

Background and Foreground: Four Colorado Architects Discuss Cultural Influences on Their Designs

By Sarah Goldblatt, AIA



East to West

In his book, *Buildings of Colorado*, noted historian Tom Noel observes that “Colorado’s expansive, high, dry, sunny environment warrants a special architecture, but Coloradans generally have borrowed styles from elsewhere that are no match for the climate or the setting.” There are, however, architects with diverse cultural backgrounds practicing throughout Colorado who seem to naturally grasp the unique conditions of the place and achieve the special design that Noel refers to.

Hisa Ota, AIA, is one of them. Though born in the congested city of Tokyo, his childhood home was surrounded by gardens with ponds and hills that made him feel as though a bit of the countryside had seeped into an otherwise confined urban setting. His rare experience attending summer camp near Yosemite National Park forever cemented his love for the expansiveness and freedom of the West and he promised that he would return. And he did, initially to complete high school, then college, and then graduate school at Columbia where he earned his master of architecture.

After college Ota still longed to distance himself from his Japanese roots, but he needed a green card to remain in America. So he took a job as a curator at the Japan House Gallery in New York City. He was disdainful of the old-fashioned nature of the exhibits until one day the director made him sit in the gallery space and not leave until he saw “something.” He was shocked, first at how close-minded he had been, and second, to discover the level of creativity in Japanese art.

The revelation caused a career shift and Ota enrolled in architecture school. After graduation, he joined Isozaki’s office and later pursued a

Above: A view towards the entrance of Hisa Ota, AIA’s home located on the western slope of the Sierra Blanca range. The project received a 2008 AIA Colorado South Merit Award.

Opposite page top: Photovoltaic panels on Hisa Ota, AIA’s home in Mosca, Colo., supply 97 percent of the home’s electricity requirements.



Hisa Ota

speculative business venture in southern Colorado. During his first visit to the San Luis Valley he observed the starkness of the landscape and wondered, “Who would want to be here?” To him, coming from Japan and the East Coast, the place seemed like a “wasteland ... nothing was growing.” But similar to his experience at the gallery, he learned to find beauty in something that he previously could not see. The vastness was captivating, and he chose not to leave.

Today, he designs buildings and homes throughout the San Luis Valley. While he notes that his designs are not a direct reflection of his Japanese heritage, the influence permeates through in subtle ways, such as his use of a module to organize spaces and to create an unseen, but palpable sense of order, similar to the purpose of the tatami mat in Japanese homes. Flow and connection between the inside and outside are also important elements that draw upon the relationship of the traditional shoji screens and exterior spaces. But beyond applying these principles, he believes that in any given design opportunity, “you need to look at what the context dictates ... and what the client wants. ...The building really is already there, you just have to find it.”

Where Earth Meets Sky

Gopal Shrestha, AIA, grew up in a remote river valley in Nepal. Like Ota, he references the potential of the place as a point of departure for his projects. When he was 10, he was recruited to attend school in Katmandu with other promising students from throughout the country. Dur-



Hisa Ota

Above: In the Macaulay house, designed by Hisa Ota, AIA, the stair has modern detail and color but alludes to the tradition found in Japanese folk houses.



David Kress (RB+B Architects, Inc.)

Above: A view towards the sky from the center of the Westfield Park Pavilion in Fort Collins, Colo., designed by Gopal Shrestha, AIA.



Fred Fuhrmeister Photography

Above: Outdoor space was integral in Gopal Shrestha, AIA's design of Kinnard Junior High School in Fort Collins, Colo.

Below: The structure of the Fossil Creek Lake Pavilion in Fort Collins, Colo., designed by Gopal Shrestha, takes cues from the fossils found on the surrounding site.

ing a sixth-grade English class he was introduced to the word *architect* and began his quest to understand its meaning. A visit to Kahn's Kimball Art Museum during his architectural studies fueled his appreciation for the built environment, particularly the integration of landscape, light and the poetry achieved in the composition of just a few select materials. Because Nepal is one of the poorest developing countries, he was taught at an early age not to waste anything. In response, he aspires to tread lightly on all aspects of a project. "I wouldn't put something in that isn't necessary — I want to make full use of the materials."

As a result, his projects at RB+B Architects in Fort Collins are uncomplicated and thoughtful with clear deference to the site, views and context. He also has an affinity for outdoor spaces that he attributes to the dependence on rooftop spaces in Nepal for eating, sleeping and praying. This respect for the sky subconsciously appears in projects such as the Westfield Park Pavilion in Fort Collins, where the structure reaches for the sky like a Native American council circle that establishes the whole and defines the center. The pavilion at Fossil Creek blends the sky and water by framing views of both. Shrestha explains the roof form as having some connotation of the wing of a bird, with the exposed structure making reference to fossils found on the site. The timeless elements of his projects clearly demonstrate his command of the word architect.



GSC Photo

Natural Expression

Michelle Lopez Orsini, Associate AIA, describes her native Puerto Rican homeland as “lush and very green ... with winds that cool the hottest days. Nature is integral to design and you rely on the sun and the elements in a very direct way. There is great attention paid to bringing the exterior to the interior and a respect for the land. You wouldn’t demolish the mountains and then build in place of them, rather you would design something that would feel part of the land, rather than the land being subservient to the building.”



Above: The Fort Collins Police Station, designed by Michelle Lopez Orsini, Assoc. AIA, includes a sweeping canopy that establishes a civic presence and provides direction for visitors.

Orsini credits her architectural education for teaching her about expression through form, and she brings these influences and the love for color to the design table in her work at Humphries Poli Architects in Denver. In her experience, she has found that some of the firm’s clients, like those planning jails and work-release centers, flat-out reject the notion that buildings should open into the landscape or be light-infused and colorful. Though she finds these projects to be very program-oriented and often not receptive to new ideas, she works hard at finding ways to infuse the justice-related projects with a strong civic presence and with elements that will be welcoming to the community.

The sweeping canopy in the foreground of the Fort Collins Police Station illustrates this approach. Functionally, it provides direction to visitors while its expressive form and substantial sandstone supports project a strong identity and sense of place where the public will feel secure and welcome. The use of locally quarried stone at the building base and the seemingly natural distribution of boulders around the site give the impression that the structure is emerging from the earth. Although Orsini asserts that her involvement in library projects affords more opportunities for expression, she does find ways to integrate her culturally infused design sensibility into each project.



Computer rendering by Ugljesa Janjic

Above: Rendering of Meeker Elementary entry canopy.

Below: Rendering of Meeker Elementary in Meeker, Colo., designed by Ugljesa Janjic, AIA. The school, which is currently under construction, responds to the natural setting and climate with its orientation, sloped roofs and building materials.

Tabula Rasa

Ugljesa Janjic, AIA, is another architect whose work successfully fuses with Colorado’s landscape, though he takes exception to the notion that his designs are influenced by his ethnic background. He considers himself more of a cultural hybrid, moving between his native Serbia and Venezuela multiple times before settling in Colorado. He now works for the Neenan Company in Fort Collins. For him, the project location and client needs are paramount.

As for Janjic’s design process, he maintains a tabula rasa approach. “I start with a blank page for each project and evaluate each individually.” He looks to the site context for inspiration, and often finds that an agricultural structure or outbuilding helps shape a concept. One such project, Meeker Elementary School, is currently under construction and demonstrates this approach. Janjic explains that the school’s design “reflects elements of the mountains and surrounding ranching community. It also plays with the joyfulness of color – an element that is borrowed from the adjacent neighborhood.” Although not a LEED-certified project, the building is sensitive to the climate and natural conditions. For example, the orientation optimizes sun exposure and, in combination with high windows and light louvers, daylight will project deep into the classrooms.



Computer rendering by Ugljesa Janjic

Janjic does concede that he may have been influenced by his parents, both of whom were architects, who were ensconced in the Modernist Movement when he was child.

He cites this transformative time as a cause of the dissolution of cultural memory in architecture. As an offspring of the movement’s disciples, he finds his own design philosophy to be culturally neutral.

With or without direct reference to their own cultural backgrounds, it is apparent that these four architects approach design with a unique sensitivity to the relationship of a building to its natural context. The result is architecture that is rooted in place. ■

Changing the Façade of Architectural Practice: Three Leaders Pave the Way

By Sarah Goldblatt, AIA



Above: Elizabeth Wright Ingraham, FAIA.

Three modern pioneers in Colorado have bridged the gap of women and minorities practicing architecture. Their stories contain struggle, yet they are full of accomplishments and contributions to the field. These individuals have established standards of practice and levels of civic engagement that are relevant to all practitioners — regardless of gender or race.

Elizabeth Wright Ingraham, FAIA, is one of them. At 85, she is full of vitality with architectural vision that remains 20/20. She is not only among the 14 percent of licensed women that comprise AIA Colorado members, but probably the only one in her age bracket. What keeps her going? A quest for knowledge ... and there is no end in sight. Her advice to anyone interested in participating in the conversation? Speak up! That is not to say speak louder, but take a stance on social issues and make a difference. She urges architects to use their ability to transcend boundaries to be a catalyst for change. This has been her lifetime objective and she encourages others to follow her lead.

Ingraham's contributions to the field of architecture are substantial, let alone her sheer ability to be in continuous practice for more than 60 years. She prevailed over the usual limitations seen for women in the field early in her career and established a thriving practice where, even today, she continues to push the design envelope. For example, she recently designed a glass house in a forest setting while all the time being mindful of prefabricated building components and alternative energy sources.

She cites the establishment of the Wright Ingraham Institute at the 640-acre Running Creek Field Station in Elbert, Colo., as one of her most significant achievements. Between 1970 and 1982, college students and

Courtesy of Elizabeth Wright Ingraham Architects

professors from universities throughout the country developed and participated in a program that Ingraham conceived as “integrative studies using land and the environment as reference points for study and research.”

“The goal of the program,” she explains, “was to counter the fragmentation found in education.” Although the program was multi-disciplined, the basic elements of shelter were used to symbolize the composite nature of education which Ingraham describes as “the foundation for design ... and without a foundation you have no structure for life.”

Recently, Ingraham received an inquiry from a 16-year-old girl who asked, among other things, how much money architects make. Ingraham politely responded that the question was irrelevant. Instead, she recommended that the teen learn everything about biology, sociology, ecology and art, among other disciplines, and do a great deal of reading and studying of math and physics and build a foundation. “When you’ve done that, then move on to architecture,” she advised, then added: “Once you’re in, however, you can’t get out — it’s a powerful force.”

Harold Massop, president of Harold Massop Associates Architects, exhibits the same tenacity as Ingraham in the pursuit of meaningful contributions to the built environment, but he would likely take exception to the idea of approaching the profession without a concern for the business end. He cites the emphasis that architecture schools place on design excellence over the practical knowledge of running a practice as perhaps the weak link to professional success. Referencing a statement that he attributes to Mies Van Der Rohe, Massop says, “It doesn’t matter how great a designer you are, you have to have something to design. Without a client, you’ll never be able to manifest your great knowledge.”



Ron Pollard



Ron Pollard



Ron Pollard



Ron Pollard

Top and center: Fountain Branch Library, an AIA Colorado South 2006 design honor award-winning project by Elizabeth Wright Ingraham, FAIA.

Bottom left and right: Ingraham’s geometric Solaz house in Manitou Springs won a 1999 AIA Colorado design award.



Jonathan Shoup

Above: Harold Massop.

Right: Interior view of the Montclair Recreation Center in Denver, Colo., designed by Harold Massop.

Massop describes his architectural career that spans nearly 40 years as an “extraordinary journey” that has taken him from his native Jamaica to New York, Houston and Denver. His perspective is unique. Statistically, he is among the approximately 11 percent of minorities practicing architecture and the 1.5 percent of blacks that comprise the licensed professionals in the country. In Jamaica, Massop explains, “being black does not disqualify you from attaining your highest professional goals.” In the United States, he experienced otherwise. Coming to study architecture at the Pratt Institute amidst the civil right’s movement was confounding. He recalls, when he first arrived at school, the admissions officer asked, “Are you sure that you are at the right place? This is not a black school. Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Massop was sure.



Jonathan Shoup



Jonathan Shoup

He excelled in school and upon graduation was pursued by the top architectural firms led by Paul Rudolph, Marcel Breuer and Philip Johnson among others. Massop went on to work for SOM to fulfill his desire to work on high-rise buildings and to gain experience in all aspects of the profession. But when he inquired about partnership in the firm, they responded, “We’ve never had a black partner — Harold, why don’t you be patient?” He replied, “What does being black have to do with this? I just want to be at the top of my profession.” Unable to penetrate the racial barrier at that time, he left SOM for Colorado where he eventually established his own practice. He has been involved in shaping many civic projects throughout the city including Denver International Airport, the Colorado Convention Center, the Denver Justice Center and other local projects, such as the Montclair Recreation Center and Scott United Methodist Church. He doesn’t see himself as a pioneer in the field, but he does recognize his fortitude to overcome the obstacles that the profession places in front of him, including the challenges of establishing a business as a minority.



Jonathan Shoup

Top: Exterior view of the Montclair Recreation Center in Denver, Colo., designed by Harold Massop.

Bottom: Sanctuary of the Scott United Methodist Church in Denver, Colo., designed by Harold Massop.

Massop’s enthusiasm for the profession has not diminished. He often attends high school career days to expose students to architecture who might not otherwise consider it as an option and to emphasize to them that the “sky is the limit!”



Ron Abo, AIA, president of the Abo Group, Inc., is a third-generation Japanese-American who is among the 2.4 percent of licensed AIA members in Colorado with Asian-Pacific ethnicity. As a child, his family preferred not to identify with their Japanese heritage. It wasn't until the late 1960s when he was studying architecture that he experienced an "awakening in terms of social responsibility" that caused him to embrace his own background and recognize that everyone has a right to his or her own voice and identity.

A pivotal experience in his fifth year of architecture school reinforced this belief and it remains a cornerstone of his practice today. Instead of doing a traditional thesis project, he and a few other students were given the option to participate in a Community Design Center experience. The students were placed in an inner-city setting and asked to apply their design skills to mediate for a neighborhood that was being negatively impacted by a proposed road-widening project. Abo asserts that, "back then, there was no participation or community involvement in the process." Although unsuccessful in their efforts to change the Department of Transportation's course of action, the exercise taught him that people "needed to be involved in the process of designing and controlling the destiny of their communities." After graduating from architecture school, he started a non-profit organization, Environment Inc., with other graduates of the Community Design Center to put the resources of architecture in the service of the public interest.

Abo continues to believe that community involvement and engagement in social issues is a fundamental obligation, not only of those in the architecture profession but all members of society. Many of his firm's projects are with non-profit agencies that address issues surrounding low-income housing, community center development and revitalization of neighborhoods. In each of Abo's projects, the end users are part of the design conversation early in the process.

Elizabeth Wright Ingraham, Harold Massop and Ron Abo recognize that the diversity of architectural professionals has not kept pace with the demographic changes in American society. Additionally, they agree that there is a need to expose students of all backgrounds to the potential of the profession, so that it may more clearly reflect society in the future. ■

Left: Ron Abo, AIA.

Top: Bruce Randolph Avenue Townhouses in Denver, Colo.: five affordable, sustainable townhouses for a non-profit housing developer designed by The Abo Group Inc.

Bottom: The Curtis Park Hope VI project in Denver, Colo., designed by The Abo Group Inc., disperses public housing tenants in a market rate development. The project received a 2002 Congress of New Urbanism Award of Merit.



Michael Peck Studios



Courtesy of HMA Architects