

On “Ben” (Spring 2011)

What a wonderful tribute to Ben Thompson! Thank you! He certainly brought joy to a huge number of people.

It was interesting to see mention of Bernard Rudofsky’s *Streets for People* in the same issue. Somehow Ben was able to get some of the mounted photographs from Rudofsky’s 1964–65 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, “Architecture Without Architects,” which traveled to each of the then-existing D/R stores—Cambridge, New York, and San Francisco. The lesson to me, at the time a salesperson in the San Francisco store, was that there is also design without designers—that good design is the result of good thinking not just by designers but by anyone who is thoughtful about how we live. Although many of the products D/R sold were created by “name” designers, many were made by talented craftspeople and manufacturers from around the world who believed in making things of lasting quality and usefulness. How many of us still treasure items we purchased from D/R many years ago for what then seemed a bit beyond what our pocketbooks could bear!

LU WENDEL LYNDON
Placewares+LyndonDesign
Gualala, California

Reading your rich issue dedicated to Ben Thompson brought me back to the wonderful years I spent working for him in the mid-’60s, first as his assistant at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and then as a public-relations/speech-writing person at BTA. I was in my mid-20s, recently moved to Cambridge after growing up in conservative Boston—and what a learning experience it was! People, creativity, and celebration: They all came together in those three-projector slideshows flashing images of glorious architecture, food markets, and flowers to the music of Sonny & Cher and Simon & Garfunkel.

As your articles said, Ben was a genius in bringing people together in surroundings that made them feel at ease, playful, and creative.

CLARA WAINWRIGHT
Cambridge, Massachusetts

The idea that a building represents a “legacy” is often suspect. Buildings and their uses change over time; their original design intention becomes subject to misinterpretations due to evolving trends and lifestyles and, worse, over-intellectualization. This is particularly true of retail projects which, by nature, have a shortened half-life and must be renewed every few years in order to stay viable in the marketplace.

Retail projects worked well for Ben Thompson because he had the same need to stay fresh. He was constantly changing them. And he was also constantly changing his studio/office. Ben had a habit of placing something new and fresh on his secretary’s desk almost every morning. It might be a flower or a photograph or a piece of folk art, or simply a colorful fall leaf that he had collected on his walk to work. This was emblematic of the way he was constantly refreshing the studio with new, colorful furniture and fabrics, beautiful large-format photographs, and products of the “in-the-works” design processes for the wonderful projects and special clients that he also seemed to attract. Ben also “collected” the people around him. He attracted those who had a particular artistic bent or a way with words—people who had creative impulses and multiple skills. He didn’t have an office of architects as much as a cast of characters who covered the waterfront, from writers and editors to food preparers and model makers.

Ben also employed a full-time photographer and photo librarian to help him put together his famous three-projector slideshows. These were not highly edited client presentations—they were colorful,

artistic collages that filled Ben’s little windowless black box theater with wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling extravaganzas of light, color, and sound, meant to inspire creativity in himself and everyone else. Studio presentations, whether for a client or just the design team, were similar exhibitions of colorful drawings, models, and mock-ups, put on with a combination of rehearsed precision and improv.

Here is Ben’s real legacy: Very often, I will run into someone whom I worked with at BTA. If we find ourselves alone in an elevator or walking down the street, we will reminisce about the studio, or the Harvest, or D/R, and we will inevitably marvel at the very creative and inclusive environment that Ben had created and conclude that it must have been rare, because there seem to be no firms today that even approach that level of artistic and creative stimulation. At one such encounter recently, as we parted, my colleague said, “Do you miss the old BTA studio as much as I do, after all these years?”

Yes, I do.

JIM VAN SICKLE
Cambridge, Massachusetts

As the successor owner of Ben Thompson’s D/R building, I was one of the many who regarded Ben as a friend. Often when we met in the Square, he would ask me where I was going on my next trip. He would invite me to his office, show me slides of doorways, back streets, small parks. He helped me understand the soul of the city I was about to visit.

When Ben wanted to open the Harvest restaurant in my building next door in 1975, he showed me a sample menu he had drawn with sketches of half lobsters and champagne glasses. When I told him that I doubted whether those would be big sellers in Cambridge, he switched easily to a discussion of Harvest burgers, meatloaf sandwiches, and house wines, as well as the type of wood he wanted to use in constructing the bar.

Recently I was in Shanghai, sitting in the D/R Bar, an oasis in a renovated building in the middle of an exploding and fractionated metropolis. As a teacher myself, I began to think about Ben's role as a teacher. He taught by example. There were few boundaries between his professional and personal lives. To him, buildings were more than a collection of bricks and mortar, certainly more than numbers on a spreadsheet. They were an opportunity to share with others his view of the importance of a community, where people could work together productively and share joyfully and openly in the many pleasures life can bring. I thank *ArchitectureBoston* not only for putting together such a delightful and comprehensive series of vignettes covering Ben's life and the influence he had on so many of us but also for reminding us of what seems to be missing in what has become an increasingly polarized world.

WILLIAM J. POORVU
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Many thanks for bringing Ben back to us!

He is my hero, and because I once worked with Scott Wilson, one of Ben's former associates, I still use many of his techniques (colored yarn, pins, game cards) in interactive charrettes with my clients. They shift the discussion away from making an "object" to making a "container for activity."

I just have one small comment on "About Joy." The article misses Ben's point, which is: we don't *think* joy, we *feel* joy. Remember the awe of the cathedral, the sense of community of the street market, the warmth of the home? Sensuousness is the great, ineffable quality of architecture. Ben got it and tried to teach it in his "Ode to Joy" speech to the AIA. If only more of us could hear it (feel it, smell it, and en-joy it)!

TAMARA ROY AIA, LEED AP
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I left a recent presentation by Jane Thompson at the pinkcomma gallery excited again about the potential for a design community and collaborative practices. I

was comforted by her emphasis on the contextual necessity for designers to work toward a larger social goal. Jane explained BTA's role as one of facilitators and not dictators: "We are not the decorator," she stated. "We provide the space, and (users) fill it as they see fit."

As a young follower of the Tillian dictate that "mess is the law" [Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends*, MIT Press, 2009], I have embraced the notion that our creations are not pristine—they are intended to be used and lived in. The willingness to relinquish a stranglehold on a project and embrace a community-based design strategy involving other designers along with clients and users shows restraint and communal care.

This continued emphasis on community made the event's location at pinkcomma that much more appropriate. As a young designer arriving in this city without any allegiances or connections to local institutions, the gallery has provided me a welcoming home. I scanned the gallery space to see my friends and colleagues as Jane spoke warmly about BTA's history the way a family member might reminisce about childhood memories, and recognized that Boston and other cities need more spaces like this, devoid of institutional allegiances, that allow the design community to gather in welcome and not exclusion.

The collaborative approach that Ben and Jane Thompson's work emphasizes reminds the community of young designers that the struggle to grow as creative practitioners is not meant to be undertaken alone. Not only that, but the fact that this struggle transcends generations provides the comfort that the goals we continue to pursue are not new but are part of a larger search for holistic design integrity.

JONATHAN HANAHAN
over, under
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POSTMASTER: changes of address to *ArchitectureBoston*, 52 Broad Street, Boston, MA 02109

ISSN 1099-6346