

DOUGLAS
OKUN

THE ART OF DESIGN:

**COLLABORATING WITH CLIENTS
IN THE ENDLESS PURSUIT
OF PERFECTION**

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“Design is the application
of elements, color, material, space,
and structure to fulfill a purpose.

It synthesizes vision,
function, site, and budget
with the aspirations of the client
to create something great.

Without an aspiring client,
there cannot be a truly creative solution.”

DOUGLAS OKUN, AIA



*Pierce Lecture Hall,
Harvard University,
2008*

Douglas Okun discovered the joys and challenges of making things at an early age. It was a pursuit born of curiosity, and it was the genesis of his ability to design. “I was very happy making model planes and ships as a boy,” he recalls.

But as a teenager, he needed spending money. “My first job was working for a small contractor. I had good drawing skills and I began to explore the concepts of building design. This was the first time that ‘learning’ became meaningful to me. It occurred to me that there were infinite creative opportunities here that did not reside in other fields of endeavor. Making things with my hands transformed into the concept of making things with my head.”

*Museum of Sculpture,
Student Work, 1962
(Watercolor)*

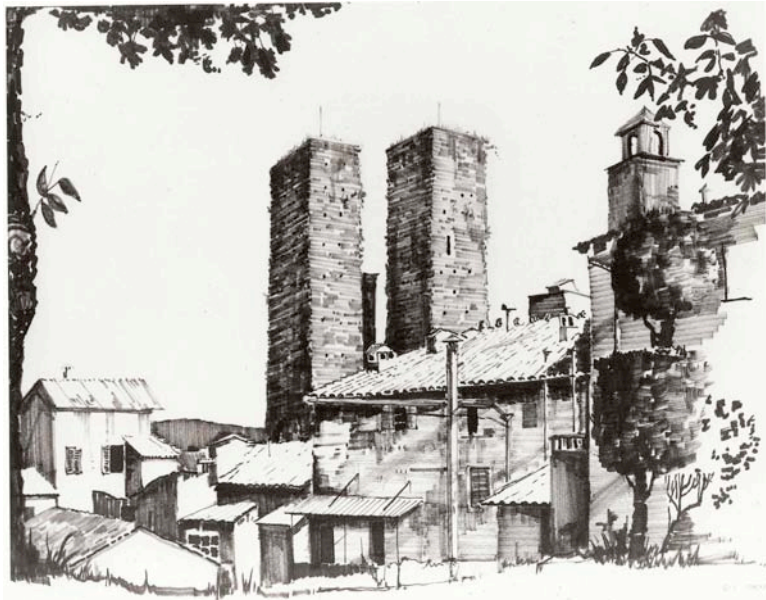


The first hint of Doug’s prodigious design talent emerged at the University of Illinois, where his professors worked hard to awaken his aesthetic eye. “I was making progress, but it was inconsistent. Then it occurred to me – I was drowning in the details. I vowed, then and there, not to draw a line until there was a concept of the project’s entirety.” The manifestation of this shift is evident in Doug’s *Museum of Sculpture*, completed in his second year at the University. The challenge was to develop a home for various pieces of sculpture in different settings. Doug’s solution was a bold one. “A concrete space frame wrapping many of the areas, providing a singular unifying element,” Doug recalls. “I still like the design.” His bold modernist lines and innate talent with materials presaged the thousands of inspired designs – and aspiring clients – to come.

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In 1967, Doug was awarded the Edward L. Ryerson Traveling Fellowship in Architecture, made annually to one student demonstrating outstanding design ability, technical competence, personality, and promise of leadership in the profession of architecture. The result was an eye-opening six-month tour of Europe – the first major touchpoint of Doug’s career. “It was a tremendous learning experience,” says Doug. “At that time, Europe was an unparalleled mix of old and new. The Pantheon, Roman ruins, medieval, gothic, the Renaissance, all combined with the new city planning and revitalization after World War II. I was particularly enamored with the energy and imagination emerging from the early days of the Bauhaus with Le Corbusier and others.” Doug took copious notes, made countless drawings of what he saw, and put together an illuminating book about his travels as a way to synthesize and refine his own emerging design oeuvre. In *Thoughts About A Better Vernacular* (1976), Doug began articulating a design principle that has informed his craftsmanship to this day. “Architecture is a reflection of lifestyle,” he says, “and its vitality is an indication of the health and vitality of its creators.”

*One of Doug’s drawings
from Europe,
1976*



Doug’s long and fruitful work with Benjamin Thompson & Associates in Cambridge, MA taught him much about both the creative and business sides of architecture. Most of

all, it gave him an innovative, thought-provoking environment in which to shape his design dexterity and match it to the needs, desires, and dreams of his clients. “I benefited from Thompson’s observations on the way people live. To Ben, architecture is a backdrop for the function of living, and it is best when it is bustling with activity.” Ultimately, Doug came away from the Thompson years with a deep appreciation of how a building’s design connects to its inhabitants. “Architecture is the most intimate of expression of how people want to live, share lives, and share their common humanity,” he says.

*“Architecture is a reflection of lifestyle ...
it is the most intimate of expressions
of how people want to live.”*

When Doug launched his own firm, Douglas Okun & Associates, Inc., in 1978, he was looking to create an open, exploratory environment that took advantage of the inherent collaborative nature of architecture – what he calls “the building of an intuitive relationship of trust between client and designer.” All of the modernist themes he had been developing over his career – from his early years at the University of Illinois, travels abroad, work at Syracuse-based King & King Architects, and eight years working with Benjamin Thompson – coalesced as he built his practice and acquired an eclectic list of clients. From private residential designs to institutional and commercial challenges, Okun & Associates rapidly became a highly sought-after firm where clients could directly experience Doug’s uniquely collaborative approach to design.

*Bird Library,
Syracuse University,
1967
(King & King)*



Okun & Associates also became known for innovative solutions to the budget challenges that are inevitably associated with any construction project. As Doug puts it, his approach to cost control is to “collaborate with a client on innovative out-of-the-box structural and design solutions that reduce the project’s biggest cost centers – labor and materials.” This has saved clients countless dollars over the years, whether it’s Harvard University, a client with whom Doug has been working for 30 years, or dozens of other corporate or private clients. It’s a sterling reputation that Doug is happy to embrace. “We design to fit a client’s needs within the budget we are given. Good design isn’t conditional on large budgets. It just needs smart judgment and a sense of adventure. We have been very successful with this approach.”

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A CONVERSATION WITH DOUGLAS OKUN

Whenever you talk about design, you always start the conversation with two words– “the client.” Why?

Doug: The history of architecture as a formal discipline – its theories, accomplishments, and technical evolution – is an amazing one. And no one loves to talk about design theory more than I do. But after working in the field for 40 years, I can tell you that behind every great design is a great client, from Justinian to Edgar Kaufmann Jr. This is where all inspiration begins. My focus has always been on that side of the business – the human side.

But the client isn't the one with the formal training to design the space. You are.

More often than not, it starts with the germ of an idea, or the articulation of a challenge, by the client. Let me give you an example. In 1980, Harvard University approached me with what they called a budgeting problem. They wanted to build a new headquarters for the Harvard Police Department. Twice it was designed and sent to bid and twice it came in 100% over budget. They asked if I could bring it in on budget. I told them that if I couldn't, I wouldn't charge them. It was to be housed in an old ballroom. I made two cost-cutting decisions. First, I eliminated columns and beams, thus saving on the excavation and repairs of the concrete slab. I used a lightweight, load-bearing wall that was separated by the existing concrete slab. Secondly, in previous schemes Harvard planned to remove the existing plaster ceiling. I chose to retain it and use it as a design feature. The project came out beautifully and came in at 66% of their original budget. Since then, my firm has completed more than 200 projects for Harvard. But my point is this: the design was a direct outcome of the client's leadership and priorities. We made a great team.



Speaking of cost control, this is something for which you're well known.

My goal with every project is to create something so eloquent, stunning, and functional, it takes your breath away. But I refuse to waste anyone's money. As many of my clients will attest, I am quite willing to spend lavishly to build a work of beauty and elegance. But the design must be clever enough to sneak under the



client's budget. For example, Harvard asked us to renovate the Malkin Athletic Center in Harvard Square and add 4,000 of new square footage in a very tight space. I designed a new long span bridge over the swimming pool. Other architects had tried similar schemes but they were too costly. The sub-basement was below the Charles River, requiring new footings to support the bridge. The process would have required excavating through two layers of reinforcement in the 15-inch concrete slab and then continuously pumping out the water until the floor was repaired – very expensive. Instead, I designed an inverted truss that rested on the sub-basement floor

that became a large column base. This reduced the budget by 14% and created the new space the University was seeking. The project was awarded Harvard's first *National Trust for Historic Preservation Award*.

You seem to approach design from a unique perspective that combines creativity and discipline, art and business. Where does this come from?

Design is a process of give and take, adjustment and re-adjustment, cost and benefit. I have always been highly cognizant of the business side of this field. In my early days at King & King Architects, I was asked by Syracuse University to design two new buildings sharing a common lobby between them. The twist? The second building was to be built at some point in the future. The University needed a design that was ready for it. The donor said he would contribute the funds only if he knew the two buildings would be linked in the future. It came out very nicely, but at the time I was struck by how the funding was driving the design. Later, at Ben Thompson & Associates, I learned the ups and down of the business by watching Ben. I saw him exhausted from road trips trying to bring in work. He told me that 1 in 100 attempts are successful – an exaggeration, but the numbers stuck in my head. This actually became an asset for my survival when I started my own firm.

In what way?

Any architect who's done it can tell you – running a design firm for more than three decades and completing more than 2,000 projects is no small feat. Success depends on hitting home runs, not singles. It depends on collaborations with clients that are so intimate and productive, there is no chance to misinterpret the challenge or come up with an off-target design. Because just one mistake can cost the firm big. The magic happens when you align the design with the client's needs and do it quickly and cost-efficiently. This requires accuracy in judgment – sometimes as to what a client *means*, not necessarily what they *say*. And it requires taking big swings at big ideas. Because that's the joy of design. It's about swinging for the fences for both yourself and the client. Big jobs, small jobs, it makes no difference. The key is a 100% commitment to a beautiful, useful *design*. I think we've been successful taking this approach across the gamut of challenges – from large institutional projects to single-family residences.

*Gordon McKay Library,
Harvard University,
2007*



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not singles ... it’s about swinging for the fences
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