

The genesis...

Architecture and exhibition

With many years' experience in the industry, Jacques Forest decides to go into business with ten thousand dollars in his pocket and a concept in mind: to create a name that would combine **architecture** and **exhibitions**. **Archex** is born.





Behind the name Archex lies another, rather surprising, intention. “It was the era of the Yellow Pages. When your company name starts with A, you are in the first pages. My father wanted to take advantage of that visibility.”

Anik, Jacques’s eldest daughter, remembers very well the humble beginnings of the venture in the mid-seventies. At a very young age, she sees her father devote himself body and soul with the means at his disposal.

“ My father used to jokingly say: I had to mortgage the house, the cat, the dog and the goldfish. ”

Uniqueness



Before founding Archex, Jacques Forest had been a senior executive at Exhibit4, a company with a similar mandate. When the owners put the company up for sale, Jacques showed interest in buying shares, pointing out his extensive experience and his current management position. But his request was turned down by the owners, who decided to hand the company over to family members. This is all it took for Jacques to decide to launch his own company in Montreal.

The dedication of Anik's father becomes a great inspiration for the young woman. She decides at an early age to enter the business world.

“ I always saw myself as a boss, going to work in a jacket, with employees to look after. ”

On the other hand, when she enters the job market, Anik does not see herself taking over the company so soon, having already embarked on a successful career in finance.

Succession



“ Then, when I was 23, the opportunity suddenly presented itself and I didn't want to miss it. I told my father that I wanted to take over the business. ”

The opportunity itself is the sudden withdrawal of her father due to illness. Jacques has to undergo dialysis treatments that would prevent him from fully performing his duties for at least five years.

“During those years, I had one foot in the door, as we say. My father was still with the company, but I was taking care of most of his duties.”

One thing leading to another, Anik is promoted to Managing Director of Archex toward the end of the 1990s, succeeding her father at the management table most of the time.

Taking up the torch



The FOREST trio

Stéphanie Forest also joins Archex some time after her sister Anik.
But her career path is even more unusual.

As a commercial aircraft pilot, she regularly leaves home for several days at a time to travel to remote parts of Canada, including many First Nations communities, where she sometimes has to stay for a while.

However, at age 29, a stroke forces her to give up her pilot's licence. "It was hard on my sister because she really liked her lifestyle. She is into nature, hunting and fishing and it allowed her to do all that."





Anik's invitation comes quickly: she immediately offers Stéphanie the chance to join Archex's graphics department. Stéphanie accepts the challenge. One thing leads to another and the former pilot becomes production manager, acquiring shares in the company alongside her sister.

“I think her background as a pilot is very relevant. Her brain is always in solution mode, just like when she is steering a plane in bad weather.”

Convinced that she “couldn't do the job” of her sister, Anik often insists that she and Stéphanie complete each other perfectly.

“I plan for the long term, whereas my sister is into immediate, short-term operations.”

“ It took us some time to discover this, but our difference is our greatest asset. ”

Change



Uniting the assets

When Anik joins Archex in 1991, the company has sales offices across Canada as well as a second production workshop in Vancouver.

However, the young woman is going to bring a much more local flavour to the Quebec company, in order to get closer to customers and concentrate operations. Oh, and because... Anik is pregnant!

“ I thought twice before embarking on this adventure, knowing that I was expecting a baby. ”

The prospect of being able to move the business back to Montreal tips the scales. By doing so, Anik has the possibility to reconcile work and family more easily after the birth of her child.

Outside Quebec, only an office in Ottawa remains open. “Our expertise is so specialized that we don’t need to be everywhere to find customers. And there is nothing to stop us from doing business with international clients, since we have partners in other provinces and other countries.”

Partners

“ Today, 40% of our market is outside Quebec. Often they are Quebec clients taking part in events abroad. ”

To support its international clients, Archex works with partner companies in the host country that also design exhibits for corporate events.

First and foremost, this approach is more eco-responsible: Archex does not have to transport tons of materials across the world, since the exhibits are made on site by partner companies. But there are other advantages too.

“These local companies know their country, their customs and their laws better than we do. It’s easier for us, for the client, and for everyone.”





Vision and values...

Building the foundation

Among the few companies offering this type of service in Canada, Anik is one of the rare women to hold the position of CEO. This comes with its share of challenges, but also opportunities.

Anik can not help but chuckle when she thinks back to her father's reaction thirty years earlier. She is referring to 1991, more precisely, when she asks her father to take over the company during his illness. "Come on, you're a girl!", Jacques said. "I think he wanted to protect me, because I was young, and my father only knew older men in the industry. But if I were to remind him of that today, he would surely be ashamed, she says with a smile on her face."

Despite the glass ceiling she has to break through to take on her new role, Anik is quickly making her mark in the industry. Partners, competitors and customers all have great respect for her. “In the industry, there are often ‘dads’ the same age as my father, so it’s as if everyone wanted to help me or take me under their wing.”

“I think it has something to do with my image as ‘the little girl from Archex’. That is how people identified me and it was always positive.”

Family-run business

However, Anik’s business relationship with her father presents other challenges. Traditionally, Jacques travels to Florida every winter and only returns to Quebec in the spring.

From the moment Anik takes over as managing director, even though her father remains the majority shareholder, she is responsible for running the company in his absence.

So, during the transition in the spring, there are sometimes differences of opinion between Anik and Jacques.. “At one point during the winter, I bought a second saw bench to increase production, without consulting my father. When he came back, he let me know he was not happy.”

“ I was sometimes torn between my father and my business decisions. But with time, we found the right balance. ”



Reinventing the wheel

“Everything will be all right” was the headline everywhere in the spring of 2020. But for Archex, it is hard to believe these words when its business model is based on holding events... that are suddenly no longer taking place.

“ Overnight, there are no more trade shows, no more conventions, no more gatherings. Our whole business collapsed. ”

The first months of the pandemic prompt the company to reinvent itself, and fast. After decisive discussions, the team comes up with an inventive solution. Archex has everything it takes in its workshops to manufacture the famous Plexiglas panels that are now requisitioned by all those who comply with social distancing rules. Additionally, Archex can put its carpenters to work on the design of commercial furniture.



Professionalism

Peace of mind

“It wasn’t a very profitable formula. But at least we were able to keep everyone on our payroll, at 80% of their salary.” And management decides to double its efforts to retain its valued employees, most of whom are confined to their homes in the early months of the pandemic. Every Thursday, for several months, Anik makes sure to send a gift by courier to each member of the staff.

“That was crucial for the team’s morale. I have been told that some of them were waiting for the Purolator guy on their doorstep on Thursday mornings!”

“ I said to myself:
the wheel isn't turning
fast, but at least it's
turning. Because after
a crisis, it's easier to
restart a wheel that is
turning slowly. ”

However, the situation remains rather uncertain for Anik and her sister, who are impatiently awaiting the moment when the sanitary measures would allow them to resume their basic activities.

“I have had many sleepless nights. I was having panic attacks. But we got through it, and when we resumed our activities, it was even stronger than before.”



Back to our roots

The return of corporate events in 2021 allows Archex to gradually return to its pre-pandemic activities, while several competitors did not survive or have scaled down their activities.

“After the pandemic, our competitors would sometimes tell their customers: I can’t serve you anymore, but call Archex. They still can.”

Today, Archex manages around 700 projects a year, designed by a Montreal-based team of between 25 and 30 employees depending on the season. The peak season for trade shows is from January to April and from August to November. During these periods, some former employees, now retired, come in to lend a hand.

The most important thing is that Archex always has the resources it needs to represent its customers anywhere, at any time.

“With us, clients no longer have to worry about being represented at corporate events. We take care of everything, wherever they are in the world.”

Aesthetics



“ Our mission is to
make our clients shine
with peace of mind. ”



Behind the
scenes...

The
caring
one

Passionate

Honorable Mention

Client
Damotech

Design
Traffic Design

Fabrication
Archex

EXHIBITOR Magazine's
35th Annual
Exhibit Design Awards

EXHIBITOR



Anik Forest President

Anik studies human resources at UQAM before she lands a job in banking, an area in which she sees potential for advancement.

When the opportunity to run Archex presents itself, however, she senses an even greater potential. Furthermore, she cannot abandon her father, who is having health problems.

“I was far from having all the experience I would have needed. But then, experience came with the years!”

All in all, Anik is very excited about joining Archex. She likes events and the diversity of the work – clients are coming from all sorts of different industries.

“What’s more, my job allows me to travel a lot. It’s quite a stimulating environment. Customers are excited to go to their shows, and I am just as excited about accompanying them!”

Anik is lucky to have a very close family. Her sister Stéphanie is an important part of her life. “We share everything. First of all, the company, of course. But we also share custody of a car and a boat, she says grinning.”



Team

An outline of the future...

The cubic relaunch



During a trip to California in 2019, Anik sees something that catches her eye.

It is nothing particularly innovative from a technological point of view: it is simply a metal shipping container, custom-modified to accommodate “pop-up shops”. But in a post-pandemic context, where companies are reinventing themselves, Anik is convinced that the convertible container concept has potential.

cuboxTM

Thus is Cubox™ born, a turnkey service offering for clients who want to display their finest assets in a contemporary outdoor setting.

In line with Archex's eco-responsibility policy, the vast majority of the materials can be reused: not just the container itself, but also counters, carpets and lamps, for example. They simply need to be painted a different colour to match the client's branding.

“ My intuition prompted me to launch Cubox™. And so far, my intuition hasn't been wrong. It works really well. ”

The *personal* touch

On an individual level, Anik joins EntreChefs PME, an association of small and medium-sized business leaders in Quebec.

“Being challenged by other entrepreneurs there helps me a lot in my development.”

And Anik has a good idea of where she is going. She has already been giving talks, and in a few years' time she would like to become a coach for other entrepreneurs.

“I cannot have acquired all this knowledge and not pass it on to others.”





9200, Henri-Bourassa West
Montreal (Quebec) H4S 1L5

514 334-1012

archex.ca



Publishing Director: Audrey Dallaire
Author: Laurent Mercier-Roy
Translator: Frédérick Poulin
Graphic designer: Liliane Racine
Proofreader: Céline Chabot

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