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# DEVELOPING A DESIGN THEORY: THE ABEND SINGLETON STORY

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Figure 1. Paul Hamilton Office Building, Kansas City, Mo (1968)

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of a larger study on the work of celebrated late 20th century Kansas City architects Steve Abend and Crichton Singleton. It will explore the principles and practices that enabled Abend Singleton to remain in the forefront of the profession from 1967, when they began their work together, until 2011, when Abend's final project was completed.<sup>1</sup> Through their forty years of practice, Abend Singleton was able to produce a remarkable body of work that changed with the times, but also exhibited a remarkable underlying consistency; it flirted with, without surrendering to seductive Post-modern excesses, and it managed to be both timely and timeless. This paper tries to understand the values, principles, and practices that allowed Abend Singleton to gracefully weather the challenges of changing times. The paper discusses three kinds of factors which helped to guide the firm and its work:

1. the expectations and aspirations the principals brought to the undertaking,
2. the firm's evolving work habits and organizational structure, and
3. recurring formal themes and patterns of judgment.



Figure 2. Clay County Annex, Kansas City, MO (1980)

## BACKGROUND

First, it must be acknowledged that Abend Singleton's achievements grew from the partners' personal sensibilities and motivations. Abend and Singleton were remarkably different people, with strangely complimentary attitudes and abilities. Steve was driven by an unbending determination for excellence, and a pressing desire for peer validation. He brought relentless, passionate, inspirational, and sometimes infuriating energy to the work of the office.

Crichton was equally driven, but by a different muse. He felt deep social obligations. For him, architecture was a means to better the world. He, for example, brought consistent concern for energy conservation to his work. Steve and Crichton were drawn together by the respect they had for each other as individuals and by the depth of their respective convictions. These convictions provided a kind of gyroscope that helped the firm maintain its balance when faced with difficult choices or uncertain options.

Second, Steve Abend and Crichton Singleton's educations provided them with a broad-minded and flexible view of architecture. As students at Washington University in St. Louis they were both indoctrinated with principles of mainstream International Style Modernism, notably that buildings could and should reflect their construction and use. From their respective visiting thesis advisors, Aldo Van Eyck and Balkrishna Doshi, they learned, in different ways, about

how cultural issues and values could and should influence contemporary architecture.

Third, Both Steve and Crichton had other powerful educational experiences that tempered the lessons learned at Washington University. Steve went on to graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania where he participated in Louis Kahn's masters studio. More than anything else, Steve was impressed by Kahn's dogged and uncompromising efforts to understand and then express the essential nature of each design challenge. Steve became convinced that an architect should give a client not only what they wanted and needed, but also more than they were able to imagine. Ian McHarg's course in landscape architecture, Edmund Bacon's course in urban planning, and Robert Venturi's course in architectural history opened Steve's eyes to the power and potential of architecture.

For his part, Crichton had fallen in love with architecture at Princeton University, prior to commencing his studies at Washington University. Although he had not gone to Princeton with the intention of studying architecture, Crichton was caught up in "one of those rare windows of time in architectural schools, where a convergence of faculty, students and events sparked a period of inspiration, intensity, and innovation."<sup>2</sup> Crichton came to appreciate architecture as moral force, as a means to not only enhance the built environment, but also as a vehicle for human empowerment. Crichton was also touched by Louis Kahn as an intern in Balkrishna Doshi's office and, like Steve, admired Kahn's passion for architecture.

Steve and Crichton emerged from their educational experiences as enlightened modernists, who were deeply grounded in the idealistic imperatives of modernism, but who could also see real validity in the emerging challenges to narrowly defined modernist dogma. In short, they were committed to making uniquely appropriate buildings that would make a real difference in peoples' lives. They chose to believe, as Louis Kahn suggested, they could discover an essential defining idea or "form" for each project that could be nurtured to life through a "design" process that accommodated the unique circumstances of each site and each client.<sup>3</sup> They went forth with confidence in their abilities to produce sound and practical buildings that could also spark dreams and enhance communities.



Figure 3. Kansas History Center, Topeka, KS (1988)

## PRACTICE

The second set of factors that helped to guide Abend Singleton's work had to do with the ways that Steve and Crichton were able to apply their early lessons in practice. Their ideals were tempered and forged through the rigors of practice. Steve and Crichton began their work together as interns in the office of Kivett & Myers, the leading architectural design firm in Kansas City in the post WW II era. The experience gave them a common model of practice and a consistent set of standards.

First, as with Kivett & Myers, Abend and Singleton chose to share support infrastructure, but for the most part, the partners worked on different projects, simply "supporting one another as friends and colleagues."<sup>4</sup> Despite the informality of their collaborative strategies, the projects led by one partner were, with only a few exceptions, virtually indistinguishable from those led by the other. So it would seem that Steve and Crichton's desire to please one another, and their employees' desire to please them both, was a steadying force within the firm.

Second, again like Kivett & Myers, which had a reputation as the finest post-graduate school in the region, Abend Singleton hired the best young architectural talent they could find. When they found a person they wanted, they hired him or her, regardless of whether or not they had work in the office to support the hire.

Then, third, they would put the new employee in a position to contribute to success of the firm. Steve asserted that "every project that went through the office was the result of a collaboration between a younger person and an older person", normally a principal.<sup>5</sup> And while Steve and Crichton had different ways of working, they each were able to draw-out ideas from their younger colleagues, and make them feel as though they shared in the authorship of the work.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps more than anything else, the involvement of young designers helped the firm's work remain contemporary, as new graduates anxious to explore current trends were given the opportunity to contribute to projects.

Fourth, the office was organized to allow the younger contributor to a design team to stay with a project as it moved through all the stages of the work. This not only allowed the young person to learn a wide range of skills, it also brought continuity to the job, so crucial design ideas were not forgotten but were nurtured and enriched, even as others joined the development team

Fifth, the office was able to maintain its essential order and values even as the firm began to take on more and bigger projects. As the firm grew to a maximum size of almost 60 people Steve and Crichton, as well as others in the firm were forced to take on more specialized responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> Despite the growing complexities of the operation, Abend Singleton's commitment to the quality of every project never wavered.

Sixth, so even on large jobs where people were brought in to help manage or detail the project, the designers maintained control of the project. Everyone involved in the project was expected to think like a designer, and make design quality the highest priority, even in the smallest details, and even if it impacted the schedule or the budget.

Seventh, projects were developed in a strategic fashion in a way that maximized the impact of the design decisions. Design energy and scarce financial resources were concentrated in places that were highly visible, and were employed in a way that reinforced the central design intentions.



Figure 4. Whittaker Federal Building, Kansas City, MO (1998)

### STYLE

The third, and final, set of ideas that guided Abend Singleton's design strategies sprang from the characteristic habits, or patterns of choice, of the principals. Though these sets of preferences often remained unarticulated, and even unnoticed, in retrospect they can be seen to provide the work with a subtle but recognizable stylistic consistency through the years and across building types. These patterns of choice reflect an approach that was at once tremendously idealistic, and fundamentally pragmatic.

This flexibility of approach can be seen, first, in the rationale they employed in seeking commissions. They looked for jobs where clients would appreciate the “something extra”<sup>8</sup> they hoped to provide. They preferred institutional projects where the architects' efforts could promote the public good, rather than private and particularly speculative projects, where the economic bottom line discouraged unconventional thinking. But they also followed as fate led them. For example, their experience on public buildings led them into a specialization in the design of law enforcement facilities, including jails

Second, the “something extra” that Abend Singleton hoped to provide took a variety of forms that might be best described as being the art of architecture. Steve in particular was a connoisseur of art and a careful observer of the art world. He observed that an artist's success was bolstered by his or her ability to “tell a story” about his or her work.<sup>9</sup> Through his own work, Steve could sense how a narrative could both provide useful guidance in the development of the project, and a powerful tool in helping others understand and appreciate a design proposal.

Third, while Steve appreciated various forms of art, he had a particular interest in ceramics, which he saw as having significant parallels to architecture. Like architecture, the success of a piece of pottery depended on mastery of the material of construction, demanded sensitivity to tactile issues, had a utilitarian component, and was subject to unanticipated developments, like accidents in the kiln. Thinking about the challenges of the potter supported Steve's understanding of the challenges he faced as an architect, and helped him to focus on the importance of detail in his work.

Fourth, Abend Singleton realized that, as with artists, their success with critics and connoisseurs depended on their ability to differentiate their work from that of their peers. In an effort to do this they would often add a special recognizable flourish to their work, which Steve referred to as a kind of “desert”<sup>10</sup> to finish the building.

Fifth, one of the common distinguishing features of Abend Singleton's work was the use of organic or curvilinear elements, sometimes in building forms or often in furnishings or finishes, to contrast a largely orthogonal building.

Sixth, another common feature of Abend Singleton's work was the use of reflective surfaces, often in the form of dark glazed panels, used to add depth and complexity to forms and spaces.

Seventh, often Abend Singleton found themselves organizing their buildings around a central open space. Sometimes this space was then highlighted by sculptural elements. On several occasions the infill elements took the form of groupings of miniature building-like elements.

Eighth, Abend Singleton buildings were almost always ordered by their structure. Often structure became a featured element of the building. They had a preference for the use of exposed steel as a

defining feature of the building's major space. On occasion they placed the structure on a diagonal to the dominant building forms.

Ninth, Abend Singleton buildings were always ordered by a clear defining geometry, as manifested in their structure, circulation patterns, and / or programmatic characteristics. Steve and Crichton both sought order and clarity in their work.

Tenth, the force of the context often had a strong influence on Abend Singleton buildings; or as Steve said, "they must have sense of place, and feel right in that place."<sup>11</sup> Where possible, Abend Singleton designed their buildings to enhance the larger context.

Eleventh, Abend Singleton also wanted their buildings to represent and communicate their use and typology. Steve described this as "a concentration of purpose."<sup>12</sup> This was done both through manipulation of building order and form as well as by application of telling ornament.

Twelfth, they wanted each project to offer something new. Steve in particular discouraged the use of precedent from previous work, either that of others or from their own work. They were also anxious to take advantage of new materials and products, sometimes developing unique applications.



Figure 5. Kansas Bioscience Venture Accelerator, Overland Park, KS (2008)

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, the concerns and predilections of Steve Abend and Crichton Singleton gave a consistency to Abend Singleton's work, regardless of the varying superficial or decorative treatments employed for different projects. The variations in the work are the result of a variety of factors, including circumstantial issues like the client's preferences or the interests of the young designers assigned to the job, or through deliberate calculated efforts like attempts to provide buildings with a uniquely appropriate symbolic presence

or to help integrate them into their surroundings. Though pulled in different directions, the work is held together by the sheer will of architects who were willing to invest what was necessary to give every project "an unforgettable spirit."<sup>13</sup>

Architects over the next forty years can be expected to face even greater changes than those faced by Abend Singleton in their forty years of practice. While the coming changes will, no doubt, be different from those of the past it is hoped that an understanding of how Abend and Singleton were able to successfully navigate a sea of shifting challenges can give good guidance to architects who are now at the beginning of their careers.

One can hope that beginning architects will enter practice with the kind of broad-minded and forward-looking education, exemplary internship experiences, deep sincere convictions, and supportive camaraderie shared by Abend and Singleton. Furthermore, one can hope that new professionals will organize their practice with the kind of organizational flexibility, openness to new ideas, and commitment to employee development, as well as dedication to design quality that characterized Abend Singleton's office.

Finally, one can hope that at the conclusion of their careers the next generation of practitioners can look back over their body of work and see the kind of consistent and characteristic excellence, as well as the patterns of continuous and responsive evolution, that can be seen in Abend Singleton's work. Given the changing times, Abend and Singleton's experiences may not provide a precise model for today's beginning practitioners, but they can certainly inspire optimism in the face of an uncertain future.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Dean Graves elected to leave the firm in 1973 and the name of the firm was changed to Abend Singleton Associates. In 1996 Kite left the practice and the name of the firm changed to ASAI. In 2006 Steve merged the firm into Peckham Guyton Albers and Viets Architects (PGAV).
- 2 Kreim, Kevin.P., *An Architectural Life: Memoirs and Memories of Charles Moore*, Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1996. p. 52.
- 3 See Louis Kahn's essay "Form and Design" in Twombly, Robert, *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2003, pp. 62-74.
- 4 Conversation with Crichton Singleton (1/27/11).
- 5 Conversation with Steve Abend (1/22/11).
- 6 Steve would often begin by sharing his feelings and intuitions about a project with his young collaborator but would leave him or her to make the first move. Then he would spend hours at a time every couple of days with the young designer talking and sketching, pushing his young colleague to explore and develop a variety of alternatives. This process, which was much like the process of academic critique and was described by several young associates as "the grind", would continue until Steve was satisfied with the result. Crichton, on the other hand, would often begin by giving a young collaborator sketches and diagrams to help guide the design process, and would then give them more latitude in the development of the project. Conversation with James Poulson (12/5/11).
- 7 Steve began to assume more project-based responsibilities, while Crichton took the lead in marketing and personnel issues.

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- 8 Conversation with Steve Abend (9/30/11).
- 9 This was a natural part of Steve's design process. Even in something as simple as the planting of a Red Maple tree in his back yard, Steve had to invent a narrative about the life of the tree, and create a setting in which it would feel comfortable. Conversation with Steve Abend (5/5/11).
- 10 Conversation with Steve Abend (4/21/11).
- 11 Conversation with Steve Abend (8/11/11).
- 12 Conversation with Steve Abend (8/11/11).
- 13 Conversation with Steve Abend (8/11/11).