

Local architect harmonizes style with island

By Michaela Kennedy

Architect William Burgin has a popular face about town – the face of his building designs, that is. With an award-winning style recognized locally, statewide, and nationally, Burgin designs are sought after for municipal, commercial, and residential projects.

An architect for a town does not just design a building, but establishes a whole look and ambiance for a town. Burgin has earned himself the unofficial title here as the architect of record through his conceptions that consider the island's character and enhance its rural style.

Last year, Burgin's design for the new town hall won praise from residents and town officials. The blueprint combines preservation and renovations of the original 1883 building. He admits to have "aggressively pursued the town hall," expressing his care about history and aesthetics in his professional art. Since the town approved \$3 million in bond money for the project last June, Burgin has been working closely with Pezzuco Construction of Providence to stay on budget. "The \$3 million is tight, but we are giving extremely good value to the town," he notes.

Adding to the enhancement of the town hall, Burgin has also designed a face-lift for the Jamestown Historical Museum across the street, incorporating a hand-capped-accessible ramp in front of the old one-room schoolhouse.

Burgin's molding of the local architectural character goes back to the '70s, when he completed school. Burgin came to New England from Colorado in 1967 as an undergraduate at Franconia College, in New Hampshire. There he helped in the design and construction of various buildings, including a new dormitory for the college. He continued his apprenticeship with other construction projects in the Franconia area until he transferred to the Rhode Island School of Design in 1969. Burgin completed numerous construction projects in the Rhode Island and New Hampshire areas while working on a degree in architecture.

When he graduated from RISD in Providence, no work could be found locally in building design. He went to Oregon, but the econ-



Architect Bill Burgin stands in front of the Jamestown Police Station which he designed.

Photo by Michaela Kennedy

omy lagged there as well. "The architects were playing cards in their offices," Burgin remembers.

He returned to Rhode Island, partnered up with architect James Estes in Providence, and worked on establishing a clientele. "Architects don't acquire a good network until they reach their fifties," he says, chuckling.

While the construction industry was still slow in the early '70s, he and his wife came to Jamestown and bought the old Schoolhouse Café on Narragansett Avenue for \$2,000. The building was originally a general store owned by Isaac Carr in 1829, and housed overflow classes for a short time from the old schoolhouse up the street in the early part of the 20th century.

Every day in the summer weather, they worked on renovations to the historic structure, with Burgin shirtless in shorts and his wife in a bikini most of the time. They restored it to look like the old general store, and added a stairway in the rear. "It's interesting to find how many people you can meet when you're working outside every day in a high exposure area," he says.

The Burgins finished their rebuilding in 1979, and built up a network of business contacts as well. The list of his local designs includes the storefront row across from the East Ferry waterfront, the building that now houses Jamestown Wine and Spirits, and a num-

ber of single-family houses that continues to grow. In line with his success story, Burgin adds a word of advice for young architects: "Build a building that has high exposure."

Burgin went on to acquire the contract for the Jamestown Police Station, which was completed in 1991 and recognized nationally with the American Institute of Architects Architecture for Justice Award. Burgin knew the only way to come up with a successful design for the police station was through extensive research.

He found a criminal justice consultant from Colorado who knew about police station planning. The consultant joined the project team made up of then Police Chief James Pemanell, Officer Clarke Westall and Town Administrator Robert Sutton.

"We presented our plan, and during the interview process. We

got the job," Burgin recalls.

His more recent award-winning design projects include two beach facilities, the new Roger Wheeler Beach Pavilion in Narragansett, and renovations to the Easton's Beach building in Middletown. Burgin's company recently completed the new pavilion at Misquamicut State Beach in Westerly.

With his inclusion of state-of-the-art recycled materials, universal access, composting toilets, and life-saving facilities at the beach pavilions, his company has become "inundated with waterfront projects."

Burgin has received recognition for design excellence from local and national professional organizations including the American Institution of Architects, the National Association of Home Builders, and the National Association of General Contractors.

The National Trust for His-

toric Preservation also presented an award to his firm for his use of fiber-reinforced panels, cast in stone, and natural materials in the restoration of the facade on the old Providence Journal building in Providence

The well-established architect attributes much of his love for design and landscape to his experience in the mines out West. "My grandparents were mining engineers, and I used to work in mines in Utah," he remembers.

Burgin is a registered architect in multiple states, and serves on the board of directors for the Jamestown Historical Society. He is now partnered with Robert Lambert, and architect who has worked with him for 13 years. "Rob adds new energy to the company," he says.

More information about Burgin and his partner Robert Lambert can be found online at www.burginlambert.com.

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