

A Tribute to Richard Blinder, MArch '60, 1935–2007

by John H. Beyer, MArch '61

Dick Blinder, a Founding Partner of Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners, died in his sleep on September 7, 2006, in Shanghai, where he was working on a new theater complex and urban park in the city's center. The cause of his death has not been determined. He was 71 and lived in Manhattan.

John Belle and I met Dick in 1961 while we were working at Victor Gruen's New York office. Although the three of us were in Cambridge in the late 1950s, we never met there. John, who came to the U.S. via Wales and the Architectural Association in London, worked for José Luis Sert on Le Corbusier's *Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts*, and Dick and I were in different programs at the GSD. When Le Corbusier came to Harvard in 1960 to unveil his design for the *Carpenter Center*, John and Dick and I attended the event in *Robinson Hall*, having no idea at the time—as we nibbled cookies baked in the shape of Corbusier's Modular man icon—that we were standing in the same room with our future partners.

As the three of us got to know each other in New York, we realized we shared a common vision of architecture and for the planning of our cities. We decided to join together in 1968 to put into practice our beliefs that to influence the future form of our cities, something fundamental had to change in our profession.

If eminent leaders of our profession such as Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and I. M. Pei could with good conscience sign on to design new buildings that would result in the destruction of *Grand Central Terminal* and if the fight to save Greenwich Village from destruction by Robert Moses's Lower Manhattan Expressway was led not by our fellow architects but by community advocates like Jane Jacobs, then indeed it was time for a change that would bring our profession back in touch with our fellow citizens.

Believing that there were opportunities for young architects to change this approach, Dick led the effort to get our first work designing affordable housing through reha-

bilitating existing buildings throughout New York and New Jersey. Eventually we rehabilitated more than 15,000 units. From these beginnings, which included working with Jane Jacobs and the community on a plan for the Greenwich Village waterfront, Dick's social commitment strongly shaped our firm.

What set Dick apart from most of his colleagues was his ability to remain totally focused on whatever it was in a design that was important to him. It was a trait that sometimes could be exasperating in its single-mindedness, but it always resulted in a better building. It was that creative and mental concentration on a project that would carry the client, consultants, zoning officials, and community to the completion of the project that was up to his standard of excellence.

Dick was instrumental in bringing James Marston Fitch into the firm as a partner in 1980, after his retirement from Columbia University's School of Architecture, where he had initiated the program of Graduate Studies in Restoration and Preservation of Historic Architecture. Fitch's influence on the firm was profound, leading to iconic restoration projects, such as the *Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration* and the restoration of *Grand Central Terminal*. After Fitch's death, Dick became the Chair of the James Marston Fitch Charitable Trust, which provides grants to mid-career professionals in historic preservation.

As the practice expanded, Dick's passion turned to designing cultural places for the visual and performing arts, where he further shaped the artistic direction of the firm. As the lead architect for the *Rubin Museum of Tibetan Art* (in the former Barney's store on West 17th Street in Chelsea), which housed art from the Himalayas, he oversaw the incorporation of a new entrance that was meant to evoke the Mandela, a form representing the universe in Hindu and Buddhist imagery.

In the 1990s, Dick also oversaw a renovation of the Japan Society building, on East 47th Street, in which the firm sought to adhere to classic Japanese principles while carving out additional space for gallery exhibitions. In Montclair, New Jersey, where he lived for twenty-eight years, he designed a new wing for the *Montclair Art Museum*. He led the team that created the *Ford Center for the Performing Arts* (now the *Hilton Center*) in 1997 in the Times Square district, incorporating vintage elements of the razed Lyric and Apollo Theaters.

He was masterful at inspiring people to work together to create something much larger than they could accomplish individually. A good example of this is the *Center*

for Jewish History in New York, where Dick functioned not only as the architect, but also as one of the leaders in the creation of a new organization made up of four entities: The American Jewish Historic Society, The Leo Baeck Institute, The Yeshiva University Museum, and The Yivo Institute for Jewish Research. The whole became much greater than the sum of its parts, resulting in the foremost center of Jewish scholarship and culture, and architecture of timeless beauty.

Dick loved music and art, and he loved New York. His memberships in non-profit and civic organizations, where he also served as a board member, included the Seventh Regiment Armory Conservancy, the James Marston Fitch Charitable Trust, the Century Theater Foundation, the Center for Jewish History, the Harvard Graduate School of Design Alumni Council, the Montclair Art Museum, and the Montclair Redevelopment Authority.

Dick was at the pinnacle of his career, with no end in sight, when he was cut down by sudden death. The *Shanghai Cultural Plaza and Theater* he was designing was to be the culmination of a deep commitment to Asian culture, art, and architecture, which started with his beautiful work at the Japan Society and was further enhanced at the *Rubin Museum of Tibetan Art*.

It was Dick who first concluded that our firm should go to China. He opened the office in Beijing in 2003 and immediately entered a number of important design competitions, including the Shanghai project. But typically Dick didn't just set things in motion. He soon was spending half his time in the Shanghai office with a group of dedicated young architects designing this building and park. He quickly came to love working there. He said that the Chinese actually listened to you. To the pleasure and surprise of his clients and staff, he took to riding a bicycle around Shanghai just as the locals did.

Dick was not a man on the road to emeritus status. My friend and colleague for over four decades was an architect ascending. Over the past decade he found himself realizing more and more his vision of what architecture could be: bold, exciting buildings that enhanced their surroundings, not through idiosyncratic design statements but by taking their inspiration from their context and their user's needs. It is in our hands now to complete his vision.

He was true to himself absolutely. He was pure, serene, noble. No sweeter person ever lived.



Richard Blinder, MArch '60. Courtesy, Beyer Blinder Belle Architects and Planners