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“Man About Town”

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Hugh Shepley FAIA retired from Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott (SBRA) in 1990, but he seems to have more energy than ever. I run into him with a frequency that always surprises me. In the last year, our shared itinerary has found us: in a breakout session at a BSA retreat; bumping elbows at the bar before the annual Fellows dinner at the Tavern Club; at a lunch for former BSA presidents, intended to offer advice and sympathy to the incumbent; and at a reception hosted by SBRA, where he was formally presented with the BSA Award of Honor, in the company of friends, colleagues, and his family.

We recently walked together from The Architects Building up to Downtown Crossing, where Hugh was heading to catch the T, and we talked about some of our encounters. Hugh was president of the BSA 32 years ago and was already a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects at the time, but today, his observations on the profession remain uncannily relevant and he remains an exceptional member of the profession, who has played a central part in Boston's architectural growth and in the continuing collegiality of its architectural community.

at the Ex-Presidents Lunch ...

Peter Kuttner FAIA: You talked about some things that haven't changed since you were president of the BSA 32 years ago.

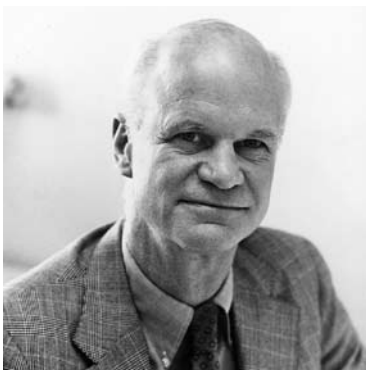
Hugh Shepley FAIA: Architects still need to talk to the public much more about what we do. The public doesn't really understand what we add to the building

Clockwise from top — Hugh Shepley FAIA: with photo of great-grandfather H.H. Richardson, portrait by Elsa Dorfman for *ArchitectureBoston* (May/June 2006); with SBRA staff, circa 1955; on 1992 circumnavigation of Manhattan, with SBRA's New York Hospital in the background; SBRA portrait, circa 1990; with SBRA principals Jean Paul Carlhian FAIA and Paul Sun FAIA (all photos courtesy SBRA except as noted).

Man About Town

Hugh Shepley FAIA, recipient, 2007 BSA Award of Honor

by **Peter Kuttner FAIA**



process. We know we do more than just make the final project look good, but the public needs to better understand how we improve the entire process, from the very beginning.

Peter Kuttner FAIA: You also mentioned that architects are still underpaid.

Hugh Shepley FAIA: I once asked Joan Goody FAIA why we are underpaid, and she said, “Hugh, caregivers are always under-appreciated, and architects are perceived as ‘caregivers.’” Norman Fletcher FAIA always seemed resigned to it, saying “It’s the price we’re all willing to pay for the privilege to shape the built environment.” But I think it’s because we’ve been giving away our responsibility to others. There are people out there called “project managers” and “construction managers” who are doing the things we used to do. We’ve let go of many things we can do better than anyone, and we need to let people know we can do it all.

at the Fellows Dinner ...

Peter Kuttner FAIA: You mentioned your misgivings about “celebrity architects.”

Hugh Shepley FAIA: Architects do seem drawn into celebrity over time, and it’s clear there’s a cycle. It’s been going on since Michelangelo. I have very mixed feelings about some of the results — projects like Frank Gehry’s Stata Center, which leaks and looks like a train wreck. When SBRA did the Polaroid headquarters on the Charles River in Cambridge in 1938, it was the firm’s first Modern building, and it was considered quite a design risk. But when my father took me to visit the project during construction, I was most struck by how much care went into the design, and how thoughtful its designers were about every aspect of the building.

Today, many projects are just striving for effect, and some of them are not well-considered.

at the SBRA Reception ...

Peter Kuttner FAIA: I met your wife Mary Waters Shepley at the party. She’s been part of a long family history in architecture that goes back more than 125 years to your great-grandfather, H.H. Richardson.

Hugh Shepley FAIA: We’ve been married 56 years, and she’s learned to be economical. She’s from Baltimore, where many girls had double names, so she is known to everyone as Mary Waters. My father, who himself was a third-generation architect, had warned me away from the field after his experience in the Depression. So after I graduated from Harvard, I went into construction. I took some courses at night at the BAC [Boston Architectural Center] in materials, and then took a design studio. I discovered I was pretty good. We were already married and had two boys, so it was a tough experience raising a family, working days, and going to school nights. But the BAC was a fantastic experience. I was awarded the BSA Scholarship, which then allowed us to travel in Europe for three months. After three years working and going to school, my father realized I was hooked, and hired me at the firm. My sons Tony and Pip have found success in the building industry, although they have avoided architecture. But my nephew Roger Shepley AIA practices in Boston.

Peter Kuttner FAIA: I presented a picture of you as the Obi-Wan Kenobi of the BSA, influencing new generations of BSA leaders. How do you see the BSA today?

Hugh Shepley FAIA: In the 42 years since I was first on the BSA board, it has grown enormously. Back then, the BSA

was more of a cozy club. Now it’s a real advocacy organization, dealing with real issues. I love how it’s taken on all kinds of interesting challenges.

Peter Kuttner FAIA: Your son Tony told us about an infamous family picture of you balanced on the edge of the Grand Canyon.

Hugh Shepley FAIA: I was 19 years old when I hit the Grand Canyon, and of course I thought I was infallible. I was an acrobat in my youth, and I was driving cross-country with two friends. I saw a ledge, and a handstand just seemed the right thing to do. But I was a better juggler. At the gym practicing acrobatics, I met three professional jugglers and apparently impressed them. One arranged an agent for me, and I became a juggler in nightclubs for two summers. When I was drafted, my juggling put me into special services. The Army had me entertaining the troops at Fort Dix in New Jersey for the rest of my service.

Peter Kuttner FAIA: Has juggling helped in your professional career?

Hugh Shepley FAIA: Not directly, but I do have mighty fast reactions. ■

Peter Kuttner FAIA is the president of Cambridge Seven Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and represents New England on the national AIA Board of Directors.

Editor’s Note: An interview with Hugh Shepley FAIA (“Looking Back, Looking Forward: Hugh Shepley FAIA talks with George Takoudes AIA”) appeared in the Spring 2000 issue of *ArchitectureBoston*, available at www.architectureboston.com/archives.