Architectural legacies are unpredictable. For one thing, there are no guarantees that a physical legacy will endure. In the first half of the 20th century, as the profession of architecture grew in stature, the field had appeal for anyone with an immortality complex: a significant commission had staying power. In the age of the tear-down, however, there are no assurances of permanence when even office towers and museums can be demolished to make way for the next new thing.

Even those structures that do survive are subject to changing interpretations, passing in and out of fashion. A few buildings are so extraordinary that their iconic status endures, their initial innovation still apparent. Some suffer from the flattery of imitation, blanderized by their own success. (How many visitors to the Hyatt Regency in Atlanta know or care that it was the first atrium hotel, designed by John Portman in 1967?)

But an architectural legacy is not necessarily a constructed legacy. Some buildings launch ideas that are more fully or more successfully developed later in other projects. Some lead to a new direction in the architect’s career and work. And some serve as reminders of a road not taken — an architectural direction abandoned due to economic, political, or cultural forces.

The projects included in the following sampler of Ben Thompson’s work suggest the range of his considerable influence and represent different aspects of his architectural legacy. What they have in common is a more ineffable legacy — their influence on the people who worked on them, who have occupied them, and who have delighted in their generous contributions to the communities in which they were built.

— Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA

The Thompson Sampler

Five buildings, five views of an architectural legacy.
It was perhaps the worst building Ben Thompson ever designed. The roof leaked. The house was drafty. There was no privacy. Form did not follow function. I should know. I grew up there.

My parents, Ben Thompson and his first wife, Mary, built the house in 1949 and 1950. There they raised five children: my sisters Debby and Marina, brothers Nick and Ben, and me. Despite my current views of the design, it was a magical place to spend my youth. I loved living there.

The time was the post–World War II baby boom, when Walter Gropius (everyone called him “Grope”) was mentoring his seven young partners in The Architects Collaborative (TAC). Driving up Moon Hill Road, past the common land and swimming pool, were the homes of TAC founders Chip and Sally Harkness, Norman and Jean Fletcher, and Bob McMillan. The road swarmed with children biking, roller skating, playing capture-the-flag. At the end, just off the cul-de-sac, our house sat perched on a rock outcropping with an expansive view south across woods and meadows. This was my father’s first experiment in residential design.

The house felt like one big room — a big flat-roofed box made of Philippine mahogany and glass. Inside the front door was an expansive two-story space, which served as the dining room and sometime drafting studio. From there, you could see into almost every room in the house, including bedrooms and bathrooms. Noise carried unimpeded throughout our home, upstairs and down.

A floating teak stairway, without risers or handrails, was the first architectural element to greet you, launching dramatically (and perilously) toward the second level. At age two, I tumbled head over heels down those steps, prompting the babysitter to pronounce me dead.

The two-story space was illuminated by an Akari paper lantern hung from the ceiling; a huge freestanding fireplace was the focal point of the house, showcasing modern sculpture and paintings. A Calder mobile swung silently in the air between stairway and chimney. You could reach out and touch it as you walked down the steps.

Often on Thanksgiving, Grope and his wife, Ise, drove from Lincoln for dinner. At Christmas, they returned bearing gifts and watched my brothers chase each other around the fireplace on tricycles. Debby, Marina, and I hung by our knees from the underside of the stairs, feet and legs threaded through open risers. These were wonderful times for our family on Moon Hill.

In 1953, when my father and Spencer Field started Design Research (D/R), the store’s purpose was to meet the furniture needs of Modern architecture. But D/R expanded into a lifestyle, while our house became its testing lab, changing with each revolving crop of chairs, tables, beds, and colorful textiles. My parents traveled regularly to find new inventory, returning to Moon Hill with suitcases filled with beautiful products from around the world. Dad designed furniture as well: tables on wheels, butcher-block benches, and his well-known Haitian-cotton couch. In the late 1950s, they came back from Finland with Marimekko. They immediately built a sauna in the basement, and this began a grand family tradition of bathing together. It shocked our friends, but we enjoyed it.

Eventually, my father’s strong entrepreneurial spirit and individualism took him in a direction different from that of his TAC partners on Moon Hill, who dreamed of a world of communal housing and social responsibility. Dad, though he continued to practice the full scope of architecture, had discovered a lasting inspiration in retail and commercial design. In late 1965, he departed Moon Hill and moved to Harvard Square; he left TAC the following year and formed Benjamin Thompson & Associates (BTA). Although he went on to design more residences, he never again created a house like ours on Moon Hill. Perhaps he ultimately found, as I do now, that its striking but minimally utilitarian design was better left to the past.

Anthony Thompson lives in Washington, DC. He wishes to acknowledge the editorial help of his sister Marina Thompson, who resides in Lexington, Massachusetts.
When Ben Thompson, then a principal of The Architects Collaborative, remodeled Harvard’s Boylston Hall in 1959, it had already undergone a century of expansion and renovation. But none of the previous modifications was as startling or influential as his thoroughly Modern approach.

Originally designed by Paul Schulze as a chemistry laboratory and museum, Boylston Hall was built in 1857 in an Italian Renaissance style. In 1871, Peabody & Stearns topped the Italian palazzo base with a Second Empire mansard story, providing an additional floor. Over the next 50 years, the building was renovated several more times.

In 1959, Harvard hoped to build a center for the study of modern languages on the site of Boylston Hall but was constrained by the terms of the donor’s bequest from razing the antiquated building. Charged with remodeling the structure, Thompson faced an ambitious task, requiring a 40 percent increase in floor area.

Unlike Peabody & Stearns, Thompson and his team intended to transform the building from the inside. The solution was to insert new floors into the monumental floor-to-floor heights of the original building — in effect, inserting a new office building into the historic structure. Two principles of European Modernism were well suited to this problem: the “free plan,” a floor plan that serves as a neutral canvas; and the “free façade,” a building enclosure that is untied to the organization of the interior space. But the Boylston “free façade” was not a Modern construction at all; it was instead the historic granite mass.

The architects showcased their Modern interior through sheets of glass fitted to the stone openings with minimal steel frames, inventing a new window system incorporating a spandrel panel to accommodate the new floor level and a minimal vertical mullion to allow office partitions to be framed to the center of the window openings. This treatment radically transformed the architecture of the building.

The appeal of the design was immediate. First, in an environment in which tradition was revered, it had a refreshingly subversive quality: the new design brilliantly opposed the restraints of the building’s history and multiple styles. Second was its utopianism. New office floors replaced the historic stair hall and chambers with neutral space; people animated the building. Third was its assertion of flexibility; its repetitive elements offered an aesthetic of systems design that was synonymous with the Modern Movement.

Thompson’s solution is still powerful because of its unspoken connections to the traditions of American Modernism. Providing views to the interior was a generous act of openness unique in Harvard Yard, where buildings were typically shuttered by the grill-like character of historic windows; it continues to be an invitation to engage in the building. The drive to reduce and simplify, dramatized in this design through the geometry of wall and void, is a fundamentally American impulse at the root of this country’s embrace of Modernism; here was a historic building that was suddenly spare and abstract. Finally, Thompson’s precise aesthetic reveals a reverence for craft as a fusion of beauty and usefulness; historic granite and modern glass are valued equally and brought into a harmony independent of traditional styles.

Ben Thompson’s work evolved from these qualities of engagement, abstraction, and craftsmanship by always transforming problems into aesthetic opportunities. His was the anti-authoritarian world of the craftsman and artist who builds with material fact, speaks of common life, and invents from necessity. Thompson’s work was cool in the ’60s because it reflected the aspirations of its time. The lesson of Boylston Hall today is a vision of tradition invigorated by modern life, of past and present beautifully joined in the contrast of the abstract order of its architecture and the emotional impact of stone and glass.

Robert Olson AIA is the principal of Robert Olson + Associates in Boston, which completed an extensive renovation of Boylston Hall in 1998.
The Design Research building has won architecture’s highest honors, yet it is rarely discussed purely as an architectural icon; conversations usually include a stew of memories from the D/R retailing story that birthed it: loving Marimekko; watching the people, products, and activity from the outside in; discovering a store that felt like a party everyone was invited to.

Ben wouldn’t have had it any other way.

“Any architecture must be secondary to people.”

When I worked at BTA, I was swept up by Ben’s humanist approach to design. To him, architecture was a backdrop for the living of a joyful and dynamic life; he had little interest in the creation of architectural masterpieces. D/R was designed to serve other passions: the seduction of “must have” merchandise, the buzz of a bustling market, the poetry and energy of movement.

A “non-building” (Ben’s term), D/R was the quintessential product of that approach: a showcase for beautifully designed merchandise that didn’t compete with its surroundings. Its ethereal design consists of floating minimalist concrete slabs cantilevered from raw concrete columns, enclosed by a totally transparent glass skin. Its open corners invite the world in, and the faceted façade combines reflection and transparency, in what Ben described as a “kaleidoscope of people, shadows, buildings, and clouds.”

“If you can see it, you want it.”

Ben loved the products he sold, believed in their ability to enrich life and home, and understood how to showcase them.

“If you can see it, you want it,” he would say, and the D/R building embodied that philosophy as one large, multilayered display window. We see all-glass design in today’s Apple stores, but in 1968, it was a revolutionary retail concept. The building’s transparent skin erased the distinction between interior and exterior, leading the 1971 BSA Honor Award Jury to note that “the life of the building extends to the life of the street.” The brick sidewalks continue into the interior, which Ben described as a “high, airy lobby, not unlike the plaza where a festive street bazaar is in progress.”

The interior kept shoppers moving through the store: Staggered half floors beckoned upstairs — the climb up short stair runs seemed inviting, not daunting, thus solving an eternal challenge for retailers. On every floor, an open, wall-less plan, enhanced by natural materials — brick, wood, sisal, and cork — complemented the merchandise and the building structure, creating an endless showroom.

Ben’s worldview shaped a design philosophy that valued research and experience over intellectual theories. I remember working on a handrail design and being sent out into Harvard Square to find and feel well-designed handrails. Ben always strived for excellence and enjoyed researching new ideas. D/R’s famous glass skin itself is an example. It began as a conventional storefront system with mullions but, when the design team discovered a new technology allowing glass to be engineered as free-floating unframed panels with silicone joints and metal clips, Ben approved the innovative system, which was new to the US market.

“Markets depend on movement.”

What is Harvard Square without window-shopping, and what is the D/R building if not window-shopping on a grand scale? It mined the connection between products and people, magnifying the activity inside.

“Good markets and fairs thrive on movement and action,” Ben said. “They don’t happen in architectural masterpieces, but in lively spaces that mix people and functions.” In its visible, market-inspired bustle, the D/R building glowed out to the street, particularly at night.

It still does. Now on its third retailer and fourth decade, its faceted glass box endures, and I can’t imagine Harvard Square without it.

Wendy Prellwitz AIA is a founding principal of Prellwitz Chilinski Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was a designer at BTA from 1976 to 1980.
It is easy these days to dismiss Quincy Market — as the Faneuil Hall Marketplace is commonly known. The whole idea of an urban “festival marketplace” is now so familiar as to be uninteresting; an idea exhausted by multiple, unworthy imitators across American cities, (while still influential and being discovered across rapidly urbanizing Asia). Still, although the activities of shopping, dining, and people watching (not to mention juggler- and clown-watching) are commonplace, the place itself remains, well, distinctive, special, venerable. Whereas the Design Research building (as Cantabrigians still refer to Thompson’s other landmark of retail architecture) is about the display of the things inside, and so is dependent on being full, the Market is about a place in the city and the appeal of a promenade. The appeal of the Marketplace has never been primarily about the stuff being sold there, as critical as sales are to its financial stability. Ben Thompson was among the first Modernists to figure out the power of intertwining history, commerce, and leisure in the cause of contemporary urbanity. Even as the enclosed, “atrium-ed” suburban shopping malls were gaining popularity, Thompson foresaw that a simulacrum of a traditional street was ultimately unlikely to be as satisfying as the real thing. Yet he understood that the traditional street required modernization, not to accommodate cars, but to rev up the attributes of promenading for a modern society. The magic of Quincy Market lies in the seductions, encounters, and small pleasures experienced along a walk.

A certain urbanistic alchemy was required to revive the downtrodden downtown in the mid-1970s. Saving some parts of the city’s heritage from the prowling imminent wrecking ball of urban renewal was key. To come upon these reimagined long-shuttered warehouses when they first opened was to experience something short of a miracle. The setting seemed at once modern yet historic, unprecedented yet traditional, certainly new but somehow also familiar, and now meant to be enjoyed! It was uncanny to discover that these utilitarian, everyday structures — in a Bostonian’s memory forever grimy, decrepit, and inaccessible — could be marvelous porous containers capable of accommodating goods and people in equal measure. Faneuil Hall’s restored presence and historic status surely added to the aura, but it is precisely the casual embrace of a national landmark, not its dominance, that resonated for a modern culture of flaneurs. The Market also reintroduced suburbanites to the pleasures of visiting downtown and reassuring them that it was safe to do so.

What’s more, a long civic corridor had materialized, tying the newest urban-renewed parts of the city to one of its oldest precincts. A connection was made between the then recently completed, heroic yet somewhat unsettling Government Center and Boston’s ancient, fitfully reawakening waterfront. This was a gift. City Hall and its Plaza had tried their darnedest to turn their back to the old Dock Square and its dilapidated structures from a bygone era. But here was sprung a “bridge” from the present to the past, with the bridging elements themselves being old and new. City Hall Plaza, not often loved, would surely be less visited, and less tolerated, were it not for the adjacent marketplace serving as its counterpoint. And the waterfront, too, would be less often reached were it not for the funneling outward from the Market.

No matter that Bostonians take Quincy Market for granted these days. Thanks to Ben Thompson’s intuitive understanding of the importance to cities of experiential, tactile, visual, olfactory connectivity, the Marketplace revived the pulse of the city, once again becoming the fulcrum of the city center’s public realm. Though largely ceded to a visitor economy, and perhaps over-programmed, the Marketplace reminds us well of the primal pleasures of city life.

Alex Krieger FAIA is a principal of Chan Krieger NBBJ in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and professor in practice of urban design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.
It was the early ’80s, and Ben Thompson’s design practice was at its height of productivity following the resounding success of Faneuil Hall Marketplace. The focus of the practice was clear: seeking the perfect balance between Modernism, which represented the firm’s true roots, and the very essence of what makes a building or a city livable and vibrant.

Then along came a new commission for Ben and a new building type for BTA — the Ordway Music Theater. With it came the beginning of a new era in theater design.

The design effort on the Ordway began, as always, by learning all we could of recent precedents for this particular building type. The discovery startled us: architectural Modernism had not been good for the performing arts. Actors, directors, musicians, and conductors all largely reviled the results. The theater design giants of the time, Kevin Roche and John Dinkledoo, Caudill Rowlett and Scott, and Max Abramovitz, to name but a few, had seemingly fallen victim to too much “form follows function,” too much acoustical engineering, and too much architectural democracy.

The theater and concert hall work of the 1960s and ’70s represented a large body of publicly funded structures, each aimed at reaching maximum audience capacity, efficiency, and acoustical perfection. The structures were monumental in scale — sometimes scale-less. Auditoriums featured “acoustically shaped” walls and ceilings. Floor plans emphasized crowd management: continental seating, with seemingly endless rows of identical seats, swiftly moved patrons to and from their adjacent parked cars. The buildings were grand, with soaring lobbies and gigantic staircases, but something just wasn’t right. The patron experience had been boiled down to the bare essentials of functionality. The ceremony and celebration of attending a live performance with others had been designed out of the overall experience.

Equally distressing was the experience of the performers onstage. They looked out into a venue with overwhelming scale, a sea of human bodies. The actor, the musician, the conductor — still the same size as ever — suddenly seemed diminished and unable to artistically or emotionally connect with the blur of anonymous faces.

So our design-precedent search rolled back the clock and largely skipped the latest decades of design. We looked at venues across the globe, some hundreds of years old. After months of slideshow immersion, we began to define the essentials of why these historic buildings worked so well and were so revered: We needed aisles — for it is in the aisles that we meet friends and share in the common enjoyment of the arts. And why not have people “on the walls”? Not only is it great to see other happy patrons smiling back at you, but the proximity of those very patrons also connects the performers with their audience.

Once we discovered that acoustician Larry Kirkegaard shared these observations, we soon learned that boxes, balconies, aisle railings — all the elements that served our humanistic goals — made a positive contribution to the natural acoustical qualities of the room. Somehow these attributes had been lost.

And so the Ordway Music Theater design journey began, combining a new understanding of performance spaces with BTA’s experience with urban theater, pulling the excitement of the performing arts into the city itself. After its heralded opening in 1985, the design community took notice; a new paradigm had been set. Hardly a performance hall has since been built, regardless of its signature style, that does not populate the walls with people, gather them in aisles, and foster a celebration of the arts. That’s the legacy of the Ordway.

Scott Wilson AIA is a principal of Wilson Butler Architects in Boston. From 1981 to 1993, he was a designer at BTA, where he was project architect for the Ordway Theater and the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, which his firm is currently renovating.

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