

“W.G. Clark” by Sarah Sargent

W.G. Clark may be the most important architect you don't know. Quietly plying his craft in Charleston, South Carolina and Charlottesville, Virginia since the 1970s, he's produced a small number of sublime buildings that occupy that rare nexus where architecture meets art. This is not to say Clark is completely unknown: he's regularly entered and won major competitions, is sought after on the lecture circuit and is a revered professor of architecture at his alma mater, the University of Virginia.

Raised in the rural south, Clark grew up with a deeply rooted appreciation of nature. It is this reverence that governs his quest to produce work that balances beauty and restraint. “We want our [artifacts and habitats], like those of the civilizations we admire, to form an allegiance with the land so strong that our existence is seen as an act of adoration, not an act of ruin.” It's all about economy, which to him signifies “an ethical act that regrets the taking, imposing itself as a respectful, if insufficient act of atonement.” His choice of scale, materials and design all reflect this attitude. The work may make a small physical footprint, but its design seizes the attention in a way that transcends its modesty.

Clark uses inexpensive building materials, poured concrete, veneered plywood, steel door and window frames; it's in keeping with his economy-driven philosophy but it's also an approach that imparts strength: without the distractions of fancy materials, all attention becomes focused on the design. It's a bold and confident choice because you really have to know what you're doing to make concrete blocks look sexy.

Clark credits his grandmother, a self-educated woman as being his greatest inspiration. Indeed, her encyclopedia occupies pride of place in his house, clearly still a touchstone

of great import. He says his architectural epiphany occurred as a youngster on a Boy Scout trip when he came upon an old mill in Louisa, Virginia. He was bowled over by its extraordinary "power of belonging to the place."

Early on in his career, Clark worked for Robert Venturi in Philadelphia, hired for his skill as a draughtsman. When he decided to strike out on his own, he set his sites on the South expressly because it had no serious modern architectural tradition, and picked Charleston because it had once been a great architectural center and he thought it could be so again.

Clark was lucky to get a few plum commissions, including, the Middleton Inn built on the grounds of historic Middleton Place. Such a forward thinking design, especially in such close proximity to one of Charleston's sacred cows, must have raised eyebrows, but the building went on to win a national AIA award and was featured in Architectural Digest.

Clark returned to Virginia in 1988 to assume the chairmanship of UVA's Department of Architecture then in the throes of a Post-Modernist possession. Clark swept the house clean, bringing in a replacement crew of Modernist "savages." But he loathed administrating and soon got back to the hands-on approach that he loves: teaching and designing.

Clark knows his worth, but he's not arrogant. He comes across as a generous and kind mentor, one who demands excellence but is also willing to nurture it. His addition to the UVA Architecture School is a paean to the architectural review process, which Clark extols and a tribute to the students themselves. Warm, inviting and elegant; it is a transcendent statement of function and design; one would feel genuinely worthy standing on the raised step that runs along one wall forming a podium to face one's professors in defense of one's work. And Clark says he's most proud that

the top floor room is where the custodial staff gather each day to eat their lunch.

Perhaps Clark's most beautiful building is the house he designed for himself in Charlottesville in 1994. A perfect little villa, it's gloriously contemporary and yet so at one with its woodland setting. Inside, soaring space gives a sense of expansiveness despite the fact the structure is a succinct 1,400 square feet. Light, diffused and crystalline, is a major player in the design. Glass blocks are used for privacy from the street in front and to disguise a less than stellar view in the rear, their opacity is counterbalanced on the sides by large plate-glass windows looking out to woods. From the outside, the house resembles an organic sculpture during the day; at night, it becomes a glowing box of light.

Another fine example of Clark's work is Les Yeux du Monde Gallery just outside Charlottesville. Art dealer, Lyn Bolen Warren and her husband, painter, Russ Warren wanted a dynamic design to house her art gallery and his studio, what they got was a structure that addresses, and befits, the artistic endeavors it contains.

Approaching the building up a long hill, you initially see a large expanse of rusting steel rising like a Richard Serra sculpture from the meadow. It suits its setting just as a piece of rusting farm equipment does not look out of place in a rural landscape. The façade is broken at one end by a two-storey window, the only indication that this is, in fact, a building. Fortress-like, it begins to take shape as you drive around. A second steel wall forms the end, separated from the front wall by another, more narrow, two-storey window. Coming around to the parking lot side, the building opens up: here, imposing rusted COR-TEN steel is replaced by a wall of glass blocks set in the gentler surface of painted steel sending the message that this is the home of a welcoming enterprise where aesthetic concerns are paramount. From here the graceful flourish of wing-like roofline becomes

apparent. To really highlight this side, Clark has extended the gallery walls and roof beyond the ends of the building creating a frame of brilliant white. At the entrance, a ramp of poured concrete is both practical and aesthetic forming the handicapped access and establishing a directional pull towards the front door. A poured concrete rectangle is set in front of the ramp providing a nice geometric contrast as well as a step.

Inside, the space is airy; it's a night and day contrast to the visual weight of the exterior. The exhibition space is a luxurious double-height room. Light floods in from the glass block wall, where because it's diffused is perfect for displaying art, and from the multiple, different shaped windows that pierce the walls. In addition to light, these provide glimpses of the outside landscape. Their size and placement ensure that there's adequate wall space for artwork.

At the rear, the area is divided into two levels with the gallery office on the ground floor and the studio above reached by a handsome wood stairway. A large rectangular wall separates the work areas from the gallery space. It's freestanding which maintains a sense of airiness and flow, and when the gallery is crowded, allows traffic to move around on either side. Gaps are very much a part of the Clark aesthetic, appearing throughout the design. He uses them to create a lively negative and positive spatial dialogue and in linear form on a stair riser or where two panels of wood or steel meet, they act almost as an underline emphasizing a feature or direction Clark wants to draw attention to.

The Warrens' residence, adjacent to the gallery, makes a bold architectural statement itself and it was important that the two structures complement one another, as well as maintain a separation of public and private spaces. The property's views are spectacular and making use of them to

their best advantage was key. Russ Warren's studio on the second floor has the best view of distant mountains, a particularly inspirational vista for an artist. And as with all Clark's buildings, Les Yeux du Monde relates to its surroundings in a symbiotic way, adding to rather than detracting from its lovely setting.

Clark's firm is currently occupied with the design of the guest quarters for Mepkin Abbey, a Cistercian order in South Carolina. It's a logical choice as the Cistercians are known for their brilliant architectural tradition, which fuses austerity and spirituality to produce structures of great power.

Asked what his dream job would be, Clark points to the Habitat for Humanity multi-unit complex he designed for a SECCA (Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art) competition. His intention is to form a community (as opposed to a neighborhood) with different size options to accommodate different sized households and a variety of design choices available to the residents. A green structure, power would be supplied by photovoltaic strips on the roof, which is slanted so water runs off into a channel in the central courtyard to be collected into a reservoir. This water is used for irrigation of the communal vegetable beds that take the place of lawn. The structure seems to sum up what's Clark's about: it's low impact, democratic, and stripped down to the bare essentials, it is a triumph of graceful design.

Thomas Jefferson casts a long shadow over UVA, Charlottesville and the South itself; the place is rife with modern iterations of his architectural vernacular. But using brick and white columns does not a Jeffersonian make. It's more about the spirit of the thing, its form, its function, its inventiveness. And while there is much that is different about Clark's architecture, it's far truer to Jefferson's spirit than what's out there masquerading as Jeffersonian.