

WHAT I'VE LEARNED: History is the Silent Partner to Modern Design

By Jason Hart, AIA, LEED AP

In 2013 North Carolina Modernist Houses.com asked Jason to contribute to its notable section entitled "What I've Learned – Insights on Life and Architecture from the North Carolina Design Community."

I learned how to design from the outside-in at St. Petersburg Junior College, how to design from the inside-out at the University of Florida, and how to design through research at MIT. But none of these places really prepared me to assemble a real building, much less how to structure a business. I've gathered that knowledge by working for nearly a dozen firms. At Renzo Piano's office, I learned attention to detail at every level is intricately connected to the qualities of the whole. At DiMella Shaffer in Boston, I learned how to manage a large team, stay profitable, and the importance of delivering a coordinated set of drawings. All these experiences instilled enough confidence to co-found my own firm in Boston: CUBE design + research. In 2012, my wife and I decided to return south and I've carried the firm with me.

I believe thoughtful design can inspire the human spirit and that every project must balance ideas, place, finance, and construction logic. My partner Chris Johns and I strive to create a critical architecture that both address our clients' concerns and the pressing issues of our time, adding to the discourse of how and why architecture is made. It is the process of making architecture and the conversations with clients that I find most rewarding. This mentality has led my firm to an unusual array of work, from playhouses, to beach houses, to landscapes, to historic preservation. The latter is perhaps what surprised us most, because preservation was so far off our radar it was actually on the "no interest in doing" list. Yet over the last four years, it has provided us a unique voice.

In 2007, I read an article about a Paul Rudolph building in Boston set to be razed, and I thought, "Why?" It was a cool 1960 building and after looking into it, I found an amazing history that few realized. So I wrote a short manifesto on it and created a video of possible alternatives. One thing led to another and in 2009, we entered the long-standing fight to save Richard Neutra's Cyclorama Building in Gettysburg, PA, which was sadly demolished earlier this year. In both these proposals, we analyzed possibilities from keeping the whole building to demolishing the whole building, and all degrees of partial preservation and transformation in between. We took some cues from artists like Gordon-Matta Clark, but the proposals were all backed by deep research aimed at reinvigorating historic meaning, finding common ground, and questioning how and why we preserve in the first place.

Preservation is too often a battle between one party wanting to save the entire building and another wanting to demolish the entire building. Rarely is anyone trying to make sense of it all. Preservation is viewed through a narrow lens by most people: restore to the original condition and encapsulate in place forever. But how we engage with our physical environment has dramatically changed and will continue to shift with technology, cultural fashions, and diminishing resources.

Once we began to research preservation to learn how it came about, the politics that structure it today, and consider its future we began to see plenty of room and need for innovation. Buildings that show their age in our communities are what provide us a sense of rootedness in place and a connection to something larger than ourselves. They are the background to our stories. But for historic buildings to

continue to hold cultural relevance and memory generation after generation, sometimes we have to reinvigorate them with meaning. This requires multiple ways to preserve and a rethinking of our current system. Preservation should be something that is integrated with our design and development thinking in creating rich and vibrant communities that reflect time and history along with our future aspirations. Preservation should not be just the protagonist in the battle to save or the antithesis to modern design.

In April of 2013, we completed the full renovation of an 1875 National Landmark building in downtown Boston designed by H.H. Richardson that had remained vacant since a fire ripped through it 1985. With a modern aesthetic, we reintroduced historical elements and meaning, paying homage to the architect, the neighborhood, and former occupants. New and old have a symbiotic relationship, telling the visual story of past and present at the same time. It is in these relationships that emerges the richness of place and understanding of time.

Our work in preservation started simply by saying something and led to a defining voice and a large commission. Big things have humble beginnings - you just have to start something and be persistent.

Our experience examining old buildings has shaped the way we're approaching new projects. In the Triangle area, we have a modern residence, a playhouse, an office, and other things underway we're excited to share. One of the best ways to learn is to teach and I look forward to conversations with NCSU students this fall. Professors bring experience but students bring an imagination unencumbered by rules and restrictions. This combination, much like new and old, can yield results that shift our thinking and heighten our understanding of place, time, and architecture.
