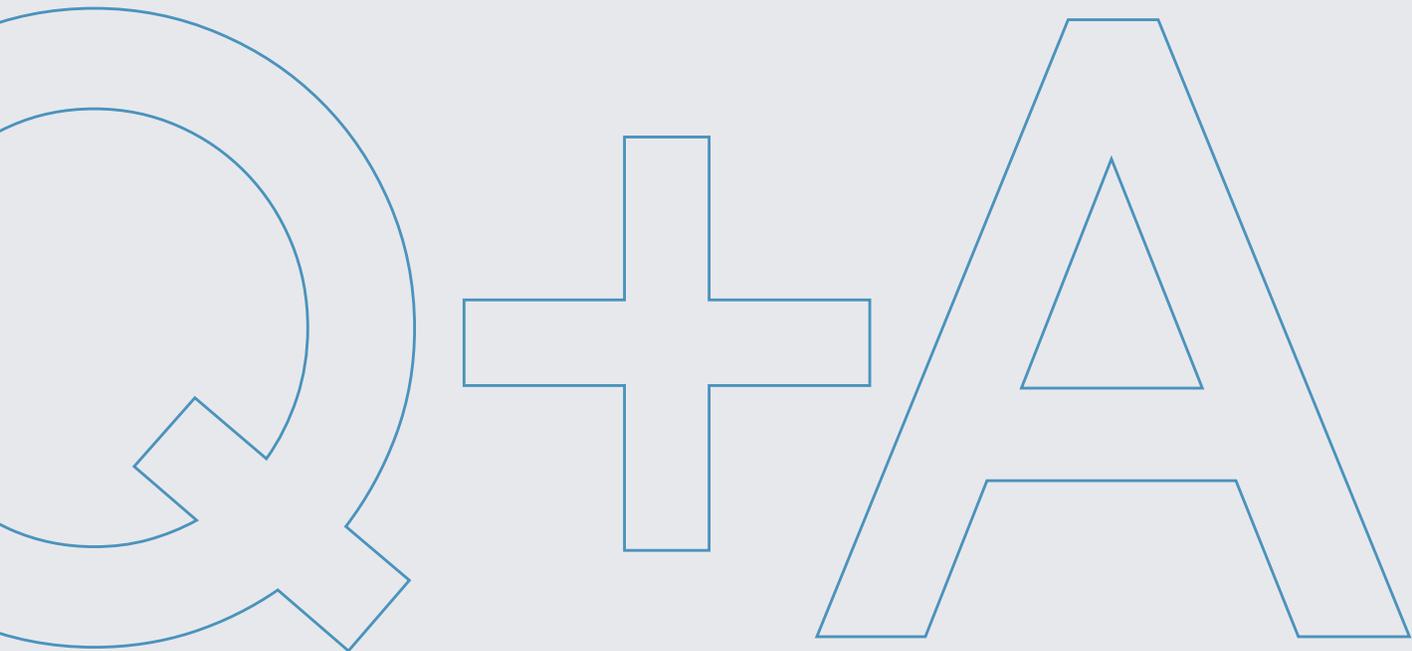


A conversation about VMDO's latest project, Lubber Run,
and their unique process of public engagement.



Joe Celentano

Principal, VMDO Architects





Designing with and for Community

If you find yourself touring a school campus in central Virginia, chances are you're witnessing the design talents of VMDO Architects. The Charlottesville and Washington DC-based firm has designed and renovated dozens of academic spaces in the surrounding communities, including K-12, collegiate, and adjoining athletic facilities. One of their keystone projects, Bluestone Elementary, was recently named the "Most Livable Building" in the U.S.

For each project, VMDO looks beyond textbook design principles and staff expertise, proactively seeking input and engagement from community stakeholders. They are a JUST organization and long-term stewards of sustainable design and construction, laying claim to five net-zero buildings, including one of their most recent, Lubber Run Community Center.

Helping lead these efforts is Joe Celentano, VMDO principal and studio leader of athletics and community. Think Wood sat down with Joe to talk more about Lubber Run, their unique process of public engagement, and why he loves nature, but not the word biophilia.

THINK WOOD: VMDO has a focus on civic projects that are anchored in community engagement. How have you learned to successfully navigate this process?

JOE CELETANO: The goal is to have a very elaborate, inclusive, and complete process so that people agree on what the vision is and feel their voices have been heard. Only then can the ultimate design be satisfying. For Lubber Run, there was a whole contingent of people that did not want to see any building in the park, and if we did have to build something, they wanted us to push it in the corner and make it four stories tall.

VMDO's approach to public engagement is not about taking input at the beginning and coming back with a new design at the end. It is about bringing people to a new idea—in Lubber Run's case, [the idea of] how buildings and natural environments can exist together. It was a long public process with different schemes to build consensus. (Editor's note: The public engagement process for Lubber Run took almost one year.)

What's an example of an engagement scheme you used for Lubber Run?

JC: We used schemes to illustrate extreme scenarios of a certain approach. For example, there was a design option with the building almost completely underground so that you don't lose any park space, as well as an option with the building stacked tall in the corner. When people saw those options presented, they realized that it was maybe not the best thing for the building or the community center. So slowly, by seeing their input come to life, we were able to bring people along to a more moderate position.

You mentioned the integration of buildings and natural environments. How does this connection to nature align with the concepts of biophilic design and human-centered architecture?

JC: There's tension between natural and man-made environments. Unlike the landscape surrounding a private residence or office building, a park is a public space that belongs to everyone, and a lot of meaning is embedded in the design because of that. For Lubber Run, we wanted a building that was

integrated with the environment, not separated from it. Arlington is a place where people feel like development is slowly squeezing out open space. So, the open spaces that are left are precious, and it's necessary as human beings for us to connect with nature. We seek to create those opportunities for people.

In the past, I've shied away from using the term biophilia. It makes people think you're messing with their biology. But in all seriousness, biophilic principles are definitely a part of how we think. There is a desire to make this connection to nature through organic forms and materials.

How is wood construction contributing to VMDO's design goals?

JC: For Lubber Run, there was never any doubt that we wanted wood for the structure of the building. The building literally grows up out of the ground, and the surrounding forest became a metaphor for our design. We also found during the community engagement process that the community liked the natural looking materials.

I have a goal to do a building without any drywall—only using natural materials, like wood. Drywall is the anti-material material. It says nothing about how it's made or its connection to the earth. The primary materials used at Lubber Run—concrete, wood, and copper—express a diagrammatic metaphor for the building—earth, forest, treehouse. These materials show the forces of nature in the way they patina with age. Wood as a building material is the most versatile and expressive of its origins. You can see, smell, and feel the tree in a piece of wood. I don't think you could say the same about drywall.

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VMDO is leading net-zero construction for Arlington County schools and civic projects, even pushing for this level of sustainability when the government may not be. Why is this important?

JC: Aside from being good for the world and the earth, I'm particularly interested in buildings that work well, that are more in step with nature as opposed to just trying to hold it off. It's interesting because in some ways a building is a way to shelter us from nature's forces, right? But we're slowly moving away from hermetically sealed, unhealthy buildings, and are exploring buildings that re-engage again with natural environments. VMDO makes an attempt [for sustainable design and construction] with every project. Sustainability is different for every client, but it should always be a design driver.

ABOUT JOE CELENTANO

Joe lives in Charlottesville, VA with his wife Pnina and their four children. In addition to family life and work responsibilities, Joe dedicates his spare moments for making and building—any excuse to buy a woodworking tool!

