

Known Globally, Practicing Locally, Homespun Architectural Resources Cambridge Fetes 40th

BY JOE CLEMENTS

CAMBRIDGE—Manifest destiny is a popular topic at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, but that mantra has seemingly escaped the building's designers. Whereas the landmark assignment in the 1970s did establish ARC/Architectural Resources Cambridge as a first-rate firm now celebrating its 40th anniversary, its practice over the decades has concentrated on New England and relies on loyal clients in that realm.

"We don't want our people to spend their entire career on an airplane," President Philip L. Laird offered in a recent interview at the firm's headquarters in East Cambridge. ARC has toiled as far a field as China, Taiwan and Great Britain, yet retains just the one office and four out

of five jobs are repeat business. Deerfield Academy has used the firm for 30 years, and ARC has designed some of Genzyme Corp.'s most recognized buildings throughout Massachusetts.

The migration across town to 5 Cambridge Center in 2005 was itself a major shift for ARC, having always been in Harvard Square. Albeit enthused by the results, Chairman Henry "Dusty" Reeder says the move was only made due to a lack of contiguous space in Harvard Square, where a half-dozen young architects broke off from fellow upstart Benjamin Thompson and launched ARC in 1969.

Reeder and Arthur Cohen are still active at the firm, whose other founders are James F. Davies, the late Joseph Maybank, Robert Nizel and Colin L.M. Smith. There are eight current principals, among them Jeffrey M. Johnson, Thomas N. Loring, Robert H. Quigley, Been Z. Wang and Robert A. Zverina.



Henry S. Reeder



Arthur Cohen



Philip L. Laird



The staff of ARC/Architectural Resources Cambridge.

Laird, who joined in 1979, cites the chemistry and talent of the original six for ARC's resiliency in an industry known for volatility. "The camaraderie has been spectacular over the years," concurs Reeder, who further credits complementary skills that have enabled the firm to become a preferred designer of academic, institutional and research facilities and ancillary projects such as conference centers, corporate offices and sports stadiums. Familiar local outcomes are Boston College's Alumni Stadium in Brighton; Genzyme's striking manufacturing plant in Allston; and a state-of-the-art research building in Boston's Longwood Medical Area designed for Harvard Medical School.

"I think our business has evolved very nicely over the 40 years," Reeder says in reviewing ARC's expansive legacy. "We have provided a good product and good service and we're pleased with the way that has paid off." Especially impressive is the amount and quality of design services generated considering its relatively modest size, with a spurt of recent hires only now putting the firm near its year-end goal of 75 staffers. Until a round of cutbacks decimated the industry, some competitors were double and triple that size. "We have been careful," Cohen acknowledges of ARC's personnel levels, which grew to around 35 in the first 20 years and was up to about 65 to begin 2009.

Real estate's capricious nature is one reason for keeping operations lean and mean, Cohen explains, and there is also trepidation regarding the administrative burdens. "We didn't want to be managing people; we'd rather be out practicing architecture," he says. Indeed, client attention by principals is sacrosanct, Laird relays. "We don't want to expand to the point where we lose our control and sense of involvement," he says, adding, "Architecture is still a profession built on relationships—it will always be that way, and you cannot lose sight of that."

ARC's design menu has helped weather cyclical shifts, says Reeder, dips that have cratered some competitors. The firm, for example, rarely designs for private developers, and Laird says the hardest hit sectors in this downturn—office buildings, restaurants and retail—are not major practice modes, ARC is among a scant few firms actually growing staff wise, and while

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The Real Reporter

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 35

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ARC

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still measured, Reeder says the level of experienced architects seeking positions makes this a good period to be hiring.

Even with its comfortable roster of projects, Reeder says the firm is ever mindful of the industry's short horizon. "If you stop looking for work, you are dead," he says. ARC is presently parlaying its reputation as a top architect for private schools and life sciences buildings to markets nationally, including Colorado, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Texas. Laird, who took the helm in 2007 as ARC's first non-founder president, stresses the firm will travel when feasible. "We don't want to be limited by geography," he says. "When we see projects and opportunities, we like to be able to apply for them."

Equally key, according to ARC leadership, is ensuring the firm has the skill sets and technology in place to be viable in the new millennium. Sustainable design has become a primary focus, with ARC recognizing early on that changes were afoot that would make that arena increasingly important. "We've been doing it for quite awhile," says Cohen,



Genzyme Corp. manufacturing plant, Allston MA

who is a LEED accredited professional by the USGBC, as are principals Johnson and Laird. A goal of 100 percent staff accreditation is worth the effort, Cohen maintains, noting an industry wide indifference towards sustainability that ARC grappled with early in its existence is now replaced by motivated parties on all sides. "There's much greater awareness today," he says.

As for kicking off the next 10 years, Laird says he is encouraged by the near-term prospects, aided greatly by ARC's selection

in late 2008 to design the \$405 million Albert Sherman Center for the UMass Medical School in Worcester. "It made the prospects for 2009 a lot better, and I think we are in good shape for 2010," says Laird. Although he anticipates the current recession will linger longer than others ARC has encountered, Reeder says there does appear to be a recent increase in RFP's and RFQ's, and there are hopes federal stimulus funds will eventually have an impact. "I'm sure it will help at some point, Reeder says." ■