

The Thacher News



Fall
2005
2006
Winter

Architects and Their Craft
Margaret N. A. Huyler (1919-2005)
Dedicating the Performing Arts Building

Peter A. Matthews CdeP 1976

Seeking Dynamic Equilibrium

by Jane D. McCarthy and Michele Hyams



In second grade, Peter Matthews knew he wanted to be an architect. No wonder. He grew up in a family of artists—painters and advertising men who deliberated art and all things visual. He credits his mother, a gifted colorist who paints abstract oils, with introducing him to the fascinating “dance between abstraction and figuration.” His grandfather built an advertising agency with offices from LA to Rome, and his father, who nearly joined the circus as a clown, made Foote Cone & Belding’s San Francisco office a creative hotbed.

As a child, Peter built sprawling sandcastles on Carmel Beach, designed yachts and trains, and worked in the family seaside garden. His early passions were as diverse as Japanese-garden design and *New Yorker* cartoons. He religiously followed the Ships-In and Ships-Out listing in the *Chronicle* so he would know when his favorite ships were in port. On a trip east in the fourth grade, he was wowed by the huge locomotives he saw, and overwhelmed by his visit to Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry. He was equally captivated by the bizarre Fun House at Playland and, in morning chapel at

Cathedral School, by the awesome Gothic space of Grace Cathedral.

Arriving at Thacher as a freshman, Peter took the School by storm, indulging himself in the School’s many offerings. A student that relished the insights and connections that learning offers, he balanced academics with artistic pursuits both on campus and independently. He passionately explored Humanities studies with Marvin Shagam, Ted Hayward, and Peter Robinson, and was mentored by Edgardo Catalan in the studio and by Chuck Warren in the mountains. During the exchange program with Emma Willard School, Peter was inspired by Edward Larrabee Barnes’ integration of the modern Library and Arts Building into the collegiate Gothic campus. At Emma Willard, Peter prepared designs for a school gym, and



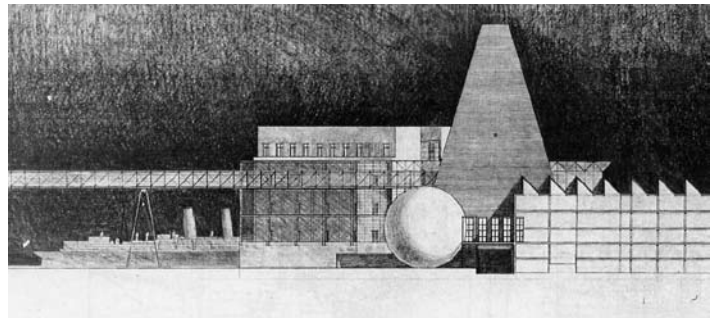
later would work in Pittsburgh with Peter Bohlin, the gym’s architect. For his Senior Project, he designed an Arts Center for the Thacher campus that was planned around an asymmetrical hillside court, opening to the sublime landscape of the nearby rocky barranca riverbed.

Under the guidance of friend and coach Geoff Bird, Peter was Thacher’s top runner for three years, earning him the Heffelfinger Track

Shield. He ran for three more years under Olympic Track Coach Larry Ellis on Princeton’s Cross Country team that for years dominated the Heptagonals (Ivy League plus Army and Navy). Senior year at Thacher, Peter served as School Chairman with a “strong sense of beauty and harmony and the desire to build a positive community,” as one teacher wrote. At graduation, he was awarded the first Headmaster’s Award. Presenting the award, William Wyman said that Peter “best exemplified qualities the school encourages: scholarship, creativity, concern for others, and the unpretentious kind of courage that make for true individuality.” To his friends, with whom he shared survival interests, it was Peter who successfully negotiated for the much-appreciated Salad Bar.

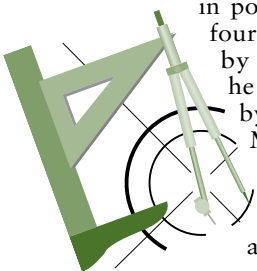
During his years at Princeton, Peter earned both undergraduate and graduate degrees, *magna cum laude*, in Architecture and Urban Planning. With an emphasis on history and theory, the small school is a leading forum for critical thinking in architecture. In 1984 (“the Orwellian Year”), based on his premise that technology should be considered in cultural terms, Peter designed for his master’s thesis a science museum for a site next to Stevens Institute of Technology on Hoboken’s waterfront. The design, published in *American Institute of Architects Journal*, was cited by the jury as “both celebratory and ominous.”

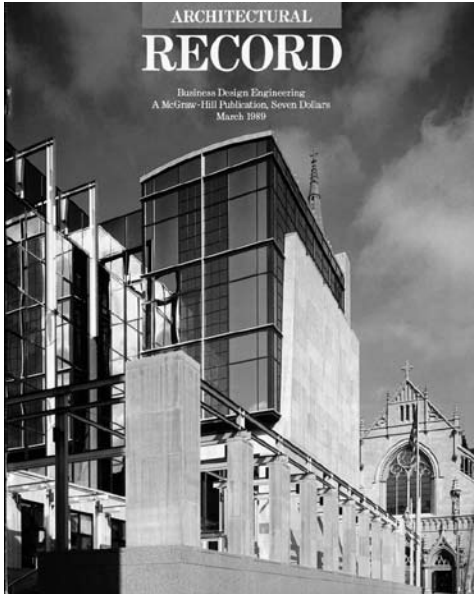
“I was very fortunate to study closely with architects such as Michael Graves, Raphael Moneo, and Alan Colquhoun, one of the most highly regarded critics in our field,” Peter recalls. Graves is currently seen on TV advertisements plugging “good design” for Target and has been credited with moving American architecture from abstract modernism to post-modernism. Madrid-based Moneo, who recently completed the new Catholic cathedral in Los Angeles, is known for developing “an awareness of place.” Peter also enjoyed independent reading courses with David Coffin, noted Renaissance art historian, and with the pre-Columbian archeologist, Izumi Shimada. According to Peter, “Whether considering an urban or natural site, these fellows were all for rooting the building in its surrounding landscape. This is a concept I thoroughly embrace.”



New Jersey Museum of Science and Industry

He spent five months in South America, sketching and photographing the pre-Columbian ruins of Peru, where he witnessed remarkable solutions to building in the landscape and developed a sensibility that would lead him to industrial archeology, the history that precedes today’s electronic revolution. Peter is inspired by Lewis Mumford’s writings about the dehumanizing effect of the machine and by Siegfried Gideon’s complementary *Space, Time, and*





Software Engineering Institute at Carnegie Mellon

Architecture, in which “dynamic equilibrium” is proposed as an ideal for a modern age that combines both constancy and change.

After grad school, armed with experience and education, Peter joined Peter Bohlin (architect of the popular Apple Stores) at his Pittsburgh office to design the Software Engineering Institute, a Reagan “Star Wars” project, at Carnegie Mellon University, where he also taught a graduate design studio. The finished building, which, interestingly stands in the shadow of a Gothic church, won numerous national awards and was featured on the cover of *Architectural Record*, entitled “Soft Machine.”



In the mid-nineties, Peter served on the Nantucket Planning Commission, where he advocated for the Village Plan, an infill concept that required revising the island’s land-

use zoning; he helped lead a community initiative for a long overdue island-wide master planning process. In his architectural practice, he gained vital

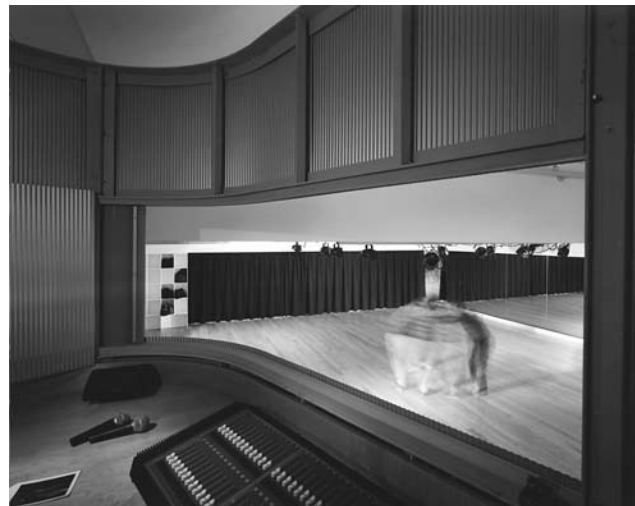


Nantucket residence

experience designing and building a range of residences and commercial projects for extreme conditions. He drew inspiration from his family’s Quaker sea-captain history and from historical traces left by the island’s native peoples. Playing with scale and unlikely combinations of materials and using arbors and trellises to engage the natural seaside setting, he reinterpreted Nantucket’s vernacular architecture.

Peter returned to New York, and under the tutelage of veteran modernist John Lee, architect of the IBM building in New York City, worked on a variety of large-scale commercial projects and served as Project Architect on a waterfront office building for the infamous NY developer, Sam Lefrak.

Several years later, Peter started Matthews Architects (MA) with a focus on education- and arts-related projects. Located in a downtown storefront, MA’s shingle hangs from a yellow pencil “as a reminder of the days before the computer existed,” he explains. “We embrace the computer, but not to the exclusion of the past, as some current architectural thinking tends to do.”



Performing Arts Center at The Dalton School

MA was recently selected from a field of established architectural firms to design a new Dining Room and Commons for the Dalton School. Known for its progressive educational philosophy, Dalton is an independent K-12 co-educational day school of 1300 students on Manhattan’s upper east side. “Our design approach is based on the imagined premise of an urban student caught in the ‘concrete jungle’ and daydreaming of playing in the park,” explains Peter. “At the center is a green plot, suggestive of a New England village green or commons where the Dalton community can congregate. To capture a playful, park-like setting, we’re bringing nature indoors.” MA’s design for a Performing Arts Center for Dalton



Affirmation Arts

conceptually unifies the theater, dance, and music programs with a play of dynamic forms and curtain-like materials to inspire the Harry Potter demographic.

Peter has maintained his ties with Thacher via the NYC committee and social gatherings. When then-Director of Development Terry Twichell mentioned to Peter that Thacher was “off to the races” planning the Commons and Performing Arts Building, Peter convinced then-Thacher Board President Marshall Milligan CdeP 1969 and Head of School Michael

Mulligan to form an Architectural Review Committee of alumni involved in the industry to select a suitable architect for the project that would define the Thacher experience into the future.

Peter’s design for Affirmation Arts, a four-story arts foundation on Manhattan’s West Side, is currently under construction. The program brief called for a place to house both art-production studios and art-viewing galleries. The design differentiates between the orientation of lower-level galleries with the street and upper-level studio spaces facing the river, supporting his conviction that

balancing “real-world constraints with creative freedom” will provide an inspirational stage for creative endeavors. The street façade and adjacent side facing the river will be enlivened by two 40-foot-tall ivy trellises that are part of a larger composition of sliding metal panels and framed space that are intended to combine in “dynamic equilibrium.”

“As we become further entwined in the electronic age, it is essential that we embrace technology without being dehumanized by it. Architecture is a reflection of the world around us, and we can recognize its potential to simultaneously represent static truths and dynamic change.” 🌿