

ST. TIMOTHY'S SCHOOL

VÉRITÉ SANS PEUR

THE ALUMNAE BULLETIN

FALL 2013



Lit by Design:
VALERIE BOOM '73



A PASSION FOR CREATING SPACES THAT ARE BEAUTIFUL AND FUNCTIONAL
ILLUMINATES THE LIFE AND WORK OF VALERIE BOOM '73.

LIT *by* DESIGN

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The biggest challenge for architect Valerie Jane Boom on a project that had its share of them was the lighting.

Its main source would be the sun, or at least it would be on days when the weather cooperated, and that meant windows, lots of them. And although the client wanted people inside to be able to look up and see blue sky through those windows, the idea was that no direct sunlight would shine in, lest it cause damage to or interfere with the viewing of the objects there. On days when clouds drew a blanket over the sun, electric lights would go on as backup support, but the lights and their fixtures had to be configured in such a way that no one inside would see them. Add to this some exacting, foot-candle-precise requirements for the amount of light in the space, and add to that the requirement that the same amount of light was supposed to be there every day, whether the sun shone brightly or there was a slight overcast or thick black storm clouds had gathered. Or the sun had gone down.

Now to all of that, add the fact that this wasn't just any ordinary project. It was 1988, the client was the government of France, and the project involved a total makeover of the Richelieu Wing of the Louvre, the world's most famous museum of art.

"It was incredibly exciting to be part of that," Valerie Boom says. "But there was a lot of skepticism about whether it was going to work."

The Dutch Girl Comes to America

Valerie Boom (it's pronounced *boam*, rhyming with *foam*, though hardly anyone gets that right) grew up in Holland, the daughter of an American mother and a Dutch father who met in black-and-white-romance-movie fashion on an ocean liner crossing the Atlantic. Florence Hopper was a recent college grad from Pasadena, California, heading home after studying in Paris at the Sorbonne. Willem Boom was a Delft engineer who worked for a Dutch valve company run by his father, and was on his way to

New York on a business trip. Three weeks at sea allowed a relationship to blossom in ways that just aren't possible on an eight-hour transatlantic flight. They were married in Paris in 1950.

Valerie inherited her mother's romantic spirit and her father's Dutch practicality. As a girl Valerie loved to draw and paint, but also to do science and math. She spoke three languages. She was well traveled. Florence Hopper Boom had a firm belief that exposure to art and culture were essential to a proper upbringing. "My mother thought it was important to get a great education and become a stronger individual," Valerie says. "We spent a lot of time going around Europe visiting churches and going to museums. There wasn't a lot of sitting on beaches."

It had always been part of Florence Boom's plan that someday Valerie and her brother would attend American schools. St. Timothy's was among the schools that acquaintances had recommended. A friend in Holland — Mille Clark van Griethuysen '64, an exuberant American woman and a St. Timothy's alumna — spoke enthusiastically about her alma mater, and that helped seal the deal.

"Her passion about the school was something unheard of," Valerie says. "That convinced me it would be a great idea."

The Education of Valerie Boom

Valerie Boom's résumé is impressive. On it are projects for the Louvre and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. It includes jobs and collaborations with world-renowned architecture firms like H.O.K. and Arquitectonica and I.M. Pei & Partners, which had the Louvre contract. It highlights her participation in competitions for the Concert Hall for Luxembourg and the French embassy in Tehran. It shows off her Ivy League chops — her bachelor's degree from Brown and her MArch I from Harvard — as well as her study at the École du Louvre.

And up there a few lines from the top it says “St. Timothy’s School, Maryland: Calculus Award.”

“I was proud of that award,” Valerie says, more or less stating the obvious. “Everybody always said, ‘Oh, girls are bad at math.’ I really did enjoy that class.”

Calculus class wasn’t the only thing she enjoyed about St. Timothy’s. In Holland she had begun chafing against a style of teaching and learning that she remembers being heavy on memorization but light on critical thinking. In her French class in Holland she translated texts. In French class at St. Timothy’s she read literature, listened to what her classmates had to say about it, and got a chance to offer opinions of her own. It was the same in other classes, exploring how concepts could be interpreted, looking at things from different perspectives.

“For me it was a completely different way of learning,” she says. “It was totally liberating. It was the beginning of having my own voice.”

From St. Timothy’s she went to Brown intending to become a math major. But after taking architecture courses from William Jordy, an inspiring art history professor, and after getting encouragement for her painting skills, she changed majors to art history, with a minor in studio art. It was also at this time that she began working in three dimensions, spending a lot of time in the sculpture studio and learning how to weld and work with wood.

As college graduation neared, Valerie contemplated her next step. Many of her friends had their sights set on careers as studio artists. She considered following their lead, and made trips into New York City to check out the art scene there. But ultimately the studio-art world felt a little too self-indulgent, a little too macho, a little too male. Architecture, on the other hand, seemed a better fit. “The idea of creating something functional but also beautiful really intrigued me,” she says.

So she applied to the architecture program at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. It’s worth noting that her St. Timothy’s calculus award found its way into paragraph one of the essay she submitted with her application.

Designing the Louvre

What today is the world’s most visited and best known art museum started out as a 12th century fortress, perched on the north bank of the Seine River to protect Paris from Anglo-Norman attacks. The building later became a palace for French kings, and stayed that way until 1672, when Louis XIV moved his residence to Versailles.

Over the next hundred years the Louvre became a place of art, though not yet a place where the public could look at it. Various French academies of art and culture took up residence there and hosted salons for artists to attend. In 1793, at the height of the French Revolution, the Louvre’s doors opened to the public.

Fast forward nearly 200 years to the 1980s, when French president François Mitterrand launched his Grand Projects, an ambitious civic effort with eight monumental building projects intended to bring renewed visibility and respect to France. Among other projects, they included the conversion of the Orsay train station into the Musée D’Orsay, construction of the Opéra Bastille and the revitalization of the Louvre.

For the Louvre, the French turned to the brilliant architect Ieoh Ming Pei, best known at that time for his work designing the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The hiring of a Chinese-American architect was controversial, as some doubted his ability to understand and convey a suitably French aesthetic. The centerpiece of his design was even more controversial – I.M. Pei proposed constructing a giant glass-paneled pyramid that would rise from the Louvre’s center courtyard over a new subterranean main entrance, a stark contrast to the classical architecture of the museum.

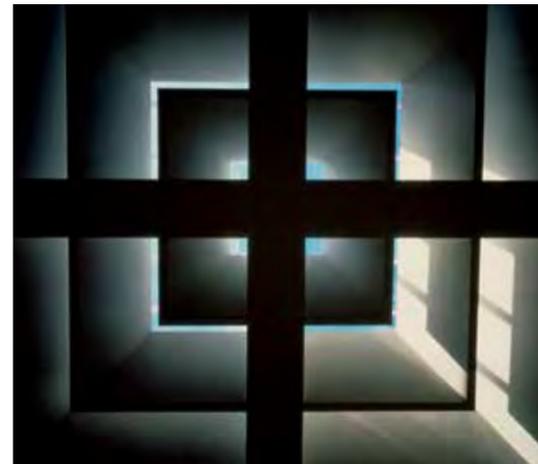
In the early 1980s Valerie was working in New York City with Redroof Design, a small and talented architecture firm headed by Yann Weymouth. It was an exciting time professionally. Weymouth brought in interesting clients, giving his employees “all these amazing projects to work on,” Valerie recalls.

The excitement could extend beyond working hours. Weymouth’s sister is Tina Weymouth, former bass guitarist for the Talking Heads, who at the time were in their heyday. Several of Redroof’s clients were connected to the music industry. Valerie remembers going to parties at Weymouth’s loft that would attract some of music’s big names. Another popular haunt for the Redroof crowd was CBGB, the Bowery nightclub and punk mecca where the Ramones, Patti Smith and the Police played at a time when relatively few knew those names.

I.M. Pei asked Weymouth to come to Paris to work on the pyramid, and Weymouth agreed, triggering the beginning of the end of Redroof. He asked Valerie to join him, but she declined. She had just met the man who would become her husband, and had started her own firm in New York City, Valerie J. Boom Design. The timing wasn’t good.

In 1985 Valerie married Jim Gunderson, who worked for the petroleum-services company Schlumberger. A few years later the company moved him to Paris. Valerie explored a few options there, and eventually was again asked to join the I.M. Pei team, working on the redesign of the Louvre’s Richelieu Wing.

Reuniting with his former employee delighted Weymouth. “I thought she was fantastic,” he says. “Valerie is extraordinarily gifted, very intelligent, very sensitive and a wonderful designer.” And, he adds, she had a manner



The art of design for art: providing optimal light for viewing masterpieces was one of the biggest challenges Valerie faced in designing the Louvre’s Richelieu Wing.



Upstairs Downstairs: Valerie's design for this Tribeca loft for a client turned two floors of a former warehouse into an open and contemporary environment for work and living.

that would serve her very well in Paris in a field and on a project dominated by men – confident, but not pushy. “After a few brilliant suggestions people become very comfortable with her.”

The Program Has to Work

Valerie's tastes in architecture run wide. She admires the exuberant structures of Spain's Antoni Gaudi, some of whose buildings look like they belong on the pages of Dr. Seuss books. Yet she also admires the stripped down, no-nonsense aesthetic of the Dutch De Stijl movement. Much of her architectural sensibility she inherited from her mother, who grew up in Pasadena as the California-modern style was coming into vogue, with its clean lines and interlocking cubes and abundance of windows.

The Tribeca apartment Valerie shares with her husband, their daughter and their son when he's home from college is a study in elegant simplicity, a post-and-beam structure in white and black, with splashes of bright color – a bowl of yellow flowers, a bright blue dog bed, a pink papier-mâché pig. Lofts are ingeniously hidden up near the ceiling in the children's bedrooms. Bookshelves are everywhere, and reveal eclectic tastes – art and architecture, but also literature running from highbrow (French classics, Faulkner), to middlebrow (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*), to lowbrow (a collector's-quality set of Marvel comic books).

It's a corner unit, so it has more windows and more light than many New York City lofts. Out those windows is an architectural wonderland. From one you can see the neo-Gothic Woolworth Building, one of America's oldest skyscrapers. From her breakfast table you get a good view of the new One World Trade Center tower, just blocks away, now the city's tallest building at 1,776 feet. On 9/11 her then-six-year-old son was eating breakfast at that table when American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the former World Trade Center's north tower. Out another window is a skyscraper designed by noted architect Frank Gehry. At the top you can see the vaguely surreal warp effect that has become a Gehry signature.

If there's a philosophy that guides Valerie's work, it may be one she learned from Gehry, with whom she studied during her last semester of architecture school at Harvard. He gave his class an assignment to design a downtown shopping mall for Oklahoma City. Shopping malls were unusual tasks for architecture students, and this one came with a lot of limiting factors, such as strict developer demands and rigid budgets.

Gehry urged his students to put function first. “Before we even thought about the creative side of it, we had to make sure the program worked,” Valerie says. “And that's something that's stuck with me ever since. It's the key thing for any good building – the program has to

work. If it doesn't, then no matter how creative it is or how beautiful it looks, it'll be a failure.”

The Richelieu Wing of the Louvre

Failure was not among the options as Valerie and her colleagues began working through the challenges they faced designing the Louvre's Richelieu Wing, which had the reputation of a French president hinged to its success.

The Richelieu Wing had been home to France's Ministry of Finance, whose relocation to offices in Bercy freed new space for art, specifically for paintings of Northern Europe. Not uncommon for spaces being designed for people to look at great works of art, lighting posed the biggest challenge.

The solution was equal parts art and architecture and mathematics and engineering and even meteorology. To let visitors see out without letting direct sunlight in, architects and lighting engineers devised a white screen grid made of tiny fan-like parts set at different angles, which would go up near windows in the vaulted ceiling. The grid left the sky exposed but deflected direct sunlight, preventing it from shining into the gallery where it could damage the masterpieces hanging on the walls. Supplemental lighting aimed up where it would bounce off the white ceiling, not down toward the paintings. A narrow walkway up above allowed for easy changing of light bulbs, but was out of sight of visitors.

To appease skeptics (and reassure themselves), the I.M. Pei team built a full-scale mock-up of the gallery space in the Tuileries Garden to the west of the Louvre, where the firm's offices had been set up. It worked as it was designed to, so it went live.

“It was all about how to make natural light come in at different times of the year,” Valerie says. “It was a low-tech solution, but sophisticated in its own way.”

Valerie subsequently served as design supervisor for the Richelieu Wing's second floor, in charge of the process from construction through opening. She felt a thrill at the end of construction as masterpieces were brought in and unrolled to be hung. When the Richelieu Wing opened in 1993, she had not yet celebrated her 40th birthday.

You might think that someone who had just played a pivotal role in the design of one of the world's most iconic buildings would be eager to broadcast that fact. But that's not Valerie's style. When her friends and St. Timothy's classmates Jane Runyeon '73 and Cecy Armstrong White '73 went to visit her in Paris around this time, Valerie had told them nothing in advance about working on the Louvre. It was only when she started marching them through the I.M. Pei office and the Richelieu construction site that they began to figure things out.

“I said, ‘Who do you report to?’” Jane recalls. “And she said, ‘I.M. Pei.’ And I said, ‘*What?*’ My jaw dropped completely. But that’s Valerie. She’s a modest, thoughtful person.”

Truth Without Fear

On a warm New York afternoon in early October, Valerie is taking a visitor on a tour of another of her favorite projects, the Uris Center for Education at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. This was a big project, 80,000 square-feet worth, encompassing everything from the gathering space where schoolchildren enter to offices, conference rooms, classrooms, studios, multimedia rooms and a library.

Before-and-after photos speak to the project’s success. The open, light and airy gathering area is an alternative to a former entryway through a garage off a delivery ramp, past racks of cafeteria trays. Uncluttered classrooms with warm wood paneling and hidden storage have replaced rooms with view-obstructing pillars and chairs piled in the corners. Natural light streams in from every possible direction.

Department staff rush up to give Valerie hugs when they see her, no doubt motivated in part by the fact that the renovation moved their offices from the basement to the top floor, with a view of Central Park. The stories they tell about envious colleagues at other museums underscore how much of a gold standard the project has set.

“I think the place is a marvel,” says Kent Lydecker, who was the museum’s associate director for education during the Uris Center’s transformation. Lydecker, now director of the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Florida, says Valerie’s ability to be fluent not just in the language of design and construction, but also in the language of those who would use the space, was a key to its success. “She would go the extra mile to understand practical concerns.”

Lately those practical concerns have been on a smaller scale. She converted a maid’s quarters into a dialysis room for a friend of her mother’s. She transformed part of a former Tribeca warehouse into a stunning two-story loft, a dramatic work/living space with 18-foot ceilings, Venetian plaster walls, exposed joists, and about as much natural light as it’s possible to bring in in downtown Manhattan.

These days projects tend to come to her through word of mouth, or because people see publications about her work, or because they like past projects she’s done. For all her success, there was never a time when she sat down and drew up a set of blueprints for how her life and career would unfold. “I wasn’t thinking, ‘I need to be married by 28 and have my first child by 32,’” she says. “Things just happened. One way or another, you have to make it work.”

Valerie turns 60 in June, but retirement is not on her radar screen. Architecture is well known for the long and productive careers of its practitioners. I.M. Pei, now 96, did some of his best work in his late 60s and 70s, and kept working well into his 80s. Frank Lloyd Wright worked pretty much until his death at 89. Philip Johnson stayed productive into his 90s.

Valerie would like to follow their lead, but on a path of her own making, and she hasn’t yet figured out what direction it should go. She still runs Valerie J. Boom Design, but knows she needs to be more focused about what her small firm is and does, and more intentional in promoting it. Do a Google search for her company and you won’t find its website, because she hasn’t created one yet.

Part of the reason may just be Valerie’s personality, her reluctance to push herself too vigorously at people. “She has a quiet, calm countenance,” says her friend and former classmate Freddy Struse ’73. “But once you scratch the surface there’s this deep sense of creativity and intellect that you wouldn’t know was there if you didn’t spend time with her.”

Valerie does not lack for ideas. She wants to become more skilled with the technological tools of her profession — computer-aided design and 3-D rendering and fabrication. She’s interested in sustainability, passive housing, green design. The intersection of landscape and urban design fascinates her.

Her adult life has unfolded in stages. There was the post-graduate-school burst to establish herself in her career. Then came the challenge of staying productive professionally while raising two children, including a daughter with learning disabilities. Now with her children grown, it’s time for the next stage, but its shape isn’t fully formed. “I feel like I’m recharging myself to figure out how I can still contribute,” she says.

Bet on her to figure it out. Thoughtfulness and humility are Valerie’s most noticeable traits. What takes a little longer to reveal itself is her competitive streak. It’s important to her to *have* that St. Timothy’s calculus award, but even more important that she *won* it. She knows how to fight for something.

Last spring, during a talk she gave at St. Timothy’s, Valerie said she thought *vérité sans peur* — truth without fear — was a great school motto. But it’s also not a bad way to live. It means being true to yourself without being swayed by what others think. It means heading off on a path because it feels right even if you don’t have a clear sense of where it will lead. “That’s a very apt motto for Valerie,” says Yann Weymouth. “She’s not afraid. And she’s very strong.”

“It’s the idea that it’s OK to be different — that was just so strong at St. Timothy’s,” she says. “It’s about being honest with yourself and what you’re interested in.” ♦

