can handle this particular project." We have done work for governmental agencies from local townships, the state of Ohio, all the way up to the federal government. We have been in contact with all those types of governmental agencies.

Obviously the way our business develops is contacts. We don't

advertise. It has only been in recent years that architects were allowed to advertise with respect to the ethics of the profession. Up to a few years ago, it was unethical for an architect like doctors and lawyers to advertise. Now architects can advertise. We still keep it minimal because we think our type of profession is such that our best method of advertising is to do an outstanding job for a client and hope that client will relate it to future clients. Our best method is to go to a potential client and tell him that we are the best firm for this job on a basis of past experience and we would like to give you some names of the people that we have done work for and hope that those people will give us good report. That is how we operate. When it comes to politics, we just stay out of politics. That is about the only thing that I can say in respect to that because we can't afford to get involved with any other closer relationship than to simply say we are architects and we can perform a service for a client and that is our business. That is the way we have been operating for thirty years.

- C: Have you, thinking about the types of jobs you have done, done any general jobs such as steel mills or actual businesses and those types?
- S: No, we haven't done work for steel mills specifically. That is really not our line of work. That is more or less the line of work for engineers rather than architects. We have done buildings for industrial related facilities such as Commerical Shearing. We did their office building. We did work for Hynes Steel. Those are the types of buildings that we would provide for the steel industry. They would have to be office related type of facilities and that type of building opposed to a steel mill where most of the engineering work in involved in the machinery.
- C: In terms of profits, how have you grown?
- S: It has been better the last year or two than it has been four or five years ago. Let's put it that way. Sure, we have grown. I'm not sure exactly percentagewise how that has been. I will say this, when we had those lean years, we took some salary cuts. We have maintained those salary cuts. We will continue to maintain those salary cuts. We are tending to be more conservative now than we have been on the basis that one never knows what is going to happen down the road. However, we would like to think and feel that we are optimistic about the number of jobs that are coming out and that we will have a pretty good opportunity to acquire some of those jobs and hope that will improve our financial position.
- C: What would you say is the average dollar amount you do each year?

- S: You are talking about construction or fees? Construction is about \$10 million or \$12 million. That is construction.
- C: What are your fees?
- S: Our fees are generally somewhere between 6% to 10%. It could vary depending on the job. It would be 6% to 10% of the cost of construction.
- C: What do you plan for the future?
- S: Work harder and try to get more work. It is difficult for us to plan. Our business is based on what is out there and what is available. We are fairly busy now. We have a lot of work on the boards. We have one man in our office who tracks down potential future projects. That is what he does almost exclusively. If we have a lead on something and make some inquiries and there are forms that need to be filled out, this person fills out those forms. If the work is out there, we are going after it.
- C: You plan to continue giving people, perhaps expanding this area also, a total package?
- S: Oh, yes, at all times. The total package consists of architecture, engineering, interior design, and that type of thing. It is a complete package.
- C: Do you have any observations on the Youngstown area or your experiences as an architect?
- S: Both my partner and I have been in the business for thirty years now and we were born and reared in this town. It is difficult for us to even think about new ventures. The town has been good to us. We have worked hard. We hope that things will improve over what they have been. I can see nothing but going up as far as I am concerned. I think the situation in the mills and the area has been somewhat depressed, and I think that it can only go up. A lot of people in this town still have a lot of confidence. I think we are a part of that. I look for better things.
- C: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW