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Architecture **Boston**

Is There a New Boston School?

Architecture to Die For

Cultural Identity

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2005

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Pink House Bay Window, 2003.
Oil on panel, 8 x 12 in.
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School Spirit

Boston's architectural scene has an undeniable energy that some observers attribute to the emergence of a new Boston School. Could they be right?

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Brand Aid

A popular line of sunblock lotions made its place in consumer consciousness through a particularly cunning ploy: it spent no money on advertising. Whether the idea was the product of world-weary Madison Avenue cynics or up-and-coming “creatives” on the cutting edge of the self-referential “meta” trend, No-Ad clicked, especially with young people, who are at once most susceptible to and most calloused about the advertising culture. No-Ad somehow found a niche between cutesy beach names and the abyss of store-brand generics, implying a focus on the value of the product itself.

Just as it is nearly impossible to launch a consumer product without advertising, these days it is nearly impossible to discuss identity without a reference to branding. Discussions of branding are pervasive, serving simultaneously as the business consultant’s strategy *du jour* and a shorthand reference to identity. Unfortunately, both incarnations avoid any meaningful consideration of the complex role of identity in our society and culture. And so, with this issue, *ArchitectureBoston* offers a No-Brand examination of identity in which all references to branding have been banned.

It’s not been easy. Our roundtable discussion about the rumored emergence of a new “Boston School” — referring not to an academic institution but to a creative affinity — might have quickly degenerated to idle chatter about a new Boston brand. Instead, our participants wrestled with the implications of a shared identity and what constitutes a school. Rumors of a Boston School have been percolating recently in response to a growing perception of commonality among some practitioners (a school also calls to mind a band of similarly finned creatures swimming in the same direction). Less a style and more a sensibility, it is manifested in a restrained, elegant, humane neo-Modernism that is respectful of context and site and that uses materials in inventive ways. The result is a body

of work that is perhaps best described by what it is not: It’s not built therapy (à la Libeskind); it’s not built theory (à la Eisenman); it’s not built self-expression (à la Gehry); it’s not a built joke (à la Johnson); it’s not built violence (à la any of the Deconstructionists). And it is certainly not the latter-day Postmodernism that some Boston firms are still producing. What is most interesting — and this is what suggests a school and not merely a clique — is that there is evidence of this new sensibility in the work of established firms as well as newcomers.

The discussion of a school, which suggests a regional identity of sorts, offers the most obvious counterpoint to the “Elsewhere” theme of our last issue. But in fact, both of these issues were conceived as a continuing two-part discussion of

Just as it is nearly impossible to launch a consumer product without advertising, these days it is nearly impossible to discuss identity without a reference to branding.

the relationship between people and place. It is, of course, silly to imagine that a magazine could offer comprehensive insight into such a vast topic; “people, place” generates 172 million hits on Google, while “identity” generates over 87 million. But every day, news reports bring more evidence that the association between what we build and who we are resonates deeply in the human psyche. As the contributors to this issue indicate in different ways, the urge to invest our architecture with meaning runs strong; simply put, we want our buildings to say something. Our collective fascination with identity suggests that it is probably all too human to want them to talk about *us*. ■

Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA
Editor



Mediterranea, the newest kitchen in the Arclinea Collection, now on display at Arclinea Boston



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Here's a radical suggestion. Don't try to fix City Hall Plaza. Fill it in with new construction: a fine-grained, exciting project with a large residential component as well as plenty of commercial space. Leave a small plaza so that one can step back and see some of City Hall — the building really looks best, as Steve Rosenthal's photos show ["The New Order," May/June 2005], when you don't see all of it at one time. One successful example of a small plaza in front of an overbearing modernist "monster" is the lively Place Georges Pompidou (Place Beaubourg) in Paris, which is about a quarter the size of City Hall Plaza. There is no need to have a major civic space connected to City Hall. Siena's public plaza, which was meant to be the model for Boston's, does focus on its city hall with its wonderful tower, but other cities' great public spaces do not. The city halls of Venice, London, and Paris are not major buildings and are separate from their cities' great public gathering spaces; New York's gem of a city hall faces a minor park.

I propose that we keep our grandiose City Hall, make it a lot more friendly on the inside and less of a fortress on the outside, but scrap the Plaza. Who needs it? Let's get to work on creating some really fine urban spaces in the Greenway.

Jonathan Hale AIA
Watertown, Massachusetts

I was very surprised that none of the roundtable participants ["Creating Destinations," July/August 2005] brought up the recent proliferation of convention centers in the United States as the prime example of cities trying to create a destination.

Elected officials and urban planners across the country are building convention centers at a rapid rate because they believe it is an easy way to guarantee that several hundred thousand people a year will visit their city. Convention center feasibility studies are under way in every second- and third-tier city in the country — if shovels

aren't already in the ground. But their plans are often misguided. Unfortunately, many of these investments will struggle or fail, much to the delight of convention center critics who hold up these cities as examples of why convention centers don't work. I would argue that it's not the convention center that failed; it's the attempt at creating a destination that failed.

The roundtable participants discussed the need for old and new layers and attractions that are real and part of the community. These concepts are precisely why Boston can be and is a premiere convention city and for that matter a destination. What we have always known in Boston is that the facility alone is only a piece of what draws convention and meeting planners. It is the mix of attractions, culture, history, entertainment, and business and professional demographics that already exist here, that makes a great convention city.

James E. Rooney
Massachusetts Convention
Center Authority
Boston

This landscape architect read your roundtable discussion on creating destinations [July/August 2005] with great interest. Greater Boston's challenge is to make sense of the incredibly rich legacy of contributions it has made across all fields of endeavor (many of the region's hundreds of "firsts" are not just national, but global), but takes for granted, or worse, has forgotten about. Here we are in the IT age, in the "it" city, wondering if we have anything to say about ourselves, and to other destinations.

To paraphrase the old proverb, where there is no vision, and no memory, the people perish — or perhaps simply muddle their way into a different place. Places, like people, can suffer from their own kind of amnesia, anemia, and Alzheimer's.

We in the business of conceiving outdoor space know that a wink and a nod

won't cut it anymore. To quote Boston-born Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., "Life is action and passion; therefore, it is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of the time, at peril of being judged not to have lived." Is open space simply the innocent bystander? Or isn't now the time and Boston the place for embracing something a bit more evocative of the passion and action that has made greater Boston great? Open space design and programming should evoke the actions and the actors — the firsts, the progenitors, the inspirations. There is a lot to be said, and a lot to learn, and it should not all happen indoors.

Thomas M. Paine ASLA
Brown, Richardson & Rowe
Boston

Your recent focus on the theme of "Elsewhere" [July/August 2005] stirred me to think about the related notion of "Here." As the topic of authenticity developed throughout the issue, I realized that this is the fundamental issue in the design dialogue that takes place in Boston. What is this place and how is it expressed architecturally?

Boston is a place where we continue to add strata of new buildings to the already layered city. Each building contributes to the public realm that, in turn, becomes the stage for our daily lives. The public realm, with its background tapestry of architecture, becomes our destination — the place where we walk, where we play, or where we simply observe. Each façade is a stage set that informs the actors as to how or what to perform. The daily routines of the inhabitants move by endlessly for the visitor, who has come to this particular destination to witness these events. We are the destination: people and buildings and streets and spaces.

Authenticity, for us, is that we live here — playing, learning, working. When we overlay the grand festivals of

life — marriage, birthdays, holidays — the effect is more potent. Add the broad social activities of politics, sports, arts, and the result is intoxicating. We have created the culture of Boston. The drama of our “here” is a compelling destination with rich layers of architecture, in the streets, parks, and squares, which provide us with distinct, authentic venues for expressing our Boston lives.

Alfred Wojciechowski AIA
CBT/Childs Bertman Tseckares
Boston

Somewhere deeply lodged in the genetic code is an urge to wander and explore elsewhere, a gnawing hunch that “elsewhere” (a sense or place of comfort) isn’t here and now, but could exist in some other place at some other time and must be sought out, found, captured, and brought home. An in-born hunger for “hunter-ings” and “gatherer-ings” of place? Most folks also secretly harbor Walter Mitty-esque dreams of taking on exotic and adventuresome roles and playing out those roles in similarly exotic and unfamiliar places.

Never satisfied with the present, we oscillate between living in re-creations of an imagined past (which never existed) and/or inhabiting projections of a hoped-for future (which, ever-obedient servant of the Law of Unintended Consequences, does not arrive as imagined). At best, architects and planners study past and near-past places, learn from them, and inform new places with forward-looking vision based upon old wisdom and present-day means. At worst we make stuffed-and-mounted cartoon cut-out trophy caricatures of the past and service them with “up-to-date technology.”

The fictional Adventurer Across the Eighth Dimension, Buckaroo Banzai, offers to all of us the stark Zen paradox: “Wherever you go, there you are.”

Jeremy Scott Wood AIA
Weston, Massachusetts

We speak of authenticity as if it’s a universal quality — elusive but greatly sought after, and achievable if we just use the right materials, proportions, and

“intent.” Architects have long measured their status by their ability to produce this condition, to only make “real” things, and looked down on what were deemed the artificial environments of popular culture. But in a multi-tasking world, places can now be simultaneously fictional and authentic, virtual and historic, or synthetic and hyper-real. In this sense, authenticity is like pornography — its meaning is in the eye of the beholder.

In practice, I’m not sure you can design authenticity — it’s an emotional quality, the by-product of things or experiences we choose to give special value to. And it takes time, a factor outside the designer’s purview. How many generations did it take for the green wall to become The Green Wall? And how many, if ever, will it take for us to associate this feeling with City Hall Plaza? The more powerful influence on place is narrative. Like other design values, its application is fully within our control. But it calls for a different measure of architectural success. If we can express the stories, emotional content, and information of places in our work, then many good things, including “authenticity,” will follow.

If we don’t like to think of cities as brands, consider the \$150 million race among five world-class places to host the 2012 Summer Olympics. The challenge of destinations is not proving their authenticity, but in keeping their stories relevant to each new generation. If you want to join the experience economy, this is the new Holy Grail.

Gregory Beck AIA
New York City

Correction: The Tampa Bay Hotel, shown in a photo on page 40 of our July/August issue, is now the Henry B. Plant Museum at the University of Tampa, Tampa, Florida.

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Subscriptions and Guidelines

ArchitectureBoston is mailed to members of the Boston Society of Architects and AIA members in New England and New York City. Subscription rate for others is \$26/yr. Call 617.951.1433 x228 or e-mail architectureboston@architects.org.

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ArchitectureBoston invites story ideas that connect architecture to social, cultural, political, and economic trends. Editorial guidelines are at: www.architectureboston.com. ArchitectureBoston assumes no liability for unsolicited materials. The views expressed in ArchitectureBoston are not necessarily those of the editorial staff, the Boston Society of Architects, or Pohly & Partners, Inc.

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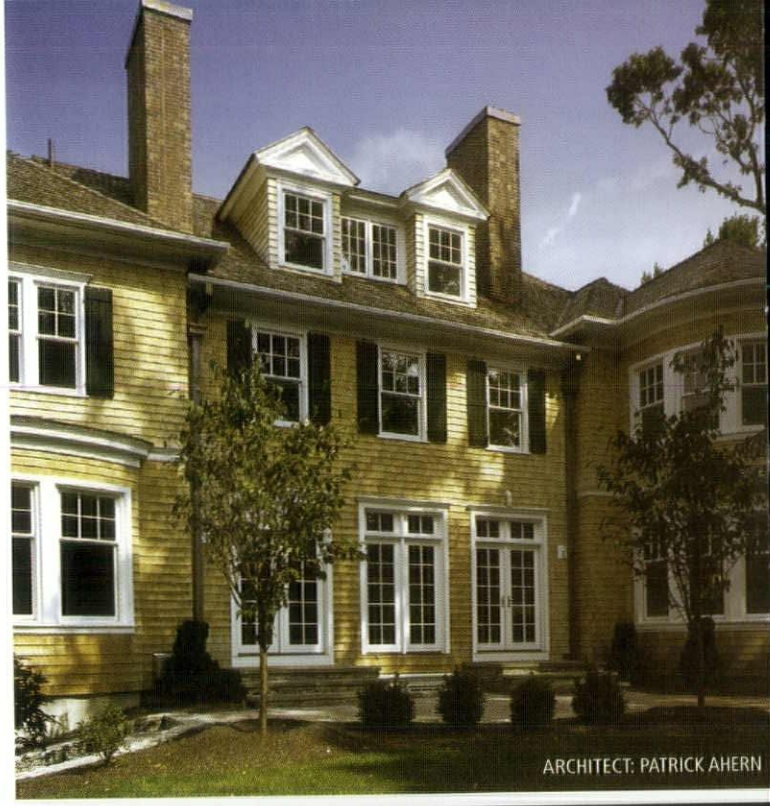
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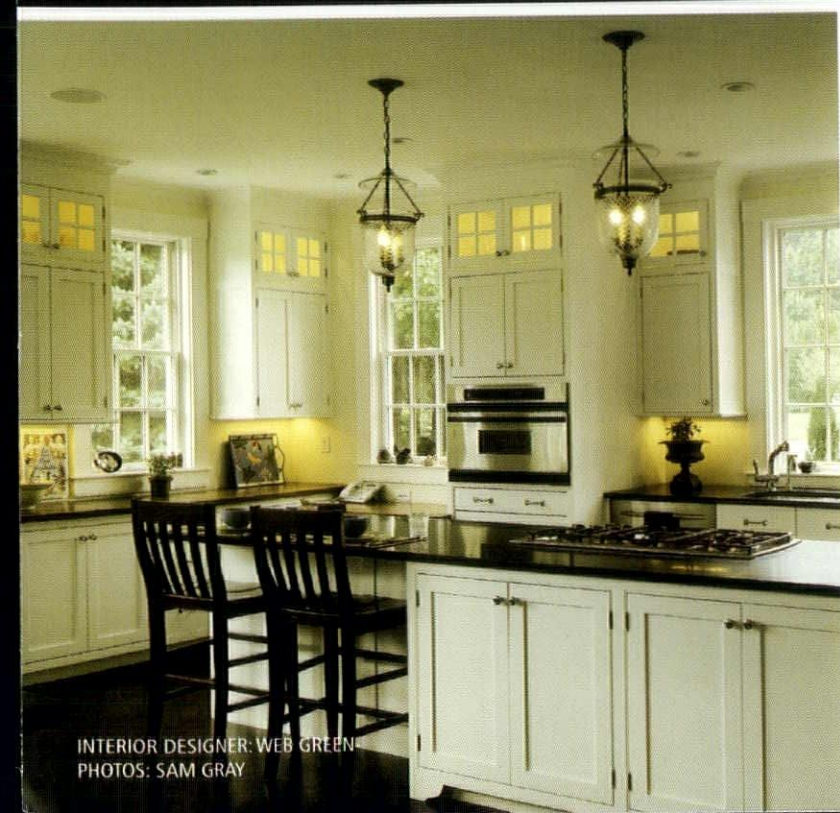
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Density 2: Rethinking the Urban Village

Northeastern University

May 13 – 14, 2005

Local devotees of inclusive, sustainable places convened in May to demonstrate how a more tightly packed Boston might in fact be a desirable Boston, one that relieves pressure from the region's undeveloped outskirts by creating attractive communities on sites near existing infrastructure. "Density 2: Rethinking the Urban Village" was the sequel to the BSA's 2003 "Density Conference."

Architect-developer teams provided the basis for the two-day discussion by presenting a series of schemes for a hypothetical site, accommodating 3,000 housing units and other elements in financially realistic projects. Boston-area designers, public officials, and financiers joined practitioners from Charlottesville, Seattle, and Chicago to critique these proposals, examine societal trends that might herald increasing demand for such environments, and consider examples of above-average

densities, such as in Seattle where two to five floors of housing are built atop each new grocery store.

Organizers accepted that their well-structured seminar did not allow enough time for dissecting or engaging community opposition toward density, yet an underdeveloped sensitivity to this issue might help explain its absence. An audience member's question about research on public attitudes elicited only references to decades-old book titles, and no one mentioned the unsettling dearth of research on the social benefits of mixed-income projects, which planners recommend broadly. Architects and planners need catharsis as much as anyone, but they must evolve beyond dismissive reductions — and one-sided judgments — of public preferences if they're to be leaders in more open-ended debates on community-building.

Kimberly Jones is a senior planner/project manager at Chan Krieger & Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

New Skills for New Americans

Education in Craftsmanship at the North Bennet Street School

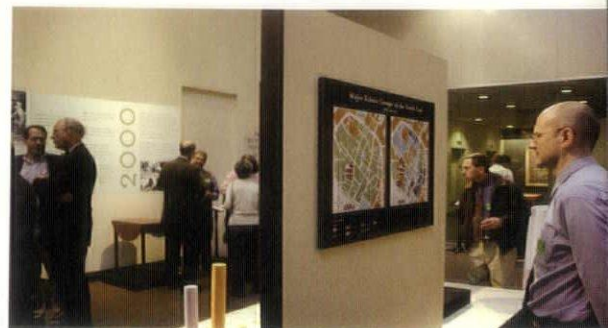
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For 120 years, the North Bennet Street School has provided education in crafts such as furniture and jewelry making, bookbinding, and carpentry. A current exhibition links craftsmanship and economics by presenting outstanding work by students, instructors, and alumni.

An early philosophy of the school, "hand and heart lead to life," assisted thousands of North End immigrants in developing holistic physical, intellectual, practical, and social skills to aid in upward economic mobility during the school's first 35 years. Care and dedication are obvious in the work shown: intricately joined desks and cabinets; chairs with gracefully curved legs; a meticulously restored balustrade; finely bound books; metal locks; beautiful violins; and even 1920s pottery created by the now extinct Saturday Evening Girls Club.

The exhibition is free, but appointments must be made in advance. Contact Melita Podesta at melita.v.podesta@bos.frb.org or 617.973.3197.

Andrea Ruedy, Assoc. AIA, is an intern architect at Goody Clancy in Boston.



Druker Lecture: Maya Lin

Boston Public Library

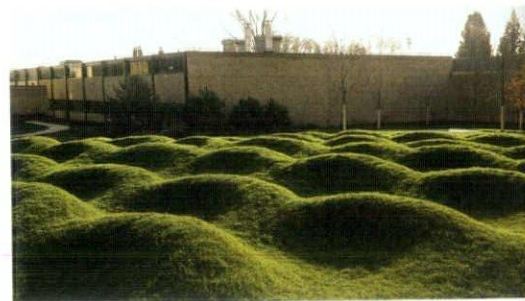
May 14, 2005

Going to a Maya Lin lecture is a little like watching an episode of VH1's "Where Are They Now?" You knew her name, you loved her Vietnam Memorial, you celebrated her wunderkind success, but Where Is She Now? The Rabb Auditorium at the Boston Public Library was packed with not-very-architecture types, eager to find out.

Since her debut in 1981, Lin has been on a mission to escape public commodification. She was trained as an architect at Yale but has established herself as an artist. Over the years, she has dodged monument commissions (she is not a monument designer) and avoided architectural work (it's not the right scale, it's too logical, it's not intuitive). She thrives when she's told she can't do something, and has consequently turned out some surprising work that challenges traditional artistic boundaries.

Several of her large-scale earthworks recall the Great Serpent Mound, an ancient manmade topography in southern Ohio near her family's home. "Wave Field," at the University of Michigan, is a quarter-acre of grassy moguls whose arrangement was drawn from a textbook photograph of the Stokes Wave phenomenon. For an outdoor piece in Sweden, Lin drew a long, wiggly line in the patron's gravel driveway, snapped a photo, and built it as a continuous 3-foot-high earth pucker over 1,000 feet long.

Throughout her tenure, Lin has often collaborated with her brother, Tan Lin, a poet, to inspire and adorn her works with words, producing work such as a charming Lewis Carroll-like reading garden in front of the Cleveland Public Library. She also showed three residences in development, which are



Wave Field, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1995.

minimalist, orthogonal, and carefully detailed. The final project presented was an enormous "water table," for which she struggled over several months to find an appropriate quotation. Her epiphany: a single arty line, reminiscent of the Swedish driveway image, will be furrowed into the stone's surface — a sinewy scar in the polished face.

Is this the inchoate edgier Lin? Judging by her ease with her own intuition, whatever comes from her will certainly be elegant. This author hopes the work will gain greater intellectual acuity as well.

Rachel Levitt is a designer and writer.

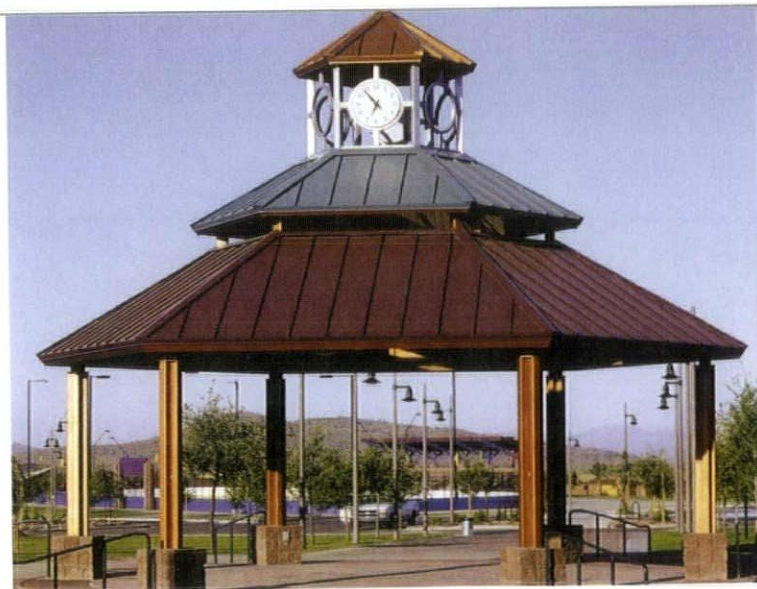
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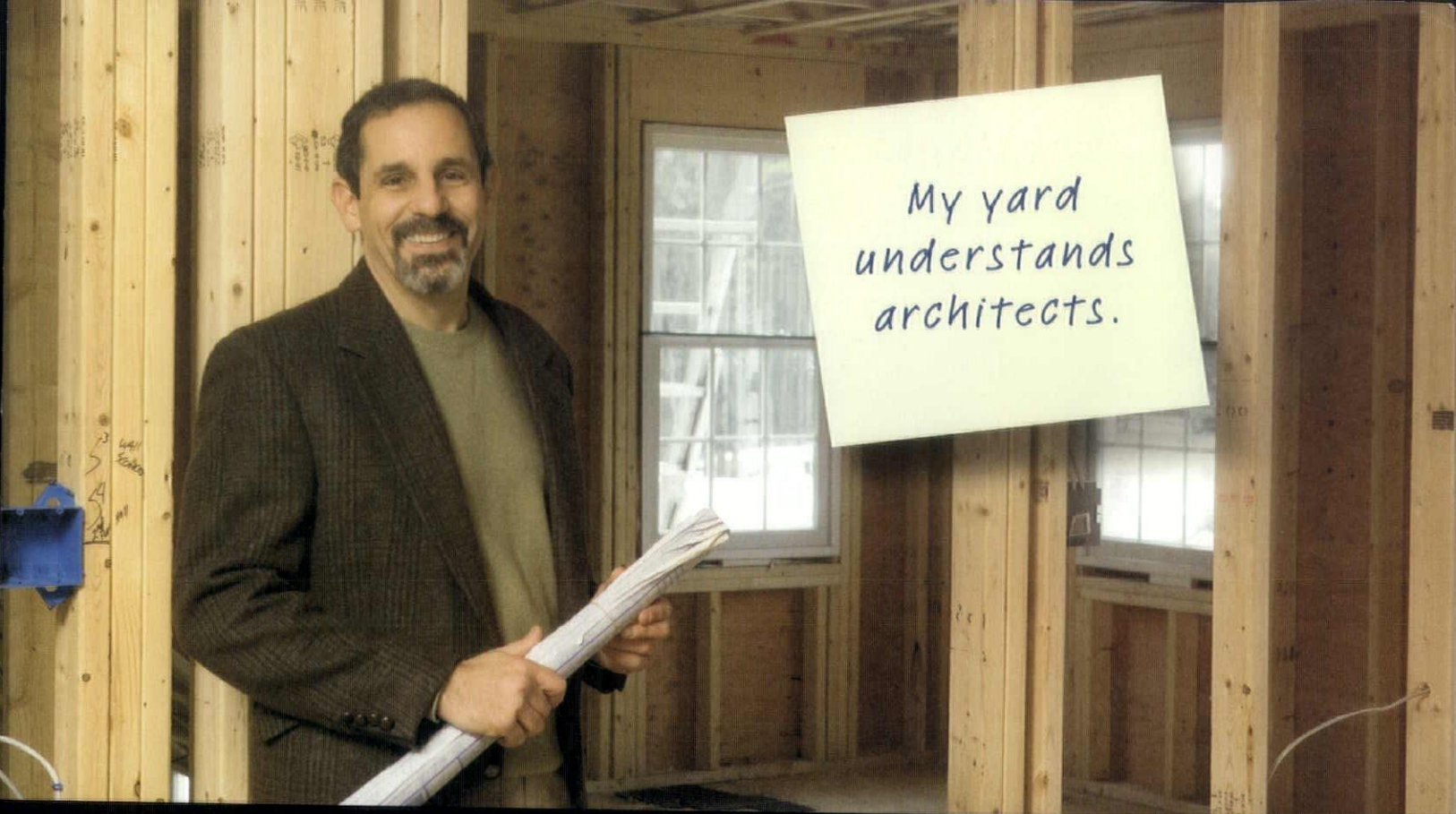
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Judging a Design Competition

The competition: A visitors' pavilion for the Boston Harbor Islands national park, to be sited on the city's new Rose Kennedy Greenway.

The jury room: A nondescript, low-ceilinged white room in Boston's Coast Guard building. Bagels. Doughnuts.

The jury: Three women, seven men. Many are local; others have flown in for the day. Architects, planners, a landscape architect, and public officials, including one from the National Park Service — the client on this project.

The day:

8:20 The chairman suggests taking a first pass through the entries, identifying the serious contenders. "Our job is to pick a first, second, and third, and then honorable mentions as we see fit."

8:25 The Park Service representative: "Ordinarily we choose a designer partly based on the ability to have a relationship — but this is a little different because it's blind. It's a leap of faith." She reminds people of some of the criteria for a successful design: "Functional, beautiful, and energy-efficient."

8:40 One juror comments, "This isn't an ideas competition. Whatever we pick needs to be buildable."

Someone answers, "I'd expect that everything we see today will be buildable."

The first smiles grimly. "Don't bet on it."

8:58 The jurors move to an adjoining room, deeper in the heart of the building

and windowless, which adds to the feeling of secrecy. Design boards — 65 of them — lean against the walls. Carrying preliminary ballot sheets, the jurors split up, moving to different walls and corners to gaze at each entry. After a minute, a voice breaks the stillness: "I need coffee for this."

9:02 Utter silence. Some jurors stand; some are solemnly rolling from entry to entry on chairs they've wheeled in from the other room.

10:30 Colored Post-its are handed around: one color per juror, so they can each mark 10 nominees. There's no discussion of the designs — though there is a brief procedural debate. "Should we put the stickies on the front or the back of the boards?"

10:37 The jurors begin zig-zagging around, Post-its in hand, heading for their favorite entries. With its silent intensity and flashing pastel colors, the scene resembles a children's Easter-egg hunt.



10:50 Some entries have quickly accumulated multiple Post-its: several have four, one has five. One scheme occasions some humor. "No votes for this?"

"Hey, I'm going to the mat for that one."

Two jurors stand close together and, for the first time, someone voices an opinion, albeit quietly. "I have to say this is my personal favorite." He points at the one with five Post-its.

Another board, suddenly, has six.

10:55 The entries with multiple votes are ranged along a wall, and those with one Post-it are spread out nearby.

"OK," the chair suggests, "Let's articulate what we were looking for when we made our nominations."

"Form."

"Handicapped access."

"Something distinctive for the Greenway. If it looked like it could be a nice T-stop somewhere else, that was a negative."

"I eliminated those that seemed to want to completely redesign the park."

"I was drawn to the ones you could walk through in different ways."

One juror says, "I was looking for beautiful and memorable buildings." Pause. He shrugs. "Sorry."

There's one design that pleases everyone and thrills no one. They all agree it's safe: buildable and affordable. Someone asks, "Can you ever get away from the image of the modified bus shelter?"

11:00 Discussion begins of the heavy-hitters, entries that have attracted four or more Post-its. "Great interplay among the different elements and circulation."

"But it has an ugly broken roof."

"Can we make suggestions about how to improve these schemes?"

"Oh, that's so discouraging: 'We like it — *but*.'"

11:05 Next entry.

"I don't know. The whole masts-and-spires routine borders on the cliché for me."

"Too close in spirit to the stuff we've already seen at City Hall Plaza."

11:10 Next entry. Six Post-its. Lots of admiring murmurs.

One juror says, "This one was borderline for me, but hearing all this talk..." He sticks a Post-it onto the board.

"It was borderline for me too," another man says, stepping forward and ripping his Post-it off.

11:19 Next. Four Post-its.

"This was the most elegant of the glass pavilions."

"Flat-out gorgeous."

"But a flat glass roof? That's not going to happen."

"But if it could happen, it would be spectacular."

"I'm going to push the negative, just to keep the discussion going. The reflecting pool creates a barrier — it's a moat. And there's only one door. It's a display pavilion that you don't go into."

The chair reminds people not to go too far into details at this point. "We're not voting yet. Just pointing out the pluses and minuses of each."

The jury lingers in front of the board before moving on. "The technological

advances in glass are unbelievable — it's not impossible to imagine you could pull off a structure like this. Glass has changed."

"But structures haven't."

11:25 Next. "It's a mish-mash, isn't it."

"Kind of a collage."

Silence.

Two jurors step forward and remove their Post-its.

11:27 Next. "Who knows what this material is?"

"Transparent concrete."

"Dirty glass."

11:29 More boards are discussed — some advance, and some are eliminated.

Comments about various projects: "This building doesn't know what it wants to be. There's a kind of corporate language here that says 'lobby' rather than 'harbor islands.'"

"Go to the Denver airport and you see this in spades."

"This is like the Calatrava building in Milwaukee. A moving building. Wow."

"With this one, access to the water and the ferry is confusing."

"This is singular — but one of my criteria is not looking like the New Jersey tolls. Does that bother anyone else?"

11:58 The contenders have been winnowed down to eight.

The chair suggests a lunch break. "Then we'll see if there are any passion votes to retrieve anything we threw away."

12:15 Sandwiches. A discussion. "How do we know the winning design will be buildable and affordable?"

"Yes, we have to guard against wishful thinking — you know, how would a great architect pull off the structure represented on the board?"

12:39 After considering whether there are any eliminated entries which ought to be reinstated — there aren't — the jury begins discussing the leading contenders. Even the widely admired come in for intense criticism, both aesthetic and technical.

1:31 A straw vote is taken, to see how close the jury is to consensus. Two schemes emerge as front-runners, each with five "first" votes; but others remain in serious contention.

"Well," says the chair, "what would cause you to change your minds?"

A chorus of voices, regarding several different projects. "More technical information."

"Knowing it could be done for the budget."

"If the roof changed."

"But," a juror says suddenly and fiercely, pointing at one of the boards, "no amount of redesign could help this one to move souls."

1:42 Momentum is building for the "flat-out gorgeous" glass box. But one juror is concerned that the reflecting pool might prove a safety hazard. Another points out that the renderings are treeless, although the site's environmental commitments stipulate retaining trees.

"Forty years of planning, this beautiful jewel about to be placed in this beautiful greenway — and you're asking me to sacrifice all that because the Park Service needs a place to put its *mops*?"

A third speaks up: "I would contend that the elegance and power of this scheme don't depend on the water or the trees."

2:10 Discussion continues of other schemes. There's one design that pleases everyone and thrills no one. They all agree it's safe: buildable and affordable. But someone asks, "Can you ever get away from the image of a modified bus shelter?"

2:15 A decision to look back through the rejected contenders to see if anything wonderful jumps out. Something does. A beautiful and original exterior, everyone agrees, though the core of the building is pretty standard.

2:32 Further discussion of the glass box. "It's risky and challenging — but isn't that what we want?"

"I'm afraid of the initial sticker shock."

"But you hire your architect here the way you always hire your architect — you say: 'This is the budget, now make it

work.' Then they respond to that."

"Yeah, they can't just say, 'You chose this, now you find the money.'"

Another juror snorts: "We don't get to live on that planet."

3:02 One juror (not from the Park Service) expresses a last reservation about the glass box. "It's so transparent. Where does the Park Service put its stuff?"

Another juror stares back, shaking his head. "Forty years of planning, this beautiful jewel about to be placed in this beautiful greenway — and you're asking me to sacrifice all that because the Park Service needs a place to put its *mops*?"

3:12 The chairman passes out Post-its. "OK, this is our first real vote."

"The other vote wasn't real?"

"Nope. Just idle discussion."

This time the glass box is a clear first.

3:29 Generation of adjectives for the Park Service's press release. "Simple." "Elegant." "Flexible." "Shimmering."

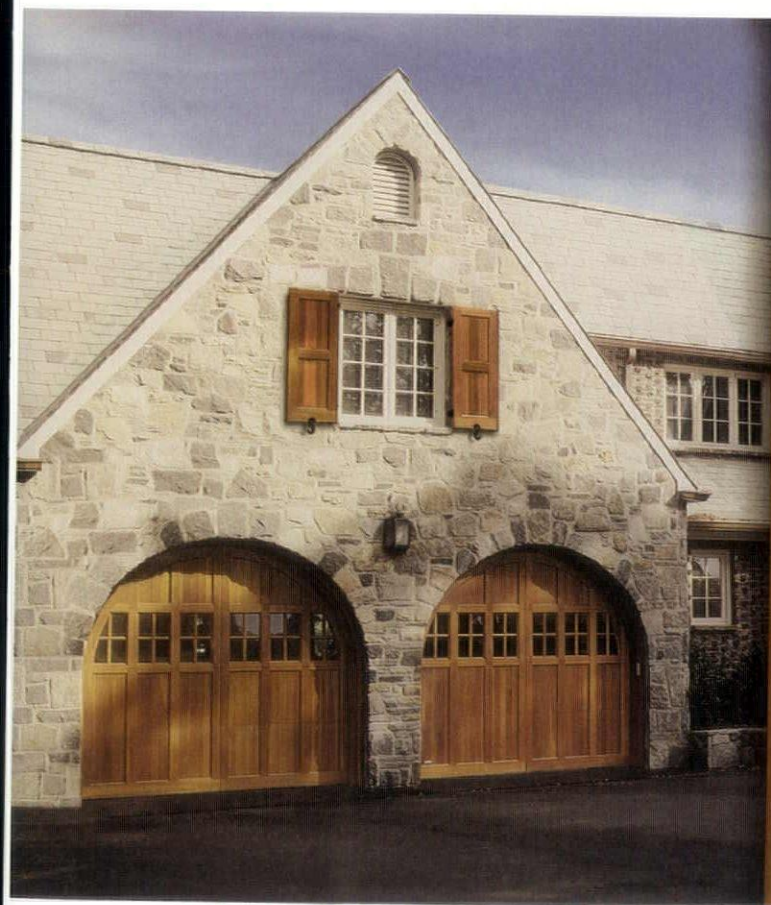
3:52 The envelopes are opened, and the names of the winners read aloud. A juror grins at one name. "Interesting. That's a young guy I've been trading messages with. He's applied for a job in my office."

4:10 Jurors crowd around the list of entrants. Several frown at the list and flip through the boards. "Uh-oh." They hurry off into the inner room, where the discarded entries, the ones that got no Post-its, are still stacked. "Someone you know?" a woman calls after them.

Their voices, half rueful, half laughing, drift back into the main jury room. "Uh-oh. Uh-oh." ■

Joan Wickersham lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is the author of *The Paper Anniversary* and is finishing a new book.

The winning entries to the Harbor Park Pavilion Design Competition may be found at www.bostonislands.com/pavilion/pavilion_compete.html.



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Boston's architectural scene has an undeniable energy that some observers attribute to the emergence of a new Boston School. **Could they be right?**

SCHOOL SPIRIT

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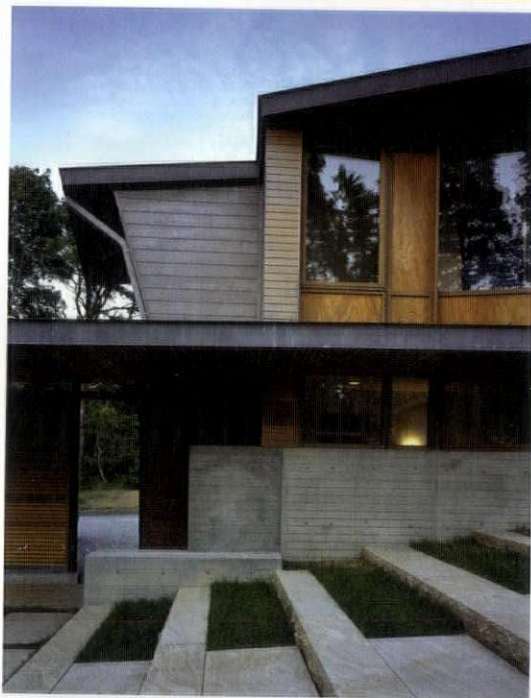
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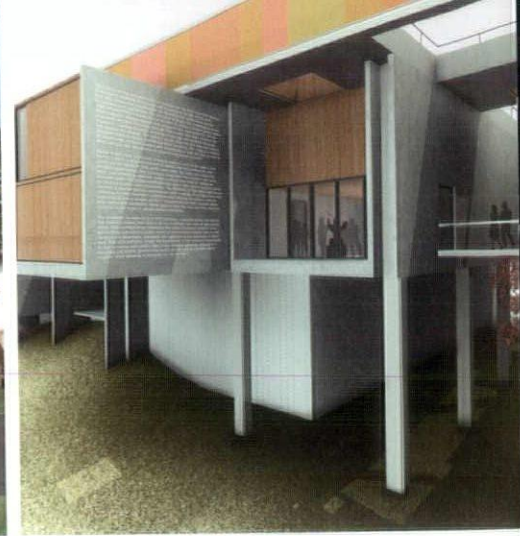
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Elizabeth Padjen: Boston's design community seems to be undergoing a metamorphosis of sorts. There is, of course, the natural evolution of new firms making their mark, but more than that, we're seeing hints of something I would describe as a confident edginess. Admittedly, that's not a phrase usually associated with Boston. But change is afoot, and it turns out that lots of people are having that conversation: something different is happening here. And some of them are floating the notion that what we are seeing is the emergence of something that might be called the Boston School.

The idea that there may be a Boston School of architecture is an interesting one. We hear references to what is sometimes called the Cambridge School — meaning, of course, not the institution by that name, but a loose coterie of architects in the '60s who generally shared values and ideologies and produced work that had a certain stylistic consistency that helped to shape the direction of architecture nationally. But there hasn't really been a sense of that kind of shared innovation associated with Boston architecture for some time. Some of you might think that this is all wrong, that the idea of a Boston School is ridiculous, and what we're seeing here in Boston simply mirrors what is happening in the profession nationally.

Robert Miklos: If there is a Boston school, I'm not sure it has a fully formed identity yet. But I do believe that there's a lot of new energy and new ideas here in emerging practices as well as in some practices that have been around for a while. I think there are some common approaches, values, and themes that work back and forth through our community, that aren't just about style. A few years ago, we could have characterized a school of architecture in Los Angeles that was about capturing a particular moment of our society, its chaos, its discord, and that was probably more typically identified with style. The things that join a lot of Boston practices are the values, the ethics, the process, and





the approach, rather than the result, the style, or the image. Those common values are beginning to influence how we all practice. There's an admiration in Boston for what each other does, and I think as practitioners we're open to learning from each other and sharing ideas; that's part of a tradition that probably comes from our academic roots. If there is anything characteristic about Boston architecture, I would say that it's not typically egocentric or self-referential. That might come out of our Yankee roots, even though most of us are not born New Englanders. I think our work is characterized by ideas and content, approach and process.

Elizabeth Padjen: Do you think that's more so here than other places?

Robert Miklos: I think there's a certain rigor to the way we approach design problems. There's a certain straightforwardness and practicality. There's an appreciation for simplicity and for elegant, direct solutions. We are great problem solvers.

Mark Pasnik: I would say that people in other regions tend to perceive a Boston identity more than we do, and for better or worse, it has something to do with respect for urbanism and respect for context. I worked for Machado and Silvetti for about 10 years, and on short-lists in places like California or Seoul, we would almost invariably find ourselves in the company of several other Boston firms. Clients seemed to feel they could find what they were looking for in Boston.

I'm intrigued by this idea about levels of commonality — there's some truth to it, but I also have reservations. There are a lot of emerging firms here that have very little tie to Boston in terms of their history or even the clients they work with. Many are associated with the universities, which attract people from all over the world. For example, I'm forming a practice with three colleagues. One is a London-born Canadian citizen. Another is Egyptian-born, but American-educated. Another is a Colombian-born Swiss citizen. And then I'm the Jersey boy in the group. Given the growing diversity here, I wonder if it's even possible to build a singular identity.

David Hacin: Identity is often born out of opportunity. And one of the interesting things about Boston is that there are two strains of firms here that have grown in response to different sets

of opportunities to build. Those firms that work in their own backyard have struggled with issues of identity that are different from those that affect firms that are working on projects all over the world. It sets up an interesting dialogue. There is a dynamic tension between what's happening locally and what's happening globally, and the schools are the link because they attract people from all over the world. A lot of people who stay after they graduate have a global perspective. But they also need to understand a lot about the region and the city in order to be able to fully participate in the opportunities that exist here.

Robert Miklos: Mark's description of his firm resembles a lot of firms that have been established here over the years. It occurs to me that one of the strong values and great traditions of the Boston architectural community is collaboration — not just within our studios but also with other disciplines like planning and landscape.

Elizabeth Padjen: I suspect we are all starting to sound too self-congratulatory.

Charles Rose: Wouldn't it be lovely to have a Boston School? I came to this discussion hoping to be convinced of that. But for something to become a school, you have to create a body of work in a geographic region. That's certainly what characterizes the significant schools of painting — Hudson River, Ashcan. In Boston, we are great at exporting talent. Everyone at this table probably has done more projects outside the city than in the city. It's been a real frustration for many of the younger firms in Boston because, frankly, we can't fish successfully in this pond. Generally speaking, the people who want to build challenging buildings are not building them in Boston right now. It's a very conservative market.

Jane Weinzapfel: But is there something we have in common that we're exporting? Mark mentioned short-lists for projects in California or Seoul that were dominated by Boston firms. What are others seeing that we're exporting so well?

Charles Rose: Boston is seen as a design powerhouse; people bring in Boston firms for their intelligence, experience, and design sensibility. But many of the firms that are exporting are not getting much work here. I think that keeps us from creating a real school.

David Hacin: I think that's true in the institutional sphere, where Boston firms have a very strong reputation and dominate many markets across the country, only to find local projects going to out-of-towners. But I think there are other opportunities here; the residential market, for example, has been quite strong. You need to find the opportunities to experiment with cutting-edge ideas. Boston is and has always been a city of fabric architecture, not necessarily iconic, monumental architecture. It's what defines the city. But you don't need to be iconic to be cutting-edge.

Elizabeth Padjen: You mentioned opportunity earlier, and it strikes me as a significant aspect of how a school, or at least a regional identity, might be formed. For example, you might define vernacular architecture as the architecture of local opportunity — in terms of materials, climate, topography, and all those kinds of conditions that start to create an architecture that belongs to a particular place. Are there ways we can extend the metaphor of vernacular architecture to identify local influences and opportunities that somehow feed a Boston architecture?

Robert Miklos: Market forces might be one — the clients and specific building types that are peculiar to this area, such as historic buildings and cultural institutions.

David Hacin: I'd say community engagement is another. The public process in Boston is extremely sophisticated — many times very thoughtful, sometimes very frustrating. You need different skill sets working in that environment versus working in an institutional or corporate environment. And at some level, perhaps those skills shape a common identity.

Charles Rose: I still have a very difficult time looking at what's been built and feeling that it somehow meets the criteria to be a school. Where are the big ideas that are linking this all together? In the days of The Architects Collaborative, clients invested in an enclave of TAC-designed houses in the inner 'burbs. That was, perhaps, a school — there was capital that was connected with a set of ideas and it produced something new. I think a school has to be noteworthy for some reason. Has that really happened here? It seems to me that the money that is spent on construction here is fractured; it is not invested toward a common goal, and as a result, the design responses are sometimes good, sometimes bad, but separate and not really cohesive.

Mark Pasnik: It's an interesting point. At that time, there was an alignment between the values that the new school wanted to create or perpetuate and the values of the clients who sponsored that

work. I don't think that alignment exists at all today in Boston. And that's why a lot of the edgier talent is seeking out work elsewhere. You could compare it to a place like Los Angeles, or even better, the Netherlands, where there seems to be a real alignment of the values of the architects and what they want to build with the values of the community and what it wants and aspires to. And I think that's the alignment necessary for a school to succeed in its own home town. I'm not sure that's going to happen here.

Charles Rose: If you look at places that have had strong identifiable schools, the people who are in the commissioning role are remarkably optimistic about design and its potential to create an environment. I actually believe that Boston may be approaching a turning point; I think there is more optimism about design. I think we're seeing an easing of conservative values that is more open to possibility and to new terrain in design.

Carol Burns: Shared values between architects and commissioning agents might produce commonality in identity in the next generation of Boston architects. Perhaps the value of this conversation is simply recognition of some potential for a future school. However, no such school exists now.

Elizabeth Padjen: It seems to me, though, that a disconnect between what firms are capable of doing and what the local commissioning agents are looking for is not necessarily the issue we might think it is. Falling back on the example of painting schools, the Cape Ann school of painters did not necessarily sell all of their paintings on Cape Ann. The product does not necessarily need to be consumed in the place in which it is made in order for us to perceive some kind of coherent identity. That will always be the case in Boston, because of geographical realities. I think of firms like Jane's as part of the vanguard of an emerging school. Early on, Leers Weinzapfel adopted a different way of looking at this place, which in turn influenced the work they did elsewhere. And they've been around long enough now that they have traction and have in effect graduated other architects from the firm who have gone out on their own, taking with them some of those values and some of that way of looking at this place. I cannot imagine Leers Weinzapfel as an LA firm.

Jane Weinzapfel: I think Boston architects are very lucky in that we have this incredible physical context. You can have a dialogue with it or you can push against it. It's very strong and robust. And it allows us to think of how we can work in the present with today's materials and today's ideas and still have an interaction with the past — the magnificent fabric of the city. It's strong enough to

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— Charles Rose AIA

“To build in Boston, we learn a special patience. If there’s something that distinguishes Boston architects, it might be that carefulness about issues of place is fostered here.”

— Carol Burns AIA

stand up to it. Our firm used to think of the design process as a conversation between building presences, our building being the most recent member of a pre-existing group. That metaphor evolved a bit, toward imagining that the building listens in on the conversation and finds its own distinct voice, offers new directions, and becomes an ensemble player. Ensemble players who perform together, coordinating complementary parts, settle into a group identity even as they are recognized individually.

Elizabeth Padjen: That’s an apparently subtle shift, but I think it reflects the larger sense of change in the city that I alluded to when we began. One could say that Boston architects have been trying to figure out how to deal with this fabric for the last 50 years. For a long time — certainly the last quarter of the 20th century — we were completely deferential. Now, it seems that we’re starting to realize that we can push back in ways that are inventive and at the same time respectful.

David Hacin: I think that’s exactly correct. The city is also more secure about what it is. There was a long period of time when the city’s identity was, in so many people’s minds, under siege. Now it is renewing itself again and moving forward. It can be more assertive.

Stephen Chung: And in that process, some things have changed in the economy of the city that may have created some shared experiences for practitioners — maybe this is another of those influences that shape an identity. For me, starting a practice during the Internet bubble gave rise to all kinds of possibilities. Typically, the clients were very young and, at that time, very well off. For a few years, we built lots of interesting projects; it was an example of market forces and the people behind them combining to promote new ideas and to create architectural opportunities.

When the Internet bubble popped, things changed. The opportunities didn’t necessarily end, but they shifted — away from the more speculative, maybe even hedonistic, types of projects to more normative residential work. Even with the economy waning, the residential market remained very strong. And even though Boston is a dense city, there were a surprising number of opportunities to build new residential buildings. I’m not sure that we need to identify a certain shared style, or even an approach. But it seems that many of the younger firms that I know have had similar types of experiences.

Robert Miklos: I think emerging Boston practices are characterized by a certain intelligence, resourcefulness, and adaptability that can make strong projects out of any conditions that affect the building process. If there’s any place in the United States that’s difficult in terms of process, it’s Boston. We have learned

to navigate through complex institutions, strong personalities, a daunting public process, and still have the project emerge with a strong design with great integrity. Maybe that’s one of the greatest traits that we export. It’s not a preconceived notion of image. Most of us practice in such a way that the project derives from the place, the interaction with the client, and the circumstances.

Elizabeth Padjen: Let’s explore that a bit — it seems to me that architects practicing in Oklahoma probably also say that their work responds to place and interaction with the client. The same language appears in everyone’s brochures. Does it mean something different here?

Carol Burns: Jane’s notions of ensembles are resonant for me: the sense that there’s already a conversation going on and that a new building contributes to and affects the dialogue. This approach to architecture is not separate from the issues of process that Bob alluded to earlier. To build in Boston, we learn a special patience. If there’s something that distinguishes Boston architects, it might be that carefulness about issues of place is fostered here, then exported elsewhere. A client on the West Coast might put three Boston architects on a short-list because they represent something — not style, but let’s say sensibility — about contending with complex existing conditions that are physical as well as political, economic, and social. I’m not sure that architects in Oklahoma who say that their buildings respond to their place bring the same preparedness.

Charles Rose: So we have some shared experiences, some shared sensibilities. I don’t understand how this constitutes a school. And can you really have a school and say it’s not stylistic? I’m not sure about that. Every historical school I can think of has been stylistic. I believe there are hints of some stylistic borrowing among certain practices in Boston. I don’t think we can be only a school of process, unless our process is creating something fantastic. Frank Gehry and the West Coasters created a school driven by a lot of process, which produced different results. Our process is sounding like a marketing brochure to me. There is a lot of truth in what’s been said — we all get on these short-lists because we are good at solving problems. But again, I’m not sure it adds up to a school yet.

Stephen Chung: We also have to recognize that the conscientiousness of Boston architects sometimes results in the label of being “safe.” When clients want something special, they don’t necessarily look for “safe.”

David Hacin: I would contrast that sort of conscientiousness with another global trend in architecture, probably most explicitly articulated by Rem Koolhaas, which is one in which context does



not play a role. It is a very forceful argument that stands distinct from what we're talking about around this table. And that does set Boston architects — or perhaps most American architects — apart.

Carol Burns: There are different kinds of context. Some architects work in the context of their own developing oeuvre, trying to create the next best museum to trump the last one, in the context of their own developing style. That's the context for many of the designers who are flown around the world to bring in a signature piece.

For other architects, context is the history book: they want to make something that will contribute to thought or be part of the tradition of the development of modern architecture or just get published. Rem is provocative and wants, I think, to make sure we understand that the context that he's trying to put his work into is a cynicism about the marketplace.

Perhaps it's old hat for architects to focus on the physical context. Nevertheless, the physical world is the place where we live our lives.

Elizabeth Padjen: And maybe whatever shared identity Boston architects have is less a question of school or style and more a question of sensibility. Boston architects, by and large, do believe in the physical context. Maybe it starts with something as basic as that.

Mark Pasnik: My reservation about making place the fundamental consideration in identity is that it drops a lot of the other traditional forms of identity that might also be important — racial, ethnic, sexual, economic, political, social class, cultural, regional, national. Maybe there is no single school here, but many; there's a lot of work going on that is exploring different types of identities in different contexts. Maybe it's a good thing that we can't all work in Boston, that we're actually forced to do things in other cities, because it encourages more of this exploration.

Robert Miklos: It might be an interesting exercise to try and identify the formal characteristics that bind the work of some of the cutting-edge Boston firms. For example, there is a great tradition of craft and of expressing material. There is an affinity or preoccupation with elevating buildings of utility — sheds, shacks, barns — to a different art form.

Charles Rose: There is a special attention to tectonics — the expression of structure and material and detail.

Robert Miklos: Some of that comes from the presence of some outstanding faculty members at the local schools. I'd say Rafael Moneo at Harvard in particular has influenced a whole new generation that cares about tectonic expression and is making it part of the restrained Modernism that seems to characterize a lot of the new work in Boston.

Carol Burns: There is interdisciplinarity — somewhat related to the collaboration issue that was touched on earlier — especially among architects who are interested in an allegiance with landscape design. But there also seems to be a growing interest in opportunities for collaboration with mechanical engineering designers, in terms of issues of sustainability.

Mark Pasnik: I wondered whether somebody would bring up sustainability — mostly because I'm curious why Boston isn't a leader in this. We're in proximity to great research institutions. The lead architect for the Genzyme building [Behnisch, Behnisch & Partner] is from Europe, and you see cooperation all across the EU. Why can't we collaborate from one side of the river to the other?

Charles Rose: I feel like a curmudgeon here, but LEED and sustainability are everywhere. The US government demands LEED, as do most institutions. But it is interesting to think back to the time when solar energy was really avant-garde. MIT was building experimental solar houses. There was real excitement generated by one of our local institutions, and it had an effect throughout the region; it would be exciting if we could somehow maintain an innovative edge. Certainly some of the best engineers are here. The same goes for landscape. We have some of the most talented landscape architects in the country here. It's easy to get them on board with your projects.

Jane Weinzapfel: Materials research is one source of innovation and another example of local resources that we could work with more closely. Our firm, for example, has been fortunate to be able to develop materials in the course of project design that eventually became products.

Carol Burns: Is that another factor that distinguishes Boston architects? Architects here do carry out research — although they barely have the time and money to get it done, much less generalize, write it up properly, and disseminate it.

Charles Rose: The idea that we would be the home of inventive thinking, not only around design but also around the actual making and materiality of a building, would be a great goal. Another ingredient of a school, historically, was that the members would cross-pollinate.

Jane Weinzapfel: Painting schools also often enjoyed dynamic rivalries; I always like to think of the word “rivalry” as hovering with potential between “striving” and “strife.” To be able to call in colleagues and have them critique your work in a pointed, good way is terrifically useful and something that we’re already doing in some fashion. The BSA’s “Conversations” series is another forum for lively critique. We should encourage more of that as a shared propulsion system.

David Hacin: One of my concerns about Boston is that it’s very cynical. We are very quick to criticize ourselves, to complain about this condition or that condition. We really have to conquer that in order to come together in a meaningful way and set up the conditions that would allow a Boston school to emerge. That’s a problem not just in architecture; that’s a


problem across the board. Maybe it’s because we live in the shadow of New York.

Charles Rose: In New York, Mayor Bloomberg instituted the Design Excellence Program. Designers submitted their portfolios, and the city selected 24 firms to receive all the commissions from the city’s Department of Design and Construction for the next three or four years. We’re one of the firms on the list. In essence, New York has decided that it’s going to promote 24 younger firms. It’s giving them a huge amount of work with good budgets and a tremendous amount of support from city agencies. It makes you wonder if something like that could happen here, and how different Boston would feel if not all the big commissions went to the large, well-established firms. It could engender some really interesting work within the city.

David Hacin: I think the public is ready for that, too.

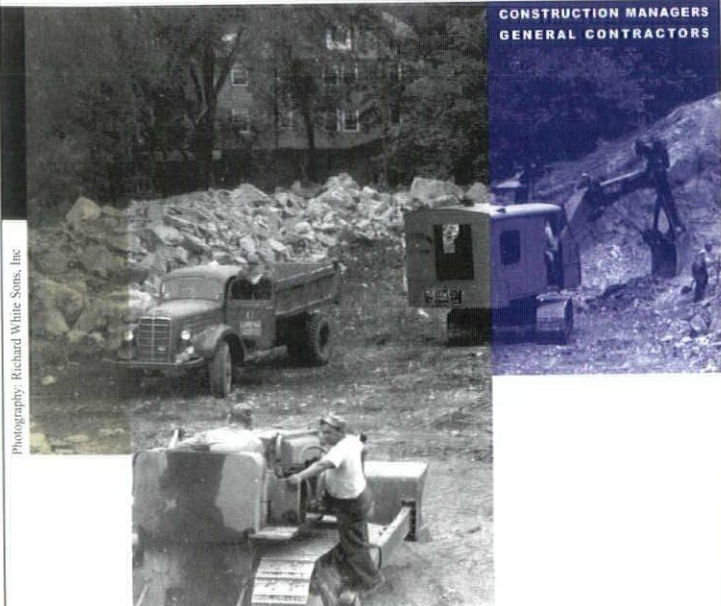
Elizabeth Padjen: Why do you think the public is ready? What’s different now?

David Hacin: I think what should be preserved has been preserved, in large measure. And the city is trying to figure out what its identity is, in the wake of the dot-com crash. Now the city is identifying itself as a biotech center, a medical center, a city that is forward-thinking in terms of its industry and




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technology. And that needs to translate somehow into the built environment. That's why, at the level of city officials on down to the public, there is some sense that Boston is emerging as a new kind of city, that there is a "New Boston" coming that needs to be expressed. I think the South Boston waterfront, with the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art] and the convention center, is beginning to suggest what that might be. That's why I'm such a soldier against cynicism, because I think there is great opportunity and we have to be out there as a profession advocating for it.

Stephen Chung: In our practice, we couldn't wait for opportunities to just come along. I decided that I had to find a way to be more proactive, so I formed an alliance with a developer and, together, we have been able to go after projects proactively. I don't know if that type of arrangement has any relevance to a new Boston School — but it is one example of a new way of working. I think there is evidence of other emerging firms developing other innovative ways of practicing here.

David Hacin: The fact that the city selected your team for the police-station project in the South End, over a lot of firms that took a much more traditional approach in a very conservative neighborhood, speaks to the desire of the city to promote that kind of design. The announcement made me optimistic that at the civic level there is an awareness that we need to be advancing this discussion.

Mark Pasnik: I'm actually more cynical. If the public were ready for this, then we would see a lot more of it. It's because of architects creating unusual situations like this that we're starting to see some of this work. And it's because of certain institutions that are more ready for it than the general public. One of the things people identify with Boston is education, and we certainly have a lot of architecture schools and programs. Why aren't we educators teaching and encouraging the public to be more receptive to this sort of thing? At Wentworth, which is a pretty small force in the city, we're trying to engage locally with the Fenway community and develop some relationships there. I know Northeastern's doing the same thing. We're making an effort to get out there in the community in order to try, from the ground up, to have some influence.

Stephen Chung: I think you should be more optimistic. Look at the South End and South Boston. There are a lot of young architects doing interesting projects — Utile, Office dA, Doug Dolezal, Davin Hacin — and those are areas that have been less receptive to new things in the past. When the developers see that the projects are successful, they will continue to tap these architects.

Charles Rose: The problem is that Boston has had bad experiences — the West End, Charles River Park. And so, unfortunately, there is some literal and figurative scarring that is sometimes hard to overcome. But I agree that there's reason for optimism — the South End points to that. I like the idea that we're at a turning point. ■

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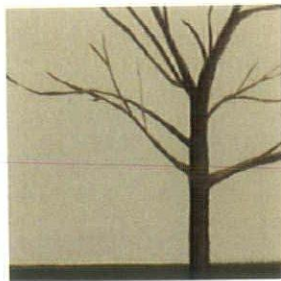
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Behind the FAÇADE

Paintings by Jessica Rohrer

You don't get to pick your relatives, and you don't get to pick the homes that shape your life: the Victorian where you grew up, your best friend's ranch house, your grandparents' apartment, that Gothic college dorm. Even adults sometimes seem surprised by their own choice of dwelling; property values, rents, transportation, and proximity to schools or work often conspire in the logic of a choice. HGTV aside, if you're into self-expression, clothing is a better medium than real estate.

And yet there is a tangled relationship between our dwellings and our *selves*. These are the places that are the containers of our most intimate memories. These are the places that define our "somedays": someday, I'll live in a place just like this; someday, I will get out of here.

The painter Jessica Rohrer explores that relationship in her series of portraits that capture every place she has ever occupied. Like a trail of bread crumbs, these paintings lead back through a life: a career in New York; studies at Northwestern, the Art Institute of Chicago, Yale; a childhood in Wisconsin. In our increasingly peripatetic society, a list of addresses is every bit as unique an identifier as a fingerprint or DNA.

We can't know the memories that these portraits conjure for their maker; in that sense, they are truly façades, walls that conceal the lives beyond. But they do allow us to project our own memories and associations, and in that sense they suggest an architectural history of America that is more personal and more real than any presented in a textbook.

— Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA

"Monitor Street," an exhibition of paintings by Jessica Rohrer, will be on view from November 17 to December 23, 2005, at P-P-O-W Gallery, 555 W 25th Street, New York.



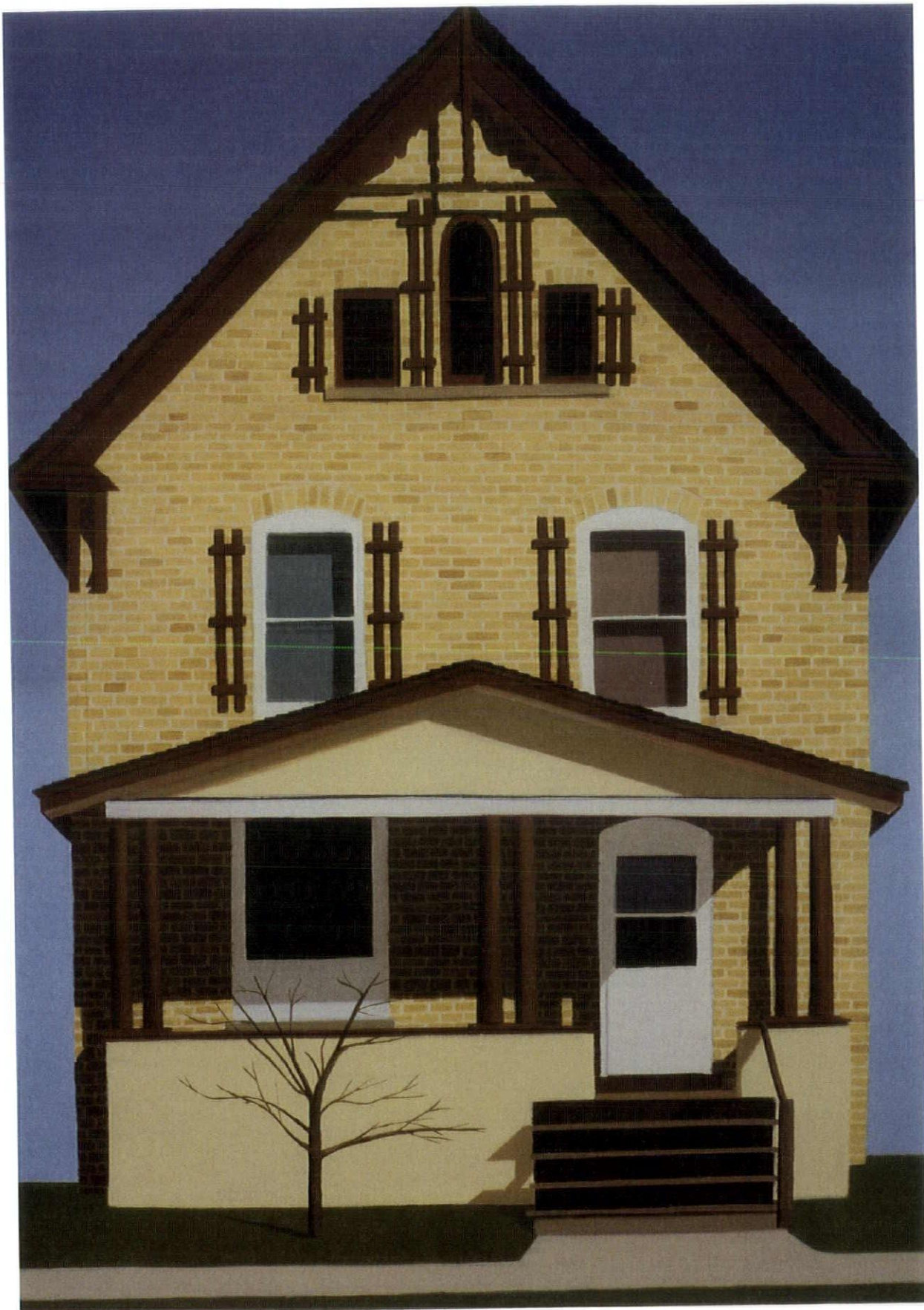
Pink House, New Haven, Connecticut, 2001. Oil on panel, 11 x 12 in.



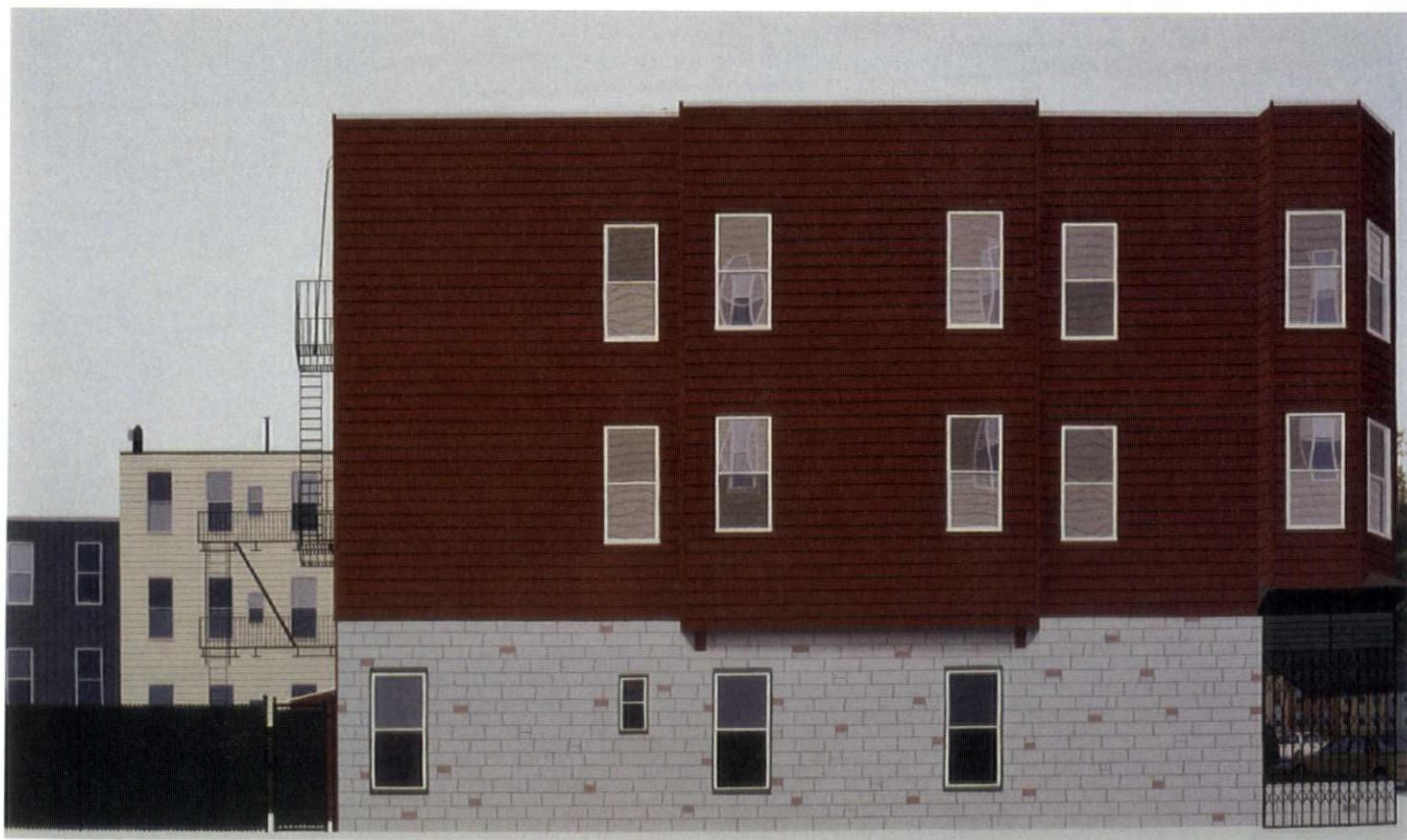
Apartment, Brooklyn, New York, 2002. Oil on panel, 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 10 in.



Top: Modern House (Side View), Kewaskum, Wisconsin, 2002. Oil on panel, $11\frac{1}{4} \times 21\frac{1}{2}$ in.
 Bottom: Dorm, Evanston, Illinois, 2002. Oil on panel, $15\frac{1}{2} \times 31\frac{1}{2}$ in.



Yellow House, Kewaskum, Wisconsin, 2001. Oil on panel, 9 x 13 in.



Top: Untitled (Monitor Street Series), 2003. Oil on panel, 20 x 49 in.
 Bottom: Untitled (Monitor Street Series), 2004. Oil on panel, 20 x 33 in.



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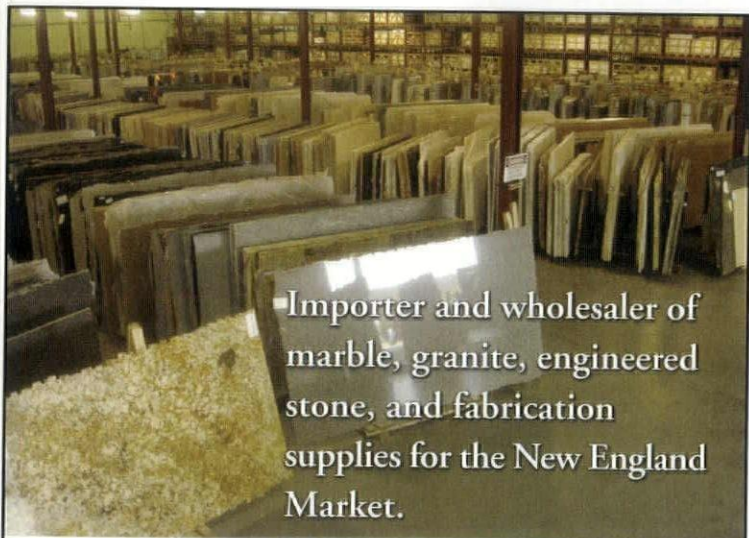
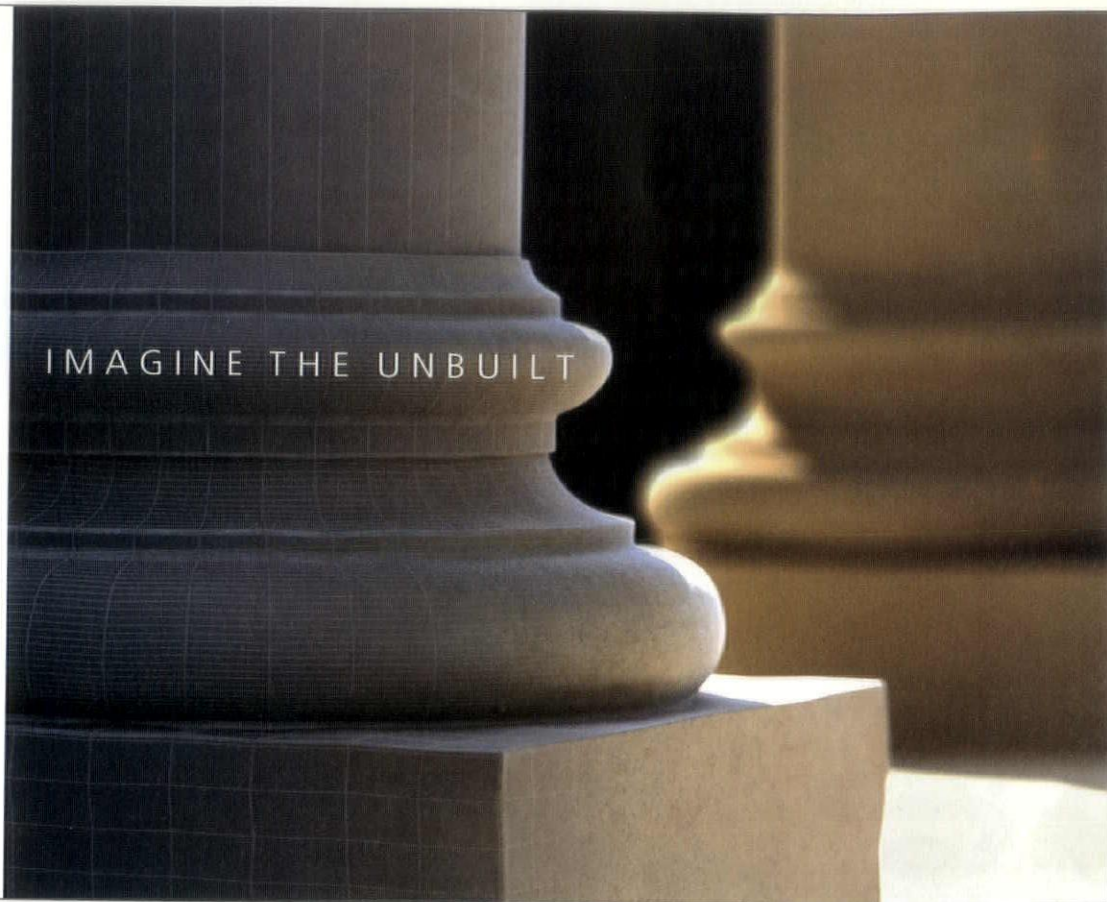
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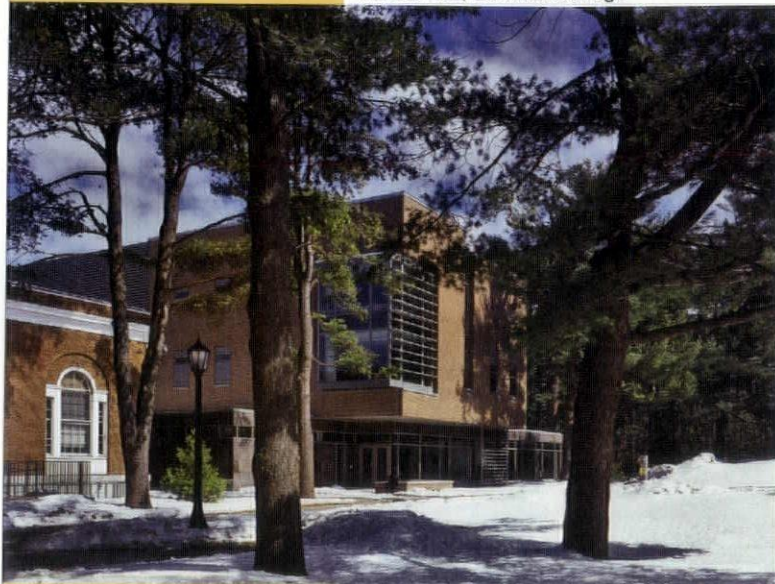


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ARCHITECTURE TO DIE FOR

When is a building more than a building? **By Hubert Murray AIA**

For those in search of Donald Trump's inner philosopher, the moment of revelation may have come. In proposing that the twin towers of the World Trade Center should be rebuilt as a replica of the original (plus one story) the self-seeking blond mogul seems to have offered an insight into our cultural identity that none of the other protagonists involved in the rebuilding seems to have cottoned onto.

In making his proposal, Trump has shown that he alone has understood the mythical power that was invested in the sibling skyscrapers by the demonic bin Laden. Prior to 9/11, Yamasaki's towers were never accorded much recognition other than as landmark or viewpoint, depending on where you were (looking at or looking out). After 9/11, however, images of the towering inferno and twisted wreckage have been seared into our collective consciousness, embracing in their representation the bundle of myths that bind us together as a country: the nobility of workers building their "ordinary American" lives within that

citadel of capitalism; the heroism of New York's Finest; and the steely resolve that sought restitution for the dastardly attack on Pearl Harbor. Just as the power of the WTC as national icon was created by bin Laden, not Yamasaki, so, arguably, this mythical power cannot be supplanted by Libeskind, Childs, or anyone else on the dream team of architects and engineers who seek to rebuild and memorialize on this vast and lofty scale.

To what extent then are icons of cultural identity born, *ab initio*, from the mind of the architect, and to what extent do they achieve that status or have that greatness thrust upon them? To ask the question another way, to what degree can architecture imbue in a building its strength as cultural icon? Or is such strength derived from context, circumstance, and the spirit of the times, the architecture merely coincidental?

The World Trade Center is not alone among buildings for having attained mythic status through violent attack. Examples abound, particularly religious ones: the 2001 destruction of the Buddhist Statues of Bamiyan in Afghanistan identified, at least to foreigners, the oppression of a community at odds with its Taliban rulers. The 1984 storming of the Golden Temple at

Opposite: Golden Temple, Amritsar, India.



Above: Rynek Market Square, Warsaw, Poland.

Amritsar, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, inspired members of that religion to assassinate Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who had given the orders for this assault on the identifying sanctuary of their community.

There are also secular examples. Warsaw, utterly destroyed by the German occupation in World War II, from 1945 rebuilt its historic center in facsimile from the paintings of Canaletto, as meticulous a documentation as one could wish for. As an assertion of cultural identity, this museum-like restoration of the heart of the city gained its strength as a repudiation of Nazi destruction. In its reference to an 18th-century Italian as the (albeit unknowing) guardian of their heritage, it was also a reminder to the Soviets that Poles are children of the European Enlightenment, not of the Slavic East.

Dresden, the so-called Florence on the Elbe, has suffered in the last 50 years the annihilating destruction of Allied bombing in 1945, the punitive neglect of the workers' paradise through 1989 and, as an almost trivial afterthought, the devastating floods of 2002. Through it all, the high church of Protestantism, the Frauenkirche, has undergone an iconic metamorphosis from dignified skeleton among the ruins, to memorial of neglect reproaching those still under the influence of the people's opiate, through its most recent manifestation, fully restored, as a phoenix rising from the ashes of war and godlessness. Gottfried Semper's Opera House, thrice built and thrice destroyed, the last time by flood, is being meticulously restored for the city's 800th anniversary in 2006. One religious, the other secular, each a remarkable work of architecture in its own

right, these buildings have assumed a stature in the community beyond their creators' imaginations.

The National Library in Sarajevo, long a repository of religious and intellectual culture from the three monotheistic traditions, was shelled by the Serbs in 1992. The building itself, no more than a hundred years old, became an instant symbol to Bosnians and to the world of the centuries of cultural and social pluralism that stood as the antithesis to the sectarian nationalism with which it had been pummeled.

Then there are those exceptional buildings that, while avoiding the cauterizing passage to iconic status through violent assault, have been recognized as cultural symbols from the beginning. The strictly architectural examples are rare however. In his essay on the Eiffel Tower, Roland Barthes declares that "architecture is always dream and function, expression of a utopia and instrument of a convenience." It is striking how many of the buildings that are "born iconic" are strong on utopian dream (many of them religious) and weak on function. As Barthes notes, the Eiffel Tower itself, the symbol of Paris (if not of France), is most significant in its uselessness. It is the dreams that the Tower generates — in an industrial nation at the peak of its imperial power — that imbue it with its iconic strength. The immateriality of form, the antigravitational thrust, the conquest of space, and the promise of modernity are utopian fantasies with infinitely more power than any banal function that might be attributed to the structure as viewing platform, radio tower, or weather station. The very secularity of the structure bestows its enduring significance as a symbol of the Enlightenment.

Another case of a powerful identifier bereft of material function is the Voortrekker Monument in South Africa. High on a hilltop south of Pretoria, this 40-meter granite cube commemorates the Great Trek of the Afrikaaners from the Cape to the Transvaal in the 1830s. More than a monument to an event, however, this shrine to Afrikaanerdom purportedly represents the triumph and determination of God's chosen people (their Calvinist selves) over the oppression of the imperialists (the British) and the forces of barbarism (the Xhosa, Zulus, and other African peoples). Erected at the time of fascist domination in Europe and completed in the year of the Nationalist Party ascendance to power in South Africa (1948), this monument to white supremacy, of questionable artistic merit even then, was at the peak of its iconic strength. While it has physically survived the transition to democracy, however, this vast and trunkless block of stone stands abandoned, its meaning nullified by universal suffrage.

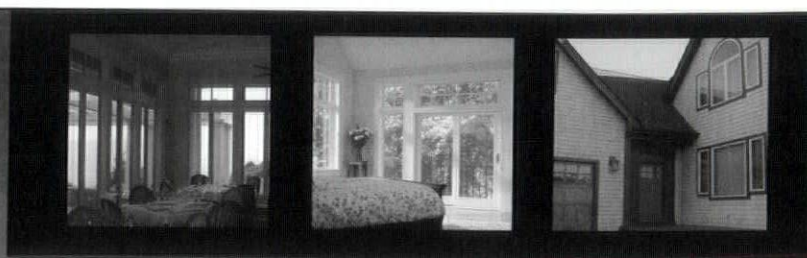
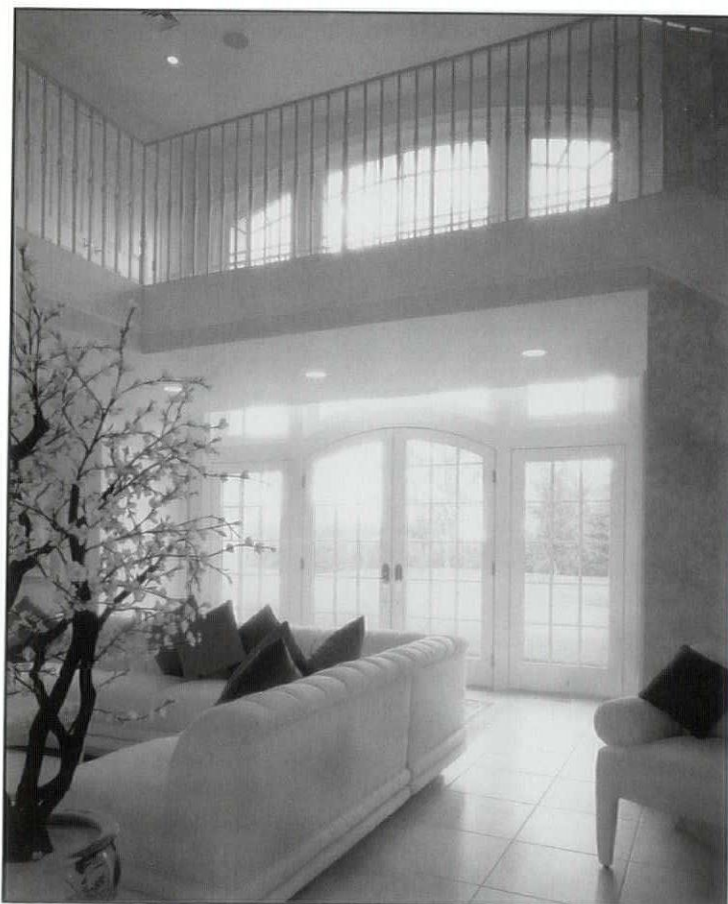
A contrary case can be made for bridges. For the most part decidedly un-useless, bridges are often cited as cultural icons signifying place and, sometimes, community. The Golden Gate Bridge and Sydney Harbor Bridge are inseparable from their cities and topographies. The Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma and the Mostar Bridge in Bosnia are inseparable from their histories.

But bridges, however functional, are the stuff of fantasy. Tunnels do not have that cachet. A possible exception — at least until recent events — was the London Underground,

To what extent are icons of cultural identity born, *ab initio*, from the mind of the architect, and to what extent do they achieve that status or have that greatness thrust upon them?

which in the minds of Londoners of a certain age represented the safe haven that it became during the Blitz of 1940. Henry Moore's sketches of mothers and children asleep in each others' arms on platforms and within the tunnels themselves invested this stinking and dysfunctional infrastructure with a numinous quality that may now be gone forever.

In this period of nomadic voyeurism, it is important to distinguish between the icons of consumption tourism (the Taj Mahal, the Pyramids) that are simply items on a checklist of the visiting foreigner and those buildings that have served to define and to give identity to their native populations. To the international art set for instance, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is celebrated as one more brilliant product in a constellation of such cultural destinations.



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For those wishing to revive their cities, the "Gehry object" is as reproducible as any work of art in an age of mechanical production. For the Basques, however, the building derives its strength uniquely from its place and political context. The anarchy of form, though striking in itself, attains its fullest meaning when viewed as a reflection of Basque resistance to the central authority of Madrid and 60 years of fascism. Considered in this way, Gehry's inspired creation is not a fungible commodity that can be traded in New York and Los Angeles with indifference.

Infinite reproduction does not necessarily dilute the power of the symbol. The Parthenon is unique in its site and in its expression of the Doric. It has been reproduced in generic form wherever the institutions of Graeco-Latin culture prevail. Far from diminishing the authority of the original, however, the latter-day facsimiles found even in their meanest form in the portals of a bank or a high school serve to fortify the meaning of the original and the Athenian humanism for which it stands. Paradoxically, the Parthenon Marbles, the contested sculptures that constituted the frieze and metope of the temple that were "rescued" by Lord Elgin and taken to the British Museum, have become for Greece a more eloquent national symbol in their very absence.

Do any of Boston's buildings repay examination in this way? Is there an architecture in this city that embodies the collective consciousness of Bostonians, that gives the city

its identity? Russell Banks once cleverly remarked that the vernacular architecture of farms and villages is to New England as reggae is to Jamaica. Or, one might add, as red brick is to Boston. Try as one might, it is hard to say whether the icons of democracy such as the State House and City Hall, or the places of worship such as Trinity Church and Old North Church have any more stature in the public mind than, say, Fenway Park or the Citgo Sign.

Whereas the seats of government and the churches have an iconic stature embodied in their architecture as intended symbols of community, the same cannot be said of the ballpark and its gasoline advertisement neighbor that, despite their architecture, have inherited their shrine-like status through historic association with the much beloved resident team of erstwhile losers. Old North Church, beyond its inherent elegance, has a national stature attributable as much to Paul Revere and Longfellow's poem as to the architecture itself. The latter day symbol of the city is of course the Big Dig, ranging from the sublime image of Christian Menn's cable-stay bridge, to the literally sub-liminal weeping walls of Tip's Tunnel. As a symbol of a city whose glass from one day to the next is either half-full or half-empty, it is not an unfitting monument. ■

Hubert Murray AIA has an architecture and planning practice in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



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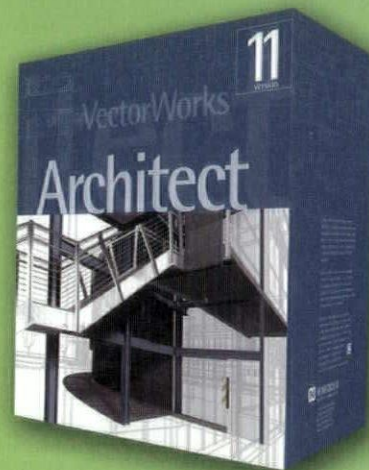
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IN PRAISE OF IDENTITY

“Good artists copy; great artists steal.” — Pablo Picasso

The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) defines *identity theft* as “the use of [a person’s] name, address, Social Security number (SSN), bank or credit card account number, or other identifying information without [that person’s] knowledge, with the intent to commit fraud or other crimes.” Identity theft, in other words, means pretending to be someone else, but with the specific intent of using the adopted identity to deceive others. Swapping one identity for another is easier than many of us probably suppose. In 2004 alone, more than 246,000 individual complaints were lodged with the FTC concerning identity theft, most of which involved a sum of money well under \$1,000. Identity theft’s trend toward ubiquity and democracy seems surprising only because we experience our own unique personal identities so vividly. Our identities — like our résumés — are works of art, obsessively sculpted to fit snugly into all the crenels and craters of a modern life. We carry these abstract tikis with us to every office party and PTA meeting. None of us would ever mistake our own identity for someone else’s. And so it doesn’t seem reasonable that stealing something so cumbersome and so personalized could be so easy.

Yet, as the artists and mystics have been telling us for millennia, an identity is really an elaborate fiction, a pretense discarded as soon as it ceases to be useful. Even our most cherished sources of identity — our ethnic heritages, levels of education, and social classes, for example — are far more arbitrary than we usually care to admit: ethnic heritage is a question of how far back one looks — two generations ago to

Germany or 50 generations to Moorish Spain; even at the highest levels of education we are all equally ignorant outside the increasingly tiny domains of our expertise; and social classes are subject to the larger and more impersonal forces of economics and geography. In all cases, our identities are largely (though never entirely) voluntary. Further, recent tectonic shifts in information technology, marketing psychology, and financial systems have rendered the tissues of pretense that constitute our identities at once more abstract and more friable. In a world of infinitely replicable infomedia and balkanized marketing segments, assembling and donning another identity is no more difficult than wearing the right brands and learning to type. We are, in other words, all pretending to be someone, and it has never been easier to cobble a new identity for ourselves using the fragments modern culture has made of our lives.

American culture is at once at ease and at odds with fluidity of identity. Few cultures in human history have so aggressively pursued such an authentic form of egalitarianism. We Americans may often feel inconvenienced by identifying factors such as a Buddhist upbringing or a Spanish-sounding surname, but we rarely feel completely trapped by them. On the other hand, we are constantly urged simply to “be ourselves,” by which is apparently meant that we should be true to our own unique, personal genius.

Such strong ambivalence is due in part to the fact that ease of pretense may be a dominant theme in our age. Indeed, it applies as well to buildings as to persons. Architecture even provides

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American culture is at once at ease and at odds with fluidity of identity. Few cultures in human history have so aggressively pursued such an authentic form of egalitarianism.

us with one of our most beloved and profound metaphors for an appearance which masks an underlying reality: the façade. A noteworthy shift in thinking about façade has occurred in our age, driven by the advance of building technology and the concomitant drift in our thinking about architectural identity. While the distinction between façade (or ornament) and structure has long served as a conceptual aid to builders, designers, and philosophers trying to think about how and why we build, it now serves primarily as a technical assumption. With steel substructures covered with whatever weatherproofing we like best, contemporary buildings reflect an unconscious belief that structure, function, and façade can be completely independent of one another. Any function can be housed in any building whatsoever.

Adaptive reuse represents the bright side of the freedom granted by the divorce of structure, function, and façade. The other, darker, side of the coin is the disintegration of architecture's visual vocabulary. Buildings are no longer implicitly legible merely as a corollary to their form. Laymen can no longer tell what role a building plays in the community simply by examining its façade. All too often these days, it seems buildings are simply matrices of quantum spaces, to be sequenced into whatever Tetris-block configuration of uses the owner of the moment so desires. A revealing symptom of our culture's fundamental architectural illiteracy is the fact that intensive signage is required not only to help people navigate within homogenized corridors and chambers, but also to permit them to distinguish between schools, prisons, and homes in the first place. Where architectural identity was once underpinned more or less equally by structure, façade, and function, architectural identity has become almost purely a function of façade. A major source of meaning in architecture is (or was) the dependable linkage between a building's façade, its structure and layout, and the kinds of activity housed within its spaces. The pre-eminent goal of contemporary architecture is thus not to design spaces that improve our bodies, minds, and souls, but rather to pin striking façades on protean buildings.

Like buildings throughout human history, our buildings seek to weave identities principally by using their façades to reference other buildings, artworks, or concepts. Architects, like all creative people, have always copied from each other, stolen ideas from great innovators, and paid tribute to their favorites. What is therefore interesting in contemporary architecture is not that architects play games referencing one another, but rather that those who design our buildings seem not to understand what they're referencing. Within a culture fully fluent in its own vibrant, living

language of architectural forms, visual references imply structural and behavioral references. To use a Greek temple front to decorate an important government building is not merely to give the building a snazzy look, it is to imply a certain style of design as pertains to the structure (e.g., higher ceilings, larger spaces, more durable materials) and a more dignified register of speech and action. Just as authentic language, more than a mere jumble of marks or sounds, points beyond itself to a fact or concept, so an authentic architectural composition (what might be called a "good building") points beyond itself to a constellation of culturally significant attitudes, practices, and feelings.

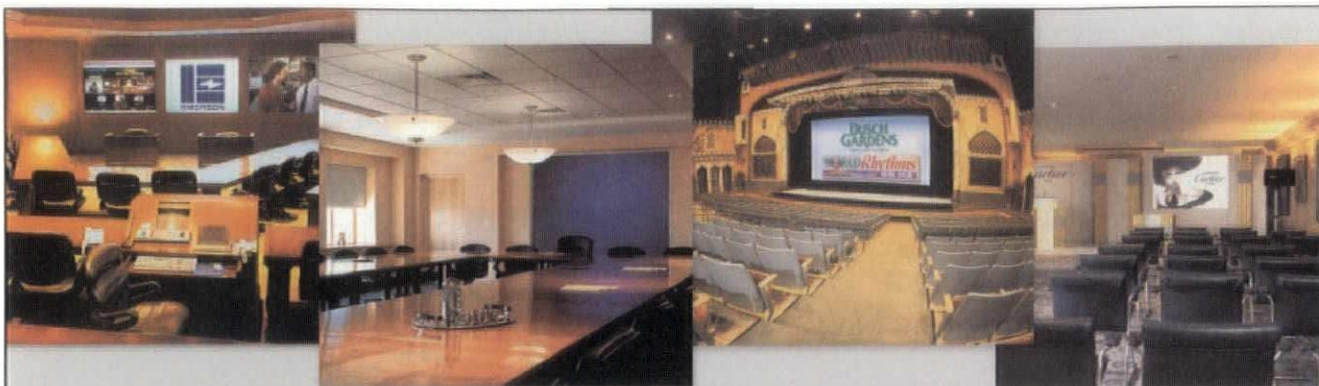
We can criticize the Postmodernists for their cavalier cut-and-paste attitude toward visual forms, but the alienation of façade runs deeper than that. The Moderns are also guilty. Le Corbusier's fetish for industrial forms, best expressed in his dream of transforming homes into "machines for living," is deeply disturbing because it implies that he believed that all cultural functions would be equally well served by skyscraper cubicles, gargantuan gardens, and superhighways. Like the Postmodernists, he saw no essential connection between façade on the one hand and structure and function on the other.

When today's architects copy and steal from their predecessors and from each other, it's difficult to discern what their choices of subject matter are supposed to mean. Because the visual vocabulary of architectural identity has become shallow and self-referential, even highly skilled and well-intentioned architects have difficulty making their designs actually speak. It's no great challenge to design a building that shouts, "Look at me!" but crafting a building that says something gritty and complicated and true, and says it deftly, is another matter.

As it stands now, most architectural identity thefts are heists of questionable value. To employ the bigness of a jumbo jet without also making use of its dirty, servile strength; to mimic the towers of Oxford while deliberately setting aside its stuffy wisdom and priggish rigor; to clothe an apartment building in brick simply because architects in the same city chose to use brick in previous generations — these are petty thefts. Architects need to recover the art of architectural referencing, of copying — of *stealing*, in Picasso's sense. They should become identity thieves of the first order, mercilessly improving ideas by taking ownership of them.

As amalgams of visible, fungible, and reproducible units of information, architectural identities will always be fluid and ephemeral. It is precisely this flexibility that makes them interesting because it makes meaningful reinvention possible. The identities we choose always mean something, even and especially when we are not fully cognizant of the full ramifications of our choices. The key is choosing identities that are packed with meaning, replete with structural and behavioral references that contribute to the quality of the whole. Design needs to stop being about only the façade and go back to being about the strange power of buildings to express profound truths about the people who use them. ■

Jonathan Powers is a PhD candidate in the School of Architecture at McGill University in Montreal.



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who what where when why how

New questions about the history of Islamic architecture
offer a fresh perspective on cultural identity

Nasser Rabbat talks with Jeff Stein AIA



Nasser Rabbat is the Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Architecture at MIT. Before receiving his PhD from MIT in 1991, he received degrees in architecture from the University of Damascus and UCLA and worked as a designer in Damascus and Los Angeles. Among other publications, he is co-editor of *Making Cairo Medieval* (2005) and the author of *The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Mamluk Royal Architecture* (1995) and, in Arabic, *The Culture of Building and Building Culture: Essays and Articles on the Criticism and History of Architecture, 1985-2000* (2002).



Jeff Stein AIA is the architecture critic for *Banker & Tradesman* and the director of the architecture program at the Boston Architectural Center.



Hagia Sofia (Ayasofia) (Istanbul, 532-37). The edifice that most intrigued the Ottomans, who converted the Byzantine church into a mosque in 1453. Its interior space has a serene quality and humbling effect.

Jeff Stein: When many Westerners look at Islamic architecture, we see something that, in our innocence, we don't understand fully because we perceive a kind of "otherness" in it. Yet Islamic architecture isn't "other." It has its own strong identity and a rich and complex history.

Nasser Rabbat: That word "innocence" is actually a useful introduction to a complex subject. Innocence is a shared human quality. In our innocence, we tend to see ourselves — and others — as bearers of clear identities. We don't usually like to see ourselves as composites. For example, we tend to see other nations in terms of simple, singular identities rather than understand how complex each of those identities really is. And of course, those identities are reflected in architecture.

Jeff Stein: And there is a reluctance to think about architecture in those terms.

Nasser Rabbat: I admit that this is not something I initially thought about, either. My initial work on Islamic architecture was actually an attempt to go back to my roots. I trained in

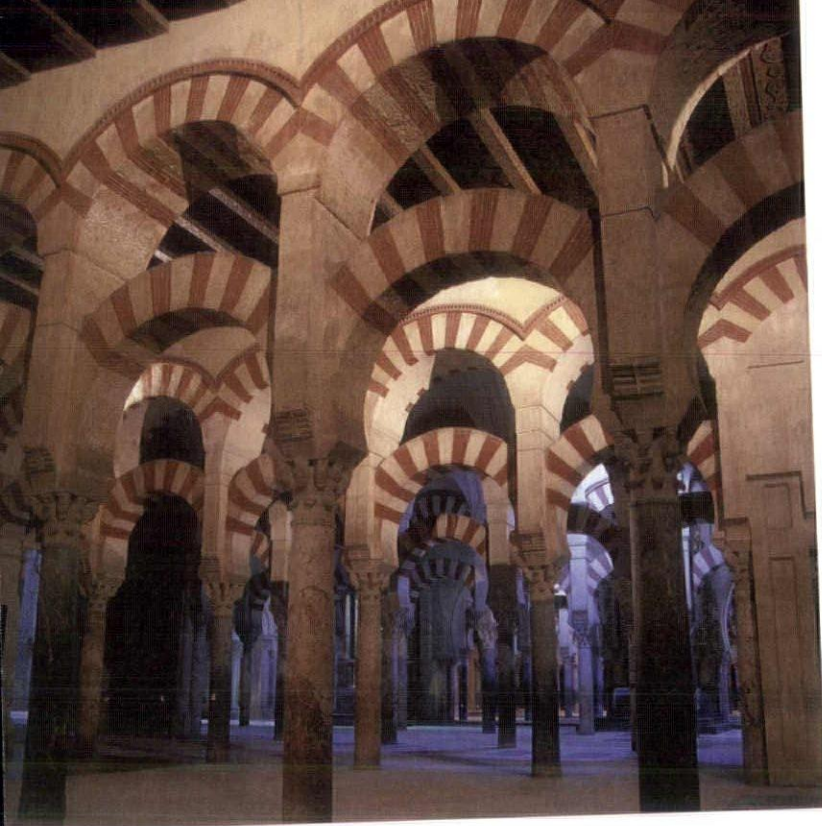
a school of architecture at Damascus and then at UCLA, but the curricula at both schools are Western-inspired. There's hardly any school of architecture outside of the West that is not Western. But there's nothing wrong with that. I believe that all architecture is the heritage of all people, although some architecture is the heritage of some people more so than others. It's only a question of degree. But there is no exclusionary architecture that says that you do not belong.

Jeff Stein: And yet the notion of identity in architecture suggests that there might be a moment in which someone in the presence of a particular work feels that he or she doesn't belong.

Nasser Rabbat: Of course. But don't you think some of that feeling is ideological, rather than spatially or architecturally induced?

Jeff Stein: Yes, I do.

Nasser Rabbat: For example, people who go to Cordoba's Mezquita, regardless of their religion, usually feel awe. The



The Great Mosque of Cordoba (Cordoba, Spain, 786, enlarged several times between 832 and 987). The intricate hypostyle arrangement with double-tiered arches over marble columns gives the impression of an urban forest for the faithful.

same applies to Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Both are well-known religious symbols. Yet the architecture lends itself to some primordial human feeling. I am an unreligious person. But in these two spaces, I feel really touched, not because they are related to my heritage, but because they have broader meaning that I respond to. And that may be hard to understand because of the way we view history. We are ensconced in the belief that history has a certain sequence: we start from one point and move on, and every time the road forks, we forsake one path to proceed in one direction. So there have been exclusions in the history that we have. And there have also been attempts at saying, "This is mine and no one else's."

Jeff Stein: We see that in the sciences. Living systems lose quite a bit of their vitality when various branches of science dissect them as if they were mechanisms, as if each part belonged to a different scientific discipline. The interrelationships between the parts go missing, and then we miss understanding how the whole system works.

Nasser Rabbat: And architecture does that. I start my courses with [architectural historian] Bannister Fletcher's highly Eurocentric tree of architecture. It moves from a beginning in the classical tradition all the way down to the present Western tradition and excludes everyone else by describing them on that tree of architecture as the dead branches that are not going to grow.

One criticism of Fletcher is not that he excluded other cultures, but that he decided on a sequence that led from antiquity — an interpretation that he claimed to be his alone — and moved on to the present. I claim that Islamic architecture cannot be understood outside of classical architecture — the heritage of Islamic architecture is Greek or Roman classical architecture. The architecture of Egypt, Syria, Turkey, or Cyprus

between the years 300 BC and 700 AD cannot be excluded from the classical world. But what's more important is that those regions also contributed to the development of classical architecture, in ways that are regionally defined and somewhat idiosyncratic. And those elements should be brought into the vocabulary of classical architecture and understood as something that enriches it. But we usually look at classical architecture as if it's purified of all of these regionalisms; it's presented as something that started with a very specific order and has come all the way down to the present almost undisturbed. The early, foundational monuments of what is called Islamic architecture are actually rooted in the classical architecture of the sixth and seventh century. The later monuments of Islamic architecture are rooted in another classical tradition, which is Central Asian, Persian, and ultimately Chinese and Indian classical architecture. What Islamic architecture has done over time is to bridge all of those traditions. It synthesized them and made them part of its own heritage, and vice-versa.

Jeff Stein: Have you been able to document the kind of cultural dialogue that has gone on?

Nasser Rabbat: It's a recent interest of mine. Initially I thought I was going to look at the Crusaders period. The tendency in this field has been to say, "Who influenced whom?" To me this is almost a redundant question: it doesn't really matter, because everyone influenced everyone else. What's more interesting is to see how, with all the strands of influences in that period, you could create either something original or something derivative. If we look at mosques that were built in, say, Cairo in 1200, right at the end of the Crusaders period, there are elements that we could isolate as having come from an encounter with the Crusaders. And so we have historians saying things like, "This decorative element in a religious complex in Cairo must have come from the Loire Valley, because we have an example there dating from around 1100, whereas this example in Cairo is 1284. Therefore, the Loire Valley is the root of influence." I don't think this is how we should think about architecture. We should think more broadly about what it means to learn that the Loire Valley has a presence in an architectural element in Cairo in 1284, despite the fact that the two had been fighting for the previous 200 years.

Jeff Stein: How are we going to find out about this?

Nasser Rabbat: Research. What is important at this time is not to theorize but to remain open-minded. And of course, not to see this all as a tree that starts from some roots and moves all the way to the present. It's actually strands of things that are coming

The so-called Little Monastery (Deruneh, Syria, sixth century). The stone façade presents a typical “continuous molding” motif of the “Dead Cities” region, which also appears in later Romanesque and Medieval Islamic architecture.

together all the time. Although my primary focus has been the Medieval period, I am also looking at the 19th century and the burgeoning interaction around the Mediterranean. People like the Welsh architect Owen Jones, for example, were very interested in exploring what Islamic architecture had to offer — not just what Islamic ornamentation had to offer, although ornamentation ended up as the greater influence on designers like Jones and William Morris, who literally turned it into wallpaper. But there were a few architects who were looking more deeply. One was the German architect Karl von Diebitsch, who in the 1850s and 1860s promoted Islamic architecture as an industrial-age architecture, because its use of pattern lent itself to prefabrication.

Jeff Stein: Is pattern, rather than representation, one of the characteristics of Islamic architecture?

Nasser Rabbat: I don't want to pigeonhole it as such, because there are periods in which representation dominates. The period that I'm interested in, right before the Crusades, is actually the beginning of a representational phase of architecture, which lasted for about 200 years. What was happening then was a change in population: this is when the Turks became a more dominant presence in the Middle East. But the architecture also changed — there was a tremendous movement toward volumetric expression, where architecture was no longer the superimposition of planar elements. The architecture of the late 11th century was quite austere; it was really about the play of volumes, and decoration was limited to specific spaces.

Jeff Stein: My question probably came from that Western impulse to determine a fixed identity in Islamic architecture.

Nasser Rabbat: I would say not only that Islamic architecture has no fixed identity, but also that the claim of a Western sequence of identities is an extremely misguided one. It's impoverishing to everyone. It would be much better for all if we started to understand historical context beyond the point in time in which you can prove that people were in contact. That means seeing beyond the fact that Marco Polo went to China and came back with something new. In fact, there were millions of unknown Marco Polos who were bringing things back all the time; the exchange between people has been continuous. Despite our focus on communication technology today, communication has always been the dominant theme throughout history. Isolated cultures that develop their own image of themselves — their identity, if you will — in isolation of other cultures, are a myth of the nationalist age.

I'll give you an example: the recent exhibition at the Louvre, “La France Romane,” which is about “Romanesque”

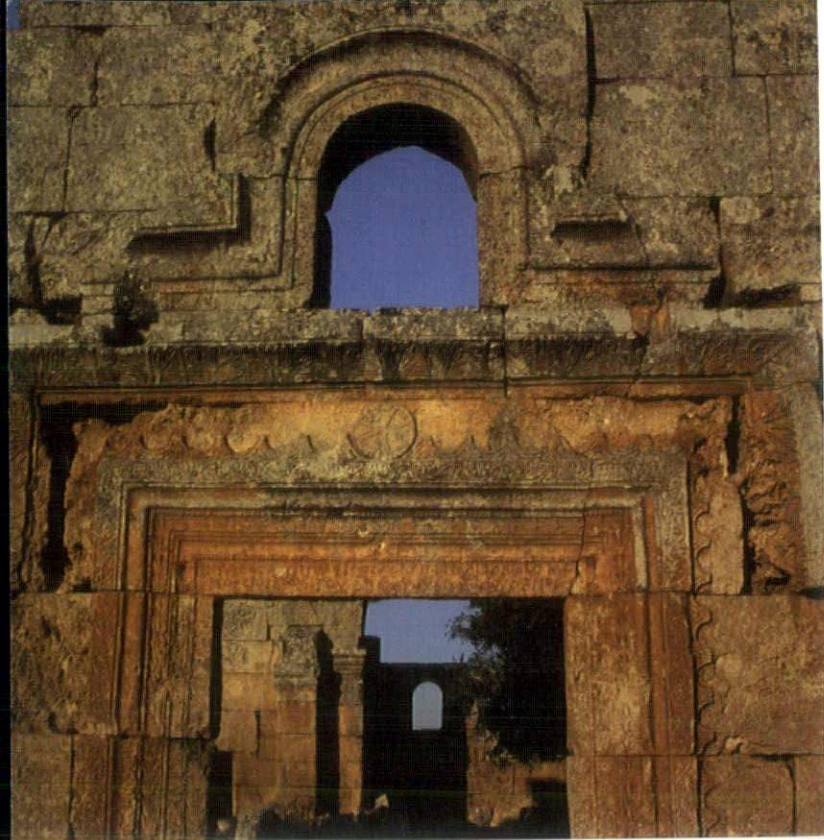


France between the 10th and 12th centuries. Of course, there was no France in the 10th century; that is the creation of a nationalist perspective. The exhibition included objects from Constantinople, Persia, Syria, and Egypt that were remade in France, and therefore called French. For example, a crystal stone vase, a form for which Cairo was famous, was remade into an ewer by adding a base and spout. The exhibition never asked how someone made the decision to take something beautiful, add to it, and in the process transform it into something else that is also beautiful. It never acknowledged the original source other than to mention that the body may have been made in Egypt. France today is a culture that is trying to defend itself. But cultural boundaries today, as in history, are very porous.

Jeff Stein: And we can see that fact at work on many levels, in many places. In the American Midwest, there are numerous examples of Prairie Style houses that no one connected with Frank Lloyd Wright ever designed, because people would see Wright houses while commuting by train to Chicago, and come back and say, “I'd like to do that.” You can transfer that microcosm of the work of a single architect — how it was adapted and then spread geographically — to the macrocosm of the Islamic world.

Nasser Rabbat: Of the entire world. I am teaching a course that is Islamic history, but what I'm trying to impart to my students is an open-minded method. I show them examples of work from different places but the same period that reflect the fact that these cultures were in communication — not under influence.

Jeff Stein: I was recently at a workshop about the current situation in Iraq; part of the discussion focused on the ethical



The Church of Saints Paul and Moses (Dar Qita, Syria, circa 418). The door frame of this small church in a minor “Dead City” site presents a wealth of exquisitely carved Syrian classical motifs.

responsibility of Western architects in its rebuilding. An historian presented a slide of Frank Lloyd Wright’s 1950s plan for Baghdad’s redevelopment. People literally caught their breath, because it was so beautiful, and so right for that place. Wright was in Baghdad; Walter Gropius was in Baghdad —

Nasser Rabbat: Mies van der Rohe was there, too. A lot of the staples of the Modern Movement went to Baghdad.

Jeff Stein: And they felt very much at home there.

Nasser Rabbat: The trend today is for people in Baghdad, or people who claim to speak for Baghdad, to reject the intervention of a Frank Lloyd Wright. And for people in Illinois, or people who claim to represent the heritage of Illinois, to say that Frank Lloyd Wright has no place in Baghdad. That rejection, from both sides, has to be resisted. We can of course reject the implied dominance of an attitude that says, “I am the modern architect. I bring you my knowledge. You receive my knowledge.” But if you and I believe that we are all partaking of the same sources, then your knowledge is a composite knowledge to which my people have contributed heavily. I would then have no problem with your suggesting that we build in a certain way, because we share sensitivities. Rejection of your ideas is really a political act, an ideological act. A lot of world historians are working on that pivotal moment in which what used to be called the open world system became a closed world system, a power relationship that is constantly defined by a dominant and a dominated.

Jeff Stein: That suggests that when the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, in the middle of the 20th century, was fighting

against what he called internationalism, he was really addressing that power relationship.

Nasser Rabbat: Hassan Fathy came onto the scene at a time when the Egyptians were struggling to assert their identity and independence from the colonial power that dominated them at the time, which was Great Britain. Fathy was looking for an Egyptian heritage, and in essence invented a style that was initially dependent on two sources. One was the Mamluk architecture of Cairo, and the second was the architecture of what is today southern Egypt but until the 16th century was the independent kingdom of Nubia. Fathy combined the two, creating a style he called vernacular Egyptian. In the 1940s, Egyptians weren’t debating whether they were Arabs or something else; in fact, the “something else” was still strong in their mind. Thirty years before, they called themselves Europeans, because Alexandria was a classical capital, and the ancient Egyptians had influenced Greece and were really not Arabs. But by the 1950s, pan-Arabism was on the rise and Fathy began to refer to his style as Arab. By the time he died in 1989, he called it Islamic; the Islamic identity was on the rise and Arabism was losing ground.

Jeff Stein: What does it mean to be essentialist about Islamic architecture?

Nasser Rabbat: What does it mean to be essentialist about anything? In its simplest form, essentialism is not very different from puritanism. In architecture, it refers to people who want to see a return to some pure elements that frame who they are. I’m trying to resist using the word identity, but they wish to claim what they believe to be theirs. An essentialist is not only someone who claims something that happened in the past to be his or hers alone, but also someone who claims that that thing will remain his or hers for the foreseeable future.

Jeff Stein: And that person is probably mistaken on both counts.

Nasser Rabbat: We have to remember that this is an ideological debate. This is a time in which people have become much more essentialist, much more identity-bound or puritan in their view of the world. I’m instead advocating a hybrid approach toward the world and toward history, because people have never lived in isolation. Perhaps you lived in Florence and I lived in Damascus. We did not necessarily interact, but our representatives interacted and brought us stories, and perhaps actual objects, from the other city. We live by words, we live by imagination. And that is fed by stories, images, and tales that are gathered from many sources. Today we have what are fashionably called neo-nomads. Who are these people? Where are their

The church complex of St. Simeon, Syria (near Aleppo, Syria, mostly sixth century). This most famous of the "Dead Cities" sites includes many Syrian classical motifs, such as this acanthus scroll cornice running along the wall of an apse.

boundaries? I cross the Atlantic about 10 times a year. Where are my roots at this point in time? There are about 10 cities in the world that I know how to move around in. Until the age of 24, I only knew Damascus. Now, there are cities that I know much better than I know Damascus.

Jeff Stein: It seems that it now takes less and less time to become that neo-nomad, to be equally comfortable in any city around the world.

Nasser Rabbat: Most Americans who are in the upper echelon of society are neo-nomads: they have a home in New York, but spend a weekend in Los Angeles, another in Miami, a third in Chicago. And each of those cities represents a different culture. And now you can even add to that mix Seoul, Tokyo, Sydney, Beijing.

I want people to travel. Perhaps you've heard the statistic that 80 percent of Americans have no passport. I want people to see each other, to see how un-different we are. Americans understand that better than the rest of the world in at least one way. There are people around the world who think that McDonald's is a tasteless export, and that if McDonald's comes into their city, then their city has been Americanized. But there is no American city that will reject the notion of a Greek or Syrian or Egyptian or Chinese restaurant.

Unfortunately, our educational system is still perpetuating artificial boundaries in our architectural, artistic, and literary lives. Perhaps it is an artifact of the post-colonial movement, which taught the West not to explore the rest of the world but to somehow retreat to its own trenches. I want my scholarship to work in the opposite direction. I have been focusing on Egypt, but I am now going back to look at Syria, which is such a hybrid country on all levels. And it has many examples of hybrid classical architecture. What makes one hybrid succeed? What establishes it as the norm if there is nothing inherently superior in it? Larry Vale, the head of the MIT urban planning program who has studied post-colonial capitals, has concluded that national styles — national architectural identities — represent the architectural language of the elite.

Jeff Stein: So there's a sense that identity comes from patronage?

Nasser Rabbat: From an oppressive patronage, as a matter of fact.

Jeff Stein: Ordinarily. But we, too, are working in a society of patronage. For example, your patron just happens to be an institution, MIT, that allows and in fact advocates a broad world view.

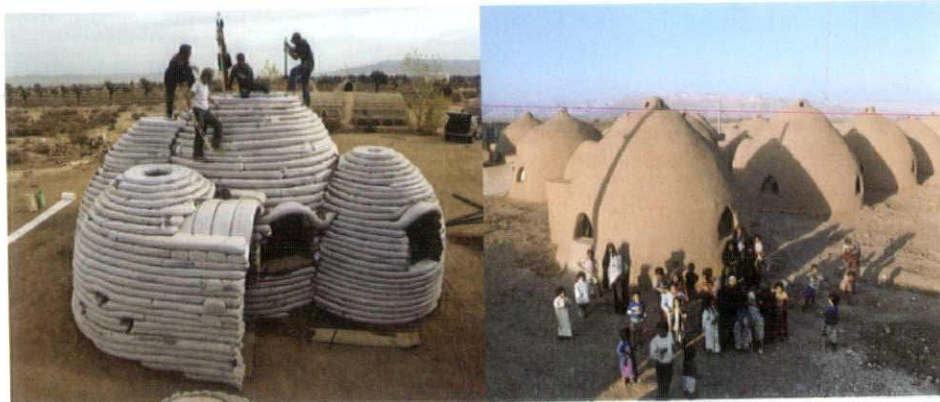


Nasser Rabbat: Yes. I am extremely cognizant that I am lucky to be in my position. Perhaps if I were elsewhere, under a different system, what I say would be considered heresy. But the historical role of patronage, such as in post-colonial societies, has been to promote standardization and homogenization. Homogenization would not be so dangerous if it were agenda-free. But homogenization almost always advances the interest of a specific group over a larger group. For example, the WASP culture was the norm in America; in order to reach a decision-making level in this society, you had to be accepted by WASP culture, either by marrying into it or behaving like it or acquiring enough money and dressing properly to appear to be part of it. This was a real pressure in the early 20th century.

Let me tell you the story of my name. My first name is that of the Egyptian president, even though I am Syrian; he was the hero of Arabism when I was born. My last name refers to a silk maker; my family has been in the silk trade for 300 years. When I became an American citizen, I told a friend that I would like to run for office, but no one would vote for a person named Nasser Rabbat. And she said, "Well, why don't you change your name?" I said, "I don't want to change my name," because I had lived 40 years of my life with this name. And she said, "Well, let's meet midway. What is the meaning of Nasser?" I told her that Nasser is Victor in Arabic. And everyone calls me Mr. Rabbit. So my friend said, "Why don't you change your first name to Victor? It will still mean Nasser. And since everyone is calling you Rabbit, how about changing your last name to O'Hare? Your name can be Victor O'Hare." This would have been the expedient solution. But it's a reflection of homogenization. I want a world in which we can all run for office with any name. I think architecture has always accomplished that. The world of architecture is a hybrid world. It's just that we do not recognize it. Or, perhaps, that we prefer not to recognize it. ■

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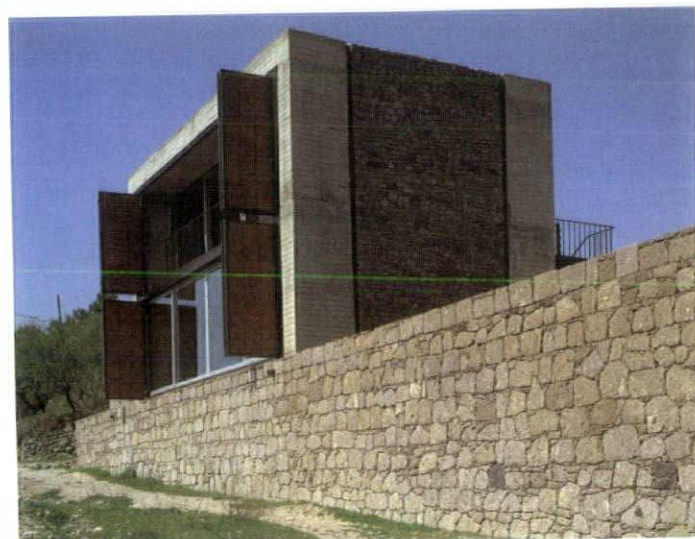


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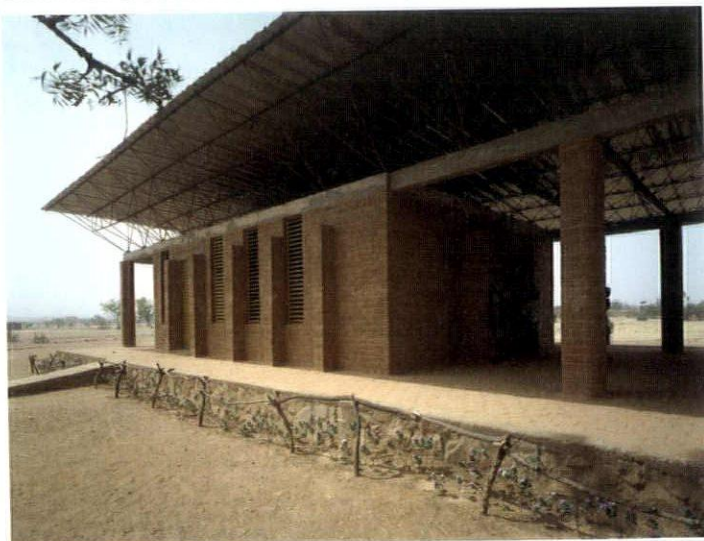
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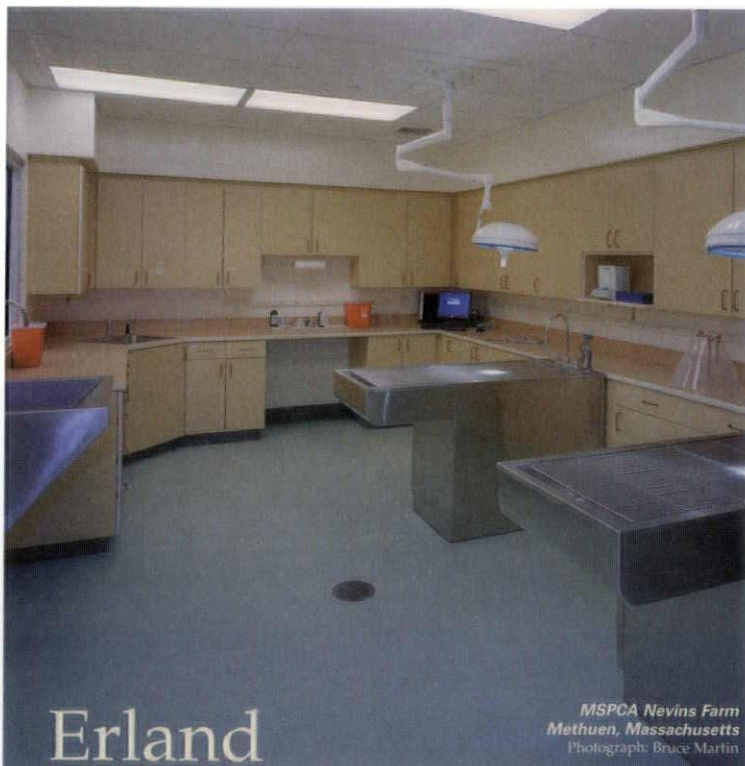
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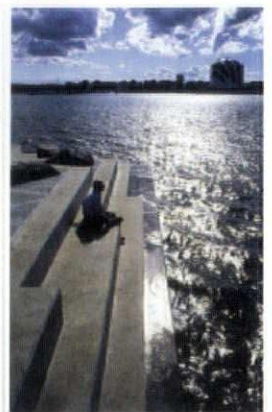
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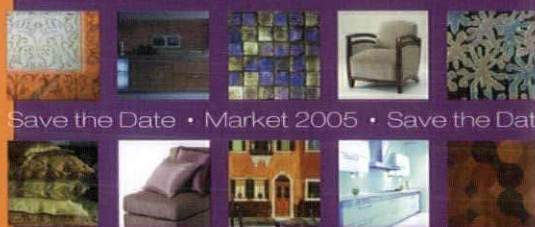
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Covering the Issues

Still learning from Las Vegas... The AIA's recent national convention was held in the glitzy center of schlock, the wedding-chapel capital of the world, *and* the fastest growing city in the country — a title Vegas has held for over a decade. While the AIA may have largely ignored its surroundings, the general press certainly knows that something big is happening there. In 2004, Vegas added 45,000 jobs and boasted the hottest housing market in US history: sales grew 52 percent, an annual increase more than triple those of New York or San Francisco. In "Rolling the Dice on Vegas Real Estate" (*Details*, June/July 2005), Ian Daly reports on the current Vegas craze: condos. By the end of this year, 100 new projects totaling nearly 34,000 units will have begun construction. Lofts, naturally, are the most popular. And why shouldn't this city create a Fort Point Channel in the sand? It's already spawned Paris, Venice, and Caesar's Rome.

Vegas, baby, Vegas... Zoom in on total decadence, and check out "Steve Wynn's Biggest Gamble" (*Vanity Fair*, June 2005). Nina Munk gets up close and personal with this developer extraordinaire, who is credited for "sanitizing the town and giving it middle-class respectability" with "recreation-and-entertainment businesses." They are casinos, yes, but so much more. Wynn's latest endeavor came in at \$2.7 billion — \$1 billion more than what is now budgeted for the Freedom Tower.

The boys of summer... For variations on the black suit and other light-hearted insights to males, a special issue on "The American Man 2005" (*Esquire*, July 2005) offers "inspiring profiles of extraordinary lives, plus one dog,

7 architects, and the sexiest woman alive." Indeed, the seven designers fill the fashion spread. The seven real architects-turned-models include the stratospherically known (Daniel Libeskind), the somewhat-known (Richard Gluckman), the soon-to-be-known (Martin Finio), and the BSA's very own ex-president. Which one? While the possibilities are surely vast, the answer is below.

More eye candy... *Surface* magazine takes on architecture and other related pursuits in its annual "design" issue, with its focus on "Mapping the Beautiful Mixed-Up World of Fashion, Architecture, and Design" (issue #53). Good beach-browsing here, and a few meaty bits, including Erin Cullterton's "Net Losses," which presents unrealized house designs that were victims of the dot-com crash. This is the Modernist Newport-that-wasn't: contemporary mansions intended for titans of our recent Gilded Age.

Take it or leave it... Some voices in the electronic media are questioning the Supreme Court's recent *Kelo v. City of New London* decision, which upheld efforts in New London, Connecticut, to redevelop the Fort Trumbull neighborhood through eminent domain. The American Planning Association has endorsed the decision, but libertarians writing in *reasononline* (June 24, 2005) and *Planetizen* (July 5, 2005) object — as does former Milwaukee mayor John Norquist, now head of the Congress for the New Urbanism (*PBS Online NewsHour*, June 24, 2005). They predict sweeping effects, similar to the 1954 *Berman v. Parker* decision, which unleashed urban renewal as we knew it in the 1960s: projects like Boston's West End.



Extreme makeovers... "Is It Time for the Preservation of Modernism?" asks *The New York Times Magazine* (May 15, 2005). Now 50 to 75 years old, the elderly structures that were once striking symbols of the future are not aging gracefully. Should they be removed to make way for the Next Big Thing (much as 20th-century Modernism bulldozed the Victorian cities before them), or should preservationists now apply their strategies to their long-time foes? *The Times* dances around the subject and the underlying questions: how — and should — Modern architecture be saved? ■

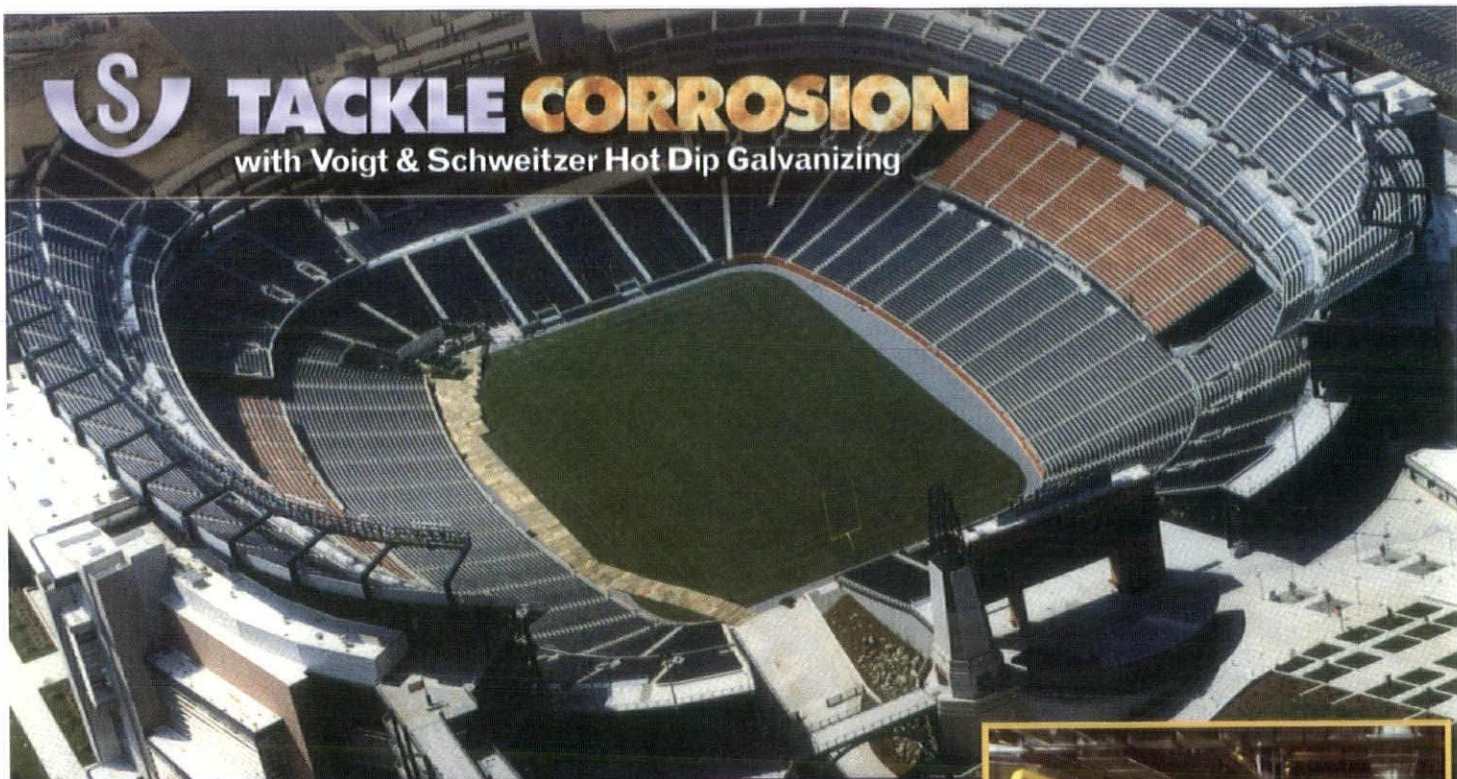
Gretchen Schneider, Assoc. AIA, directs the architecture studios at Smith College and is a designer at Rogers Marvel Architects in New York City.

Answer: Brian Healy AIA



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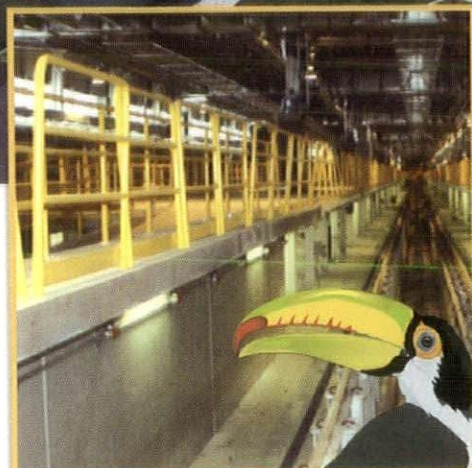
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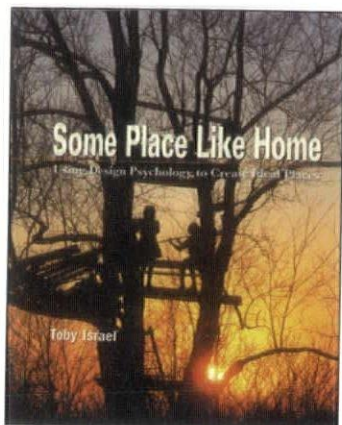
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SOME PLACE LIKE HOME: USING DESIGN PSYCHOLOGY TO CREATE IDEAL PLACES

by Toby Israel

John Wiley, 2003

Reviewed by A. Vernon Woodworth AIA

Toby Israel explores here what we all acknowledge but for which there is no adequate theoretical framework: our profound emotional connection to our environment. "Design psychology" is her term for the reservoir of memory and fantasy that informs our preferences and our choices with regard to the world we live in. Her account ranges from personal musings to interviews with designers (Michael Graves, Charles Jencks, Andres Duany) to exercises you can do at home to uncover your own design psychology. Interspersed among all this are references to the work of dozens of psychologists, urbanists, and architectural theorists. Her tone is occasionally breathless ("My tropical adrenalin rush was even more pronounced on this February day, since I was on my way to visit Andres Duany, the current darling of the international planning world"), and her ambitious scope and frequent sharp turns can leave the reader in a similar state. But Israel's excitement is communicable, for she is exploring emotional memories of a particularly vivid variety.

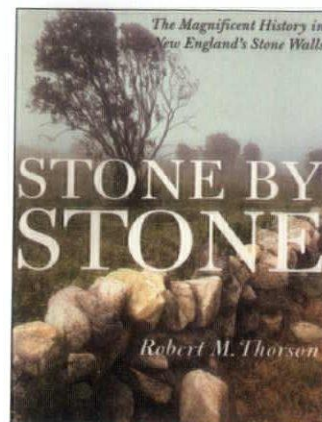
Designers who do residential work understand that their clients are operating from internal images of tremendous power. This is design psychology at work. Israel's approach may have its

greatest value in providing a method for designers to work with the "self-place story" of their clients and to explore their own spatial/emotional history. In their interviews, Graves, Jencks, and Duany appear to have gained new insights into the emotional impacts of their environmental histories. This is apparently due largely to Israel's probing. But her guiding principle appears to be her exploration of her own environmental history; this gives the book an autobiographical tone and Israel's "discoveries" a self-fulfilling flavor.

Certainly we carry images of our childhood environments that we draw upon as we seek our orientation in the adult world; Israel fails, however, to explore fully the meaning of these images. Michael Graves describes the void left in his childhood home by the frequent absences of his alcoholic father, and Israel observes that Graves' fascination with the stockyard buildings of his hometown is more than spatial, as these were his father's workplace. We discover that the stockyards influenced Graves' conversion of a warehouse into his residence, and Israel recognizes other clues that Graves is still working through childhood attachments in his life and work. But her perspective on this is idealized, devoid of an acknowledgment that there is pain lurking beneath the surface. She does not explore the meaning of "stockyard" as an image, only the spatial residue as it manifests in Graves' design work.

Israel's work provides a new entry point into the emerging field of "ecopsychology," the study of our psychological relationship to our environment. Like all psychological endeavors, it is a study in subjectivity, open to further growth and development.

A. Vernon Woodworth AIA holds a diploma in analytic psychology from the C.G. Jung Institute-Boston. An associate at R.W. Sullivan Inc., he chairs the BSA Codes Committee and is an instructor at the Boston Architectural Center.



STONE BY STONE: THE MAGNIFICENT HISTORY IN NEW ENGLAND'S STONE WALLS

by Robert M. Thorson

Walker & Company, 2002

Reviewed by Phyllis Andersen

Robert Thorson uses the history of the stone wall to recast New England's agricultural history. In this rich and intriguing study, he generates a new timeline for land use that erases the hackneyed image of early yeoman farmers with one eye on the boulder at their feet and the other looking west, fixed on stone-free, treeless land with no impediments to cultivation. Thorson is not interested in the extravagant stone walls of late 19th-century estates, which are more products of Colonial Revival nostalgia than authentic farm labor. His focus is on the "tossed wall" — primitive, mortar-free, tossed to the edge of fields rather than laid up in orderly fashion. These are the walls one finds in New England woods, less walls than cryptograms of field-clearing labor that define perimeters now transformed into melancholy ruins by geological forces of aging.

The earliest settlers in New England preferred the stone-free coastal lowlands, hence no stone walls. They led a communal life sharing pastures and fields without ownership boundaries. The surge of stone wall building came about in the 19th

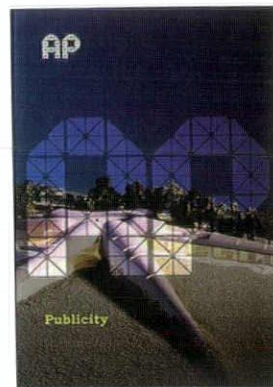
century, when the population spread inland and improved the land for farming. Forest-clearing exposed the soil to deep winter freezing and spring thaws; then began the inevitable course of the land heaving up field stones that obstructed the plow. As communal culture gave way to private land ownership with tensions over legal boundaries, stone walls as field boundaries became what Thorson poetically calls "no-trespassing signs written in stone."

Thorson, a professor of geology at the University of Connecticut, mildly rebukes those who perceive New England farming sentimentally. He looks hard at function and utility. Among his examples are double stone walls that served as linear depositories for nonbiodegradable agricultural refuse. He points out that the amount of stone removed and relocated regulated the scale of New England fields. Always aware of time, labor, and manpower involved in farming, Thorson shifts focus from the perimeter stones to the energy needed to clear fields. He refers to the modern eye focused on an

anthill: to the ant, the mound is only a sort of dumpsite incidental to the task of creating an underground home.

In his famous essay "The Necessity for Ruins," J.B. Jackson talks about the preservation community's need for discontinuity, for a period of neglect before one rediscovers old values and seeks to restore the landscape to its former beauty (a "born-again landscape" he calls it). Thorson's passion for preserving the remaining walls of New England — many are on private land and subject to sale and dispersal — prompted him to create a website (www.stonewall.uconn.edu) and to write a sequel, *Exploring Stone Walls: A Field Guide to New England's Stone Walls* (2005), in which he presents a detailed taxonomy of wall types along with a guide to their general location.

Phyllis Andersen is the former director of the Institute for Cultural Landscape Studies of the Arnold Arboretum and is a member of the *ArchitectureBoston* editorial board.



IS IT ALL ABOUT IMAGE?

by Laura Iloniemi
Wiley Academy, 2004
Reviewed by Nancy Egan

Laura Iloniemi invites discussion with her title question — is it all about image? — and proceeds to engage readers in a round of informed commentary, interviews, case studies,

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and snappy to-do lists. The real topic is publicity, specifically media relations, and the role it plays in the development of firm image. More than a how-to and less than a treatise, the book has a distinctly British accent, although the author looks at several international practices and interviews US-based architects, public-relations consultants, and editors. The lessons here are on-target for firms anywhere that are addressing questions of self-promotion.

A successful public-relations consultant, Iloniemi uses the language and format of the book to reinforce her messages about the value of a well-constructed analysis, the importance of clear writing and first-rate imagery, and, especially, the place of architecture in the culture. Visually and verbally, the book is a treat. Provocative headlines, a variety of typefaces and point sizes, a rich mix of contributing authors, and a stunning collection of images from full-bleed shots of projects to delicate

watercolors and line drawings allow the reader to dive into the discourse on almost any page.

Noting the "complex set of inhibitions and concerns" that surrounds the topic of image in the profession, the author makes the case for public relations. As she says, "Public relations is just that — relating to the public." The point is to make certain that the firm's message is pertinent and engaging to the audience — in this case, the media who in turn speak to the wider world of clients, critics, and peers. Interviews with eight architectural writers and editors reveal distinctive points of view with a common concern for quality and professionalism, not packaging and spin.

For those who still believe that "art should speak for itself," Iloniemi offers insight into the image-making efforts of a number of firms. There are large corporate firms, such as ARUP, with in-house PR staff and longstanding relationships with the press. More intriguing are the strategies of the

smaller firms such as New York-based SHoP Architecture, where the partners have divided the PR roles within the practice to good effect, and Ocean North in Helsinki, which has focused on publishing ideas as well as projects to raise awareness of the practice. Some may be surprised to find Santiago Calatrava's publicist talking about what it takes to promote the starchitects.

In the end, is it all about image? The author says no, although it certainly helps. The role of the media, as she sees it, is "encouraging better buildings to be built through educating the public to demand them." Architects must be part of the broader culture and, in order to do that, they have to market themselves and their ideas. This book is designed to help them.

Nancy Egan heads New Voodoo, a consulting practice that provides image/content development to the design community from offices in Santa Monica, California, and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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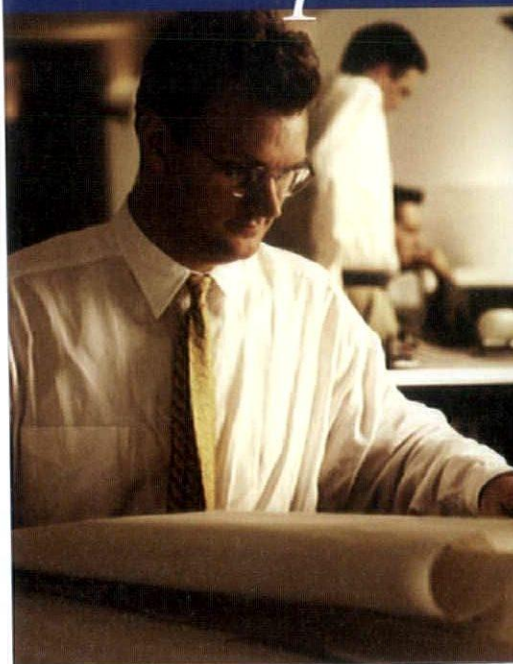
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www.idcorner.org

Some people are thinking hard about "identity architecture." One of them is Stefan Brands, who maintains this site and is an "expert on the subjects of digital identity management, secure access control, modern cryptography, electronic payment systems, privacy-enhancing technologies, and non-intrusive security."

COUNCIL FOR EUROPEAN URBANISM

www.ceunet.org

Somehow, "euro-sprawl" doesn't carry the design cachet usually associated with the "euro" prefix. Europe has its own development pressures and corresponding concerns, and the CEU wants to do something about them.

ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER: PRESERVATION BRIEF 17

www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief17.htm

The National Park Service offers technical preservation resources, including its "Preservation Briefs" series. Here's a checklist for identifying and evaluating elements that contribute to architectural character in historic structures.

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www.rootsandroutes.net

This innovative site promotes "heritage travel" and explores cultural identities in North America through migration patterns, settlements, and symbolic landscapes.

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The folks who have been giving America's children unpronounceable and unspellable names seem to be turning their attention to America's architecture firms. This, people, is a very bad, bad thing.

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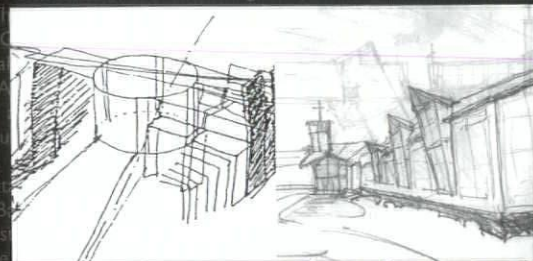
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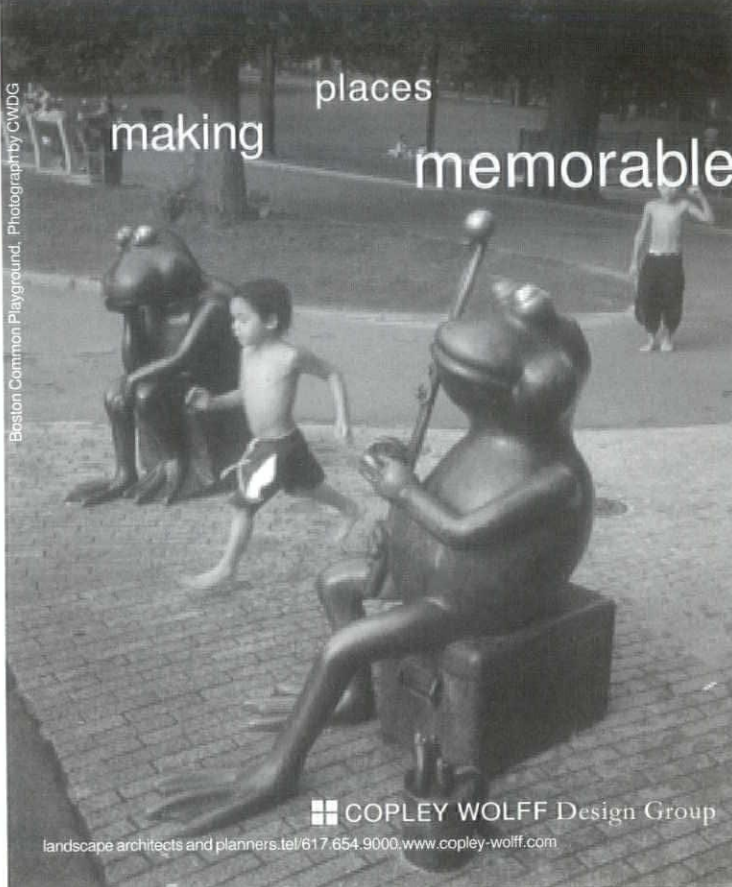
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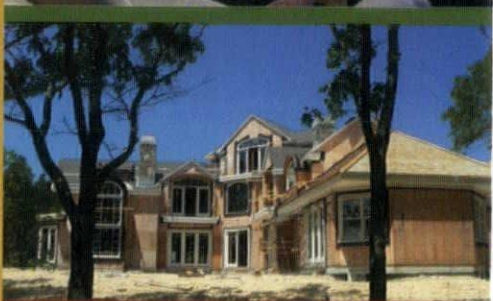
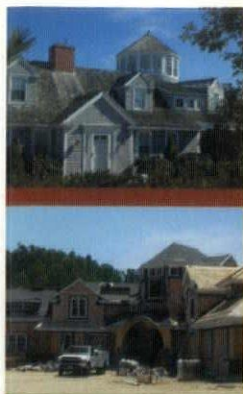
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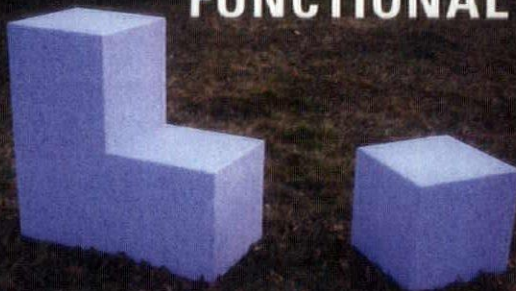
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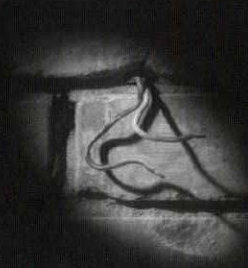
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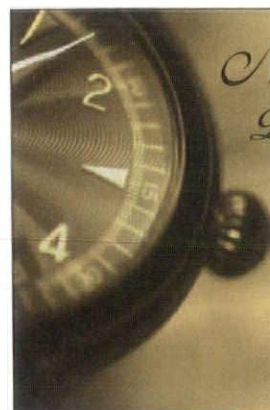
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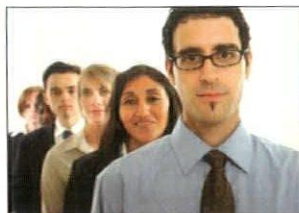
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The African Meeting House

When I was a child, all that I knew about the history of black people in America could be summed up in one word: slavery. Enslaved we arrived from darkest Africa and enslaved we worked and enslaved we remained until Abraham Lincoln signed a piece of paper and launched a war to set us free.

About rebellions I heard nothing; even about the Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman I was told scarcely a word. I was in college before I learned that in cities such as Boston and Philadelphia and even New Orleans, communities of free black people had lived and worked and even thrived out from the yoke, if not the continuing threat, of slavery.

Astonishing, such ignorance. And also, damaging; the kind of damage that rolls and rolls and rolls downhill. At a Black History event last February, an undergraduate agreed with me when I said many African-Americans mythologize Africa not because it deserves it — which it does and does not — but because our history in this country pains them so much. “Who wants to have been a slave?” the student asked. “It’s shameful.”

All of which is to explain why I took my children to the African Meeting House on Boston’s Beacon Hill. I want them to know the shame of slavery is not theirs to carry. And to know slavery is only part of our story — a crucial part, to be sure, but far from definitive.


The Meeting House is the oldest black church edifice still standing in the land. Built in 1805 by black Bostonians tired of discrimination in white-owned churches, it quickly became the center not only of black spiritual life but of community development and social activism as well. Folks called it the black Faneuil Hall.

The Meeting House, with its soaring windows and elegant brick façade, evokes English architectural style. In this it stands indistinguishable from other buildings of its time, despite the fact that \$1,500 of the \$7,700 required for its construction was donated by Cato Gardner, a blacksmith and former slave born in Africa. The building bears a plaque commemorating Gardner but no African flourishes, no carved wooden doors or geometric paintings. Looking up at the arched doorways I wonder: was this assimilation or practicality? Yet they called it “African” instead of “Colored” — the polite term at the time — though surely few 19th-century Boston blacks had seen Africa. Was this defiance? Was it gorgeous racial pride? And what did it mean when, in the 1850s, the name was changed to St. Paul’s Baptist Church — was this the simple sweep of time or a symbolic moving away from Africa? When blacks began migrating to Roxbury at the end of the 19th century, the building was sold to a Jewish congregation, not to be regained until 1972. Shifts in neighborhood identity are natural, part of city life. Still, I wonder if a people so brutally severed from their history can afford to disconnect, even temporarily, with the symbols of their past.



I don’t know the answers to these questions, but I ask them for my kids. We stand outside and run our hands across 200-year-old bricks made by proud, free, determined black people. Then we visit the museum at the Smith School next door, because place makes history concrete, especially to kids. When I was young, we took field trips to Chucalissa Indian Village and to the battlefields of Shiloh, and thus Indians and the carnage of the Civil War became real to me. But as far as I knew, Memphis had no black history worth mentioning: Beale Street — home of the blues — was a boarded-up strip for drunks and prostitutes, the Lorraine Motel — where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated — a shuttered, decaying, neglected wreck. As far as I knew, black people had accomplished little in America, save survival. I must teach my children better than that. ■

Kim McLarin is the author of two novels, *Taming It Down* and *Meeting of the Waters* (William Morrow Inc.). A former journalist for *The New York Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, she is now writer-in-residence at Emerson College and is currently at work on her third novel.



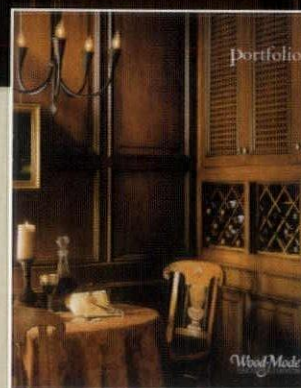
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