

Jeff Around Town – April 8th, 2025

Jeff: Time for Jeff Around Town, and I'm here with Roger Durand. If you've ever hung out in the Old Market, it's very likely that in some way you have encountered something that he has been a part of. There are those who call him the mayor of the market. Roger, thanks for chatting.

Roger: Jeff, it's my pleasure. I always followed you with the World Herald, and I'm so pleased that you're doing the KVNO. It's just super.

Jeff: Thanks. For those who don't know you, you were bopping around here and there. You were hanging out in New York in the late 60s in Greenwich Village.

Roger: Yeah, that was probably one of the last places I was before I actually returned to Omaha. I had been bouncing around the country doing odd jobs, doing creative things and manual labor and fry cooking and teaching kids art. Yeah, I thought, being in New York, I thought, why don't we do a Greenwich Village in Omaha? That seems like something that's missing, and Omaha was kind of in the doldrums. The downtown area was kind of struggling for significance. There were plans to knock a lot of it down. When I first came to the Old Market and discovered all the beautiful, the grouping of historic buildings owned by the Mercer family, I contacted them. Sam Mercer and Nicholas Bonham Carter, his nephew, took me through some of the languishing historic buildings, looking at the broken windows and pigeon droppings and debris left by squatters and that kind of stuff, and I thought, this is perfect.

Jeff: Yeah, I should say that we're chatting at La Bouvette. At this time, at least, I think of, you know, normally you'd be perched at the bar hanging out doing what, your crossword puzzle. Is this sort of like your headquarters for the mayor of the market?

Roger: I kind of, you know, I'm almost 82 years old, so I'm trying to keep the brain alive a little bit. So, yeah, between the wine and the crossword puzzles, that's kind of a push-pull.

Jeff: So, Roger, you do not seem 82. You seem youthful. And I just, I believe that when you're doing something creative and you're following your passions, it does keep you young at heart. You've been an architect. You've been into branding and helping design, not only the buildings, but the brands, as we use that term these days, the businesses back in the day.

Roger: Now, you know, I've told people I don't want to be a specialist. I want to be a generalist. And as a designer and just an aesthetician, I like to get my fingers in every aspect of everything. In my architectural work, I tell people I'll do everything from the hole in the ground to the monograms on the towels. Done a lot of marketing concepts and graphic design logos and business identities, that kind of stuff. Help people launch businesses. One of my main concerns was finding this trove of wonderful buildings not to screw them up and to really gently manage the adaptive reuse and the restoration of those buildings and kind of guiding new businesses to not do anything.

Jeff: Why is it that you're drawn to this kind of work, for one question?

Roger: My dad was an architect, an engineer, and I came from a fine arts attitude and learned all the technical aspects from him and also how to operate a business as an individual. So, it

was kind of a natural fit. I wanted to do something. I didn't want to just be a painter or a sculptor or a dancer or singer, although I played in bands when I was a kid. And I was just really drawn to making something useful and long-lasting in an artistic way.

Jeff: How has this work, particularly in the old market, how has that changed you? You have helped change Omaha for the better. And when I think of the old market, I think of La Bouvette and elsewhere in the area, when I'm abroad traveling, I long for the old market. It feels like home. How has it changed you, having worked on all of these projects?

Roger: Well, there's a lot of satisfaction in seeing a job well started and maybe not quite done. I think the old market is still a work in progress. It's way larger than its initial footprint. And I don't know half the people that own businesses down here, but I still feel like I have a positive influence in the neighborhood. And it's wonderful to sit in the middle of a work of art.

Jeff: Love it. Mayor of the market, Roger Duran, thanks so very much for joining me on Jeff Around Town.

Roger: Thank you, Jeff. I love it.