

PROFILES

Revealing *their* approach

*Like all creative professions, good architecture is about following one's passions.
Four seasoned architects divulge their inspirations.*

WRITTEN BY DAVID MASELLO



PAUL BATES and JEREMY CORKERN

Bates/Corkern Studio, Birmingham, Alabama

It begins with a sketch. When Paul Bates and Jeremy Corkern start to think of the way a house should look on its site and how its residents will occupy the rooms, the two talk together in their Birmingham studio and then begin to draw on paper.

"Jeremy and I still draw by hand," says Bates. "It's all about the romance of conceiving a design for a house. We love beautiful drawings. It's part of the magic. It's how we think best." And in an age when many architects log on to a CAD program and devise floor plans on

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For a client in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Jeremy Corkern, seated, and Paul Bates responded to the directive for a house that embodied the classic look and proportions of buildings in Charleston and throughout Louisiana.

screen, the methods Bates and Corkern employ reflect a far more emotional response to how a house and home are built. “By working the way we do, both of our voices are heard,” adds Corkern.

As they draw their visions for rooms and details, perhaps conceiving a wall of Georgian-style paneling or a row of fluted columns, deep-set dormers or the way a stone staircase courses a particular expanse, Bates and Corkern reflect also on the past. Both cite some of the best residential architects of the early twentieth century as constant references for their designs, particularly David Adler, the great Chicago-based architect who fashioned grandly scaled, period-accurate houses. “Adler, William Lawrence Bottomley, and the Atlanta-based Philip Shutze were my design heroes,” says Corkern. “Each was rooted in the classical tradition, with all the design rules in place, but they distilled those rules to a modern, chaste level. Even though they built grand-level houses, filled with detail yet restrained, there’s something still fresh about the works. Paul and I never want to be seen as just borrowing from them, but rather learning from what they did and applying those lessons to the houses we design.”

For both, a love for the discipline of architecture results from something innate. Bates recalls his childhood in Grand Bay, Alabama, where he would follow his father through

wrecking yards picking up timbers, weathered bricks, and old doors that would later figure into houses his father would build. “My father had a really great wood shop, with huge lathes and planes, all kinds of tools and machines. I was always around the smell of sawdust.” That very raw state of design and building continues to compel Bates.

Corkern credits his hometown of Brookhaven, Mississippi, as a central character in his desire to become an architect. “I grew up loving houses, loving design, and because Brookhaven is a railroad town, there were always residents there building houses in many styles. People there have always had a strong sense of style and taste. My mom, too, who is an artist, has true innate style. I get that from her — not as much from my father, who was in the sawmill business. Two summers I worked in his mill and those were long, hot seasons for me!”

“When someone trusts us, trusts our design, it’s a huge delight for us because it means they’re allowing us to be free and honest with our ideas,” says Bates.

“We want every house to reflect our style and have substance without our slavishly copying something from the past,” says Corkern. We want every project to seem fresh fifty, a hundred, even more, years into the future.”

“The more we think — on paper, together, on site — the richer and richer the design gets,” Bates adds. ■

DON MCDONALD, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 30

As a boy growing up in the south Texas town of Kingsville, McDonald was exposed to simple, handsomely scaled stone buildings. “I think I grew up in a family intrigued by those buildings and by architecture in general, and I never considered anything else but architecture as a profession. At some point, people just started saying, ‘Don’s going to be an architect.’”

One of the chief aspects of his work as an architect that continues to enliven McDonald is the fact that, “Residential architecture can be so expressive, it allows you that,” he says. McDonald cites several architects who were cognizant of this fact, including O’Neil Ford, the prolific Dallas architect, who McDonald remarks was able to combine a “sweet domestic style with a more austere and refined architecture.” He also acknowledges Alfred Giles, the British-born architect who immigrated to Texas in the 1870s to practice, largely in San Antonio, the California architect Irving Gill, known for his embrace of the Arts and Crafts style, and Adolph Loos, the Viennese architect and theorist who championed early Modernism.

No matter where McDonald’s projects are sited — Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Argentina — he undertakes the same rigorous course of research. “It seems clients all over have picked up on this approach of ours and come to us. If they’re going to take the time and energy and the money to build something of real value, they want that kindred connection to the community and its past.” ■

KIRBY MEARS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 32

smaller or less, the messages conveyed are more powerful, intense and focused. When we drive around town now, we can see buildings in this new context, this new building environment of Houston. They city is becoming more dense and a lot more fun as a result.”

Having watched his father design the midcentury modern house in which he grew up, Mears was, perhaps, predestined to love architecture. When asked what it is about the profession that emotionally compels him, Mears refers to architecture as “the most complete kind of activity there is. You work with materials, with people, with space, with light. I like thinking about how spaces unfold for an occupant and how, as an architect, you get to control this, moving people through spaces.”

As for architects of the past who influence Mears, he says the list is “a mile long.” But his immediate choices include Louis Kahn, Le Corbusier, and the contemporary architects Tom Kundig in Seattle, Rick Joy in Arizona, and the great Belgian designer Alex Vervoordt, “who is a big, guiding influence on a lot of people around the world.”

Mears cites his clients as the “great collaborators.” “The most important part of the process is getting to know the client and listening to what they say. You need to hear them, then allow time for soul-searching. There’s nothing worse than building too quickly, and there’s nothing more satisfying than building something that makes for real delight over a long period of time.” ■