

center piece

WRITTEN BY Nancy Barnes • PHOTOGRAPHED BY Michael Moran Photography, Inc.



Designing to Please



WINNING WASHINGTON FIRM

The career of Washington Depot architect Reese Owens proves just how small the world of New York architects can be. “It’s a pretty tight group, and people who are coming to town from different programs meet people from other offices one way or another,” Mr. Owens said recently, seated at a glass table in an office overlooking the high-spirited Shepaug River.

He recalled the days when, with his master’s degree in architecture from Yale University, he played in the New York-based architects’ softball league known as S.L.A.M., a somewhat tongue-in-cheek acronym for the Softball League Après Moderne, as an architect with the firm of Gwathmey Siegel Associates Architects. “I was the pitcher, and he used to hit the home runs off of me,” he said of a graduate of Harvard’s architectural program named Jon Halper, who was a senior designer with the equally prestigious firm of Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates. “It would drive me crazy.”

“And Gene Kohn, a marvelous guy, had hired Jon really right out of Harvard. It was always a question whether Gene hired people because of their ability to play baseball or their ability to practice architecture. He really was a nut of a sports fan ... So, Gene grabbed Jon in a heartbeat, because Jon is a great ballplayer, in addition to being a great architect.



Facing page, top, the West side of a Kent residence designed by Halper Owens Architects LLC of Washington and Greenwich, and bottom, the South side. Clockwise from above, the East side, a fireplace, an interior staircase and the kitchen, all in the same home, whose design won an award from the state chapter of the American Institute of Architects.



That’s where I met Jon,” he said of the architect with whom he has partnered in the firm of Halper Owens Architects LLC since 1987.

“That’s one of the highlights of my career so far,” Mr. Halper later deadpanned of the S.L.A.M. experience.

When the two set up shop in Connecticut, Mr. Halper, who had married a Fairfield County native, took the reins of the firm’s office in Greenwich, and Mr. Owens has held sway at the firm’s office in Washington Depot.

In October, the award-winning firm added two more accolades to its record, with the Connecticut chapter of the American Institute of Architects citing the firm for two projects in its AIA Connecticut 2008 Design Awards—one a commercial venue completed by Mr. Halper, and the second a very secluded residence in Kent, which was the work of Mr. Owens with the assistance of project architect Daniel Sullivan.

Born in Hartford, Mr. Owens grew up in New Preston with an early interest in the fine arts. “I loved to draw. I loved to paint,” he said, adding that he worked construction in the summer. “I was a grunt for a ▶ 32



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HALPER OWENS DESIGNS IN MANY STYLES

◀ **31** small construction company, so I swept floors, pounded nails, cut floors" Aware that Mr. Owens always did reasonably well in mathematics, his father, who was a doctor, steered him toward architecture, which he began studying at the undergraduate level at the University of Virginia School of Architecture. "I loved it. I never looked back," said the professional who went on to take his master's in architecture at Yale University, where he found the intellectual chemistry of New Haven extraordinary.

Meanwhile, Mr. Halper, a Chicago native, was taking his undergraduate work in architecture at the University of Illinois before going on to take his master's degree at Harvard.

In spite of the surge of the post-modernist architectural style in the later part of the 20th century, Mr. Owens found his training at Yale rooted in modernism. "In the schools that sort of considered themselves leaders in academic

thinking, postmodernism was not welcomed," he said. "Re-creation of early modern thinking was fashionable. People were studying [Corbusier] all over again, and deeply. The rationalists were a big deal. Stirling was big. Peter Eisenman was big. And this was the late 70's. I think [Sir James Frazer] Stirling did enormously interesting work, and highly varied. Stirling did all kinds of things, and got quite bored with singular vocabularies. He used to do all

sorts of different vocabularies."

Although Mr. Owens found architectural giant Peter Eisenman influential, the work of Halper Owens, in the variety of its stylistic vocabularies, seems to hew more closely in to the work Stirling (1926-1992), the Pritzker Prize-winning Scottish architect, whose body of work includes Harvard University's Arthur M. Sackler Museum.

"We don't have a style. We don't endeavor to sign our buildings," said Mr. Owens, whose own design

'We don't have a style. We don't endeavor to sign our buildings.'

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John Halper, far left, and Reese Owens, in photographs courtesy of Halper Owens Architects.

work includes a Greek Revival structure—this, an imposing and, also, award-winning structure in Washington. The firm also completed Hedgerow Cottage in North Salem, N.Y., from a mid-century modernist structure. The home was a 2003 house of the month in the *Architectural Record*.

Mr. Owens said the firm's strength lay in its "strong grasp and facility with the vocabulary of the project. We involve our clients as deeply as they're willing to be involved, believing that the more deterministic the project feels the better it is"

"When you ... accept a different vocabulary, a traditional vocabulary, it is enormously challenging to do it well," he continued. "You have to learn it. You have to study it. You have to understand its origins, and its origins may be two or three layers deep. If it's a revivalist type of style, or a hybrid type of style, it's quite challenging. It's not simple. And that's the good news. It enables us to keep exposing ourselves to different things, to learning how to do new details for a different type of house or a different project."

"People come to us because we have a range and a facility in many styles, and we have a consistent quality level, irrespective of the style. We wouldn't want to be pigeonholed. It would become boring," he said.

In New York, Mr. Halper served as the architect in the office of legendary interior designer Naomi Leff, who completed the redesign of the Rhinelander Mansion at Madison Avenue and 72nd Street into the flagship store for Ralph Lauren. For the Madison Avenue venue, Mr. Halper detailed much

of the large store's millwork, and, from his office in Greenwich, he has handled the design of a number of other Ralph Lauren projects.

"It's not an equation," Mr. Halper said of the shops on which he has worked. These include one in Aspen, Colo., with a river rock fireplace and a buffalo head above the mantel. "It's a real collaborative effort with the Ralph Lauren store development people, who are designers and architects as well. They work with their people to develop what is the appropriate image in general terms for that location. We have many meetings with them. We start to brainstorm. We'll do sketches of what the façade might look like It's a back-and-forth. We're the ones who are responsible for resolving all the design issues and bringing them to light."

In Litchfield County, Mr. Owens' office was responsible for the design of the spa at the Mayflower Inn and Spa and Allerton House, a project, he conceded, the office completed in the town of Washington on a swift timetable. In New Milford, the office completed the preservation of a facade on historic Bank Street.

For one of the firm's award-winning projects this year, Mr. Halper redesigned what the Connecticut chapter of the AIA lauded as a successful adaptive reuse project and that it termed a modest project with high impact.

"This was an underutilized space that was a partial warehouse [and] barely a showroom that had some odds and ends. The second floor had really minimal headroom," Mr. Halper said of the Interstate Design Center, which sits off I-95 in Greenwich. There, his job was

to turn the structure into what he termed a "real beautiful showroom that would almost be like a museum to the heritage of [the client's] company." Especially grand is the paneled oak portal with classical details Mr. Halper designed as the entranceway at the back of the showroom, where the center's detailing work is found.

Mr. Owens' award falls in the AIA's residential category, where the jury lauded the "co-existence of the old and the new in a very

successful meeting of modern and traditional vocabularies."

"There were a lot of ideas behind that building," Mr. Owens observed of the Kent residence, thinking in part of an antique barn frame his office located in New York state and the multitude of references people have with timber frames. "It's the marriage of that with a more spare architectural vocabulary," he said of a residence that, set well back off a private lane in the Kent landscape, main-

tains a surprisingly contemporary, if referentially agrarian, tone.

"We extended the living space on each end of the barn," he said of a residence constructed largely of cedar materials. "It was our choice to extend it four feet each end beyond the frame. It's just kind of an oversized sculpture. It makes it all something a little bit richer than a simple shelter."

Back in his days with Gwathmey Siegel, Mr. Owens attended a meeting for one of Charles Gwathmey's projects.

"I once sat in a meeting with George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Amy Irving, Charlie [Gwathmey] and myself," he said of a design Mr. Spielberg wanted for a residence at Trump Tower. "It was glamorous for me. For Charlie, it was run of the mill."

Today, Mr. Owens demurs on whether his office has designed projects for any of Litchfield County's better-known residents. "Not that we publicize," he said. "You know what the demographics are of our region and what segment of society actually believes that architects bring value to projects," he said to a visitor. "Inevitably, there's a sprinkling of notorious folks in that group. Inevitably, they sometimes call us." ■

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