

AIArchitect

07/2003

He's Not a Monster Architect, But He Plays One on TV

Discovery Channel program features Todd Erlandson, AIA

The show isn't as menacing as the name would imply, at least not for the viewers. It's a different story for the homeowners who place their trust and the keys of their homes into the hands of energetic and telegenic host Steve Wilson, a.k.a. Monster Foreman, and the contractors who will turn a home into a themed environment—perhaps a racecar, an English castle, or even a tropical oasis—in five days. An important link to homeowner happiness is Todd Erlandson, AIA, a consultant to the design team who helps conceptualize each *Monster House* scenario.

Similar in concept to Discovery Channel's popular show, *Monster Garage*, a construction and building team with varying skills and aptitudes are brought in while volunteer homeowners watch from an RV parked right out front during the building marathon.

Discovery.com warns:

"There's no peeking, either. You'll just have to look at the piles of stuff piled up on your lawn and wonder until the week is up." If the contractors complete the house in the time allowed (more or less), they receive

\$3,000 in power tools and equipment from the show sponsors.



Erlandson appears for a few minutes on camera at the beginning of the show during the "design shoot" where he, Watson, the production designer, and an illustrator put the plans for the week's house on the boards. Watson and the production designer have "series of ideas about what will make for a dynamic show, what will make for a dynamic finished product," Erlandson says, adding that he is brought in to "figure out ways to implement those ideas within the house." He says Watson, whom he describes as his complete opposite, and the designers push to the extreme to provoke his professional sensibilities, knowing that with that challenge they will achieve a design that is still significant but that is accomplished in a way that Erlandson can stomach.

"We brainstorm about how their ideas might fit in, how to kind of get the most impact with the least amount of change to the existing house," the architect notes. Behind the scenes and on camera he gives the monster team "guidance on how to keep the project as simple as possible, to achieve their means with as little structural and technical impact on the house as possible."

These planning meetings have led to designs that include houses in the themes of car racing, a topical hideaway, a '70s-style disco, the Old West, and an English castle. Upcoming episodes will feature a Zen house and Hollywood home.

Erlandson says that he most enjoyed working on the Race Car House, which was the series debut, because it was about "discrete elements, discrete ideas happening throughout the house," rather than a set dressing, like the Castle House, which is "very much like being in the interior of an old English castle." Instead, they tried to take racing elements and distribute them—through color,

reference

Todd Erlandson, AIA, (right) contemplates a model home that he will help turn into tropical oasis. He, along with host Steve Watson, (left), Craig Rizzo, illustrator, and Peter Hampton, production designer, create this *Monster House* design. Photo courtesy Original Productions.

texture, and graphic imagery—around the house to give the “sensibility of racing and that energy and excitement without copying some other kind of space that’s associated with racing.” Another favorite is the upcoming Zen House, a project filmed later in the series that Erlandson calls more “serious.” The Modern House is done by a “careful architect.” To respect the existing architecture, they worked to enhance the space and not to change it, “bringing in water elements and doing some work with the garden and improving some of the finishes inside the house that contributed to the house as it was designed originally,” Erlandson says.

Show biz connections

Erlandson says he met the casting director for the new show while working on an art studio project at his children’s school. “It was a new show and they were collecting people to be a part of it, and she just thought myself and my wife would be perfect for it,” he says. The original plans for the show called for a new architect and illustrator for every show, but Erlandson says that once they started asking questions about the design process, they realized that re-educating someone for each of the 13 episodes would be a daunting proposition. They shoot a new show every two weeks with four weeks to work on each project from the time they get the concept and a homeowner willing to take the plunge to the time they actually do the field work, Erlandson says.

One enjoyable part of the process is learning about the television production process, an experience that is particularly valuable to Erlandson, he says, since many architects in Los Angeles and the university students he teaches end up in the entertainment business. “I think it’s useful to get a picture of that side of what’s possible for us to do,” he notes. His firm, (M)Arch. strategic architectures in Santa Monica, Calif., is working on new offices for HBO Films as well as Original Productions, the company that produces *Monster House*. “That’s something that came out of the project, getting to know more people in the entertainment industry and understanding how that works. Now when I do the project for their production facility I know about editing bays and I know about what production is and what post-production is, and it’s like a whole other language you learn through the process,” he explains.

He also notes that his involvement is a good example of the changing role of architects, and “how we are expanding beyond the traditional boundaries of architecture.” Erlandson says, “I think it’s an opportunity that came up that we jumped on to expand the possibilities of what we can do as an office. He says his partner and principal, Sherry Hoffman, who has extensive marketing, business, and public-relations experience, is researching the opportunities that exist for architects and has done a presentation on the subject. “We’re involved in graphics and we’re involved in exhibition design as well as traditional architecture,” he says. “This is another direction we can go.”

Behind the scenes

Before each show, Erlandson says, a consultant measures and draws the entire house and investigates and understands the structure of the house. The show also has a consultant who builds a model of the house so they can view it spatially—“that’s the model you see us talking about in the beginning of the show during the design shoot. Those two things really help make the transition from production design to a real built environment.” There is also a renderer, who is also an architect, who “helps make visual the ideas of the production designer,” he notes. “Between those four things we feel like we’ve given them a good set of information . . . that’s the end of our consulting process.”

Erlandson, who is not compensated for his efforts, says his involvement is in preliminary discussions about the project in phone conversations, reviews of the as-built drawings, and participation in the design shoots. If the program is renewed, and according to Producer Jeff Kuntz, the production company is hopeful that Discovery will pick it up next season, Erlandson said he hopes to continue on the show and do more aggressive designs that would need to be permitted and engineered.

“A lot of the houses we get are out in the Valley, typical ‘60s, ‘70s tract houses that have few redeeming architectural elements, so it’s not so hard to go in and change those in lots of fun ways,” Erlandson says, “But as you get into houses that are more significant, and there’s another one in Malibu that’s coming up that has a Indian or Middle Eastern theme, it’s less playful and more respectful of the house.”

He hasn’t actually seen any of his designs in the flesh, but he has enjoyed watching the programs as they have aired. He says with a laugh that he purposefully stays away during the construction, so as not to get too involved while the project is ongoing. “When you’re on the other side of the camera, you’re not quite sure how it’s going to come together.” Erlandson says that some of his designs don’t quite make it into to the home as he intended. “But, honestly,” he

says, "after we leave the conceptual conversation about the project, it's up to the Monster Foreman to implement however the team sees fit. I encourage them to do it responsibly and to do it the most expedient way—they know a little bit better about what they can get done in their timeline, so things do change when they get out to work." As is often the case, "things certainly change when these five contractors put their heads together and try to figure out how to get these things done."

Since his appearances on the show, Erlandson says he has not received any requests to build Monster Houses, but he does say his firm let his client base know about the television show. "People have been very supportive in their responses. Particularly out here, I think people can see the difference between the entertainment industry and reality. I don't think my clients are saying 'Todd designed a disco house, and that's the kind of work he does.' They understand the value of what's designed and what's built based on what Discovery is looking for and that my role is kind of integral with that but it's not representative of my work."

—Tracy Ostroff

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