

Immersion



Left: Seiji Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood; Right: Temple Beth Elohim

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Journalism and architecture are rarely thought of as similar professions. News stories are seen as fleeting, buildings as lasting. However, just as journalists are constantly having to learn about new topics in order to write, a new building type, institution or client presents an architect with a similar chance to learn as rigorously and think as creatively as possible about something new. This chance to engage with the broader world and not just a specialized corner of it has become rare in so many professions. As such, coming to understand people, places, and building types that are new to us and translating our findings into buildings that embody a client’s aspirations is fundamental to our love of the practice of architecture.

We are fortunate to have had this opportunity to take on something new in building types as varied as a performing arts center, a federal courthouse, a police station, a synagogue, a science building and a hotel, to name a few.

For each “first,” we cannot boast a track record in that building type. In place of that, and perhaps more interestingly, we offer a track record in getting it right the first time. Our first concert hall, Seiji Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood in western Massachusetts, was ranked one of the two best concert halls built in the U.S. in the last 50 years.¹ Our first fire station has become a civic icon for the city of Columbus, Indiana. Our first hotel, The Carneros Inn in California’s Napa Valley, consistently ranks among the top hotels in the country.

We know that clients take a leap of faith in hiring a firm without experience specific to their building type. That faith is intensely motivating for us; we know we have to work that much harder. But just as there is risk, there is much to be gained. We try not to apply preconceptions or formulas; instead, we bring a keen sense of awareness and discovery. If anything is institutionalized, we hope it is that attitude.

“Getting it right” demands not just a true openness and excitement on our part, but also a process of intensive learning and a method of creating trust with a client. We have found that we need to do two things: we need to “go in,” immersing ourselves with a client at their site or campus, and we need to “go out,” looking with a client at precedents out in the world from which we can learn together.

GOING IN

The expectation that an architect will have an idea and a vision for a project at the outset presents a real danger to a client. Starting with such a vision can seem efficient, or even exciting. But how can that vision embody the culture of an institution and its community if the architect has not soaked in that ethos first? To be responsive, we must immerse ourselves.

In designing a new residential and classroom building for Harvard Business School’s Executive Education program,

we started by “living” in their existing facility: sleeping in guest rooms, sitting in on multiple classes and prep sessions, and eating meals with program participants. At Swarthmore College we didn’t just visit existing residence halls during the day when students were in class. We came back for a midnight tour organized by the students themselves, who wanted to show us the real dorm culture. We ask our clients, “What is the best way to get to know you?” We then spend the time needed to fully immerse ourselves: whether it is attending High Holy Day services, sitting in on a court trial or watching not only a performance but also rehearsals.

GOING OUT

When we visit precedent projects or existing facilities on a campus with our client, our shared goal is to learn what works and what doesn’t for that particular building type. For example, in visiting courthouses across the United

States, we saw how isolated judges can feel in their chambers and how confusing it can be for the public to navigate these large buildings. In Israel, we didn’t just look at synagogues so much as we tried to understand what makes places both old and new throughout the country so spiritual.

These trips to visit precedent projects allow us to quickly learn how to best organize the spaces in a building type new to us. More importantly, though, these trips are a chance to develop a common language with our client: a chance to learn how to talk to each other. Our clients can tell us a lot about who they are and what they value in those many hours together. Deliberately, we are a captive audience. Of course, that captivity works in both directions. We have found that clients are excited to spend the time learning what we see when we look at buildings: about the ways that natural light, material choices, and building organization can matter.

The chance to immerse ourselves in something new is a privilege we take very seriously. We believe in learning from and together with our clients, whose willingness to spend the necessary time with us is the most important first step in any project and has been fundamental to our success with building types new to us.

Still, that is only part of the equation. In addition to immersing ourselves with a client, we also need to pay equally close attention to those things we view as the constants of good design: setting the right ceiling height, infusing spaces with daylight, using warm and welcoming materials, making it easy to know where you are in a building, connecting the inside with the outside and, perhaps, even creating a moment that takes your breath away. In one way or another, these things matter in every building.

¹ Beranek, Leo. *Concert Halls and Opera Houses: Music, Acoustics, and Architecture*. 2nd edition 2004