

Selma Göker Wilson

*Architect with
the Schimberg
Group*

This past fall, the Schimberg Group, an architecture and interior design firm founded in 2004 by architect Barron Schimberg, added architect Selma Göker Wilson to its team. A quick look at her bio reveals a truly international background: born in Turkey, lived in Japan, Syria, and the UK, educated in England, worked in Turkey and London and lately, living and working in Sarasota. Locally, she will be working on a project at the Sarasota Opera House plus many others.





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Prior to working with the Schimberg Group she was with Solstice Architects, also in Sarasota, where she worked for six years. Selma has taught at Izmir University in Turkey and speaks three languages: Turkish, Japanese and English. If you add American English, that would be four languages in total. The reason for the eclectic life itinerary is due to her father being in the foreign ministry.

Interviewing an architect with a decidedly international perspective, it seems like the perfect time to ask her what her impressions of Sarasota's architecture are. "Sarasota has the highest quality of architecture," she explains and adds that architecture firms are moving here for that reason and for the "freedom to create."

Her favorite local building (I kind of knew the answer) is the Umbrella House on Lido Shores by Paul Rudolph. And the Sarasota School of Architecture's legacy has also been a driving force behind drawing quality work here today. Over 50 percent of the awards that are given each year through the AIA Florida Gulf Coast go to firms in this area, she notes. AIA Florida Gulf Coast is one of 300 local chapters representing 80,000 licensed architects and associated professionals. In 2018 Selma served as secretary on the board of directors.

She calls the current wave of activity a "new generation" of the Sarasota School of Architecture "philosophy." These might be swanky private homes, but also work done for nonprofits, businesses and arts organizations. This is not to be confused with all the hotels and apartments popping up seemingly everywhere around Sarasota.

Also springing from the legacy of the Sarasota School of Architecture is what she calls "an expectation of good design" here and, no surprise, there's plenty of money and funding to pay for that good design.

At the Schimberg Group (which is located smack dab in downtown Sarasota a stone's throw from Five Points on Pineapple Ave.), Selma is working on six projects in various stages of development. For example, one is almost under contract while another is pending and then there's everything in between with the others to be done. Selma will do drawings and manage communications to all consultants and then coordinates all their input into the process. "It's very much all hands on deck" for a small firm, she explains. Then there are the models to make, sketches to be drawn and then she adds, "write, speak—we are communicators—I communicate all day."

She arrived here in 2011 — post recession — and recalls walking down Main Street and asking "What is going on here?" because it was so quiet and empty. She had met her husband and fellow architect, Christopher Wilson, in London and the couple moved to Florida to be close to his parents. He's president of SAF (Sarasota Architectural Foundation) and teaches architecture and design history at Ringling College of Art and Design. The couple have two children and live in a home built in 1924 that was recently put on the historic register.

That last bit of information prompts a question about preservation in general. If say, The John Ringling Towers (demolished in 1998) was in Europe would it have been demolished? "No." is her reply. Fast forward,

and she was a vocal opponent of G.Wiz's demolition. "In Europe the starting point is 'Can we keep it?'" in stark contrast to here, where it's more like [my words, not hers] can't we just get rid of it? Or why keep it?

That's a fundamentally different way of looking at older buildings. "If you don't exercise it [preservation] enough and if you're used to reusing buildings" it becomes easier and more acceptable and even desirable, she explains.

Here, she feels, we simply either don't do it enough or don't do it well. There's been lots of demos in the past few years, she notes, and money is the issue. Renovating/restoring/preserving is seen as just not worth it. "People think it's going to cost more," but she adds that the "emotional cost and the historic value also have a cost."

Rather than get into great detail, suffice to say she feels it's in the building codes that communities have and that's where the problem is and where the solution can be found. Plus, there needs to be public education and engagement. And, like places in Europe, Sarasota would need to get used to restoring and preserving buildings and see demolishing an older building with historical value as a loss—not something that stands in the way of growth.

Coming up, she and her firm will be working on a renovation at the Sarasota Opera House. A look at the plans on the Schimberg website shows a new Administrative Center to the left of the Opera House and its adjoining loggia. Currently, administrative staff have offices on Main Street. Sarasota Opera will gain more space for rehearsals and staff, and add a second performance hall that's contemporary in look in contrast to the traditional (and historic) house where operas are performed.


She's a perfect fit for the Opera House project since her resumé shows quite a few arts-related structures she has worked on here and abroad. While with Solstice Architects, she worked on the renovation of Sarasota Municipal Auditorium, the Van Wezel and Sarasota High School.

In Turkey, she lists the Turkish National Opera Building in Ankara as a new building she worked on. In England there are three theaters along with the People's Palace at QM&W College in London she was involved with. There have been many other projects, but there is a decided arts connection to her work.

Schimberg Group is also working on renovating the pier on Anna Maria which was destroyed after Hurricane Irma. Another client is IMECA Lumber & Hardware that has stores throughout Florida in Tampa, Miami, Kissimmee, Orlando, Ft Myers—to name a few—and one planned for Sarasota.

Having lived in various places and speaking three languages all make this architect's mind have to work on many levels. Language affects ideas and the right words are needed in that culture's context.

Adding to her creative portfolio is that in her personal time she plays the cello and thus explains the photo above. Playing the cello which, she says, is harder than architecture but gives her perspective on the work that goes into her chosen field. She's obviously drawn to the beauty of the cello's unique sound and perhaps the instrument's natural beauty, or architecture, too.

Selma's unique creativity has been and will be continue to be seen in Sarasota's buildings —new, old and restored— and we're fortunate for that. 

 STORY: Louise Bruderle

 IMAGES: Evelyn England

 **SPECIAL THANKS** to Violin Shop Sarasota for allowing us the take Selma's photo there. The store is at 1407 First Street in Sarasota.