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The Architectural Team Fulfills Many Charges at Battery Wharf

By Jeff Stein

“If we were to use an experimental system in a building we were designing, a product that hadn’t at least been tested through a lifecycle, we wouldn’t really be serving our clients very well, would we?”

That is architect Michael E. Liu, vice president of The Architectural Team, a Chelsea design office, speaking of how his firm views the professional practice of architecture. They are serious about it.

Practice identifies design as an iterative process: the result of going over design issues again and again. Such repetition is how a designer develops familiarity with codes, materials, building types, construction processes and possibilities. Repetition is how an architect develops methods of self-criticism and concurrently evolves real-world design skills by doing more of the same sort of work again and again, over time; and as the specific content of the work changes over time, infusing it with a kind of grace.

In an age of immediate gratification (well, we recently did live in such an age, before the price of oil reached \$140 a barrel), a professional design practice like The Architectural Team, one that has unfolded over 35 years, is remarkable. It is just that sort of lengthy time frame, though, which really defines the term “practice.” Practice is not architecture-making as a one-time public service initiative, nor is it a high-aesthetic public relations effort. Instead, practice is the work of showing up at the office and studying the issues to be resolved with a client, every day.

It is practice when a developer-client – like Raymond Properties – asks, “Could your firm design a multifunction building on an historic wharf in Boston’s North End?” And it is practice that allows a design firm – like The Architectural Team – to say, “Sure,” to a project like Battery Wharf. The Architectural Team already had designed the wharf next door, San Marco/Lincoln Wharf; and a couple years before that, one further down the waterfront. Just recently, they have started on another – Lovejoy Wharf – a few blocks to the north.

Open this month after 12 years of planning, design and construction, it is Battery Wharf that has our attention. Here the consequence of The Architectural Team’s practice experience is embodied a single attribute: identity. At Battery Wharf, the designers have made architecture that is not merely comfortable in its time and place, but by means of color, scale, materials and proportions, it identifies time and place for its inhabitants and neighbors alike.

Wave of the Future Battery Wharf presents a complex series of relationships for architects to resolve. Constructing a project on a pier over water as well as on the dry land next to it is among the most interesting of these. Before imagining how the design of 104 luxury condominiums, 150 hotel rooms, an 18,000-square-foot health spa and a parking garage might look on the site, consider that the work was to make the wharf’s ground-level align with the gradient of the North End’s Commercial Street while simultaneously sitting above high tide and out of the way of a possible storm surge. It needed to be atop an existing, historic sea wall, too, a handmade artifact of granite blocks dating from the late 1800s that has not been touched by the new construction. Of



This view of Battery Wharf in Boston’s North End, designed by The Architectural Team of Chelsea and opening this month, shows the two wharf buildings that extend into the harbor, and the “oculus” in their center that delivers daylight to a hotel lobby and glass-enclosed function rooms, just below grade.

course, the level also needed to be low enough for pedestrians on the public Harbor Walk to feel comfortably close to the water.

This relationship to water and land was accomplished with the help of landscape architects of the Halvorson Design Partnership. They have created an ingenious garden edge to the buildings, a sort of invisible landscaped dyke that keeps public space close to the water and private space a little higher, out of harm’s way. They also have punctured the space with what appear to be elegant concrete waves that double as curvy benches, as if sea foam had splashed through the wharf’s deck to become frozen in place.

For the architects themselves, Massachusetts waterfront development has meant adhering to design guidelines of Chapter 91, including a 55-foot building height limit, and a public open space requirement of 50 percent, rules that led The Architectural Team to create what appear to be four separate 5- and 6-story buildings. These four are connected as one just below grade, where a large glass-domed oculus in the landscape gives ample daylight to a hotel lobby and function rooms.

The rather traditional-looking brick-and-metal-clad buildings (blue-grey painted metal reflects different-colored sunlight throughout the day) transform themselves along the wharf’s long axis. Each relates to a North End/Boston vernacular image on the land side – brick masonry, regular punched window openings, precast stone-like accents facing Commercial Street. Yet toward their culmination in the water, their design evolves, and each finally takes the stance of a nautical pilot-house, all glass and view, in their overlook of the harbor.

In a final nod to their seaside site, the roof edge of one of the two long wharf buildings creates the impression of one continuous wave. The roof itself does not actually undulate, but a screen wall makes it appear to do so, with a heavy cornice that can be seen clearly from the harbor.

The Architectural Team has not just designed wharfs, though. Stand almost anywhere in Boston and you can see a building on which the firm has worked. They have designed and renovated award-winning public buildings, hospitals, hotels, research labs, churches, boys and girls clubs, assisted-living facilities and 45,000 units of housing in and around Boston.

You might not recognize their work as a brand the way, for instance, that we identify the stamp of Frank Gehry, whose practice involves designing iterations of the same building, then placing it in a variety of cities worldwide. The Architectural Team’s practice has led them to design a wide variety of buildings and place them all in the same city: Boston. To a surprising extent, our city looks the way it does because the firm has designed it to look that way. Their work here captures the spirit of city and ocean and moment to bring us to an understanding of place. Battery Wharf? That’s Boston. It couldn’t be anywhere else.