

One Foreign Architect's Journey to Licensure by Luis Martinez, AIA

I was born in Barbosa, Colombia, in 1959. My father was a dentist, and I grew up believing that I would follow in his footsteps. However, I developed an interest in architecture, and I started my architectural education in 1976 at the Fundacion Universidad de America in Bogotá, Colombia. I earned my degree as an architect in 1981.

During my first employment after graduation from the university, I worked in design and construction with a government health organization designing hospitals under the supervision of experienced architects. I continued working with governmental health organizations until 1996. At that point, I decided to start my own business as a consulting architect, designing hospitals and schools.

In 2000, the political and economic climate in Columbia made it an unsafe environment. To ensure the safety of my family of five, I felt that we needed to move. So after working for 19 years as a licensed architect in Colombia, we moved to Miami, FL to join my wife's family.

At that time, it was very difficult for a foreign architect to get licensed in the United States. In most states it meant enrolling in an American university and starting from the beginning. For a person who has a family to support, it was impossible to even consider this option. Not only was the cost prohibitive, the schedule to attend classes would have prevented me from earning a salary. The only alternative I had was to start working in something not related to my field. Fortunately, I got a job at a firm designing airplane decals. This job lasted only a year and a half because after September 11, the company had to lay off all employees and close their doors.

My wife's sister had been living in Casper, WY for about 25 years. I decided to uproot my family once again and in 2002, we found ourselves in the "Cowboy State". After a three-month job search, I started work as a CAD operator for a local architect, and in 2004, I began a career with my current employer, GSG Architecture.

In August of 2005, I was informed by one of the architectural firm's owners that NCARB had created a new program — the Broadly Experienced Foreign Architect (BEFA) program — to allow architects who hold registration in countries other than the United States and Canada to apply for NCARB Certification. I knew that the state of Wyoming allowed reciprocal registration for architects who received NCARB Certification through the BEFA program and decided to submit my application.

Throughout the trials of uprooting my family several times, I felt in my heart that I was an architect. I knew and desired that one day, although I did not know when, I would work again as an architect. I believed that the BEFA program would give me that opportunity.

I applied for the BEFA program in February of 2006. In May, after verification of my degree and work experience, I received authorization to proceed with the dossier preparation. I decided to include in my dossier the last three projects I designed in Colombia because of the complexity of the work. I was extensively involved in these projects and felt they would best demonstrate my experience as an architect. I submitted my dossier in September 2006, and it was approved later that year in December. The final part of this process was to be interviewed by three members of the NCARB's Broadly Experienced Architect Committee. This interview was scheduled for April of 2007.

The interview process was one of the greatest experiences in my life. While I was nervous, I also felt very confident because I knew all three projects as well as the back of my own hands. Before we began, the panel made me feel comfortable by explaining that the purpose of the interview was to measure my involvement in, and knowledge of, the projects I included in my dossier. At the same time, they wanted to learn about my work experience in the United States, including my knowledge of the current building codes and laws. I would like to thank all the interviewers as they made me feel as if I was in my own country chatting with my friends.

I received my NCARB Certificate in June of 2007 and my Wyoming license in July of 2007. While the entire process was challenging, I also found it very interesting and quite satisfying. Throughout this process I received invaluable advice from GSG Architecture Principals, Lisa Hubbard, Tim Schenk, and Jim Thomas. The NCARB Education Department also helped a great deal by answering my many questions.

I encourage all foreign architects to take on this challenge. I think they will find that it increases their job opportunities. In my case, the NCARB Certificate allowed me to take on more responsibility in the firm and resume my career as a licensed professional. This would not have been possible without NCARB's BEFA program and Wyoming's acceptance of the process.

Finally, I would like to say that in my personal opinion one thing that makes this a great country is its multicultural roots. Now with the BEFA program, NCARB provides an opportunity for American architects to interact with architects from other cultures with different building systems and codes. By working together, we can design great buildings that protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public while respecting the environment. **DC**

Luis Martinez is one of the first foreign architects to receive NCARB certification through the Broadly Experienced Foreign Architect (BEFA) program. He applied for reciprocal licensing to the Wyoming State Board of Architects and Landscape Architects and is now a registered architect in Wyoming. Martinez currently works as a Project Manager for GSG Architecture in Casper, WY.

