

GROUND RULES PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 3: THE BUSINESS OF ARCHITECTURE WITH ELI MELTZER

Editor's note: This version preserves the Q&A format and core substance of the conversation while tightening questions, condensing longer answers, removing repetition, and smoothing transcript artifacts for readability.

INTRODUCTION

David Shamshovich

Welcome to another episode of Ground Rules. This one is a little different because Brenda Slochowsky is back with us.

Brenda Slochowsky

Glad to be back. It felt very natural, especially because today's guest was so strong.

David Shamshovich

Our guest is Eli Meltzer of Meltzer Mandel Architects. Eli works extensively in affordable and mixed-income housing and brings deep experience with zoning, City of Yes, MIH, UAP, and the practical realities of getting housing built in New York City.

Brenda Slochowsky

What I enjoyed about this conversation is hearing the architect's side of the work. Lawyers and architects focus on different details, but everyone is working toward the same goal: creating housing the city needs.

David Shamshovich

Eli is also active on LinkedIn and recently launched a video series called Zoning Hacks. He was a terrific guest, and I think listeners will enjoy this conversation. Eli, welcome to Ground Rules.

Eli Meltzer

Thanks for having me, David.

GROWING UP AROUND ARCHITECTURE

David Shamshovich

Have you been a New Yorker your entire life?

Eli Meltzer

Yes. I grew up on 49th Street and First Avenue, and I could see the Chrysler Building from my window. My mother was from New Jersey, and my father came from Minnesota. He was drafted in the 1950s and stationed on Governors Island. After architecture school, he stayed in New York and built his career here.

David Shamshovich

Your father was also an architect. How much did that shape your path?

Eli Meltzer

Architecture was always around me. I spent a lot of time in his office and have early memories of the transition from hand drafting to computers. My father never really learned to draw on a computer, but I remember when the first CAD systems came into the office. That shift was enormous. Before that, architecture and engineering drawings were produced by hand at large drafting tables. When computers came in, the tools were designed to help architects move from hand drafting into digital work.

Brenda Slochowsky

That kind of transition is hard to imagine now.

Eli Meltzer

It is, and it feels relevant again because of what is happening now with AI. Architecture has already gone through one major tool shift. This is another one.

FINDING HIS WAY INTO ARCHITECTURE

David Shamshovich

Was becoming an architect always the plan, or did your path take a few turns?

Eli Meltzer

It was something I was always interested in, but the path was not direct. I was not a great artist in the traditional sense, but I liked computers, building things, and solving problems. I went to Dartmouth, which did not have an architecture program, and studied philosophy. After college, I spent time in Israel and came back without a clear plan.

Eli Meltzer

I had taken film, art, and sculpture classes, so I had a portfolio. Philosophy helped me think deeply, but I was drawn to work where thought became practical. I applied to architecture school, got into NJIT, and earned a master's degree there. I thought architecture would be interesting enough to sustain me, and I also thought that maybe one day I could work with my father.

David Shamshovich

What was happening with your father's firm at that point?

Eli Meltzer

By then, my father had wound down much of the business. He and David Mandel had been very active in the 1990s and early 2000s, and they had done more than 100 buildings together. At one point the firm had 40 or 45 architects. David became sick in 2008 and passed away, and my father was already around 70. After that, he gradually scaled things down.

When I graduated in 2013, my father encouraged me to work at a larger firm and get the best training I could. He is the best architect I have ever met, and he takes the work very seriously. His view was that I should gain experience in a high-quality environment before thinking about joining or rebuilding the family practice.

KPF, HUDSON YARDS, AND THE VALUE OF PRECISION**David Shamshovich**

You started at KPF. How did that happen, and what did you take from that experience?

Eli Meltzer

I had an internship there one summer, performed well, and they hired me after school. KPF was intense: high-level design, international projects, and very high expectations. My first major project was 55 Hudson Yards. I worked on it for about a year and a half as part of a small team, and I got exposure to almost everything: foundations, curtain wall, rooftop equipment, bathrooms, renderings, construction drawings, and engineering coordination.

Brenda Slochowsky

What was the main lesson from that project?

Eli Meltzer

Precision. The building sits over the Hudson Yards MTA station, and there were columns already in place above the tracks. We had to design around those existing conditions. The columns were not in a regular pattern, so the floor plates and facade had to be carefully optimized.

At one point my boss showed me a picture of a sponge because we were trying to solve the irregular column layout. I wrote a Grasshopper script that created a grid of cubes. The grid helped absorb the variations so the facade looked clean. That was a major lesson in problem solving. Architecture is not just making something look good. It is taking constraints and finding a solution that works.

David Shamshovich

That seems to connect directly to the kind of work you do now.

Eli Meltzer

It does. Even at the top of the building, we spent a lot of time figuring out how to screen the mechanical equipment. I had to render thousands of openings in a grate, and the file kept crashing. It was frustrating, but it taught me how much precision is required to produce work at that level.

LEARNING ZONING AND REBUILDING THE PRACTICE**David Shamshovich**

Architects need to understand math, codes, design, construction, and in New York, the zoning resolution. How did you become comfortable with zoning?

Eli Meltzer

I did not really understand New York City zoning until I started working with my father. At KPF, I was not dealing with that piece of the work. When I came back to the family practice, zoning was central to what we did. Our work often turns on maximizing floor area, unlocking additional development potential, and understanding how the zoning can be used efficiently.

My father does not necessarily know where every provision is in the zoning resolution, but he understands the concepts intuitively. It is an attitude: squeeze more value out of the site, test the options, make mistakes, go back, read the code again, and keep refining.

Brenda Slochowsky

Was there a mistake that changed how you work?

Eli Meltzer

We had a project in a split district, I think R6A and R6B. The client wanted 10-foot ceilings, and we kept trying to make the building work. Late in the process, we realized that there were transition-zone height limits that applied because part of the site was near the R6B district. We had to go back to the drawing board.

After that, I became much more serious about quality control. Nothing leaves our office without multiple sets of eyes on it. Now, with AI, I also run material through different models to identify issues. It is not a substitute for professional judgment, but it is another way to check our work.

Brenda Slochowsky

Which AI tools have been most useful for that kind of review?

Eli Meltzer

For this kind of checking, Gemini has been the most accurate. Claude asks interesting questions. ChatGPT is useful for other things, but for technical zoning review, I do not rely on it alone. I like running things through multiple tools because each catches different issues.

RETURNING TO THE FAMILY FIRM**David Shamshovich**

After KPF, you worked in institutional projects before returning to your father's firm. What led you back?

Eli Meltzer

After KPF, I worked at Clement & Hausmann, which did institutional work: schools, universities, cultural projects, and some healthcare. I got experience with project management, construction, staffing, and business development. Over time, I started thinking more about housing and began looping my father into conversations.

Architecture can be a difficult business when you are working for other people and raising a family. I wanted to work on my own projects and build a practice. I was fortunate that my father could help make that possible, and I also wanted to learn what he knew while I had the chance.

David Shamshovich

So there was not a seamless handoff. You were really restarting the practice.

Eli Meltzer

Exactly. There were some jobs still in construction or amendments, and my father had relationships, but in terms of staff and active work, it was really the two of us building it back up. It was intense, but it was special. We went to meetings, networked, tried to learn, and looked for opportunities. I will always cherish that period with him.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND HPD WORK**David Shamshovich**

How did affordable housing become such a major part of the practice?

Eli Meltzer

A lot came from my father's reputation. People trusted him, and HPD trusted the Meltzer name. That matters in this space. But trust only gets you so far. You still have to get the first projects, understand the programs, and learn how the financing and agency expectations shape the design work.

My first HPD preservation project involved rehabbing apartments in Brooklyn. The first conversation was in 2019, we did site visits during COVID, and it took years to reach closing. That project was unusual, but it shows how long some HPD work can take. There are projects we started cultivating years ago that are still turning into work now.

Brenda Slochowsky

For someone coming to you with a ground-up project versus a preservation project, how different is the discussion?

Eli Meltzer

With ground-up work, clients usually know they need an architect to maximize the building. The brief is often clearer: maximize floor area, maximize unit count, control construction cost, and align the unit mix with the market. With rehab and preservation work, there is more back and forth because you are working around an existing structure. Sometimes the issue is construction. Sometimes it is whether you can squeeze in more units. The problem is more constrained.

ARCHITECTURE AND CONSTRUCTION**David Shamshovich**

How do architecture and construction relate in your practice?

Eli Meltzer

I prefer to stay involved through construction administration. That means regular site visits, reviewing shop drawings, and helping take the project to completion. Not every client wants that. Sometimes we are mainly producing permit sets, with a lighter role during construction. Both models can work, especially when the builder knows exactly how they want to build.

The important thing is to account for construction realities early. Height and story count can trigger DOB site-safety requirements. Once you go above four stories, you need an elevator. Depending on size, you may need one stair or two. Those decisions affect cost, layout, and feasibility. The earlier we understand the client's priorities and construction approach, the better the building becomes.

Construction method matters too. If it is flat-plate concrete, we may be able to tighten floor-to-floor heights and squeeze in an additional floor below a height limit or zoning setback. If it is block and plank or wood, the constraints are different. New York City code is difficult for wood construction, largely because of fire concerns. These choices need to be baked into the scheme from the beginning.

CITY OF YES AND THE NEW ZONING LANDSCAPE**Brenda Slochowsky**

When City of Yes passed, did it change the questions you were asking on projects?

Eli Meltzer

At first, City of Yes felt enormous because it rewrote so much of the code. We had to remap how we thought about many provisions. Over time, we found parts of it very helpful, especially changes to height limits, rear yards, and court sizes. For example, reducing a rear yard from 30 feet to 20 feet can materially change what fits on a site.

Eli Meltzer

For us, City of Yes created more opportunities to extract value from difficult sites. UAP took longer to understand, but the market has a better handle on it now.

David Shamshovich

For listeners, UAP, or Universal Affordability Preference, replaces voluntary inclusionary housing under City of Yes, although some VIH projects remain grandfathered. What was your experience learning the program and explaining it to clients?

Eli Meltzer

One early source of confusion was that UAP came out around the same time as 485-x. People misunderstood the 20 percent concept and assumed they could take a larger floor area but only make a small amount affordable. We had to explain that if you move from 2.2 FAR to 3.9 FAR in an R6 example, the UAP floor area has to be treated correctly. That changed the economics for some clients.

Eli Meltzer

Once clients understood the rule, we started finding creative solutions. On one project, instead of giving small affordable units, we made the UAP units larger and kept more market-rate units smaller. That let the client preserve more market-rate count than they would have had without UAP. It also created strong affordable units, which helped the project from a compliance and policy perspective.

David Shamshovich

So the value is not always in taking every square foot of available UAP density. It depends on the goal.

Eli Meltzer

Exactly. Once we realized that we did not need to take all the UAP every time, the program became easier to work with. You can also think about how UAP interacts with 485-x. In some cases, you might use affordable units at one AMI level and blend other units to meet tax-exemption requirements. The key is understanding the project's economics and structuring the affordable component intentionally.

UAP, MIH, AND DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS**David Shamshovich**

Some smaller projects hesitate to use UAP because of the process, cost, and delay, even though the extra market-rate units may have long-term value. Why do you think that happens?

Eli Meltzer

Some parts of the business are built around speed. The goal is to turn projects around as quickly as possible. That can be legitimate, especially where financing costs are high and the developer is also the builder. If the builder's priority is simply to keep building, long-term value from UAP may not drive the decision in the same way.

There are also developers who do think long term. For them, more units matter because land is expensive, construction is expensive, and every additional unit can be valuable over the life of the building. As the process becomes part of doing business in New York, I think more people will see that value.

David Shamshovich

You also mentioned charter reforms and expedited land use review. How does that fit into the broader picture?

Eli Meltzer

City of Yes got a lot of attention, but the charter reforms are also important. Changes to ULURP, eLURP, affordable housing fast tracks, BSA processes, and SEQR reform can make discretionary approvals more useful for housing. In the past, a rezoning often needed to be large enough and politically supported enough to justify the process. Now, a wider range of sites may be able to pursue additional floor area through a more streamlined path.

David Shamshovich

How do you compare MIH and UAP from an architectural perspective?

Eli Meltzer

MIH is often easier because there is one floor area number. With UAP, you are managing the standard floor area and the UAP floor area. The compliance concepts are similar, but UAP requires more negotiation between the base building and the affordable component. MIH is more straightforward from the architectural side because you know the target and design toward it.

WORKING WITH LAWYERS, AGENCIES, AND GOOD PLANS

Brenda Slochowsky

From our side, the best projects are the ones where a good architect comes in with plans that already account for HPD requirements. Then we are double-checking the numbers rather than rebuilding the analysis.

David Shamshovich

When the architect understands the program, it is noticeable. When the architect does not, it becomes much harder.

Eli Meltzer

HPD notices that too. They appreciate submissions that are thorough and vetted. In this work, rigor matters. The drawings, the zoning analysis, the affordable-housing compliance, and the legal documents all have to line up.

LINKEDIN, ZONING HACKS, AND CONTENT

David Shamshovich

Your LinkedIn posts provide small, useful zoning takeaways. How did you get into that?

Eli Meltzer

I started during COVID. I had come into the business in 2019, was networking aggressively, and then everything stopped. I started using LinkedIn, following useful content, and posting what I was learning. Over time, it became a real part of the practice.

Eli Meltzer

Architecture is visual, so zoning diagrams work well. Some of my biggest posts clearly show a problem and a solution. People like seeing that you can get more out of a site than you thought. But we are careful about the difference between social media and client work. A post can showcase a useful idea, but client work needs a much higher level of rigor and checking.

Brenda Slochowsky

It is a way to show a small piece of the knowledge behind the service.

Eli Meltzer

That is the idea. If someone can read a short post about MIH compliance or a zoning issue and learn something useful, it signals that we understand the work. It also leads to conversations with people who may have been reading for a long time without commenting.

David Shamshovich

Tell us about Zoning Hacks and the other content you are developing.

Eli Meltzer

Zoning Hacks started as an experiment with video. We wanted to keep growing the brand and test more sophisticated content. We are also working on a series tied to the firm's 30-year history, including interviews with my father about classic projects and the stories behind them. Another concept we are developing is called The Code is the Canvas.

AI AND THE FUTURE OF ARCHITECTURE

David Shamshovich

Before we wrap up, what are you seeing with AI in architecture?

Eli Meltzer

Right now, one of the most useful applications is error checking. I have also been building internal project-management tools and want to experiment with a zoning app or zoning bot. But the guiding principle has to be quality. AI should help us do the work better, not just faster or cheaper.

If a feasibility study used to require two days to create a rendering and now that takes a few hours, the point is not simply to save time. The point is to spend more time designing the building and improving the work. I do not need AI to tell me the FAR in an R6 district. I need tools that help with judgment, reasoning, and evaluating the best use of a property.

David Shamshovich

The pattern recognition could also be valuable. If you feed in prior successful projects and the reasons they worked, AI may help identify variables or patterns that are harder for a person to see at once.

Eli Meltzer

We are still at the beginning. People are stitching things together in different ways, and the most useful workflows are often improvised. I try not to chase every new app. For now, I focus on core tools like Gemini, Claude, and ChatGPT because the field changes so quickly.

Renderings are another obvious use case. A rendering that once took weeks can now be generated quickly. But that creates a risk: the rendering becomes so easy that you forget to design the building. The tool has to improve the quality of the work, not drive the work.

The long-term impact may be removing some production tasks, such as drafting repetitive details, filing systems, dimensions, and tags. That will pressure firms that operate like production mills. But if your practice is built around judgment, quality, and value, AI can be a powerful tool.

Brenda Slochowsky

Work smarter, not harder, but you are still working.

Eli Meltzer

Exactly. When computers came into architecture, the job evolved. Architects who could not use computers struggled, but the profession did not disappear. Expectations rose. The level of precision increased. I think AI will do something similar.

David Shamshovich

What does your father think about AI, given that he worked through the shift from hand drafting to computers?

Eli Meltzer

He loves seeing what is possible, but he is also very critical about design. His concern is that people might get lazy because one part of the process became easy. Computers made some things possible that would have been difficult by hand, but they also made it easy to stop thinking. His advice is to use the tool to improve the quality of the work, not to let the tool determine the quality of the work.

David Shamshovich

That applies to law as well. AI can reduce time spent on some wordsmithing, but the value is still in the concepts, strategy, and judgment. It does not necessarily reduce the amount of time spent. It shifts the time toward higher-value work.

CLOSING

David Shamshovich

This has been a fascinating conversation. We appreciate you coming in, and we appreciate the work you are doing. Where can people find you and follow your content?

Eli Meltzer

Thank you for having me. This was a lot of fun. Anyone interested can find me on LinkedIn, look for #zoninghacks, visit meltzermanlpc.com, sign up for our newsletter, or reach out directly. We are a small practice by design, and we value close relationships with clients. If someone has questions, they should feel free to start a conversation.