

BOUTIQUE design

HOSPITALITY REINVENTED

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URBANE PLANNERS

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EXIT

interview



MOTOR CITY MAVERICK

McIntosh Poris Associates cofounder and principal, Michael Poris, AIA, talks launching his own firm, navigating client relationships and the crucial role he's played in Detroit's architectural renaissance.

BY SARAH CHAPLIN

UNLIKE MANY ARCHITECTS in the early '90s, Michael Poris saw the West Coast design scene as more of a stepping stone than a final destination. Following more than a decade-long career in Los Angeles, the Detroit native returned to his home city in 1994 to partner with fellow architect and childhood friend Doug McIntosh to launch a multidisciplinary design firm together. "Good architects in New York and LA were a dime a dozen then," says Poris. "I'd much rather be doing meaningful work in Detroit than garage additions in LA. No architects were coming to Michigan, and we felt we could actually make a difference in the community there."

HOW DID YOU KNOW IT WAS THE RIGHT TIME TO START YOUR OWN FIRM, AND HOW DID YOU GET THE FINANCIAL BACKING TO DO IT? I'd been employed as an architect for 15 years. At that point, I'd learned what I could working for great teachers such as César Pelli, Frank Gehry,

Richard Meier and Thom Mayne. There wasn't anyone left that I wanted to work for. The worst part was getting over the fear of setting out on my own. Doug and I took advantage of the recession's low start-up costs, as many people did, and started our firm with our own funds. I had enough savings to live frugally for a year if things went south. But luckily it worked out.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE COPING WITH DOUG'S DEATH? HOW HAS THAT IMPACTED YOU, YOUR TEAM AND YOUR WORK?

I'd known Doug since I was three. He was the rainmaker. He was 6-ft.-4 with a big personality that we all miss. He kept in touch with everyone he met—classmates from high school, colleagues, even people he talked to on planes. He built a huge network that really helped us get jobs in the beginning. I think he'll always be here with us and have a presence in the firm. That's why we haven't changed the name.

HOW MUCH SHOULD ARCHITECTS BE ADVOCATES FOR THEIR COMMUNITIES?

We've really been backing the city of Detroit since the beginning, even before we had any projects here. At one point, 90 buildings in downtown Detroit were threatened for demolition. We couldn't save them all, but we were able to lobby with the city to save a lot of them from being torn down. We wanted to revitalize the city within the context of the existing architecture. We tried to educate the community and show them that, if we lose Detroit's history, the city won't just be struggling; it will be nothing.

HOW DID YOU KEEP CHALLENGING PROJECTS LIKE THE DETROIT FOUNDATION HOTEL GOING? WHAT WAS THE DARKEST HOUR?

There were a lot of moments when I thought the Foundation Hotel project would be killed. The city of Detroit's filing for bankruptcy in 2013 halted development for over a full year. We then learned that we had to keep one of the building's original hallways on the fourth floor, which threatened to decrease the number of guestrooms the hotel could house. Ultimately, we were able to construct 100 guestrooms as planned, incorporating the structure of the original hallway into our design. That's how we approached the entire project really. We tried to leave as much of the brick, concrete and architectural elements of the former firehouse as intact as possible.

IF YOU'RE HAVING A DISAGREEMENT WITH A CLIENT, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHEN TO STAND YOUR GROUND AND WHEN TO COMPROMISE?

To me, being inflexible sounds like an easy way to get fired. I don't know how other people get away with that sort of thing. Collaboration is really at the heart of my process. It's how we keep each new project feeling fresh. You can push to help clients better understand your perspective, but at the end of the day, it really comes down to delivering what the client wants.

WOULD YOU RATHER BE RICH OR FAMOUS?

Famous. Rich to me means being able to support myself comfortably. I could have made a lot more money if I'd stayed in LA. I'm much more interested in the impact of my work. ●