

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY LAW SCHOOL
RAY AND KAY ECKSTEIN HALL

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Illustration by Stephanie Dalton Cowan

How Ralph Jackson Found His Voice

Hard Work and Passion Transformed a Loner into a Visionary Designer of Buildings That Elevate Communities

By Alan J. Borsuk

WHEN RALPH JACKSON was an architecture student at Harvard in the 1970s, he decided not to enroll in “star studios,” led by prominent architects, that focused on creating big projects. Instead, he signed up for a class where students created a large number of small designs.

Jackson recalls one assignment: Design a book of matches, the kind that were given out at that time in restaurants. Jackson came up with a book with a transparent cover so that you could see the matches. It also had a fancy letter (“D”) on the cover. Someone could see what was inside, while the look of the whole was also attractive. You were drawn to both the outside and the inside.

In some ways, it was a long road from the book of matches to Ray and Kay Eckstein Hall, the home of Marquette Law School. So, too, was it a long road for Jackson from being a junior-college dropout, struggling with what to do with his life and barely making it by loading trucks, to being a nationally recognized architect at a prominent Boston firm.

But in other ways, the distance wasn’t that great. Like the matches, Eckstein Hall is designed so that someone outside can see a lot going on inside, can be drawn into the building, and can find the building engaging both by looking at it and by experiencing it.

The tenth anniversary of the groundbreaking for Eckstein Hall offers the opportunity to put the key figure in the design of the 200,000-square-foot building in a deserved spotlight, and to tell the story of a complicated and ultimately inspiring life.

Community. Transparency. Openness.

Jackson said that he wanted to convey certain qualities—community, transparency, openness—in the many buildings for which he was the principal designer, including Eckstein Hall. This was a crucial question he wanted a building to answer: “How do you make it possible for communities of shared interest to become better at doing whatever it is they do?”

At the same time, transparency and openness were not Jackson’s personal style. While he was known for the intensity and passion he brought to his work, he was reserved about his private life. In both his appearance—bow ties and blazers were his work uniform—and his demeanor, he was a total professional, deeply engaged in his work and in connecting on projects with the people he worked with. But he stayed apart socially.

Now, six years after retiring, Jackson is more open about his life’s path. It goes from a childhood as an African American in the Roxbury section of Boston, where he recalls himself as a loner who could have ended up accomplishing nothing big, to this scene:

One recent morning, Jackson walked into the offices of Shepley Bulfinch, the Boston firm where he flourished. He designed the building in the Seaport section of Boston, but he doesn’t visit often anymore. As he walked down an aisle, he created a bit of a sensation. Former colleagues came from all parts of the large room to surround Jackson and greet him warmly. “Our superstar,” one said.

“I didn’t realize I had a voice,” Jackson says. But he did. Architectural design was the medium for him to use it.



Ralph Jackson and Joseph D. Kearney at a building committee meeting on July 10, 2008.

Designing Things

Jackson was born in Richmond, Va. His parents and their only child moved to Boston when he was four. His life has been tied to Boston ever since.

The family lived in a rooming house in the South End, then moved to Roxbury. His mother, trained to be a professional singer and pianist, worked as an elevator operator. His father started out pressing clothes, then drove cabs, then opened a small moving company. Jackson’s mother joined his father in the business.

“They were both sort of introverts in their own fashion,” Jackson says. They weren’t very close or sociable with other people, he recalls.

Jackson took after them on those scores. He recalls his mother telling his father not to send their son to his room as a punishment because he loved being alone.

In an essay he wrote at the time of his retirement in 2012, Jackson said, “From my childhood as a ‘latchkey kid,’ my imaginative life was always central to my day. That time was often spent drawing and modeling fantasy worlds built on fragments of things around me. Growing up in the ‘50s and ‘60s, I often saw the devastation of urban renewal as it ripped through the souls of communities, often never to be revived. . . . The roots of my imaginative life in the fertile context of the visual arts weren’t simply a refuge but an opportunity to reach out in a meaningful way to help repair and enrich the world around me.”

Jackson says he looked at his parents as unaccepting of who he was. “But as I got older, I realized we were the same.”

He wasn’t an eager student in school. “I sort of comatosed through high school,” Jackson says. But he made it through and started at a junior college. He flunked out after two years, and, while

figuring out what to do, loaded trucks for a department store.

He remained drawn to designing things, the way he had done in his room as a child. And, he realized, “that quiet, unassuming kid really had things he wanted to say.” He says he saw his mother “find her voice” as she became the key figure in the moving business his father started and as she returned to performing music.

“I didn’t realize I had a voice,” Jackson says. But he did. Architectural design was the medium for him to use it. “It turns out I simply wanted to be the star,” he says with a smile. “Over time, I found I loved setting forth ideas, I loved talking, I loved presenting.”

He returned to college, taking remedial courses to develop his learning skills. He progressed to classes at the Boston Architectural College. As he developed his skills, Jackson was admitted to architecture programs at MIT, Yale, and Harvard. He chose Harvard. Harvard was “grueling,” he says, and part of the reason was resistance on racial grounds. “There were a lot of people at Harvard who didn’t think a black person should be there,” he says. But he persisted, earning a master’s degree from the university’s Graduate School of Design.

One of Jackson’s strengths was to learn from others. “I was willing to listen to people older than myself,” he says. “I could hear them and, therefore, they ended up helping me.” He developed mentoring relationships that led him through important steps in his development as an architect. One leader of a small firm where he worked became a mentor after arriving for work one morning and finding Jackson asleep on the floor. Jackson had slept over because he had worked late into the previous night and missed the last commuter train home.

On the Rise at Shepley Bulfinch

After working at smaller firms, Jackson was recruited in 1975 to do technical work for the firm of Shepley Bulfinch.

As much as Jackson is appreciative of the people he worked with and the opportunities he got at Shepley Bulfinch, he is acutely aware of resistance from some people to him as an African American in a generally all-white work world. Some people, he said, assumed that he was a black guy who always would do technical work.

"I surprised them," he says. He rose step by step within the firm, becoming an associate in 1984, a senior associate in 1988, and a principal in 1990.

Especially in dealing with others, Jackson did not focus on issues related to his race. He did all he could to blend in and not discuss his past. "I was wearing the bow ties and the blazers, trying to belong," trying to be "more acceptable," he says.

In an article about him written for the American Institute of Architects in 2007, Jackson said he generally tried in his professional work to distance himself from his past. Jackson said, "For me, it was, like, 'can I erase what happened or where I'm from? Can I blend?' So I'm one of those professionals who goes through phases. . . . You move up and erase the path that you left behind and become more and more alienated from whatever your roots are."

Since his retirement, Jackson has become more open, and he has dropped the bow ties and blazers. He was wearing a black pullover shirt and black pants when interviewed recently in the Shepley Bulfinch offices.

One major step in showing that openness came at his retirement party in 2012. He "came out," as he puts it, telling those assembled that he is gay.

Jackson benefited throughout his career from mentors. A key figure in his career was a longtime principal at the Shepley Bulfinch firm, Jean Paul Carlhian, described by some as an opinionated, fiery figure. Carlhian saw potential in Jackson and helped him.

"I wound up working for people who felt I would deliver, and I would deliver thoughtfully when other people couldn't or wouldn't," Jackson says. "I became the person people turned to."

Throughout his career, one big plus for Jackson was his intense personal commitment. People with whom he worked at the firm describe how he was involved in the work at almost all hours. He was not one who socialized much with colleagues.

"I really was never very good at leisure," Jackson says. When others hosted Thanksgiving gatherings or took holiday breaks, he stayed close to work. "Christmas was my chance to get ahead of the pack."

In more-recent years, associates say, they often would find in the morning that they had emails from Jackson with links to things he had seen on the internet the previous evening. Or he would send them ideas that he had had during the night for how to deal with an issue before them.

People who worked with him at Shepley recall how Jackson would go extra miles in working on proposals. He would create more "boards" than anyone else—concepts to be shown to clients in the process of coming to an agreement on the design of a building. He would go to extra lengths in creating scale models of buildings that were part of those proposals, working—and sometimes arguing—with the specialists who built the models. He did not argue with people over personal matters, but he could become impassioned in arguing for ideas, colleagues say.

"I never met anyone, honestly, who worked harder than Ralph," says Carole C. Wedge. "The answer for Ralph was always to do great work." Wedge worked with Jackson for more than 25 years and is now president of Shepley Bulfinch. "There's no better kind of person," she says of Jackson. Not needing to finish the sentence, she says, "For somebody to have that humble character and bold visions in one person. . . ."

Jackson never stopped learning and stretching his horizons as an architect. He had a deep interest in books. He eventually built a huge collection, mostly books on architecture and design, but also on history and other subjects that interested him. He gave much of it to architecture schools after his retirement.

Kelly Brubaker, a Shepley architect who worked with Jackson on Eckstein Hall, says, "He loved to keep learning. I don't think he was ever done learning." Inside Shepley, "he's still an icon," she says. People appreciate what they learned from him, Brubaker says, and, at the same time, admire that he never eased up on his commitment to learning from others.

A major development in Jackson's career was winning a prestigious honor, the Gabriel Prize, in 1991. It afforded him the opportunity to spend several months in Europe, particularly France. He created sketches of buildings he saw there. The experience opened fresh avenues for him in envisioning projects he worked on.



TOP TO BOTTOM
Children's Hospital
of Wisconsin

Part of the
Georgetown
University Law
Center

University of Denver
College of Law

Big Projects

Jackson says he never had an interest in small projects such as designing homes. A position early in his career called for him to work on designs of buildings such as grade schools. He found them to be too much the same and not to call enough on his creativity.

His love, he says, was big projects—projects, he jokes, where you arrive with an entourage. And those were the kind of projects that Shepley Bulfinch was known for. The firm, which dates back to the mid-1800s, built its reputation on large buildings, starting with the Trinity Church in Boston in 1877 and including Austin Hall at Harvard Law School and the Allegheny County Courthouse in Pittsburgh. The tradition has continued into modern times, with a large number of buildings on university campuses or part of other kinds of public institutions.

Higher-education projects for which Jackson was the principal architect include four libraries at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.; the renovation and an addition to the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell; work on two libraries at Princeton University in New Jersey; the international law building and the sports and fitness center at Georgetown University's law school in Washington, D.C.; a library at Fordham University in New York; and the new college of law at the University of Denver (preceding the Eckstein Hall project).

Shepley developed links to Milwaukee. With Jackson as the lead architect, the firm designed Marquette University's John P. Raynor, S.J., Library, which opened in 2003, and several buildings in the medical complex in Wauwatosa, including the main tower of Children's Hospital of Wisconsin.

When Marquette decided to design and build a new building for the Law School in 2007, Thomas

P. Ganey, university architect, and Joseph D. Kearney, the school's dean, led a process that gave Jackson and Shepley Bulfinch the job, together with Opus North Corp. The expectation—the insistence—became that it would be the finest law school building in the nation.

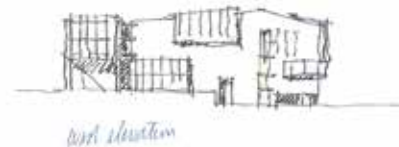
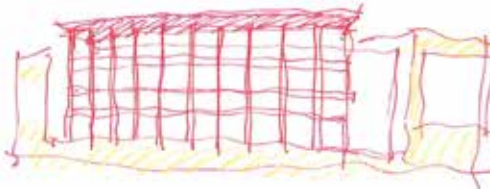
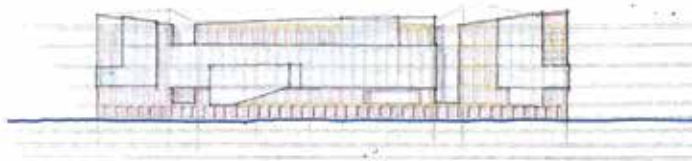
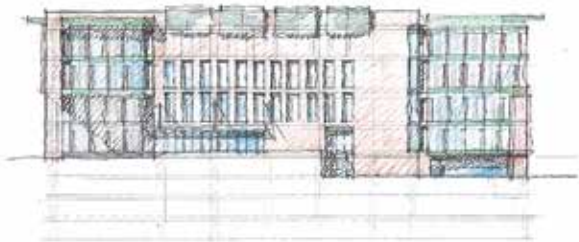
Jackson says that the site of the project, on a hill at the corner of campus and adjacent to the main freeway interchange serving downtown Milwaukee, meant that the building should offer a signal from Marquette University to Milwaukee and the region as a whole. "It had the potential to be a gateway element" for Marquette, he says, calling it "a face for the institution."

Jackson says that he wanted to create a building that would be "user-centered," and especially student-centered. He wanted to create "a narrative" for the way people would move through the building, entering into an area (the Zilber Forum) that was primarily social, where they'd have space to greet people, maybe get a cup of coffee, and then, as they moved farther into the building, get more serious about what they were there for.

Jackson saw the expanse of glass that forms the curved east and south exteriors of Eckstein Hall and the two large walls of windows in the Aitken Reading Room, the grand space in the northeast corner of the third and fourth floors, as ways to connect the interior of the building with the urban life around it. He wanted transparency for the library, café, and other places inside and outside the building so people could see what was going on, could see the diversity of activities and interests.

"I was often motivated by a notion of 'How would I approach a building and be welcomed in?'" Jackson says. The architect wanted Eckstein Hall to have "a sense of invitation . . . a sense of openness." Jackson's vision was for the building "to act as a kind of mentor or coach," so that the building would, in intangible ways, support people in their growth.

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Kearney says that he knew the project had succeeded at that level when a faculty candidate asked in a group interview in 2010 how the building had changed life at the school. A faculty member, Professor Michael O’Hear, immediately answered, “Every time I walk in the building, it’s a reminder to me that I should step up my game.”

Jackson’s thoughts on Eckstein Hall now? “I’m really grateful that Marquette created the kind of role for me that they created. . . . I’m so grateful that I got to realize a particular way of seeing the world through that building.” In retirement, he teaches architecture seminars and uses Eckstein Hall as a model for his students to see the kind of roles they could play in architecture. When Jackson retired, Shepley Bulfinch put together a beautiful hardcover book paying tribute to him and his buildings. No project is given more space than Eckstein Hall, which is on the cover and is featured on six pages of the book.

In an essay in the book, Jackson wrote, “My aspirations are derived from the arts, but more specifically from the power of architecture to create places of habitation and transform people’s lives.” He said his goal as an architect was to make a building “the celebration of a community’s mission.”

Retirement

In retirement, Jackson, who is now 72, says he is busy. He works with students and gets involved in their projects, he does volunteer work, he exercises a lot. “I’m not one for sitting,” he says.

In a 1998 interview for a Shepley publication, Jackson said, “Ensuring diversity in terms of race is not my role here. I’m a designer. I’m not a socially active person: I live-eat-breathe-sleep design.” He said in that interview, “At the time I was coming of age, part of my ability to design had to do with

escaping the conventions of the community I came from. I was never the standard young black male of the period where I grew up in Roxbury and Dorchester. I sought to escape that, and I couldn’t make a credible person reaching out to the community.”

But Jackson has reached out more in recent years, and he reflects more openly on the path of his life, including race-related matters. Looking at his own career, he says, “The notion that one wasn’t part of the privileged class informs everyone’s self-image and everyone’s behavior.”

Are things better now for a young African American who wants to be an architect? With some emotion, he answers, “I think it’s worse.” He says he goes to many conferences and similar professional events where there are no younger African Americans present.

So what’s not happening? He sighs. “I don’t know. I really don’t know.” There seems to have been a retrenchment in people’s thinking about race matters, he says. “At the heart of it, there’s probably economics,” Jackson says.

He lives on Beacon Hill in Boston and feels that, after all his years there, there still are many people in the neighborhood who don’t want black people there. And he describes the attitudes toward African Americans of some young people he works with—not only whites, but people from other minorities—with a combination of frustration and disgust.

Overall, though, Jackson is satisfied with his life and career. “The world’s a better place if we can create environments that support people growing and changing, advancing, exploring. . . . I did something worthwhile. I don’t regret the path that I followed. I’m pleased with how I spent my life.

“I don’t regret the way I spent my time. That’s amazing.” ■

Early sketches developed by Ralph Jackson and the Shepley Bulfinch team in the design process for Marquette’s Law School, Eckstein Hall.