a life in architecture

by Mildred F. Schmertz FAIA

How the boy from Minnesota became the man who reshaped cities.
Benjamin Thompson entered the Yale School of Architecture in the fall of 1938. Had he chosen Harvard instead, he would have been among the first American students to meet and learn from Walter Gropius, who had become chairman of the department of architecture in 1937. Ben and his colleagues in New Haven surely knew what the Bauhaus founder and master was up to in Cambridge, yet it was not until 1944, near the end of Ben’s World War II service as a lieutenant on a US Navy destroyer escort, that Ben finally met him. Ben’s ship had docked in Boston. It was the custom of Gropius and his wife, Ise, to gather students and friends at their home in Lincoln, Massachusetts, on Sunday afternoons, and one of them took Ben along. “I found Gropé very warm and interesting,” he remembered. “We walked about and discussed the design of his house. I think I hit it off with him right from the start.” Ben soon began to see more of Gropius, to whom he brought his own world of experience and learning as well as his hopes for what a life in architecture could ideally be.

Ben was to the manner born, although his family life was difficult and complicated. His life began in St. Paul, Minnesota, on July 3, 1918, and he had some early advantages — a prosperous land-owning father and a mother who was an artist and collector of art. He left the Midwest for a New England prep school and then the University of Virginia. Travels in Europe with his mother opened the world of architecture to him and led him to Yale, which was, at that time, still under the influence of the Beaux Arts system. Wallace Harrison, whose own architecture had begun to break with this conservative tradition and move in the direction of Modernism, was Ben’s most influential teacher.

Ben’s circle of friends and colleagues soon included architects Norman and Jean Fletcher, Sarah and John Harkness, Robert McMillan, and Louis McMillen. This young group, all of whom had been in architecture schools before the outbreak of World War II, were looking for a new way to practice architecture in the postwar world. In 1946, they founded The Architects Collaborative (TAC) and invited Gropius to form a partnership with them. At the beginning, Ben and the rest of the TAC team were inspired by youthful idealism. As could be expected, such high purpose didn’t survive the realities of practice, such as getting and keeping work. Ben, however, brought in many desirable commissions, most from New England’s academe, that allowed and supported his own idealistic beliefs. His best work while at TAC included campus buildings at Amherst, Andover, Brandeis, Harvard, and Williams.

In his years at TAC, Ben was a merchant as well as an architect and continued this activity for the greater part of his life. In 1953, he created Design Research (D/R), a retail store that occupied the ground floor of a modest 19th-century wooden house on Brattle Street. Appropriate furniture, rugs, fabrics, and housewares for the private houses TAC was designing had been hard to find. In the late ’40s and ’50s, there were very few stores anywhere for clients to buy what suited the way they wanted to live. Said Ben, “I have always believed that because the experience of living and working occurs inside a building, our best efforts should go into creating a stimulating and sensual interior environment that should be as special and personal as each owner could make it.”

“I want to make young people realize how inexhaustible the means of creation are if they make use of the innumerable modern products of our age, and to encourage these young people in finding their own solutions.” —Walter Gropius
Ben always had more to say about the beauty of the sea and sky around their home, and the ease of life there, than about the buildings. In his world, architecture was life.

Ben’s achievements as the architect of choice for elite New England academic institutions, combined with his successful entrepreneurship in the home-furnishings market, did not offset his increasing concern about the continuing loss of idealism at TAC. For him, the types of commissions the firm accepted told a sad story. He strongly opposed the master planning and design work for US Air Force Air Defense Command bases from which to bomb other countries because it served a purpose that Ben found morally questionable. The Pan Am Building (now MetLife) at New York City’s Grand Central Station, a commission that Gropius brought to the firm, was too big and out of human scale to ever have been allowed to happen. The clients who wished to build the University of Baghdad were a military regime with little time for their architects, nor did the Iraqi academics bother to pay attention to TAC’s ideas about what the content of a Western-based university education might be. Ben believed that the firm should never have taken on Baghdad to begin with and had no justification for continuing the work. He saw the commission to be so poorly conceived as to cause TAC to abandon all that was left of the higher goals the firm once had. At the same time, he was chafing against TAC’s compensation structure, which penalized him for outside income from D/R and teaching. It was clear to him that it was time to go. In January 1966, after 20 years, he left TAC to establish Benjamin Thompson & Associates (BTA).

An early initiative at BTA was the development of a revitalization plan for Boston’s old Quincy Market and Faneuil Hall, a nine-year effort beginning in 1967 that would eventually shape the direction of the firm and establish BTA’s international reputation. The celebratory opening of the first phase of the Faneuil Hall Marketplace, coinciding with the 1976 Bicentennial, marked not only an innovative design but also an innovative collaboration with the Boston Redevelopment Authority and the Rouse Company. BTA was to design four more marketplaces with the Rouse Company: Harborplace in Baltimore, South Street Seaport in New York City, Bayside Marketplace in Miami, and Jacksonville Marketplace in Jacksonville, Florida. The success of the Faneuil Hall Marketplace also led to the firm’s rehabilitation of Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco and Union Station in Washington, DC.

When Ben spoke or wrote of his life’s work, he had much to say about the joy of it, but like all good architects, he dealt with the tough realities — namely the often unforeseen contingencies that shape the always messy process of design and building. Fortunately, Ben also had the energy, drive, and resources to be his own client. In 1970, he opened the new headquarters of D/R in Cambridge, a glass-sheathed building of great beauty over which he had complete design control, simply because it was his. He also designed the restaurants he and his wife, Jane, owned: Harvest Restaurant in Cambridge and, at the Faneuil Hall Marketplace, the Landmark Inn, Flower Garden Café, Thompson’s Chowder House, the Wild Goose, and the Bunch of Grapes. He recalled that “our pleasures, our horizons, our identities became more clearly defined as we created the interiors, the menus, and the hospitable ambiance of these places. We also provided some of the vegetables from our kitchen garden on the Cape.”

Ben is best known for D/R, his academic work, and the marketplaces; yet, in later years, BTA engaged in urban redevelopment planning for many cities and towns in the United States as well as in Great Britain, Ireland, and Japan. Although he did not make a practice of designing for the performing arts, he created two outstanding concert halls: the Ordway Music Theater in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the Broward County Performing Arts Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The planning of luxury hotels worldwide was never a specialty of the firm, but Inter-Continental Hotels commissioned and built two BTA designs, one in Cairo and the other in Abu Dhabi. In 1987, BTA received the AIA Firm Award and, in 1992, the AIA recognized Ben’s life achievement with its Gold Medal. His health declined in the following years, and he died in 2002.

Scudder Lane, the Thompson summer home on a high bluff, overlooks Cape Cod Bay and a salt marsh. It is a collection of simple wooden structures that had once been a hunting camp. Before Jane joined his life, Ben had been devoting himself slowly to its repairs and new uses. He admitted that “my effort, on behalf of myself as client, might have continued to be a bit too relaxed were it not for Jane, who helped me make the old place work truly well for ourselves and our respective families.” When he spoke of their home, Ben always had more to say about the beauty of the sea and sky around it, and the casual ease of their life there, than about what he and Jane actually did with the little camp buildings. BTA people were frequent guests, and Ben liked to think that being there helped deepen their understanding of architecture and life. In Ben Thompson’s world, architecture was life.

Mildred F. Schmertz FAIA writes for Architectural Digest and The New Criterion. She was a writer and editor for Architectural Record for 33 years, serving as editor-in-chief from 1985 to 1990, and covered many BTA projects. Currently she is the editor of Ben Thompson’s memoir, a work in progress.