

Backgrounder

Centerbrook Musings: How to Succeed in Architecture



While their designs, personalities, and strengths may be various, the four partners who guide Centerbrook Architects start with the same raw material: not brick, glass or metal, but people and place. Like love, there is much that architecture should and should not be. Buildings belong to the clients and must serve the needs and aspirations – eccentricities even – of their inhabitants. The empathy extends further, to land and location, to the past as well as the future, to the larger community. The best outcomes percolate from collaboration and thoughtful exploration of such issues, rather than stylistic dogmatism or egotistical agendas.

Leadership and experience marshal all the listening and learning to the cause. From the diverse cacophony of the design process, a single building, or complex, emerges. In addition to being practical and welcoming, it should speak to those who live there – to those, too, who merely meander by. As when we talk, it is best, of course, if the finished structure has something to say, a unique voice, one that can answer questions about the people within. Who are they? What do they value? What are they doing in there?

It sounds terribly serious, architecture, but it doesn't have to be. It can be fun, induce whimsy, or inspire awe. It can swirl, twist and surprise, play hide and seek, look pretty much like one might imagine – or like nothing you've ever seen before. Successful design is more than the sum of the physical characteristics. When the American Institute of Architects bestowed its prestigious Firm Award on Centerbrook Architects in 1998, it cited them for, among other virtues, creating "human scale space filled with delight."



Since 1975, Centerbrook Architects have been plying their trade out of a restored 19th century mill complex, a series of lovingly restored buildings that speak volumes about who they are. The makeover of the 1884 factory into modern offices for its 75 employees has been thorough but not extreme. The mill dam continues to provide water power, not to drive belts and pulleys, but to generate electricity. When they combined this resource with an array of solar panels and a geothermal, heating/cooling pump, these thrifty New Englanders produce 40 percent of their annual wattage on site. From the outside, one would hardly know that auger bits were no longer being produced, except for the odd flourish here and there, such as the aluminum sculpture of a giant paper airplane swooping down from a rooftop.



The interior is remarkable for its efficient, elegant use of space and for its collegiality: work stations, including those of the partners, are open to one another, and equal, as befits a firm that values communication and a vigorous exchange of ideas. A landscaped rooftop terrace affords an idyllic platform to contemplate great blue herons wading along the Falls River. On a more basic level, the Blue Loo and Nature's Call (constantly screening a wildlife film) transform personal hygiene into an adventure.

From inside this large, inconspicuous brick building, Centerbrook Architects' projects are conceived and nurtured. They run the gamut: from large-scale scholastic build-outs, corporate headquarters, and scientific laboratories to private homes, art museums, and synagogues.

Purveyors of sustainable "green" architecture from day one, well before the term entered the lexicon, Centerbrook is committed to incorporating affordable energy efficiency features, local materials, and renewable systems into its designs. Many of its buildings have been rated by the U.S. Green Building Council as silver or gold LEED certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). The Kroon building in New Haven, the new home for the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, is the greenest facility on campus and is expected to receive the highest rating, platinum LEED certified. Centerbrook, as Architect of Record, collaborated on the project with Hopkins Architects of London. Dedicated in May, 2009, Kroon is virtually "carbon-neutral" and received its first award from the Connecticut Building Congress.

Awards and reviews tell part of the story of the past 35 years, what Centerbrook's peers and journalists think. The firm has garnered more than 300 awards for its designs. Commentary, such as the following about the design of the award-winning Nessel Wing at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida, is not uncommon:

“Access to the new galleries is through an oval atrium around whose walls a cantilevered staircase rises in a gently scalloped spiral. The cool-blue terrazzo floor mimics an abstract, classic Chinese pattern that represents cracked ice. But you need not catch the allusion to sense the subliminal submarine atmosphere. Neptune himself might choose a state entryway like this.”

(The Wall Street Journal, Matthew Gurewitsch)

The final verdict, however, rests with those who know the firm best. Centerbrook is committed to working with clients of diverse sizes and needs, old and new, from international corporations to local non-profits such as the Garde Art Center in Connecticut and Maria Mitchell Association on Nantucket. The firm’s four partners also have enjoyed long-term, productive relationships with a number of clients. Jeff Riley has been the sole architect for Quinnipiac University and its ambitious campus expansion since 1979. Chad Floyd has done numerous projects over the years for Dartmouth College and Pfizer, Inc. Mark Simon has been hired repeatedly by Yale University and the University of Connecticut over the past two decades. Since the 1980s Jim Childress has designed numerous buildings for the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, where Centerbrook has designed a total of 45 projects since the mid-1970s.

Inspired from the very beginning by former Yale professor, friend and founding partner, the late Charles Moore, Centerbrook Architects have spent decades in service to their craft. Partner Emeritus Bill Grover summed it up best: “We’re going to make good architecture, we’re going to have fun making it, and we’re going to make enough money to keep going. In that order.”



Centerbrook Architects and Planners

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