

Randolph Martz *Determined Neoclassicist*

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Chief Intern

Recognizing just how intertwined architecture was with their sense of place, around 1931 residents of Charleston established the first board of architectural review accompanied by their designation of the first historic district in America. Few endeavors gather so much attention here as architectural projects. Today, some seek to make their mark on the Holy City by introducing structures of modernist flair. Randolph Martz is one local architect who stands out from many of his peers. A self-described neoclassicist, Mr. Martz intends for his designs to celebrate the endangered essences of history personified through many of Charleston's buildings.

Randolph Martz was born in Cleveland on November 10, 1951. His parents decided to build their first home in Pennsylvania, and during the construction period they briefly lived in the small town of Oakmont, famed for its spectacular country club. His father's best friend from college coincidentally was then renting a carriage house behind one of the town's grand homes on Hulton Road. "My first memories are of exploring the grounds of that property with their son," Mr. Martz remembers, "and one day we were invited into the main house and I had never seen such opulence; it was just amazing." Observing their son's delighting in "room after room of intricate, ornate designs ... crystal chandeliers and enormous mirrors," his parents decided to indulge his amazement.

"I think that there are some people who just are, and always have been, but who have no real memory of deciding," he related when asked about what motivated him to become an architect. In describing the precociousness of his interests, the architect discussed his hobby of touring historic properties when the family was on vacation.

Eventually Randolph Martz's interests in these grand old structures would manifest into his enrollment in an architectural program at Carnegie Mellon. During his Sophomore year, the architecture student enrolled in a class taught by Patricia Waddy. "She had just been hired after spending a great deal of time in Rome and in 1971 she was presenting lectures on Italian baroque architecture — no one did this," the architect recalled. "Professor Waddy had studied architecture at Rice and presented from the sense that the structures we were studying were design problems; this drew us in as we were studying the process;" from then on he would take as many classes taught by her as he possibly could.

Reflecting on how her lectures shaped his views, Randolph Martz explained, "The idea of being a classical and modern architect was no longer foreign, she taught the legitimacy of the design process of classical architecture." When asked to describe the current influence of this school, the architect remarked, "Classicism is and always has been of our time;" he then demurred, with an uncharacteristic lack of enthusiasm in his expression, stating: "Modernism is outrageously dated."

The 1960s and '70s were not the most favorable years for most architects. President Johnson's social programs were largely funded by the sale of government bonds boasting interest rates with which the nation's savings and loan industry could not compete, according to Mr. Martz. Traditionally, such banks have financed small-scale construction projects, and slumps in the contracting and architectural worlds tend to arrive in tandem.

“Given the conditions at the time, there was not much available for inexperienced graduates from architectural programs but I was able to find a small position working with two architects in Shadyside,” Mr. Martz mentioned. The architect revealed that as there were so few projects, the tedium became completing his tasks as slowly as possible so as not to run out of work. He initially appreciated that they did not need him full time as the schedule afforded him time to make jaunts abroad.

Eventually, however, the young graduate tired of his environment, deciding on a lengthy tour of the Northeast while partaking in the favored travel mode of many affluent young people, commonly referred to as sofa surfing. “After a while I ran out of sofas and I ran out of friends,” laughter effusing amidst his notion in hindsight that “the only way to get a good job when times are tough is to establish yourself and I hadn’t stayed anywhere long enough.” Changing directions, the gypsy spirit of his youth inspired a “Southern tour.” After seeing a picture of St. Philips church in a popular architectural textbook, “I decided, why not Charleston.”

He arrived in the Holy City early in the prematurely warm springtime of 1976. “It was a party town,” he recalls, “I mean no one had really heard of Charleston.” Like many who arrived at this time, Mr. Martz marvels at how little his living expenses amounted to then. Regardless of not finding work on arrival, his immediate impression was: “This is a city in which the neighbors will be the kinds of people I want my work to be surrounded by; the beauty merits the effort.” He called home to have his library shipped down aboard a Greyhound bus.

Whether prompted by storms, fires or wars, reflecting newfound wealth or pride, or just necessity stemming from bouts of poverty, restoration has long been an artery pumping life into the spectacular façade with which Charleston presents herself. At the time of Randolph Martz’s move, Mr. Herbert DeCosta, Jr. had one of the premier restoration contracting businesses in the city. “He had a backlog of work and somebody suggested that he call me,” the architect said; then hinting at some irony, “at the time I was thinking this was the low point: I was an architect, working for a black contractor in a Southern city. I was so naïve!”

In all reality, Randolph Martz now regards this opportunity as a defining shift: “He was a wealth of knowledge of traditional architecture; he knew how these buildings were assembled.” Mr. Martz insists that his new mentor, traditionalist in his approach to projects, proved to be more of an architect than most: “He understood things such as the importance of accustoming your eye to scale while drafting — computers tend not to allow the true feeling.”

Most who know Randolph Martz might agree with the characterization of him as somewhat of a Wildean personality. Much like Wilde, the architect quickly assumed that he, like most newcomers to Charleston, “would need to learn to function as an outsider.” He claims that Mr. DeCosta, aside from offering tremendous insights about the politics of dealing with both the clients and workmen in Charleston, offered sound advice about how to approach living among his new neighbors.

“The creation of cost estimates is mind numbing work, but it was the backbone of his business, so Mr. DeCosta had given me a very important position,” Mr. Martz says about his early work in Charleston. To entertain himself, the architect began designing “house du jours.” Speaking of these designs that a friend would later have bound into volumes, he describes some of them as being refined, while others ridiculously fed his craving for creative license. Foreshadowing his move toward an independent career, he began constructing models from these designs (several are shelved behind him in the photograph of Mr. Martz sitting at his drawing table). Speaking of this pastime he noted, “Architects are ultimately not satisfied with only working in two dimensions.”

In 1984 Randolph Martz finished his exams licensing his professional pursuits as an architect. “My first important commission was designing something specifically for Rob and Nancy Mikell to look at,” he says about the homes he designed on the lot the couple had purchased at the corner of Pitt and Vanderhorst streets, adjacent their home on Pitt. The architect was originally unaware of the sort of exposure the eventual sale of each of the three Victorian styled homes would lend him. “When people started to realize that these were not restorations, it led to an endless series of commissions,” he says.

Mr. Martz says that his business — mostly centered in Charleston and in Savannah — is split between renovation/restoration work and new construction. “The most amazing change since I began working here is that people now have money to spend,” he says, mentioning, “I remember how very frugal every project once was.” In many cases his clients demand changes to newly purchased historic properties, and it becomes a job of “making these transformations without damaging the historical integrity, and in some cases restoring the inherent pleasantness that may have been lost.” One of the most recently completed products of new construction designed by Mr. Martz is 113 South Battery.

Discussing the few emerging neoclassical firms around the country, he stated: “Preservation should not be confused with neoclassicism; preservationists are all modernists because they lack perception of the continuum — as long as there is some pedigree of history they view each structure in the same light.” Such commentary is just a mere sampling of the variations in ideas floating about the locals involved in his line of work.

Despite the upheavals persistent in Charleston’s architectural world, Randolph Martz is happy with the seemingly endless supply of delightful clients he has found here. “The end product is the *raison d’etre*,” he says, noting, “I have been so very fortunate in having so many great contractors and craftsmen producing such beautiful work for me.”

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