



## MY BACK PAGES

by Jim Stanislaski AIA

For those who read nonfiction books, you know when you're in the middle. You are reading along, then the photos and maps show up. It's a milepost you know is coming, but somehow, it sneaks up on you. Twenty years ago, I entered the architectural profession, and it's likely I have 20 or more to go. I'm now squarely in the middle of my career, reflecting on the story arc that brought me here, while looking forward to the plot twists to come.

As architects and designers, we are crafters of stories and shapes. When we interview for projects, potential clients don't want a dry recounting of our past projects—they want to hear compelling

stories: how we solved a problem, met an impossible challenge, delivered an unexpected result. These story lines play to an intrinsic human desire for a memorable, juicy narrative.

Designers arrange shapes—they're one of our creative raw materials. Often, a project starts as simple forms that we push and pull to create space and place. In kindergartens as well as architectural offices around the world, there is a visceral joy in drawing a known shape, whether realized in fat crayon or 3-D computer models.

When I graduated from Syracuse University more than 20 years ago, Kurt Vonnegut, one of my favorite

storytellers, gave the commencement address. His wit and irreverence left its mark, and I had to learn more. I came across his "shape of stories" lecture, his master's thesis proposal, which was rejected because it was too simple.

Vonnegut contends that all stories have shapes that can be visualized on a simple graph. The vertical axis tracks the journey of the protagonist, with ill fortune at the bottom and good fortune at the top. The horizontal axis is time, beginning to end. There are prototypical shapes to our most beloved stories, which transcend time, cultures, and geographies. Commercially successful tales have common origins.

As a visually minded person, I find it interesting to apply this graphic overlay to the rich stories all around me. There are stories of our personal and client relationships, our careers, our projects, and our communities. Most good human stories have a beginning, middle, and an end—a satisfying structure that you can hang nearly anything on. But the story of a city is different. With its debatable beginning and unseen end, the story of a city is more complex and lacks a central protagonist. The narrative is shaped by its people, politics, institutions, and architecture. For Boston and most cities, the fortune arc has its ups and downs, moved by ever-changing forces.

Balancing on my midcareer fulcrum, I can appreciate the role the design professions have in shaping Boston's story and helping solve our biggest problems. One of Vonnegut's tips on how to write a good short story is: "Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them—in order that the reader may see what they are made of." As we stare down today's threats and dilemmas, we need to ask ourselves: What are designers made of, and how will our story be told 20 years from now? ■

### ABOVE

*Open book*, 1993, by Hossein Valamanesh. Paper, binding, and ribbon, 48.5 cm × 52 cm × 12 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales © Hossein Valamanesh. Photo: Jenni Carter/AGNSW