NEW YORK CITY IS TRIUMPHING, WITH SOM LEADING THE ARCHITECTURAL CHARGE. HOW DID ONE FIRM GET SO FAR OUT IN FRONT?

By Elizabeth Harrison Kubany

Not since McKim, Mead & White has one firm had such a profound effect on the built environment of New York City as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill’s New York office. Between 1880 and 1920, McKim, Mead & White completed more than 70 projects in the city, including the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Bowery Savings Bank in Little Italy, the Metropolitan Club on the Upper East Side, Columbia University in Morningside Heights, and Pennsylvania Station (whose demolition in 1964 sparked the preservation movement in this country). This was the Gilded Age—a period of dramatic change when technological advances led to vast infrastructure projects and widespread prosperity gave rise to many of the city’s grandest monuments.

Today, a century later, New York City is undergoing a similar transformation with SOM leading the architectural charge. Affluence and optimism have resulted in massive investment in the fabric of the city; several major projects that have been under discussion for decades are now coming to fruition. “There’s a golden moment happening in New York City and we’re paying attention to it,” says partner David Childs, FAIA.

Granted, New York may not be the first place we associate with SOM. The firm was founded in Chicago, has offices in seven cities—including San Francisco, London, Washington, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, and São Paulo—and has completed more than 10,000 projects in more than 50 countries. Some of the firm’s most famous buildings, such as the John Hancock Building and Sears Tower (in Chicago), are not in New York. Today, designers like Adrian Smith, FAIA, Larry Olmanns, AIA, Leigh Breslau, AIA, and Philip Enquist, AIA, in Chicago and Craig Hartman, AIA, Peter Ellis, AIA, and Brian Lee, AIA, in San Francisco are making news with such projects as Jin Mao Tower [January, page 82] in Shanghai, Lisbon’s Atlantico Pavilion [August 1999, page 114], 7 South Dearborn [September 1999, page 49] in Chicago, and the Hong Kong Convention Center [June 1998, cover and page 90].

The Bronx is up and the Battery’s down

Still, as partner Roger Duffy, AIA, says, “this is a remarkable moment in New York City and for SOM’s New York office.” The office is transforming New York’s skyline with some of the most important buildings of this
The story over the demolition of McKim, Mead & White's wrought iron and glass Pennsylvania Station gave birth to the preservation movement in the United States. Today, though it bears the same name, the station is little more than a rabbit warren under a two-squar block office complex and sports arena. Called "the most important public work undertaken in New York in more than a generation," the plan to convert the landmark McKim, Mead and White Farley Post Office Building (one block west of the original station) into the new Pennsylvania Station will expand the facilities of the existing station while creating a far grander arrival and departure gate for the city of New York. When completed in 2003, the new Station will serve more passengers a year than the three regional airports combined. It will provide a hub for major transportation systems, the city's subway system, and new rail links to JFK and Newark airports.
Just the tip of the iceberg: SOM has completed almost 400 projects in New York City—including new buildings, renovations, interiors, master plans, and competitions and studies—for hospitals, corporations, cultural institutions, developers, and various government agencies. The map above shows part of this proliferation.
generation, the kind of era-defining projects watched by the world. SOM’s list of current New York work includes three of the largest projects on the boards in the city: Columbus Centre, 2 million-square-foot towers that will house the headquarters for Time Warner, a Jazz at Lincoln Center performance hall, retail shops, and condominiums on the prominent and highly contested site of the existing New York Coliseum; the new Pennsylvania Station—which the New York Times called the “most important public work undertaken in New York in more than a generation”—the conversion of McKim, Mead & White’s landmark Farley Post Office Building to expand the facilities of the most heavily trafficked transportation hub in the world; and a new 2 million-square-foot trading floor and headquarters building for the New York Stock Exchange, the most powerful symbol of capitalism in America. Together, these three projects will total close to $2 billion in construction.

And there are numerous others: the new International Arrivals Building at John F. Kennedy Airport; the Continental Airlines Terminal at Newark Airport; the renovation of the landmark lobby at 230 Park Avenue (formerly known as the Pan Am building), including the introduction of pedestrian walkways with simultaneous views of subway tracks below, cars outside, and computerized signage within; 350 Madison Avenue, whose “bold design treats the addition to the tall building as a virtually new building type,” according to the New York Times’ architecture critic Herbert Muschamp; Harlem USA, a new 260,000-square-foot retail/entertainment project at 125th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard; a 50-story mixed-used building with a 660,000-square-foot headquarters for Random House and 200,000 square feet of luxury residential space at Broadway and 56th Street; and 383 Madison, a million-square-foot headquarters building for Bear Stearns. In addition, the firm is part of the master plan team for Governor’s Island, which partner Marilyn J. Taylor, FAIA, calls “a wonderful plan for 172 irreplaceable acres of historic and open space resources for the city and the region.”

**New York, New York, it’s a helluva town**

Creating architecture in New York City is notoriously difficult, so SOM’s involvement in such a great scope of work is no small feat. Muschamp recently wrote, “The millennial threshold could be a pivotal moment for architecture in New York . . . there’s been a break in the climate of hostility toward architecture that has prevailed here for two decades . . . For a
continued from previous page long time, architecture in this town has been boxed up behind closed doors . . . but out on the street—democracy's great forum for celebration and debate—this ancient art form has long lain dormant."

So, what is the firm’s secret? It begins with an understanding and love of cities. In the early 1990s, with the dearth of corporate and commercial work, SOM’s partners made a conscious decision to pursue more politically and programmatically complex urban projects because they felt they could have a greater impact that way; that decision also happened to be good for business. Senior partners Taylor and Childs, with their powerful combination of talents—Taylor’s with large-scale, complex urban-design issues and Childs’ as a designer—head a multidisciplined team, one of the few in New York qualified to address the variety of issues that arise in these large projects.

There’s just one thing that’s important in Manhattan
Taylor says simply, “I really love the phenomenon of cities.” She calls the project at Kennedy Airport "a very personal project, the reason you want to do work at home . . . to create a more pleasant arrival into and departure from this city.” Childs reiterates, "while I am primarily focused on the individual buildings, I am overwhelmed by how they fit into the city. And this city is the greatest piece of architecture ever built by mankind anywhere.” The firm’s younger partners are equally invested in the future of New York. In speaking of his work at 350 Madison, Duffy says he feels a “responsibility to give the city timeless designs like Lever House.”

This passion leads to advocacy. Taylor believes that “to affect the city you have to be involved in issues that are broader than your own self-interest. If you’re out there, then the opportunities come.” Childs feels that architects could have an “enormous influence on the world” by coming together with a collective vision, which is part of their responsibility as a profession. To this end, both partners serve in numerous civic organizations—the New York Building Congress, the Institute for Urban Design, and the New York Municipal Art Society, among others—where ideas are discussed with influential decision makers and where deals are brokered. Founding partner Nathaniel Owings called politics “the fifth dimension of planning, the art of getting things done.” This is an aggressive approach, where, rather than waiting for the RFP, Taylor, Childs, and their team try to find a way to get into a project early, "when it is still in the pipeline," says Taylor, before the criteria are set for the role of the architect.

Taylor and Childs use these organizations to advocate large-scale public goals, which is the same approach SOM brings to urban planning. Before planning was really in vogue, Owings predicted, “We are going to reach the point where environment planning will be the supreme thing in this country. Then perhaps we can . . . begin to build a real environment that is a lasting investment rather than something to be destroyed.” As a profession, planning has lost some of its clout in recent decades, but SOM and, specifically, Taylor and her team, have used it as an ace. They think about their projects in the broadest terms possible. “Planning at SOM means thinking beyond the boundaries of the project,” Taylor explains. “We try to make the object meet the ground, the city, and the neighborhood in the best way. My job is to understand the larger implications of the architecture.” For example, in addition to considering how the new Penn Station will fit into the infra-
HARLEM USA

For years, development in Harlem was almost unheard of. Recently, retail and entertainment companies started to realize the potential of the market in this part of the city. Harlem USA, a 260,000-square-foot building housing shops and a multiplex cinema, reflects this change in attitude. Located on a prominent site at the corner of 125th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, the new building is almost entirely glazed to reinforce the activity of the street. This outward-looking approach is more appropriate to New York City than the shopping mall model, proved unsuccessful in other parts of the city.

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structure of the city, Taylor is hoping for an extension of the Number Seven subway line from Times Square down Eighth Avenue, west to the new station, and then over to the Jacob Javits Convention Center. Eventually, he envisions Penn Station and Grand Central Station as the hubs of a regional railroad which would allow commuters to take a single train directly from, say, Trenton, New Jersey out to Long Island. “This rail corridor has the potential to increase mobility and match people and jobs,” she says. At Kennedy Airport, Taylor has designed the new terminal to accommodate a light-rail system that will connect the various terminals and eventually drop passengers at the A subway line. “Our European client couldn’t believe there was no train to the plane. We knew with a little bit of earnest advocacy, we had a chance to embrace the air train and put it in the building. We are trying to design conditions that will make it easier, rather than harder, for these connections to be made in the future,” she explains. Ultimately, she hopes a direct, one-seat ride from Kennedy to Penn Station will be in place, an improvement she calls “compellingly important to our region if we want to compete in the future.”

This approach makes the projects more difficult for the architect; the complexity of the firm’s work correlates directly to the time it takes to reap the fruits of the labor. “The projects we have now come from a history of 10 to 20 years,” says partner T. J. Gottesdiener, AIA. “We worked hard to develop relationships and a reputation. These projects have the work, background, and sweat equity in them that are paying off now.” Childs has completed five separate designs for Columbus Centre since the 1980s and has been talking about Penn Station since the 1970s. Taylor calls the tenacity required to complete these projects “a tolerance for the indeterminate.”

The famous places to visit are so many

SOM’s New York office is enjoying its second heyday. The first was during the 1950s and 60s, when Gordon Bunshaft defined SOM with his unwavering, uncompromising devotion to the principles of Modernism. Bunshaft’s clear, well-conceived buildings simultaneously cemented his reputation as one of the foremost Modernists of his day and changed the fabric of New York City. Lever House on Park Avenue, completed in 1951, won the First Honor Award from the AIA in 1952 (the first of 12 such awards that Bunshaft-designed buildings were to receive) and was called, by Architectural Record in 1956, one of the three most influential buildings erected during the previous 100 years. The Manufacturer’s Trust Company (1954) on Fifth Avenue, PepsiCo Headquarters (1960), Union Carbide Corporation Headquarters (1960), and Chase Manhattan Bank Headquarters (1961) compose a remarkable list of buildings—all impressive for their size, technological development, and sensitive detailing—that Bunshaft completed in Manhattan during these years (continued on page 204).

The partners of SOM’s New York office (left to right): David M. Childs, FAIA, Carl L. Gallozo, AIA, Marilyn J. Taylor, FAIA, Stephen A. Apking, AIA, Peter J. Magill, AIA, Anthony L. Vaccione, AIA, Mustafa K. Abadan, AIA, T. J. Gottesdiener, AIA, Gary P. Haney, AIA, and Roger F. Duffy, AIA.
years. Recognizing Bunshaft’s remarkable oeuvre as well as the contribution of the entire firm, the AIA gave SOM the inaugural Firm of the Year Award in 1961.

In between heydays, there were some dark times in the firm. Not too long ago, rumors circulated that SOM—long considered one of the most venerable firms in the business—would close its doors. That was in the early 1990s, the period Childs refers to as “the depression.” Rampant growth during the 1980s engendered bad habits and high overhead. In 1989, the firm’s gross receipts reached a record $157 million; the staff peaked at 1,500. The sheer quantity of work cost the firm quality control. “We tipped too far toward becoming a big production firm,” says Childs. “From a design standpoint, this was the lost generation.” By 1993, the nationwide slump in the commercial real estate market had bankrupted a number of developer clients, more than halved revenues, to $67 million, and whittled the payroll to 557 employees. To make matters worse, there were lawsuits and countersuits with former partners precipitated by the firm’s inability to pay the retirement income to which the partners alleged they were entitled.

Where no one lives on account of the pace
The crisis compelled SOM to revisit its entire approach to management, marketing, design, and project delivery. In so doing, the firm transformed its culture to a model much closer to what the firm’s founders, Louis Skidmore and Nathaniel Owings, envisioned when they established SOM in 1936. Partner Mustafa Abadan, AIA, explains, “During the 1970s and 80s, the firm lost its direction. We have returned to our roots.”

About a decade ago, SOM reinvented itself with an eye toward the future and positioned itself to ride the great wave it is currently enjoying—in terms of its design and planning skill but also vis-a-vis the firm’s internal organization. At SOM’s beginnings, Skidmore, with his legendary business acumen, was the managing partner. Management has always been embraced as a discipline at SOM, just like architecture, engineering, and urban planning. According to Gottesdiener, one of the office’s managing partners, “My job is to balance design with the business side of architecture. It used to be only corporate clients who demanded this but my role has evolved to include all clients. In a sense, my responsibility is to the client first and the firm second. We believe that if our clients are doing well, we are doing well.” More than half the firm’s work comes from repeat clients, a tribute to the firm’s ability to deliver good design while simultaneously managing the process in the client’s best interest. Stephen Ross, chairman of The Related Companies and client for Columbus Centre and Random House, calls SOM “a firm that has the total capability to create a project that is beautiful and cost effective. They create great architecture but also speak the language of business.”

When Gottesdiener began working for SOM, his role was creating construction documents. He says he had no idea he had an aptitude for business, but somebody did. Since the firm’s beginnings, SOM has been known for sniffing out and nurturing great talent. For several of the firm’s partners, including Abadan, Duffy, Taylor, and Gottesdiener, SOM was their first, and only, job. They stayed put because SOM gave them unusual opportunities. Marilyn Taylor recalls that, at age 27, she was on her way to running the Stations Program of the Northeast Corridor Improvement Project, which she directed from 1978 to 1985: “It was extraordinary that the partners of SOM thought that I could run that project. But somebody counted on me to do it. For the right people the opportunities here are great.”

Nat Owings once said, “I’ve produced the people who produce the buildings.” Few, if any, firms train and sustain successive generations as intensively as SOM does. Partners continually scan their ranks for successors. “The first thing I was told when I became a partner was that I had to find my replacement,” says Gottesdiener. Duffy says the senior partners today are “sustaining the partnership by bringing along the next generation of people.”

As a result, the firm has a deep talent pool that virtually ensures its longevity. These are the people who will lead SOM in the future. Despite the firm’s age and venerable reputation, “we are hardly a conservative force,” asserts Taylor. Gottesdiener says his firm is “a young firm right now, not in age but in attitude. We are reflective of the phenomenal change in the world and are testing old standards.” While SOM’s long legacy of good management and award-winning design work certainly factors into the New York office’s current success, this spirit of experimentation and the desire to encourage a dialogue on “issues of our time, our place, our clients,” in the words of partner Stephen Apking, AIA, will ensure that the firm has a lasting place well into the future.