

LIVE, WOR

Philip Loheed AIA, William Pressley FASLA, and Jane Thompson AICP talk with Scott Simpson FAIA about Ben Thompson FAIA and BTA



Philip Loheed AIA, NCARB, ASSOC. ASLA is a principal of BTA+ in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He joined Benjamin Thompson & Associates in 1968, becoming a design partner. After forming Loheed Design Partnership in 1990, he returned to BTA in 2007. He is the president of the nonprofit Earthos Institute and teaches at the Boston Architectural College.



William Pressley FASLA, LEED AP is the president of Pressley Associates Landscape Architects in Cambridge and Los Angeles. He joined BTA in 1970 as the staff landscape architect before founding his own office in 1977.



Scott Simpson FAIA, LEED AP is senior director of KlingStubbins in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A senior fellow and co-chair of the Design Futures Council, he has written extensively about innovation in the design professions. He was on the staff of BTA from 1975 to 1976 (his first job after design school).



Jane Thompson AICP is president of Thompson Design Group in Boston and the co-author of *Design Research: The Store That Brought Modern Living to American Homes* (Chronicle, 2010). With her late husband and partner Benjamin Thompson FAIA, she was a principal of BTA. Her work has been recognized by AIA Institute Honors and, in 2010, by the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Awards with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Scott Simpson: Let's start with the basics. How did Ben actually attract work to the office? Why did clients hire him instead of TAC [The Architects Collaborative] or Hugh Stubbins or Cambridge Seven?

Philip Loheed: I wish I knew! He always said that your friends are the ones who give you work, so it's wise to have a lot of friends.

Jane Thompson: Ben liked people. He could make a connection in two seconds: "Where are you from? What street?" Totally informal and natural—and he was that way with strangers, friends, clients, and the people he worked with.

Philip Loheed: Over the years, Jane had a great deal to do with the process of marketing the firm. But I think the real process of getting work came down to what Ben was interested in. That, for example, was the basis for the academic buildings that he did when he was still at TAC. Education was one of his thesis subjects at Yale, and he had spent some time thinking about it. So when the first jobs that came along were public schools, he jumped at them. I don't think he did anything more than persuade people that that's what he really wanted to do and that he knew something about how to make a good school.

Scott Simpson: So it was personal passion that drove him and then drew clients to him?

Jane Thompson: Yes, and also his way of seeing opportunities. I first met and worked with Ben several years later, in 1962, when TAC was on the shortlist for a high school in Vermont. I was on the board that interviewed him. You could tell that he really wanted to do this project. And part of his salesmanship was that he was a very circuitous, roundabout thinker—he walked all around a subject in order to see it from all sides. But you knew that this was someone who thought about the problem differently.

Scott Simpson: What drove him to break away from TAC?

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Is This
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Run a
Business?



Jane Thompson: That’s an epic story. It was a divergence of convictions. In the postwar years, TAC had been designing houses, some of them really experimental. But there was nothing appropriate to put in these houses. Ben found furniture for his clients on trips to Europe; he brought back samples on a ship and took a room for a warehouse so clients could make selections. And it worked. Pretty soon he rented another room, then another, until eventually it was a proper shop — Design Research [D/R]. It ended up being the biggest sub-business TAC ever had. But the TAC partners — with the exception of Walter Gropius, who saw it as part of the Bauhaus ideal of art in everyday life — didn’t care about it; they thought it was interfering with Ben’s “real” work. One of TAC’s social-equity ideas was that everybody was paid the same: a uniform salary for the partners. And if you made money anywhere else, TAC deducted it from your salary.

Ben had a very visual way of working. He would start a new project by collecting images that would address questions like, “What is this site? Who are these people? What are they doing here? What’s this about?” He felt that a design solution becomes apparent if you look at it properly.
—Philip Loheed AIA, NCARB, ASSOC. ASLA

Scott Simpson: So you got punished for being successful?

Jane Thompson: Absolutely. Design Research was rolling, so they reduced Ben’s salary for his presumed, but not real, earnings from D/R. Then in ’63, after Gropius recommended Ben for chairman of the department of architecture at Harvard, his Harvard earnings were also taken out. And he was still doing a considerable amount of work for the firm. I think the fact that this didn’t even occur to them, or didn’t matter, was the irritant that finally caused him to go out on his own. At the same time, TAC was taking on projects that didn’t match his interests or temperament or values.

Scott Simpson: So he opened up shop in Harvard Square. What year was that?

Jane Thompson: The firm was incorporated in January 1966. A number of TAC people — in effect, his whole studio — left with him; I came in just when the new company was formed.

Philip Loheed: It was a good-sized group. It included Tom Green and Mac Freeman, who is still with BTA, and Joe Maybank, Dusty Reeder, Colin Smith, and Arthur Cohen, who later spun off to form ARC.

Scott Simpson: Did Ben try to consciously continue the TAC ethos of team-based design?

Jane Thompson: TAC started out like one big studio, but eventually the partners were running their own studios; collaboration came through weekly crit sessions. That was a very different scene from BTA, where Ben was the only owner and also the oldest person by far. Ben’s approach to collaboration was more open — everybody had jobs to do, but they didn’t own them. Collaboration didn’t mean sitting around, looking at something, and criticizing it, but everybody standing over a model and moving things around. It was physical, active design.

Philip Loheed: Ben had a very visual way of working. He would start a new project by collecting images that would address questions like, “What is this site? Who are these people? What are they doing here? What’s this about?” He felt that a design solution becomes apparent if you look at it properly. And his way of doing that was to collect images: historical images, site details, artwork, ethnic objects, environmental scenes. Then he would show them to the team. People would react to the images and then he would get more images. So it was a conversation. And if other people — clients or consultants or your Uncle George — happened to come into the room, they were pulled into the conversation, too.

Jane Thompson: He didn’t use slides at the very beginning; that came a little later, and there was something aspirational about it. A lot seemed to be in decline in the ’60s — run-down cities, abandoned factories and, of course, the two assassinations. He said, “We can’t just go on talking about how bad it is. We’ve got to show how good it is.” His idea was to show beautiful things and places. This was really a message of hope to the team itself: You’re not just doing a job; you’re going to do something really special here.

William Pressley: You can’t say enough about the visual communication aspect of Ben’s design work. He’d take someone from the office to go look at a building. The next day, he would give you this three-projector slideshow complete with music. It was incredible because the images were all of minute details that you just hadn’t seen. He always had a Nikon with a 135 or 200 mm lens with him.

Scott Simpson: There was a certain optimism that suffused the whole place. Obviously, there were lots of pressures, lots of deadlines. But there was also a sense of inclusiveness. The senior staff would sometimes come to kids like me and say: “Take a whack at this.” And we’d put up a sketch or two. If it was a bad sketch, it was thrown away; if it was a good sketch, it was somehow rolled into the project. There was a sense of competition in that, but there was also the sense that everyone had a license to offer ideas. If you brought them to the table and they were worthy, they’d be considered.

Philip Loheed: That commitment to inclusiveness and teamwork really was soup to nuts. Ben’s daughter Marina, fresh out of college, worked on our models in the early ’70s. She and I used to joke about “nubby power” — the power that came from being on the team who placed the dried weeds that represented trees. Charrette sold them as “Foresto Nubby” trees, but sometimes we used dried yarrow that Bill Pressley collected in the field. Nubby power created the sizzle and

beauty added to the models through copious planting. Sometimes the staff would bring their kids in to help out on models — slicing up erasers to make salamis for the little carts representing merchandise and vendors, placing little cast-metal people and cars. There were job captains and team leaders giving direction, of course, but the overriding spirit came from the lack of a rigid hierarchy, which created camaraderie; there was a lot of whimsy and humor. We all felt that we were on a mission, that we were working hard, but that it was a lot of fun.

Jane Thompson: The models really were important. We certainly excelled at presentation models. But the act of making models was part of the design process.

Philip Loheed: Yes. When we started design, everyone would get a collection of wood blocks that represented pieces of the project's program — they were scaled to represent a housing unit, a bay, whatever. And we'd all do a scheme.

Jane Thompson: It was a great way to form architects' minds because, otherwise, you think in two dimensions. It was a hands-on thing. The model would be built up or an alternate would be made, and gradually ideas would become more specific and more realistic. At that point, a drawing or a more sophisticated representation would begin, with a more concrete understanding of the project.

William Pressley: I remember the Abu Dhabi model in particular. Phil went into the model shop and came out six weeks later. At any given time, that model — it was probably eight feet square — had at least 10 and sometimes 20 pairs of hands working on it, and the design was growing, growing, growing. It was like watching a movie.

Scott Simpson: Bill, you came on board in 1970. At the time, it was unusual for firms to have their own in-house landscape departments — although you weren't so much a department as a guy with a helper. But you were very deeply embedded in the whole design dialogue. What was that like?

Ben was not a formalist. He really believed that you could design from the inside out, that a focus on how people would experience and use the building would yield better results than a focus on materials and form.

—Jane Thompson AICP

William Pressley: I was hired on the first Earth Day, and the word “flexibility” was immediately introduced to my vocabulary. I found myself working in an architecture office where everybody had to do everything. I can't tell you how many different things I was asked to do; after several years of that, it actually starts to take hold. Ben was willing to talk about things that I don't think many

architects really grasp. The idea, for example, that the landscape shouldn't be a continuation of the building; it should be the other way around.

Jane Thompson: Ben came from Minnesota, where he had spent summers as a teenager on family farms, and part of him thought about the land the way a farmer does, as an entire environment.

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Philip Loheed: I think hiring Bill also had to do with his design approach — finding a general direction for a project and then encouraging people to bring their skills and expertise to it. Sometimes it could be problematic. We were working on a project in Savannah, and our guys were cheerfully doing all these schemes for a new town. After we got more into it, I finally looked at it and said, “You know what, this is alligator country. This is a floodplain. When people really focus on what's going on here, this project is not going to happen.” It was a very difficult moment for BTA — to have to abandon that project. But the water dynamics in that place would just not allow it. But that was another thing about Ben: It was never too late to say, “This is not right.”

William Pressley: Usually around 11:30 PM.

Scott Simpson: There was always a last-minute change of some kind on every job, because it was never perfect. It made the whole staff expect that anything could happen, so nobody got really dug into one way of doing something. Ben always wanted to try one more idea, to take it to another level. That was part of the culture that made him so successful.

Philip Loheed: Another part of the culture was the idea that we will move on when a project is done, so we're designing for the people who will occupy the place. Beginning with Faneuil Hall Marketplace, we began to see design as a tool for communicating the spirit and philosophy of a place. We realized that creating world-class environments depended upon our ability to recruit world-class people — as operators, tenants, and stakeholders — who understood that spirit and would “become the place” after we finished our work. That had implications for our process. We realized we had to demystify design and enlarge the collaborative tent of people who were involved in creating an environment.

Jane Thompson: It was beyond formalism. Ben was not a formalist. He certainly had a sense of form, but he didn't start with it. He did not start with squares and triangles and boxes and all those

things that you usually make buildings out of. He really believed that you could design from the inside out, that a focus on how people would experience and use the building would yield better results than a focus on materials and form.

Scott Simpson: One of the big pressures we all experience as professionals is budgets, schedules — all sorts of organized chaos. Was there a tension between the business side and the creative side, or was it rolled into one big flowing river of “Let’s get this done”?

There is now a resurgent interest in the holistic view that Ben took of design — that it’s all about the old and the new, about people and the environment and the planet.
—Philip Loheed AIA, NCARB, ASSOC. ASLA

Jane Thompson: You’d never find the business side.

William Pressley: I would like to hear a bit about the business background of Faneuil Hall Marketplace.

Jane Thompson: It was an example of Jane’s 42nd Law: “The secret of happiness is no foresight and a very poor memory.”

William Pressley: I remember driving a U-Haul truck to Boston City Hall on Christmas Eve 1970 to get there at five o’clock to submit the response to the RFP [request for proposal]. That was part of the flexibility I learned.

Jane Thompson: Back in 1966, Ben had prepared a proposal for the marketplace — a whole book of plans and images of what these old neglected buildings should be, based on some student work. He submitted it to Ed Logue, who was then the director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority [BRA]. Ed Logue sent it to Arthur D. Little, which was then the only research outfit around. Arthur D. Little, like everybody else, said, “This will never fly because there is no room for anchor stores. You can’t finance it.” So it came back. Meanwhile, preservation architects were trying to restore the buildings, and the BRA started work on an RFP — you’re right, the deadline was Christmas Eve. We assembled a team with a developer from Philadelphia. In seven days, we built a model with little carts, vegetable stands, the whole works. After six months, we got the good news from the new BRA director, Bob Kenney, that we were selected. But just a few months later, the BRA kicked our developer out. We offered to find another one, and Kenney agreed. We eventually found Jim Rouse; otherwise, it would have never happened. We worked on the project with the Rouse Company for the next four, five years. We were never paid a cent — not for 10 years.

Scott Simpson: Amazing! How did you manage to float the practice?



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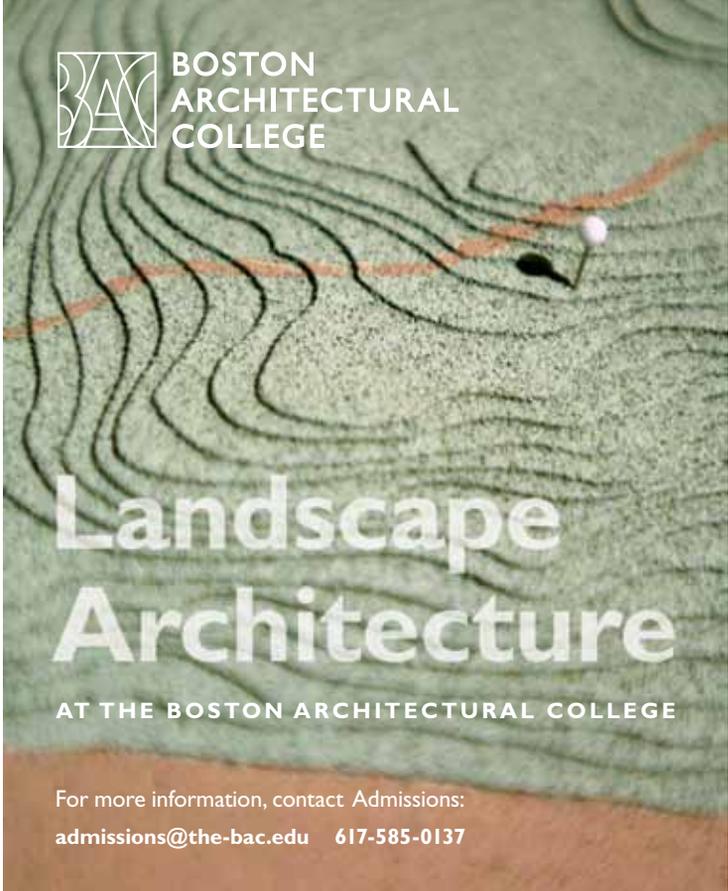
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Jane Thompson: We were very efficient and very busy with other projects, which were paying fees. But it really was the Perils of Pauline, especially with city politics. Mayor [Kevin] White fought it all the way until the city's business leaders, especially Norman Leventhal, stepped in. The lease deal with the city finally closed in 1974 and 1975. Rouse wanted to open in August 1976 — the Bicentennial year and the 150th anniversary of Quincy Market. After all those years, we had nine months to do final design and all the drawings, while simultaneously overseeing the rehabilitation of the old Quincy Market building.

Philip Loheed: What is interesting about the Faneuil Hall story, and in fact the whole experience of working with Ben, is that there is now a resurgent interest in the holistic view that it represented and that Ben took of design — that it's all about the old and new, about people and the environment and the planet. I see it in my students.

Jane Thompson: Ben tried to teach architects how great their senses are and how they can understand things with a holistic, somatic sensibility.

Scott Simpson: He had a very experiential kind of pedagogy. And it attracted a lot of talented people who later spun off to form their own firms. That's the mark of a good office.

Philip Loheed: If I could replicate one thing about those days, that's it: the spirit of a cadre of talented people working together. We've gone through a technological era where it became impossible to

replicate because of the way things were produced. We're now emerging beyond that. I recently started working on a project where the client bought a computer matching mine. We use iChat and literally move the mouse together in a very close collaboration. It's fun, and it's really engaging. And I can bring a student into the process and say, "Here, take this file. Sit across the table from me, and we'll work on this together." So the ability to collaborate face-to-face across the table is coming back, because the technology has moved beyond the rudiments that we suffered through in the last 20 years.

Jane Thompson: Ben was acutely aware of the importance of involving people in the creative process. He said, "I want quality, but not perfection." Springboarding from that is the idea of the presence of the human hand, the flaw in the perfect system. He and I were opposites on the horoscope, if you happen to believe in such things. I never did until I read Ben's. He was a Cancer, the crab, a creature that walks sideways around everything but always gets there. I'm an Aquarius, so I'm left-brained, I guess. We approached everything differently mentally, but always with the same value system. We always wanted to get to the same place. I think that his Cancerian tendencies made him much more open-minded than most architects. A newspaper reporter who was interviewing Ben in the D/R building once asked, "What's your formula?" Ben said, "I don't have a formula." The reporter asked, "So what do you have?" He said, "I have an attitude. I'm an attitude." The reporter grumbled, "Oh, hell, I can't take a picture of an attitude." And Ben said, "Just look around." ■

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