Practice Alternatives

This month, we depart from our usual focus on buildings to feature architects who have taken the road less travelled, choosing careers in government, civic organizations, corporations, and universities rather than working for private firms. Contrary to the common stereotype, these men and women are not working behind the scenes, but hold prominent positions that greatly influence the way buildings are programmed, designed, and constructed. They are not only helping their organizations to be better clients, but are educating the public about the value of architecture.

For architects in private practice, the typical path from design to construction is becoming more circuitous, requiring firms to blaze new trails. An essay by Dana Cuff, author of Architecture: The Story of Practice, discusses the reasons for this growing complexity, and a roundtable on project delivery reveals how architects and educators are responding to new ways of providing services. For most firms, the recession is an inescapable catalyst for change. Some firms are successfully coping with the sluggish economy by concentrating on specialized building types and services, as discussed in an article on niche markets. And a few enterprising architects are testing a new management philosophy to better serve their clients and ensure their own survival.

Throughout this issue, we encourage architects to venture out of design’s ivory tower and take advantage of the growing opportunities that lie beyond the limits of traditional practice.
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Silent Architects

In this issue, we examine architects whose quiet presence in the profession has gone largely unnoticed—practitioners who work within corporations, institutions, and government. While architects have long worked outside the mainstream of private firms, those who do so have been grudgingly accepted, more as client representatives than as lobbyists for good design. But as more private firms seek government and university commissions during the recession, the stature of such “silent” architects is growing. It is these professionals who are increasingly influencing what gets built—and how—in the 1990s.

To broaden professional and public awareness of alternatives to traditional practice, last year the AIA formed the Careers Task Force, an advisory group of university, state, and other architects familiar with jobs that break the conventional architecture-firm mold. The group’s first meeting, held last November, not only addressed the need to educate would-be and practicing architects about conventional careers in design, but also about jobs outside the profession that involve no designing whatsoever. The task force members are now developing educational programs and ways of publicizing career alternatives for architects, and their suggestions will be taken up by the AIA Board of Directors this December. A seminar planned for the AIA’s national convention in June, “The New Profession: Careers in Architecture,” will promote jobs “beyond traditional limits.”

The AIA admits that its initiative has been spurred by the recession-induced need to keep architects working. But a more comprehensive view of architects’ responsibilities is long overdue. Not only are more architects working outside the broadly defined practice of architecture (about 8 percent of AIA members), but those in private practice are increasingly involved in activities beyond design. Drawing attention to these alternative ways of practicing underscores the message that architecture is more than the creation of isolated buildings by a lone designer; it requires a collaborative process harnessing many talents outside the drafting room.

Those architects working outside private firms are just as valuable to this process as their conventional counterparts. Their increasing numbers will result in better clients and greater opportunities for all architects. As practice continues to change over the decade, these “silent” architects will have a stronger voice in determining the quality of our environment.

—Deborah K. Dietsch
City Catalyst

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA, IS NOT A TYPICAL SOUTHERN CITY. Founded six years after the Civil War, the city’s economy was originally based on heavy manufacturing, not agriculture, and its urban development responded to the Industrial Revolution rather than antebellum traditions. Likewise, the most influential architect in the city’s government, Michael A. Dobbins, FAIA, is not a typical Southern bureaucrat. A native of Denver, Colorado, Dobbins graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy and Yale University. He worked for an architect in Sweden for a year before earning a master’s degree in 1965 from the Yale School of Architecture, chaired at the time by Paul Rudolph. Despite his Ivy League education, Dobbins is the antithesis of the elitist architect. “I have always been interested in aspects of design that affect ordinary people,” he contends. “My opinions got me into a lot of trouble at Yale in the 1960s.”

Dobbins’s views might have been countercultural, but he managed to land a job in Rudolph’s office after graduation. In 1967, Dobbins first tasted public service under Mayor John V. Lindsay in New York City’s formidable Urban Design Group of the city’s planning department (his colleagues included Jaquelin Robertson and Jonathan Barnett). During his five-year stint in New York, Dobbins was immersed in the zoning, financing, and politics of construction—all the things you don’t learn in architecture school.” Rather than becoming averse to these processes, Dobbins recalls, “I was intrigued when I realized how much government regulations shape architecture.” After three years in New Orleans as a transportation planner and instructor at Tulane University, Dobbins joined Birmingham’s Department of Urban Planning in 1979. He was named director of the department in 1986.

Birmingham was ripe for a public architecture advocate like Dobbins. In 1976, the local AIA chapter sponsored a Regional Urban Design Assistance Team, a charrette that targeted three working-class neighborhoods in the city for redevelopment. In addition, Operation New Birmingham, a nonprofit organization founded in the late 1960s to encourage development, was becoming a more influential proponent of urban design, and a strong grass-roots commitment to preservation had emerged.

To his credit, Dobbins didn’t come to town with grand notions, but with the patience to work within the system as he gradually reshaped Birmingham’s urban fabric. During his 13 years at city hall, he has established a design review process that encourages citizen participation. In addition, Birmingham’s municipal government now formally recognizes 100 neighborhoods. Each district receives capital funding and has an elected board of representatives with a voice in city planning commission and city council deliberations. A citywide design review committee appointed by the city council (four of its 11 members must be architects or landscape architects) has the authority to approve permits for new construction, demolition, and renovation. “The policymakers had to be convinced that design should be a factor in their deliberations,” Dobbins recalls, “while the designers had to be convinced of the value of the deliberative processes that characterize civic decision-making.”

Dobbins’s technique has been to target...
districts of the city for revitalization, rather than to sponsor individual buildings; he is as interested in the spaces between buildings as the buildings themselves. In the mid-1980s, Dobbins directed the renovation of Linn Park, the city’s first public park in the heart of Birmingham, and revitalized a six-block stretch of the downtown’s principal artery, 20th Street. In conjunction with a major expansion by Emery Kirkwood & Associates to the Birmingham/Jefferson County Civic Center (a 1968 design by Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham), Dobbins rerouted and upgraded a street to create new vehicular access and renovated the pedestrian approach from Linn Park. But he has not forgotten less prosperous areas; virtually every neighborhood has received some public streetscape investment.

Projects around the city in various stages of design and construction reflect a growing appreciation of quality architecture on the part of the municipal government and the private sector. A $17 million expansion of the Birmingham Museum of Art by Edward Larrabee Barnes, in association with KPS Group, is scheduled for completion next year and will be the linchpin in the city’s cultural arts district along the western edge of Linn Park. A new campus for the Alabama School of Fine Arts by Renneckar, Tichansky & Associates, now starting construction, will anchor the western boundary of the cultural district.

As the city’s demographics and political leadership have shifted from a white to a black majority, Dobbins has stressed an inclusive approach to urban planning and an awareness of social concerns. Accordingly, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute will open later this year as the centerpiece of the city’s Civil Rights District, which encompasses sites of civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s. Although the Civil Rights Institute is a quasi-public foundation, Dobbins worked closely with the Institute’s board throughout the planning of the complex, which was designed by R.L. Brown & Associates with design consultant J. Max Bond, Jr., of Davis, Brody & Associates.

“It is the mind of the architect that is best suited to bring . . . a city into a symphonic character,” Louis Kahn asserted in a lecture at the Pratt Institute in 1973. As Dobbins orchestrates Birmingham’s commitment to enriching its urban fabric, he demonstrates Kahn’s belief in civic-minded design. “We must emphasize the common ground that holds a city together,” Dobbins maintains. “It must reflect the public will, not the expression of an individual.” —LYNN NESMITH

Phase one (left in model above) incorporates a stepped configuration (facing page, top), granite cladding (below), and entrance canopy (bottom) to engage the street (facing page, bottom).

Kirklin Clinic
Pei Cobb Freed & Partners
with TRO Architects

WHEN MAJOR NEW PROJECTS ARE PROPOSED in Birmingham, Michael A. Dobbins insists on “snatching good urban design from the jaws of good architecture.” Pei Cobb Freed & Partners’s new Kirklin Clinic is a prime example of the city architect’s emphasis on urban ensemble and the role of the community design-review process. The latest component in the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s (UAB) expanding medical complex, the $125 million clinic is located on the city’s principal north-south spine, approximately halfway between downtown and the revitalized Five Points neighborhood. Kirklin Clinic is UAB’s first facility east of 20th Street, and major concern was the five-story building’s relationship to the street, according to Dobbins. Although the clinic resisted placing street-level retail along 20th Street, the architects articulated the ground floor with series of recessed windows and landscaped plazas. They also included 18,000 square feet of retail along the ground level of the facility’s adjacent 1,450-car parking deck. The first phase of the clinic, scheduled to open this month, is clad in a gridded Italian white granite. The five-story, 430,000-square-foot facility will consolidate the medical center’s outpatient services, housing approximately 660 staff physicians, surgeons, and dentists. The second phase calls for another 430,000 square-foot structure to the south (right photo).
State Asset

IN 1986, REPUBLICAN GOVERNOR NORMAN H. BANGERTER OF Utah crossed party lines to appoint a Democrat, Neal Stowe, AIA, as state architect. Stowe, a committed public servant, has made the governor’s defection worthwhile. Because he believes that careful planning produces “smarter” buildings, Stowe demands that each state-sponsored project be fully programmed, including a detailed cost estimate, before funds are requested from the state legislature. Since the 48-year-old Stowe took office, no additional funds have been requested for such projects, and Utah, an economically thriving state, has saved dramatic amounts on design and construction.

Fiscal management isn’t the only skill that serves Stowe in the public sector. As an architecture student at the University of Utah during the early 1970s, Stowe was active in Salt Lake City’s community design center, called Assist, a local planning consortium devoted to encouraging partnerships with business to address the city’s problems. After graduating in 1971, Stowe spent 15 years working for two architectural firms in the state capital. Named a partner in the firm of Richardson Associates in 1983, he also presided over Assist’s board from 1980 to 1984. Three years later, he led the Utah Society of the AIA as president.

As director of Utah’s Division of Facilities Construction and Management, Stowe oversees an inventory of some 4,000 state buildings that constitute a range of building types: corrections facilities, higher education campuses, applied technology campuses, courthouses, and state agency offices in Salt Lake City. The capitol, a turn-of-the-century granite landmark, recently underwent an office renovation under Stowe’s assurance to the legislature that it would meet its 10-month construction schedule and $4 million budget.

Below the state capitol spreads Brigham Young’s urban handiwork, Salt Lake City, currently being reshaped under Stowe’s guidance. An art museum, to be located in a revitalized Union Pacific depot, and a new consolidated courts complex are under way. The $62 million courts project involves a partnership with the city and has already spawned local alliance with businessmen, similar to Stowe’s earlier work with Assist.

To encourage more Utah firms to interview for state work, Stowe added a local twist to the selection process. He invites one architectural firm per week to present its credentials at a brown-bag lunch with his staff, free from the pressures of a specific job interview. As a result of Stowe’s aggressive open-door policy, 33 percent of state construction and planning projects are awarded to firms that have never worked with state government.

While Stowe never aspired to be a bureaucrat, he clearly relishes his job, attacking 18-hour workdays and tough legislative questioning with energetic confidence. Aware that the majority of the state’s largest projects involve public funding, he feels both responsibility and opportunity. “Working with agencies and users,” Stowe explains, “architects create purpose and direction for the future of Utah.”

—ROBERT A. IVY, JR.

Stowe oversees buildings such as a dance center (below left) and biological research facility (below center) at the University of Utah, and the health sciences building (below) at Weber State University. The Dixie Center complex (facing page), at Dixie College in St. George, also serves as the city’s convention and community center.
Crowding is a fact of life in American prisons. Indeed, a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling makes it easier for state and local officials to challenge court settlements that require them to improve prison conditions. Yet despite the high court’s ruling—and despite a hardening of public attitudes toward criminals and stricter sentencing guidelines for convicted offenders—the Justice Department’s Federal Bureau of Prisons prides itself on maintaining humane environments for both inmates and staff. Likewise, the bureau is moving as swiftly as possible to keep up with demand as the federal prison population burgeons.

Architect Scott Higgins, who heads the Bureau of Prisons’ Office of Design and Construction, has spent his entire professional life working to meet these goals. After graduating from the University of Oklahoma with a bachelor of architecture degree in 1967, Higgins joined the bureau; seven years later, he was named administrator of its regional facility management office in Dallas. In 1983, he returned to Washington, D.C., to head the bureau’s design division.

Higgins’s tenure has paralleled sweeping philosophical changes in prison design and an increase in the federal prison population—from 20,000 in 1967 to more than 66,000 in 1992. The year that Higgins joined the bureau, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a commission to study prison reform, resulting in a Department of Justice pilot program to upgrade correctional facilities. A revolutionary new management approach was introduced: direct supervision, an open prison environment in which inmates and staff freely intermingle. This approach to incarceration required new architecture, which resulted in a wave of building for the federal prison system. The number of new facilities has grown from 28 to 68 during Higgins’s nine years with the office of design and construction.

“When the bureau embarked on a major building program 25 years ago,” recalls Higgins, “there was an understanding that quality design was an important component. Three prototypical urban prisons, which opened between 1974 and 1975, reflect the bureau’s new architectural standards: facility in Chicago designed by Harry Wee & Associates; another in New York City by Gruzen & Partners; and a third in San Diego by Tucker Sadler & Bennett. “The Chicago facility is a milestone in the federal prison system,” Higgins asserts. “Weese’s triangular plan for the housing unit remains the model for all prison housing.”

Despite the success of these facilities, increasing crime and mandatory federal sentencing laws have led to an explosion in prison population over the past decade. As a result, the bureau has had to build more prisons than ever before in its history; in 1990, for example, the federal prison population grew by 10.7 percent. Currently, $2 billion worth of federal prison projects are being designed and constructed, and Congress has appropriated another $269 million for 1992.

This boom in prison population has led Higgins and his staff to develop a campus model for new medium- and minimum-security facilities. Scheduled to open in 1993, the bureau’s Cumberland complex, designed by RTKL, incorporates a campus plan comprising a medium-security facility (below) and an adjacent minimum-security prison camp.
Federal Correctional Complex
Florence, Colorado
LKA Partners/Lescher and Mahoney/
DLR Group, Architects

THE FLORENCE COMPLEX REPRESENTS THE first time the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons has located four facilities of varying degrees of security on one site (master plan, below). Scheduled to open in phases later this year and next year, the 600-acre complex houses a minimum-security camp (top left), a medium-security institution (second from top), a high-security penitentiary (second from bottom), and a maximum-security penitentiary (bottom). Although Lescher and Mahoney had designed a medium-security facility in Phoenix in the early 1980s, the firm worked closely with bureau architects in programming and designing the bureau’s first facility constructed specifically to serve as a maximum-security facility for confining the federal system’s most dangerous inmates. Located in a sparsely populated, environmentally sensitive area 40 miles southwest of Colorado Springs, the Florence complex reflects Higgins’s commitment to site-specific solutions that also function as models for future facilities. The architects, working in joint venture, utilized complementary materials and developed an architectural vocabulary to create a unified compound that differentiates the four levels of security through density and massing.

FLORENCE MASTER PLAN
1 MAIN ENTRANCE
2 MINIMUM SECURITY
3 MEDIUM SECURITY
4 HIGH SECURITY
5 MAXIMUM SECURITY
6 TRAINING CENTER
rity federal prisons. This campus plan, which originated in Otisville, New York, with a 1980 design by Davis, Brody & Associates, clusters triangular housing modules and communal structures around a courtyard. "Otisville set the standard," explains Higgins, "but the bureau's medium-security facilities have constantly evolved during the last decade." The campus model has continued to develop under the federal architect, with 14 new facilities opening within the past 10 years. The next important prison model was the 1989 Sheridan, Oregon, facility by Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Partnership, which in turn served as a forerunner to the Three Rivers, Texas, facility (facing page). Both prisons encompass a medium-security compound and an adjacent minimum-security prison camp.

Higgins is very sensitive to the fact that his office oversees an enormous public expenditure. The less institutional look of the recently completed medium-security prisons can be credited to the bureau's search for the most cost-effective structures. "Our new facilities are as much a reaction to the expense of utilizing super-security prison hardware as trying to create a 'normal' atmosphere for the inmate," explains Higgins. His commitment to fiscal responsibility encourages architects to incorporate local building materials and construction techniques.

Although a few large and specialized firms design many new federal correctional facilities, the bureau is willing to consider firms that are not "prison architects," using the federal government's standard qualifications-based selection process. Architecture firms submit an SF-255 qualifications statement; the final decision is made from a short list of four to six firms. Once selected, the design firm works with one of the bureau's 13 staff architects, who serve under Higgins and manage a project from programming through construction. Firms currently working on federal prisons include the Kling-Lindquist Partnership, DMJM, Dworsky Associates, Odell Associates, and Middleton McMillan Architects. Keyes Condon Florance Eichbaum Esocotl King was recently selected to design a 1,200-bed facility in Washington, D.C.

As head of the bureau's Office of Design and Construction, Higgins has directed the largest federal prison-building program in the country's history. Although the 1993 appropriation for new construction is only $118 million—less than 10 percent of Higgins's budget three years before—prison construction promises to remain strong throughout the decade.

—LYNN NESMITH
Three Rivers's medium-security facility wraps around a central courtyard (facing page, top) anchored by an administrative wing to the east (facing page, center), gymnasium to the north, and chapel (facing page, bottom left). The architects exposed the structure's roof gables within the dining room (facing page, bottom right). The satellite camp (below) also links administrative buildings with arcades and features a sunny cafeteria (bottom right). The camp's gym is crowned with a metal roof and exposed trusses (bottom left).

Federal Correctional Center
Three Rivers, Texas
Helmut, Obata & Kassabaum, Architects

LIKE MANY PRISON PROJECTS DESIGNED UNDER the auspices of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the Three Rivers complex comprises a medium-security facility and a satellite camp. The site of the new prison is a 302-acre tract approximately 70 miles south of San Antonio near the Choke Canyon Reservoir. Unlike many government agencies that strive for uniformity, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons strongly encourages architects to incorporate regional materials and building techniques. In recalling his experiences at the Three Rivers facility, HOK project architect Gordon Gilmore credited the bureau with "appreciating good design and being open to our ideas." Accordingly, HOK incorporated split-faced concrete masonry blocks and stucco with standing-seam metal roofs to recall the scale and massing of South Texas vernacular architecture. Further responding to the bureau's goal of blending with the rural context, HOK developed a master plan with approximately 30 percent of the site left as a landscaped buffer of indigenous vegetation.

The main component of the complex (facing page) is a medium-security facility with buildings arranged in a campuslike setting—albeit within a double-perimeter security fence. The 30 acres within the fence contain the workings of a small city, including administrative offices, clinic, dining facilities, commissary, laundry and clothing exchange, library, classrooms, nondenominational chapel, gymnasium, and recreational facilities. The architects organized administrative and inmate services buildings around a 450-foot-long central courtyard and connected the structures with covered arcades. The prison's 958 inmates are housed in four two-story buildings, each divided into two triangular wings with two floors of cells surrounding a multipurpose room.

For the adjacent minimum-security prison camp, the architects kept the buildings' profiles deliberately low and fragmented and repeated the rooflines, window proportions, color, and materials of the main prison facility to the west. Administrative/inmate services and dormitories are also grouped around a central landscaped courtyard. To house the camp's 289 inmates, the architects designed a pair of one-story residential structures that define the southern edge of the camp's facility. Each building contains four open dormitory wings.
MORE THAN 30 YEARS AGO, FOLLOWING THE DREAM OF most young architects, Arthur Rosenblatt quit his drafting job and opened an office in New York City. It was an audacious move that Rosenblatt, married with two young children, would soon regret: lacking enough commissions, he was forced to close his practice within the year. The architect was soon to improve his lot, however, by inventing an alternative career that has made him a force behind New York's most powerful cultural institutions.

Self-reinventors can always do with some help, and Rosenblatt's came in the form of his next boss, the late architect Irwin S. Chanin, who allowed Rosenblatt to participate in the civic life of New York during working hours. The young architect joined a community planning board and helped neighborhood groups to fight for better park design and maintenance. As a result of these volunteer activities, in 1966, the newly appointed parks commissioner, Thomas P.F. Hoving, named Rosenblatt first deputy commissioner of New York City's Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs—a job that was to lead to a lifetime of public service.

In his two years as deputy commissioner, Rosenblatt initiated the first major construction program for New York's parks and cultural facilities since the Robert Moses era. In 1968, once again summoned by Hoving, now director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rosenblatt became the Met's vice president for architecture and planning, a position he held for 18 years. In that capacity, he was responsible for the museum's more than $1 billion renovation and expansion, designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo & Associates. (During the last four years, he also served as director of capital projects for the New York Public Library restoration by Davis, Brody & Associates and restoration architect Giorgio Cavaglieri.)

In 1986, Rosenblatt became the director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Responsible for program development, as well as securing approvals from the federal Fine Arts Commission, National Capital Planning Commission, and D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board, he was instrumental in the selection of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners to design the building.

Today, Arthur Rosenblatt, FAIA, is back in New York serving as vice president of the Grand Central Partnership (GCP), a private, nonprofit group consisting of property owners, commercial tenants, and city officials dedicated to the restoration and rebuilding of the 53-block area surrounding Grand Central Terminal. This high-density district includes nearly 55 million square feet of commercial space within an irregular boundary that stretches from 38th to 48th streets between Second and Fifth avenues. Dilapidated, seedy, and a magnet for the homeless, it has long been outclassed by adjoining business districts; capital improvements, funded by property owners through a self-imposed tax assessment, are expected to cost $2.8 billion. Architect of the GCP is Benjamin Thompson & Associates which has drawn up a five-year master plan. BTA's proposals include the recently completed lighting of the terminal, the restoration of the 1919 viaduct, storefront and street design criteria, and a new system of lighting signage, and traffic signals (facing page).

Meanwhile, Rosenblatt is currently steering the project through New York City's Art Commission, Landmarks Preservation Commission, Department of Consumer Affairs, Department of Transportation, Department of Parks and Recreation, Fire Department, and Community Planning Boards 5 and 6, a task that will test his well-earned political skills. "Too many architects," he asserts, "present their projects in a manner that reveals total innocence of the political realities. They need to function as effectively in the public sector as they do in the private."

—MILDRED F. SCHMERTZ

Rosenblatt supervised improvement of Grand Central Terminal, directed development of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (below left), and served as vice president for the Metropolitan Museum of Art (below).