

The New TRADITIONALISTS

PHOTOGRAPHY HESTER + HARDAWAY. PORTRAIT MAX BURKHALTER.

Houston is renowned for its modernist architecture and influences going back to the early days of Dominique and John de Menil. But the Bayou City is also steeped in a long and cherished tradition of classical design that is still going strong. From the 1920s to the 1960s, Houston architect John Staub populated River Oaks with glorious traditionally styled homes and mansions — notably the 1927 white-columned estate for oil heiress Ima Hogg, now the Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens museum. Staub's esteemed mantle has been reclaimed by architects **William Curtis** and **Russell Windham**, whose 23-year-old firm **Curtis & Windham Architects**, has designed and built dozens of stately homes, churches, offices and pavilions in the classical and vernacular traditions throughout River Oaks and beyond. No one could be better suited to the task of maintaining Houston's historic character, while ushering it into the present. Bill Curtis helped found the Texas chapter of the Institute of

Classical Architecture + Art and is on its board of directors. The firm's projects, which also include interiors and gardens, have been published in books and numerous national magazines including *Architectural Digest*, and a monograph of their work will be published by Texas A&M Press in 2016. Among their many accolades are a national Arthur Ross Award and two consecutive Palladio Awards bestowed by the ICAA, which has also honored them with multiple John Staub Awards, most recently at a ceremony in October for their work on the St. John's School Campus Center and Flores Hall, which opened in August. Located in River Oaks and built in 1946 by architect Hiram A. Salisbury, St. John's has become one of the region's largest and most prestigious college prep schools. Curtis & Windham was challenged with reorganizing the rapidly growing school's offices, meeting spaces, classrooms, parking, and a large dining hall that would become not only a gathering place, but act as the physical and spiritual heart of the school. The gauntlet had been thrown. Bill Curtis and Russell Windham share details about the renovation of St. John's and their passion for classical architecture and design. **Rebecca Sherman** reports.



Dining hall interior of Flores Hall, St. John's School

WHEN DID YOU FIRST REALIZE YOU WANTED TO BE AN ARCHITECT?

Bill Curtis: I grew up in the panhandle in a tiny farming community. My family had a shop, and I was always building things. I had a fourth grade teacher — I hated math — who told me if I would do my homework, she would let me draw during math class. So I think I got ahead so that I could draw all the presidents. I liked to build things, and I liked to draw. When I got older, I really thought I wanted to be a city planner. I think that's why I love traditional and classical architecture, because city architecture is the highest form of civic art. Architects and clients have a responsibility not only for that actual building but to everyone who walks or drives past it.

Russell Windham: I was six years old when I knew that I wanted to be an architect. I never deviated. My dad built the building for his business and I recall in 1963 — I was probably 5 or 6 years old — I went to see it being constructed, and I can remember going to the architect's offices and being very taken with them. There were drawings and models everywhere. I also liked to draw. My parents fostered that, and it gave me confidence. I grew up in a small town west of Dallas, and I can remember having a sense of excitement about going to town, because it was flashy with big glass buildings. We traveled to Greece when I was about 12, and I saw the Parthenon. That was the start of my formation as an architect.

Russell Windham and Bill Curtis



YOUR FIRM BEGAN BUILDING HOUSES IN RIVER OAKS IN 1992, AND IT'S HARD TO TELL YOUR NEW CONSTRUCTION FROM HOUSES THAT HAVE BEEN THERE FOR ALMOST A CENTURY

BC: The neighborhood was originally developed by the Hogg family, and they hired about five different architects — very good traditional architects — to develop the original housing stock for the neighborhood in an eclectic way with different styles of architecture. So we looked at that and said, 'There's a lot to draw upon, and there's a lot of value to that.' So, who are we to come here and build a house 50 feet tall if every house in the neighborhood is 26 1/2 feet tall. We just never approached it with any lack of respect. We approached it with a certain vigilance to make sure we fit in.

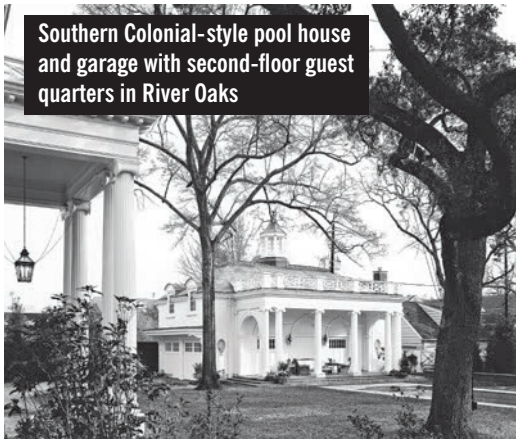
DID THE SPECTER OF JOHN STAUB INFLUENCE YOUR WORK?

BC: We're not channeling anyone other than our love of architecture. We have 3,000 books here. We love books, we love looking at architecture, and we love talking about it. I think our mutual desires to go live and work in significant urban places — I worked in Washington, D.C., and Australia, and Russell worked in London and on the West Coast — allowed us to learn as much as possible in a short amount of time.

RW: That's why we call ourselves traditionalists. Not that we're frozen in the past, but there's all this knowledge and all this expertise that's been out there for a few thousand



Recent additions to the Frank J. Forster house in River Oaks (built 1929)



Southern Colonial-style pool house and garage with second-floor guest quarters in River Oaks



Dining hall interior of Flores Hall, St. John's School



Center: Summer house in the gardens of South Boulevard residence in Broadacres



Above: La Estancia del Rio, Rio Arriba County, New Mexico

years, and for us not to know that and use that as a tool doesn't make sense. We would be uncivilized or uneducated. For any architect to come at a problem and only know 20 years of history, or five years of history, is a shame. What a missed opportunity. There's a great tradition of architecture; you can't throw that out. In the '60s and '70s, it was thrown out. Everyone started over and was doing something new, and that's a huge tragedy.

BC: River Oaks gave us great discipline to hone our craft, so that when we did projects in other regions, we understood the context and construction rituals that might have gone on before. You need to understand the geography, the difference of how sunny or dark it is based on the latitude, and that kind of thing. I think that our Houston-centric practice has allowed us to go other places such as Colorado, Montana, the Hamptons, Florida and build with an equal appropriateness.

YOU BOTH HAVE CHILDREN AT ST. JOHN'S. DID THAT MAKE THE STAKES HIGHER?

RW: We have five children between the two of us in the upper school. We certainly didn't want to do a bad job, and for them to be embarrassed by our efforts. Hopefully, we're on the good side of that. The school's newspaper wrote a critique of the project, and while there were varying opinions, we were glad to see there was discussion.

IN WHAT OTHER WAYS WAS ST. JOHN'S DIFFERENT FROM YOUR OTHER PROJECTS?

RW: The biggest difference was that we were working with a committee instead of individuals. With a residence, it's about what the homeowners want. For this, the administration and the building committee introduced the idea that we were creating a campus, including landscaping, that integrated with what was already in place. In a way, it wasn't that much bigger than some houses we've done. When you think about the long legacy of great university dining halls, what architect in their right mind wouldn't want to do one?

RW: Headmaster Mark Desjardins really understood the relationship between architecture and education by having an inspired environment. He didn't tell us what to do, but he had been around the great architecture of East Coast schools and brought that passion with him. With a client like that, it's great working environment. It couldn't have been more ideal.

YOU WERE INITIALLY TASKED TO BUILD A DINING HALL. IT TURNED INTO A LOT MORE.

BC: When we were hired, the campus wasn't beautiful. In fact, it wasn't much of a campus. It was overridden by cars. Students had to kind of navigate every time they moved from class to class. The gift of the architect is to realize what the problem is that needs to be solved.

RW: They asked for a building, and they got a campus.

YOU DESCRIBE THE NEW 10,000-SQUARE-FOOT FLORES DINING HALL AS THE SIZE OF A GYM. HOW DID YOU BRING IT DOWN TO SCALE?

RW: We broke the square footage down into different scales of spaces. It needed to be an assembly hall for the school, but also, if you're an organization of 15 people, is there a place you could sit and feel comfortable. We made the great hall like a nave of a church. Then we have an aisle off to the side, some lower ceilings and a completely different feel or intimacy. If you come in from the front door, there's one little room that's set off with three tables. This is where we used classical proportioning principals to create a beautiful proportionate smaller space, and to create a grand ceremonial space. This is a scale of a room we had not done before, so we referred to Baker Hall at Rice, and Trumbull Dining Hall at Yale and saw how those made us feel.

YOU TRIED TO KEEP THE MATERIALS AS CONSISTENT WITH THE OLDER BUILDINGS ON CAMPUS AS POSSIBLE. DESCRIBE THAT.

BC: We had a simple palette of materials such

as plaster and Texas limestone and white oak, and tried to exploit those as much as we could. The limestone cladding on the building comes from the same Texas quarry that was used for the limestone for the original buildings at St. John's, and 60 percent of the clay roof tiles are from a building on campus that was demolished. The rest was salvaged from a local building with similar tile, and much of the stone inside and out was carved by hand by artisans near Austin — some of the carved pieces in Flores Hall weighed more than 800 pounds.

RW: One of the things we learned from Oxford University is that they have lots of wooden tables and wood paneling. Brown can make everything go muddy. So at Oxford, there's this beautiful tile and stone floor laid out in a giant diagonal pattern. The red floor gave release to all the brown. So there was a long discussion. Should the floor be wood? That would be too difficult to take care of. Stone would be too unforgiving. The material that made the most sense was linoleum. The craftsmanship to lay that floor was extensive. It took them about a month to get it in, because it was hand-cut and laid.

BC: That floor ended up being one of the higher-crafted moments of the building. It had to be perfect.

HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT CREATING A COMMUNAL FEEL IN SUCH A MASSIVE HALL?

RW: The headmaster wanted round tables and chairs to reinforce community, so we had them custom-designed in white oak. The hall seats people on the first level, and there is seating upstairs on the mezzanine. There's also an outdoor arcade that runs the full length of the building with outdoor dining.

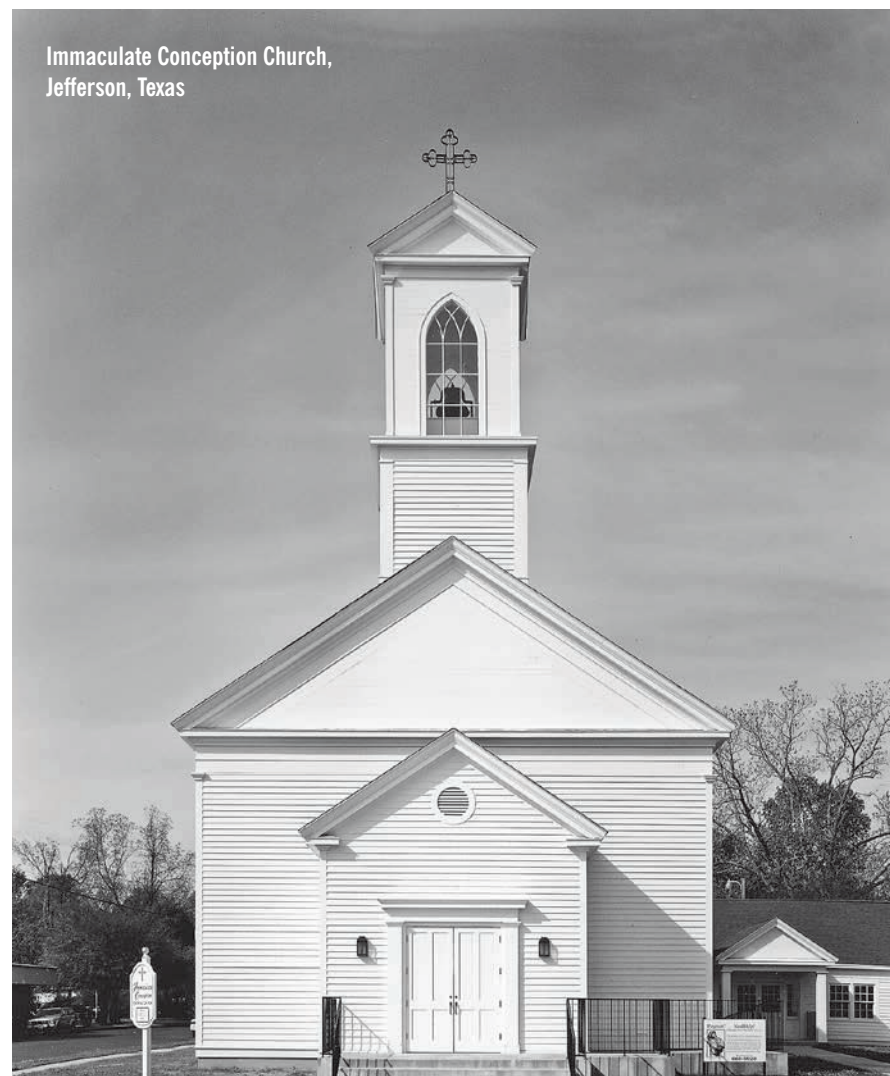
BC: We created a large, simple lawn off the arcade [called the Great Lawn] that can be used by the entire St. John's community. The school already had a senior quad with

trees that didn't get used very effectively — if you're not a senior, you can't set foot on it — so we created a democratic place where everyone can be equal and hang out. To do this, we moved the parking lot underground. It's a treeless area where the kids can play soccer or sit down and have lunch. It's also big enough to use for graduation ceremonies. They're already beginning to have events and things like the upper school play and coffee-house kind of music performances. Both the lawn and the hall are places where people can be creative in how they choose to use it, much like the halls we saw at Yale and other college campuses.

IT MUST BE A RUSH TO WATCH YOUR KIDS AND THEIR FRIENDS USE THE SPACES YOU CREATED.

RW: I've spent a large part of my life travelling and looking at campuses, and I love architecture, so to be able to create something where my kids can be part of it is almost like I'm building it for myself. It's exciting. It's sort of like, 'Pinch me, I can't believe this is real.'

BC: We filmed opening day, and it's fun to watch the kids come in for the first time and use it, just like it had always been there. You see a couple of kids with their mouths open like, "Wow," but a lot of them never even looked up. When you finish a project, the owner takes it over. It's gone from you; it's not yours anymore. I think St. John's was ours for a long time and we really got a chance to love it and to think about it very thoughtfully very thoroughly and deeply. When I go back I'm forced to deal with it on the terms of the people that are using it today. I find that fascinating. It's a part of the St. John's culture now, and I'm proud of that. Seeing people in it justifies all the things we thought about; people are well-scaled inside of this giant room. When I'm in there, I don't think about creating it anymore; I think about the joy I get from people using it.



Immaculate Conception Church, Jefferson, Texas



Entrance façade of Flores Hall, St. John's School