



BLDUP Spotlight: Al Donovan

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The BLDUP Spotlight is a weekly feature where readers gain insight into high-profile developments around the city and get to know local industry leaders. Today we chat with Al Donovan, who has been a Senior Project Manager with The Architectural Team (TAT) for the past 15 years. TAT has earned more than 200 awards for design excellence across a broad range of building types and programs, including new construction of large-scale urban mixed-use developments, multifamily, commercial, waterfront and hospitality developments, assisted and senior living facilities, and community centers.

BLDUP: *What is the last book you read that you would recommend as a "must-read" to the construction and design community? Why did you find this book so important?*

AI Donovan: I've read several books on various topics over the last few months, but in terms of one I'd recommend to industry professionals, I would suggest *Secrets of Lateral Thinking* by Ron Eastaway. It portrays a few methods of looking at things through a different perspective. The book aggregates and categorizes several creative thinking processes and suggests how and when to use each one. It's been particularly helpful in how I approach problem-solving within a group setting, something that happens daily on a construction project. One of the most useful things I've learned from this book is that it is okay not to have an answer for every problem. Sometimes, taking a few steps back to review and pause can be immensely helpful. Humor is also a great way to align a group of people to work out an issue.

BLDUP: *Do you have a daily or weekly routine that you follow? If so, how do you feel it has contributed to your success? How has this routine changed/been adjusted given the current situation?*

AI Donovan: I don't have a specific daily routine, but one thing that I do almost every day is wake up early. I grew up in a contractor's household, so just about everything started before sunrise. I spent my summers working in construction and got into the habit of getting an early start. Even at Syracuse University, I found that I could get more accomplished between 4:30am and 9:30am than I could by staying up all night when most of my peers lost focus. In my current role, this serves me well, as the contractors with which I work tend to make all their phone calls and schedule all their important meetings early in the day. These early hours are generally quiet, and I can work focused and undisturbed before the emails and meeting requests come rolling in.

BLDUP: *During the course of your career, what was the biggest challenge you faced and how did you overcome it? What other accomplishments hold a special place in your heart and why?*

AI Donovan: I think some of the biggest challenges I have faced in my career revolve around working on project types with which I have no prior experience. While I relish the challenge of learning new things, there is usually a decent learning curve associated with new building use or construction type. I have been able to overcome these types of challenges by paying attention, asking questions, listening intently to others with experience, and putting in the time to really understand nuances associated with each unique project. It's like a good paint job – the lion's share of the work is in the preparation.

In terms of other accomplishments, I think one of my proudest moments (other than my family, of course) was earning the rank of Eagle Scout in the Boy Scouts of America. This was significant in my young life, as it was my first opportunity to really lead others in successfully completing a project. Further, after all the hikes, all the camping nights and all the merit badges, it was important to me to finish my Scouting career by earning its highest honor. Since achieving this in 1992, I've helped scores of other Scouts earn their Eagle rank, both as a Scout and as a Scouter, and hope someday soon to pin an Eagle on my son's uniform.

As far as professional accomplishments, completing Oliver Lofts, a LEED-Silver Certified adaptive reuse of an existing turn of the century brewery and storage building was rewarding. Additionally, working on and ultimately completing construction at The Kensington was truly unique. The Kensington, a 27-story tower in Boston's Chinatown with 381 luxury rental units, was my first high-rise experience.

BLDUP: *What do you foresee for the future of Boston's development given mass vaccinations? The COVID-19 pandemic brought on a unique set of challenges, how has this affected your business in the short term. Do you expect to see long-term effects on your projects?*

Al Donovan: TAT had several large projects, like the [Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences](#), in construction during the pandemic. This allowed us to experience COVID-19's impact at a project level, from supply chain issues to project delays and shutdowns. Some things, like overseas material sourcing and closed borders, are already precipitating long-term effects on construction schedules and costs. These impacts will take time to settle out but seem to be slowly trending back to pre-COVID levels. On the positive side, we have seen a renewed focus on creating healthy and sustainable designs for diverse building types, from mechanical systems to an emphasis on better light air. For the Raffles project, for example, our design team has made modifications to the air system filtration and flow rates to exchange air more quickly and effectively, and to eliminate particulates more efficiently.

Additionally, I've also seen the resiliency of the Boston construction industry to evolve their policies and processes, ensuring that projects move forward. We're not back to pre-COVID levels, but circumstances are trending toward stabilization.

BLDUP: *What upcoming projects are you most excited about?*

Al Donovan: I'm most excited about the completion of the new Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences. TAT was commissioned for this project in 2011 and I've been working on it since 2012. I remember staying late to work through the shadow studies in the initial project submission to the City; making design presentation after presentation and pulling several all-nighters to wrap up the final contract drawing set. It will be rewarding to see the culmination of almost 15 years of collaboration and effort. This will be a remarkable building: it's the first mixed-use Raffles property in North America, and at 35 stories the tower will be a notable and dynamic addition to the Boston skyline thanks to its sweeping curves, fluid geometry and subtle angles. Our team, including TAT principal Gary Kane, is particularly proud of creative design solutions like the 24-foot cantilever that helped overcome the urban site challenges. There are few other buildings in Boston that have such innovative geometry, so we believe the Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences will set a new standard for the city.

Of course, I'm also looking forward to seeing a lot of other projects in my office take shape as well. One that feels particularly important is the redevelopment of [Whittier Street Apartments](#) in Roxbury. We've created a master plan for this large-scale site that

holds a significant amount of affordable housing, and we are designing the build-out in numerous phases. The project will add new housing, as well as a large amount of open space and other public realm improvements, and we think the work will transform this entire neighborhood in a very positive way.

BLDUP: *What other types of projects are you looking for right now (if any)? Certain areas, project type/size?*

Al Donovan: We're excited to continue working across our broad array of core sectors, which range from new construction multifamily developments (market-rate, affordable, and mixed-income), to historic adaptive reuse initiatives, large-scale mixed-use complexes, senior and assisted living communities, and urban waterfront projects. We're also thrilled with our pipeline of hospitality projects and are excited to leverage our multifamily expertise into student housing. In terms of project types we're looking for, waterfront work with a strong resiliency component is an area we feel will become more and more important to Boston and coastal communities around the country. Smart design solutions such as living shorelines, which our firm incorporated at Clippership Wharf in East Boston, will be critical for these projects moving forward.

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BLDUP: *Have you had a mentor or someone who has helped you during your career? What are the most valuable lessons you learned from that person?*

Al Donovan: I have tried my best to learn something from everyone I've met in this industry. I have been lucky to work with some very talented and generous people who have indulged my desire to learn. TAT Founder, Bob Verrier, and TAT Principals Michael Binette, Michael Liu, and Gary Kane have helped me to grow as a professional and as a project manager. Additionally, Marty Gordon from Cranshaw Construction was integral to my better understanding of the intricacies and rigors of managing complex and large-scale construction projects. However, if I were to name one mentor who has provided my most valuable lessons, it would be my father. I grew up watching him work hard every single day, but more important than his work ethic was the manner in which he conducted himself and his business. He has run his company with unwavering honesty and integrity for as long as I can remember, and I strive to make sure I do the same in every interaction I have.

BLDUP: *What do you hope for the future of your company in the next 30 years? What legacy do you want to leave?*

AI Donovan: I hope – and I know my colleagues share this desire – that our firm will continue to embody the spirit of its founding, which is to foster positive transformation in the communities we serve. I also hope that TAT will continue to honor Bob Verrier’s focus on creating an entrepreneurial culture and his belief in the importance of mentorship for new generations. Our work in historic adaptive reuse and other sustainable building practices is a cornerstone of the firm, and this is something I hope successive generations of TAT leaders will prioritize as well. And at a very fundamental level, we truly believe in the power of relationships, so continuing to build meaningful and rewarding client relationships will always be a focus for me and for the firm.

The legacy I want to leave at TAT is one of hard work and mentorship. I hope to have mentored a younger generation of architects that is in keeping with my values of honesty, strong work ethic, positive communication, and an approach to design that involves innovation and critical thinking.

BLDUP: *What is a favorite quote that inspires you or you strive to live by?*

AI Donovan: “Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood.” – Daniel Burnham, the Architect and urban planner known for designing the layout of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, Union Station in Washington DC and the Flatiron building in New York City. This quote is a reminder to strive for better solutions and bolder goals.