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"The Marketplace of Ideas"

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# A Marketplace of Ideas

Jane Thompson AICP, Assoc. AIA, talks with Mildred Schmertz FAIA



**Jane Thompson AICP, Assoc. AIA**, is president of Thompson Design Group in Boston. With her late husband and partner, Benjamin Thompson FAIA, she was a principal of BTA, the architect and planner of the Faneuil Hall Marketplace (“Quincy Market”), which opened in 1976. A graduate of Vassar, she was previously an assistant curator in the Museum of Modern Art’s architecture department, architecture editor of *Interiors* magazine, and founding co-editor of *Industrial Design Magazine*. She has been a director of IDCA (International Design Conference in Aspen) since the 1970s.



**Mildred Schmertz FAIA** is a contributing writer for *Architectural Digest*. An editor/contributor for six books on architecture and planning, she also writes occasionally for several national publications. She was a writer and editor for *Architectural Record* for 33 years, serving as editor-in-chief from 1985 to 1990. A former member of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, she received a B.Arch. from Carnegie Mellon and MFA from Yale.

**Mildred Schmertz:** Faneuil Hall Marketplace — the design of which was led by you and your late husband and partner, Ben Thompson — opened 30 years ago, during the Bicentennial. Its unusual success was the result of a mixture of individual passions, eccentricity, devotion, and good luck — and a collection of people who were doing the right thing at a very opportune time.

**Jane Thompson:** The story of the market actually began 10 years before it opened. The market didn’t happen because we sat down and designed it. We had to discover it — to figure out what to do with empty buildings, how to implement the plan, how to meet the requirements of treating a famous but neglected historic place in a way that would keep it alive in the new century. We always said our work was entrepreneurial, meaning we made it up, took big risks, and fought for it. Nobody asked us to do it or told us what to do. It was a total puzzle from the beginning.

**Mildred Schmertz:** What was the condition of the market buildings when you first became involved?

**Jane Thompson:** The marketplace, which was a wholesale district, had been virtually closed down because it was out of keeping with the new City Hall district. It sat on six acres of very valuable land, which developers cherished for another high-rise. Ben got interested in the site early on — this was when Ed Logue was head of the Boston Redevelopment Authority and Ben was chairman of the architecture department at the Harvard Graduate School of Design — and did a study with some colleagues and students, which they assembled as an illustrated report that he gave to Logue. Logue was interested enough to commission a feasibility study, which came back saying the proposal would “never fly.” Meanwhile, the preservationists, led

The Faneuil Hall Marketplace (“Quincy Market”) opened on August 26, 1976 — the 150th anniversary of the original market building.



by [the architect] Tad Stahl, were aware of the value of the buildings and managed to get HUD funding for exterior restoration while the BRA was working on an RFP [request for proposals] to attract developers. The big question, of course, was what to do with the buildings — 400,000 square feet of space. There was talk of offering it to the telephone company for back offices.

**Mildred Schmertz:** I imagine there was talk about a museum, too.

**Jane Thompson:** Yes, but as Ben kept saying, how many museums can an historic city support? A few market vendors were still hanging on. We had the idea of turning Quincy back into a public market, using the side buildings for shops, cafés, and offices, with apartments above if permitted. And that was the basis for our response to the RFP. This was in 1969. We built a model showing every little pushcart and every little vendor and food stall. We teamed up with a developer from Philadelphia who had done a small

**Mildred Schmertz:** How did you go about finding a developer?

**Jane Thompson:** We were pretty naïve in those days. Most architects did not really know much about developers. We called the few in Boston; they liked the project, but they didn't know how to "do" it. A marketplace was an unknown product type. I approached my friend Bob Simon, who was then developing the new town of Reston, Virginia. Bob wasn't free to do it, but put us in touch with Jim Rouse. Actually, Bob sent him our presentation book with a note: "Pay attention." And Jim did.

**Mildred Schmertz:** What made Rouse different from the others? What did he see that they didn't?

**Jane Thompson:** Rouse was one of those rare, quick-study people. He'd done numerous malls and had started a few stores, so he had an understanding of small, individualized retailing. Jim came to Boston and we gave him a tour of the

**Mildred Schmertz:** The community was behind you, too.

**Jane Thompson:** Yes. Actually, the most effective and helpful group was the Boston Society of Architects. And that had a design impact, too. Some people had a purist approach to restoring the buildings as they were in 1826. But another group favored both saving this original market *and* modernizing it, which is to say adding or changing elements to update its function for the community and consumers. Window glass was a focus of that debate.

**Mildred Schmertz:** You didn't want to put the small panes back.

**Jane Thompson:** Ben said, "How is anyone going to see goods in the windows if I have 24-pane frames? This isn't old London. This isn't Ye Olde Boston." There were many small battles like that. Rouse took on the economic viability questions. But he knew his field and had done his own feasibility study. He brought in three young, ace leasing people, and they combed the countryside to find merchants who would bring their goods to the food arcade, the stalls, and the pushcarts. Our concept was that all vendors would be small, local operators — not the chain stores that occupied the downtowns and shopping malls then and have taken over the marketplace now. I'll tell you, during the last two years before the opening, nobody else believed it was really going to — or could — happen. It was a total act of faith by a tiny band of believers.

**Mildred Schmertz:** What was it that you and Ben knew how to do, that nobody else did?

**Jane Thompson:** We had experience that was not characteristic of the architecture trade — in both design and retailing. While practicing at TAC [The Architects Collaborative] in 1953, Ben had started a shop for interior furnishings called Design Research. TAC was building many modern homes in the Boston area, and his clients had no place to buy appropriate furnishings. So he began to import furniture and then Marimekko fabrics from Finland and Denmark. He shipped

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market in Society Hill and with George Macomber, the contractor. And we were selected. Unfortunately, the city fired our developer three months later, claiming he wasn't able to make it happen. His focus was preservation, and he didn't have the experience to handle City Hall. Neither did we. So he went back to Philadelphia, probably gratefully. We then went to the director of the BRA, Bob Kenney at that time, and offered to find another developer. That was the beginning of the whole saga: initiating the project; making plans for a mix of uses in all the spaces; making a pro-forma; finding a second developer; and working out the financing of the entire development. It took about six years after the RFP — 10 years until a nickel of fee was paid to us.

market area. The place of course was dead, a complete mess. Ben said to him, "Jim, you've done 53 malls and used up a lot of corn fields in this country. Now you owe it to the American city to get down here and do just as good a job of making this place come alive." Jim was a very religious man, and he took this really seriously, as a sort of mission. The city didn't see it that way, of course; the administration didn't welcome someone from Baltimore coming here to take over *our* Quincy Market. But in the end, the city's business leaders, especially Norman Leventhal and key bankers, saw the wisdom of bringing real money into the city; they put the pressure on. It was an absolute, straight-out political contest over preservation and redevelopment issues for three years.



it all to a house on Brattle Street — just one room where his clients could see it and make selections. That was the beginning of a showroom, which expanded to three walk-ups in a few years.

Ben traveled a lot; and when you travel in Europe, of course, you eat very well. He discovered not only food but also the *experience* of food — the festival of people selling their own produce off boats and from carts in downtown Zurich, on the harbor in Helsinki and Copenhagen. Having seen these markets still thriving in the so-called modern world, we had a natural confidence that something akin to a permanent farmer’s market could work here and would also help to bring people downtown. There was a growing rebellion against packaged, processed food — the whole quest for fresh food was emerging, but there were very few sources.

The “festival marketplace” concept revitalized urban districts around the world. **Top to bottom: South Street Seaport (New York City); Harborplace (Baltimore).** (Architect: Benjamin Thompson Associates.)

**Mildred Schmertz:** Was Julia Child on the scene then?

**Jane Thompson:** Yes, indeed. Paul Child, Julia’s husband, had been Ben’s instructor in prep school, and when they moved to Cambridge, we all became lasting friends, devoted to food in many guises.

**Mildred Schmertz:** I can’t imagine having the Childs over for dinner.

**Jane Thompson:** I cooked a number of dinners for Julia and Paul. Once I cooked a lamb that was supposed to be a really rare gigot. Well, the lamb was vastly more rare than I dared to serve. But Ben

had cooked a back-up dinner. “Let’s sit down,” he said, “I’ve got an oyster stew all ready.”

**Mildred Schmertz:** That was a time when everyone shopped in supermarkets and suburban malls. Your concept for the marketplace was completely alien.

**Jane Thompson:** It was a memory of traditions not really forgotten. But in terms of assembling a market hall of high-quality suppliers, we were flying without maps. Rouse insisted the opening had to be August 26, 1976, the actual 150th birthday of the market. That gave us nine months to design and draw up documents and get it built. The night before the opening, nobody knew who was actually going to show up with wares to sell in the morning.

Quincy Market was the first phase. In order to make up for the fact we had only one building with considerable empty space, we populated the arcades with 35 hastily-made pushcarts. And all of us on the team — BTA staff, Rouse staff, and construction staff — took a pushcart and provided something to sell. We sold herbs. Someone else sold cobblestones. Jim Rouse sold baskets.

**Mildred Schmertz:** On that first day, 50,000 people showed up. It turned into a three-day party with 150,000 people in all. What were the longer-term effects on the city?

**Jane Thompson:** The immediate impact was to loosen up the economics of downtown development, especially conversions of historic structures. It was a demonstration of the synergy among people living, shopping, and visiting the city. There was after-hours activity downtown again. Most significantly, it proved you could draw people back from the suburbs into the city. I also believe the marketplace had everything to do with the rescue of Boston Harbor — it brought attention to a place when nobody went there. The marketplace wasn’t on the harbor, but it drew people to it by providing and reinforcing the connection to projects that were already emerging on the waterfront, starting



Above: Recent work by Thompson Design Group includes the Buffalo Bayou Master Plan in Houston.

in the late 1960s — the Aquarium, the conversion of Lewis Wharf, the Pilot House, and Commercial Wharf. But they were isolated from the rest of the city. It was a form of geographic pioneering that brought attention to the next opportunities.

**Mildred Schmertz:** And of course, it contributed to the revitalization of other cities, too, that followed its model: Baltimore; Miami; Yokohama; Sydney. It's hard now to think of any significant city that hasn't been influenced by the "festival marketplace" concept. But the marketplace is also an interesting example of how planning really happens: the implementation depends upon individuals. Here you had Ben, going around the decaying old market, photographing its beauty, a designer who also happens to be a merchant. Then you had Jim Rouse, who was deeply spiritual in the sense that he wanted to do some larger good. Most people think of planners as well-educated people sitting in offices with their statisticians and their policies. But here you had people with particular talents and interests who happened to be in the right place at the right time.

**Jane Thompson:** We made it the right time. Sometimes planners see drawings as abstractions and forget how or why people will actually use these spaces — why they're coming and going, what their needs are, what attracts them. Ben had that instinct and a talent for observing life. With friends, he never needed to ask if you wanted

a drink and what would you like — he would simply hand you your Bloody Mary, because of course you were thirsty.

**Mildred Schmertz:** Jane, people know a lot about Ben but haven't necessarily heard as much about you.

**Jane Thompson:** My background was in the arts, starting with dance and drama. I went to Vassar, where my thesis was a dance drama that I wrote, composed, and performed in. In the course of that project, I did some research at the Museum of Modern Art; I knew immediately that I wanted to work there. Before graduating, I took a secretarial course so that I could get a job at the museum — women didn't get real jobs without being a secretary. I was hired for the MoMA secretarial pool and soon became the secretary and assistant to Philip Johnson, the newly returned head of the architecture department. I spent several years there at absolutely the greatest time in its history; everybody in the design world came there, and the shows were groundbreaking. It was an education in the history of architecture and its future, and it also helped me develop my critical sense. After that I went into design publishing.

**Mildred Schmertz:** You founded *Industrial Design* magazine?

**Jane Thompson:** First I was the architecture editor of *Interiors* — a position I took over from Arthur Drexler when Philip Johnson brought him to MoMA. In 1953, Whitney, the publisher, asked if I would

head up a new magazine, *Industrial Design*, which I agreed to do with Deborah Allen as co-editor. We struck out without a prototype to create a publication for industrial designers that would connect them to consumers and users — the applied life of the product. That was the beginning of the magazine that continues today as *I.D.* I left the magazine to move to Bennington, Vermont, and raise a family. I did some writing — a series of books for Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. — and when I became interested in education, I wrote the program for a new regional high school for the Bennington area. TAC was eventually hired to design the school — Ben was the architect-in-charge, and I headed the building committee for the school board. I had met Ben earlier — we had published two articles about Design Research in *Industrial Design*. But I had no real insight about him until the Mount Anthony School project. It took four or five years to get the school done, at which point, he asked me to come to Boston and help with restructuring Design Research.

In the mid-'60s, Ben underwent three major shifts in his life: he was "fired" from Design Research by his investor, who managed a hostile takeover; he left TAC to start Benjamin Thompson Associates across the street in Cambridge; and he left his wife. I stepped into BTA in 1965, when the firm was beginning the studies of the marketplace project.

**Mildred Schmertz:** It couldn't have been easy — what was your role?

**Jane Thompson:** There is always a lot of verbiage in the realization of an architectural project. I've often said I'm a conceptual designer — I don't have to draw it, but I do have to write about it. When it came to the marketplace, I wrote everything about it. I wrote the program for every restaurant — including the food specialties — and every shop and every food stall that we imagined might be there. I wrote the history of the place, and later ran numbers on possible rent levels. I had to articulate the vision for the project in words and numbers to accompany the models and images, so the developers and financial people, and especially the City, could buy into it.

**Mildred Schmertz:** It's usually people with MBAs who do that sort of work. You must have been a natural.

**Jane Thompson:** I didn't know enough *not* to do it. I asked a lot of questions and observed how businessmen did it, and then I just did it myself. It was a natural pairing of talents. Ben had great expressive abilities in the visual medium, and I would translate that into verbal and financial language. While we were waiting, quite a few years, for the marketplace approvals, we decided to do a little restaurant — Harvest, which was next to our office and D/R. When I went to the bank to borrow some money, they agreed, with the condition that I provide a feasibility study. A what? I went out and did one — I counted all the people who lived within a half mile, their incomes, their ages, the number of meals out per week, where they had to go to get good food. I had no prototype or rulebook; I just did what seemed logical. And all of a sudden we were in the restaurant business.

**Mildred Schmertz:** It always seemed to me that you and Ben were always redefining the art and practice of architecture in a more comprehensive way — you were paying attention to new possibilities.

**Jane Thompson:** I think that grew out of the nature of our relationship. It was totally like dancing — an unconscious synchronizing. Our value systems were absolutely parallel.

Our personalities were absolutely opposite. But with the same objectives in our minds, we always got to the same place. So it was a very successful partnership. We both felt the need as designers to understand the more earthy experiences of life and the dynamics of the society around us. It doesn't hurt for an architect to know about waiting tables or operating a cash register.

I think that male-female partnerships are great — though I really wouldn't enjoy a professional marriage without some shared focus. I think it is a loss when women architects feel they must imitate their male colleagues in order to compete. Women think and feel differently and can make significant original intellectual contributions — and the world needs that in every area of design.

**Mildred Schmertz:** After Ben retired in 1993, you left BTA to establish Thompson Design Group. What kind of work is your office doing now?

**Jane Thompson:** We've been doing large-scale redevelopment planning in a number of communities, such as Cleveland, Houston, and Long Branch, New Jersey, with several large new communities

in Maryland and Virginia. The work represents an interesting evolution of the marketplace concept. The first festival-marketplace developments, of course, were not publicly funded projects; we tried to place them in the public realm through the grace of our design, but they were privately planned retail-based developments. That's changed — many cities have come to understand that they can't sell their souls to developers or delegate planning decisions to them. Cities themselves can initiate and even manage projects, or find a developer who will follow the rules that the city establishes. Those kinds of projects, working with smart public entities, have been our focus.

**Mildred Schmertz:** In my 33 years with *Architectural Record*, we rarely believed that the planning projects we published would ever actually be implemented, but we published them anyway in the hope that it might help. It was always heartening to me when something that we had published actually became real.

**Jane Thompson:** I believe all those plans on the shelf are necessary to the thought process. The iterations are absolutely essential to public understanding. A few people have to get the idea of change in their heads, then more people get it in their heads. Gradually everyone begins to see things in a different way. I don't ever regret the number of prior iterations of the projects we've done, because they built an audience for and an acceptance of what we were trying to achieve and finally accomplished.

**Mildred Schmertz:** That kind of process also allows people to better understand the spirit of change and the spirit of the place that is described in a planning document.

**Jane Thompson:** Indeed. When Ben was awarded the AIA Gold Medal,

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— Jane Thompson

he gave a speech — about joy. Imagine that at the AIA! Joy was the spirit we tried to impart to these places. You should feel it when you walk through a space. This is purely sensory; you don't have to theorize about it. Ben wanted the whole world to have fun; he wanted everyone to take pleasure in their environment and in other people. I think it is a singular achievement that he could survive in this field, talking about joy and delight. I'm glad he did. We have to keep reminding ourselves that's really what we're after — in a world of ugliness and cruelty, it means designing spaces and places that will give joy to the lives of others. ■