

SEEKING EQUILIBRIUM & CONSENSUS

*Jay Turnbull at the Walt Disney Family
Museum at The Presidio in San Francisco*

📷 LAURA KUDRITZKI



JAY TURNBULL HAS BEEN AN ARCHITECT with Page & Turnbull since 1981. He had been an architect and urban designer in San Francisco and New York, where he worked at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill—gaining early experience on an urban scale—and the New York City Office of Midtown Planning & Development. He also was Architect of San Francisco Architectural Heritage for five years while maintaining a practice in historic architecture.

Turnbull has a particular interest in integrating new design within the historic context.

As a former president of San Francisco Architectural Heritage and a Peer Reviewer for the U.S. General Services Administration Design Excellence program, Turnbull has published and lectured widely on preservation related matters. He has been a preservation architect for numerous National Register and locally recognized landmarks and has consulted extensively on the seismic retrofit of historic buildings. His work has been honored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, American Institute of Architects, California Preservation Foundation and other national, regional and local organizations.

Q: *Page & Turnbull celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2013. What is different about how you work with clients today than it was in the past, and what is the same?*

JT: The key aspect of working with clients hasn't changed: it continues to be communication. Understanding the client's needs and translating them into built spaces remains the central task for any architect. One thing different these days is that, with instant messaging, you can never be far away from your work. This may reduce procrastination, but it's difficult to set aside unscheduled time to just mull over the project and let ideas develop.

In terms of our work though, we aren't the same Page & Turnbull that we were 40 years ago. While we're still passionate about preserving historic buildings, few people realize that we have evolved into a design-focused practice with an emphasis on unique interpretations of historic buildings and spaces.

Q: *You have worked on some iconic projects around California (Bright Angel Lodge in Grand Canyon National Park, The Walt Disney Family Museum at the Presidio of San Francisco, Hoover Pavilion at Stanford University, San Francisco's Ferry Building, to name a few). What is your perspective on the new workplace design that we see around the Bay Area? Is it a sign of the times or will it have enduring legacy as some of the projects where you've had an opportunity to work?*

JT: We are certainly moving toward smaller dedicated and individual "me" work spaces (which are theoretically paperless!) into larger collaborative "we" spaces with opportunities for shared activity. Although there are smaller space allocations per worker, my sense is that the best collaborative offices provide maximum team, community and amenity spaces, which include focus rooms, informal meeting rooms, lounge space and coffee bars, all designed with more flexibility than in the past to maximize the real estate.

After 40 years, the architect sees a lot of the same among a sea of changes



Q: *How does this affect historic preservation? Can historic buildings be well-adapted to the modern workplace without sacrificing their integrity? How does an architect strike a balance?*

JT: One has only to look at the kind of space being rented by tech firms in San Francisco to realize that historic buildings, sometimes stripped of interior detail, offer the very spaces that attract new businesses and that are forming the modern workplace, at least here. In order to achieve historic preservation goals, the first job is to find new uses for existing buildings. You don't want to remove those parts of an old building that are 'character-defining,' but nothing preserves the best of what we have like finding a profitable continuing use.

Q: *Which (or which kinds) of the newer buildings in the Bay Area do you consider candidates for historic preservation years from now? Are we too caught up in newness and change to build something for the ages?*

JT: Every age builds well. We sometimes fail to recognize the value of recent buildings. The former Crown Zellerbach Building, now One Bush Street, is a San Francisco Landmark and deservedly so. There are other mid-20th century modern buildings that will probably be recognized before long. 'Brutalist' styles haven't been as popular, but a terrific example, the former Berkeley Art Museum by Mario Ciampi, at last appears to be saved, and should

be. I'd nominate the 'adaptive re-use' of SFMOMA, now under construction, as a future landmark. Sometimes it takes a while for people to get over the 'shock of the new.'

Q: *What will define a successful architect in the future? Is it harder to do your job today than perhaps it was in the past?*

JT: If the architect's primary skill remains communication, what defines him or her will probably remain the ability to imagine built space. I've always believed it's a miracle that any building gets built. It's always hard: Thousands of individual decisions have to come together, with reasonable tolerance, to produce something that people can use. If we look at the number of sheets in a drawing set, which has increased over the last hundred years, we might think our work is getting harder. If we begin to see robots and 3-D printers doing some of the actual building, we might guess the process is getting easier. Whether you're making a spoon or a city, it's still hard.

Q: *In our ever-connected and diverse world comprised of individuals from different countries and cultures, how does great design transcend those differences and accomplish to please so many?*

JT: What a great question! One answer could be that, as societies become ever more diverse and design becomes international, the language of building will simplify. But I think there is something

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“Understanding the client’s needs and translating them into built spaces remains the central task for any architect.”

■ JAY TURNBULL, FOUNDING PRINCIPAL, PAGE & TURNBULL

about good design that relates to us as people—our senses and our physiognomy—so that we are instinctively drawn to compositions that most of us would say are beautiful.

Q: Are you optimistic about the next year and the immediate future?

JT: Of course! I’m most optimistic about the ways in which our work continues to expand into new territories. We’re now working in places as far-flung as Alaska and Asia, on projects as diverse as the Zhongxing Concept Plan in Beijing, China and the University and Medical Center Master Plan in Anchorage, Alaska. We’re also seeing a growing pattern and acceptance of adaptive reuse and the rejuvenation of historic buildings more than ever before, which is hugely satisfying for us.

Q: What challenges are you anticipating in the near term in your industry and more broadly in real estate?

JT: In the construction industry, San Francisco excepted, the last five years have not been easy. As the recovery becomes more widespread I think we’re about to see a shortage of talent at all levels—design, construction, craft. In real estate, the entitlement process is eating up an ever greater share of project budgets, and opposition to large scale building can be brutal. Washington, D.C. isn’t the only place where the logjam dominates.

Q: What else should we be asking?

JT: Where is consensus? Where, in city governance, is there an agreement that we can do what we should do? In the Bay Area, where is real regional planning that organizes transportation, coordinates development, sets aside common areas and designs for climate change? If we are the optimists we say we are, we need to begin answering some of these questions! 📍