

Meet Hugh Newell Jacobsen, F.A.I.A.



Hugh Newell Jacobsen was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan on March 11, 1929. His father a merchant and his mother was homemaker. He describes his childhood as “happily idyllic.” He soon discovers that he is severely dyslexic. A happy and social young man, he read a great deal and finally memorized math without understanding the reasons behind it. “All math, etc. remains a mystery still” he says.

Mr. Jacobsen received a BA in Fine Art from University of Maryland in 1951. The same year he was interviewed by Carol Meek, Architecture Professor of Theory in New Haven, Connecticut. He was accepted to Yale as a result of this interview. He took his third year of graduate studies in England. His credits earned there were honored at Yale. After receiving a certificate honoring his one academic year at Architectural Association of London in 1953, he studied for two more years and graduated from Yale Graduate School of architecture in March of 1955.

Editor: What made you want to be an architect?

HNJ: After finishing my BA in Fine Arts, I decided to become a painter (portraits) –my good father put business with art and suggested architecture. I was accepted at Yale (no SATs or GREs in those days.)

Editor: What was it like – at Yale Graduate School of architecture – in early 50’s?

HNJ: My class consisted of 12 students – Graduate program, then, ran for 4 years. ALL candidates had previously earned a bachelors degree – three of them from Yale. Vincent Scully taught history of American Architecture which was mandatory for one year – I audited his courses for 2 more. Louis I. Kahn was my “crit” for two years.

Editor: Who did you work for after you graduated from college?

HNJ: I worked for the office of Philip Johnson in Darien, CT.

Editor: How did you get a job there?

HNJ: He asked me if I would like to come and work with him on the day I graduated from Yale in May 1955.

Editor: How long did you work there?

HNJ: About one year before the Air Force called me up. I owed the USAF two years after graduating with a ROTC (Reserved Officers Training Corps) commission from Yale. They commissioned me as a 2nd Lt. @ Yale’s ROTC.



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Editor: What made you decide to go on your own?

HNJ: After completing my commission, I returned to Washington, D.C. under the false belief that I knew more people in that city which would help me start my own office. I was wrong. Every Client that has retained me I met after my return to this city.

Editor: What is your philosophy of practicing architecture?

HNJ: A structure without order is not architecture. Order is everything. Good architecture, like a well-mannered lady, does not shout at the neighbors. The architects' responsibility is to make the site better.

Editor: What are some great influences in your life?

HNJ: Yale School of Architecture where I was taught by Lou Kahn and Vincent Scully. The proud sense of order in all of Kahn's work still leads me on. Scully's courses influenced the demand of history and its references on all work.

Editor: How did Khan influence you?

HNJ: His deliberate sense of scale and massing of all of his work, through the strong order he imposed, created the most beautiful and powerful buildings world wide.

Editor: Who is your favorite artist?

HNJ: Joseph Albers

Editor: Albers was the head of ART department at Yale – while you were there. Was he an influence?

HNJ: Joseph Albers was a professor at the famous Bauhaus that Hitler closed down. He ran a course that he, himself, taught. It was called "color". The only "text" was a stack of colored sheets of construction paper. He thought that there is no color that stands alone – all other colors influence it – and themselves.

Editor: What was he like?

HNJ: He was passionately human and kind – and brilliant.

Editor: Who is your favorite philosopher?

HNJ: Jean Paul Sartre

Editor: Who is your favorite musician?

HNJ: Cole Porter

Editor: What is your favorite book?

HNJ: From Dawn to Decadence by Jacques Barzun

Editor: Any teachers that influenced you?

HNJ: Louis Kahn & Vincent Scully

Editor: Any books that helped influence you?

HNJ: Sir Harry Banister Fletchers' A history of Architecture

Editor: Do you have any heroes or role models?

HNJ: Lou Kahn

Editor: Was there anything in your life that you had to overcome?

HNJ: Dyslexia. It was a bigger problem then because no one knew what it was.

Editor: What does it take to be an architect?

HNJ: Dedication and full absorption into the history of architecture as well as world history.

Editor: Can you say something about what inspires an architectural design?

HNJ: The awesome responsibilities of building something that hopefully will never be remodeled let alone torn down.

Editor: Do you spend a lot of time at the studio - evenings, weekends? Do you work alone?

HNJ: Yes. Design is not a team process - one can only do it alone.

Editor: How does it make you feel to see your designs become reality?

HNJ: It is always very fulfilling - however, it does make you try harder. I have never designed a building that I am ashamed of.

Editor: Have you had any disappointments?

HNJ: I made the final cut down to three in the process of winning the AIA Gold Medal. I have lost three times.



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Editor: Do you have a favorite among your designs?

HNJ: The project I am working on right now.

Editor: Do you take aesthetics into account? Function? What is more important to you in designing a building?

HNJ: Aesthetics - however, if the building doesn't work, it's a bad but beautiful building. It won't last.

Editor: How did you manage the recession of the late eighties early nineties?

HNJ: The practice of architecture is up and down - fortunately, "The downs have been few."

Editor: Has there ever anything you wish you never did?

HNJ: Not yet

Editor: What are your thoughts about the role of the architect in society?

HNJ: I feel sorry for anyone who is not an architect. To live a full life you must learn some record. No one wraps their fish in our work. The architect expresses the hopes, aspirations and knowledge of our society.

Editor: Would you recommend becoming an architect to a young person?

HNJ: Absolutely!

Editor: Do you think architects are as involved as they should be in the matters of the community and the matters of the environment?

HNJ: As our population has doubled in my lifetime, my profession has not been able to maintain the position of responsible citizen to lead in the community and the environment.

Editor: Would you do it all over again?

HNJ: You bet!

Editor: Any hobbies?

HNJ: Architecture!

Editor: What do you *think* our prevalent style of architecture is?

HNJ: Architects loathe the term *style*. I am amazed and admire the works of Frank Gehry, Piano, Nouvel, Meier, Gualtmey - style doesn't apply.



The Noble Architect®

July 23, 2007 Vol. IV Issue XXIV

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Editor: What's the greatest challenge of our industry?

HNJ: Sustainable architecture that is beautiful.

Editor: Thank you Mr. Jacobsen, It's been a privilege.