

After the CRAN Symposium

Attending the Custom Residential Architects Symposium is like going to your high school reunion. You may not have been there for many years, you may not have seen your fellow classmates for decades, but as soon as you walk in, glance at a few name tags, and grab a drink, the conversations start. There is a hum to these gatherings. Because, like that high school reunion, we are with a group of people with a broad base of commonality. There is nothing pretentious here; no one is trying to impress. Rather, everyone in attendance does the exact same thing and has typically traveled the exact same path. And we are simply here to talk about it. We all took Mr. Van der Rohe's gym class and Frank Lloyd Wright's Calculus 101, and we remember the prom (or our first building), as awkward as it may have been. CRAN is much more than a community; we are all alumni of a unique profession. One that gives us the remarkably satisfying gift of making great homes and great architecture, and one that comes with more than its fair share of trials and travails.

The legendary PBS interviewer Terry Gross wrote a book collecting her decades of conversations with the artists and leaders of our times. It is titled "All I Did Was Ask." I love that idea, and it sums up the essence and success of the CRAN Symposium. Just ask. Just ask anyone there, and you will instantly get back a sympathetic reflection. From one another, we receive validation of our own days in the practice of architecture, with its highs and lows. It is akin to a three-day therapy session about this fee, that client, and the land use ordinance that delayed a project for no rhyme or reason. CRAN exists to celebrate that you are not alone as a residential architect. Because in the sometimes-veiled mystery of the profession of architecture, one can often have that impression. In my experience, and apparently in the experience of many, custom residential architects spend a lot of time figuring it out, inventing it, and carving a career path that did not previously exist.

The range of the symposium's presenters serves as a metaphor for our profession, from the aspiration and inspiration of Deon Lucas and The Beehyve Collective to the engaging and technical presentation given by Christine Williamson and her unique take on building science. There was Nate Kipnis' environmentally driven reclamation and Thomas Shafer's most masterful architecture. A discourse on construction administration and risk management balanced against the complete history of Chicago's residential architecture presented as only



Top: Stuart Cohen conveys copious knowledge of Chicago architecture history. Bottom: Celeste Robbins' (right) house was a home tour hit.

Stuart Cohen can. Venturi was wrong—it isn't the architecture that's complex and contradictory; it's the profession of architecture itself that embodies these things, as it must. Residential architects are code enforcement experts one minute, building technicians the next, and artists all day long. And, of course, there is the business of it all. It is the world we all live in, and it is CRAN itself.

To come to a CRAN Symposium is to eavesdrop on the conversations and innermost workings of a profession. Often in the symposium breaks, I may be in one conversation but overhearing another. Those conversations are about fees

Photos, this page: RD Staff; next page, courtesy AIA CRAN



Deon Lucas



Christine Williamson



Nate Kipnis

and clients. The role of architects—diminishing, expanding, and changing—is a favored topic. I spent time discussing our recognition and lack thereof within the profession itself. Excluding Adrian Smith, of course, custom residential architects are the most popular of the breed. When movies are made, and books are written, they are about beautiful houses. Everyone knows the television architect Mr. Brady and his floating-stair house, but few know or care about his latest

shopping center. We are the halo car in the new car showroom. It may be all too unattainable to most, but everyone wants one. The trick is leveraging that interest and knowledge, or so the conversations go. There is a tip-of-the-spear aspect to custom residential architects. Evolution, experimentation, and proving grounds are here in this fertile soil. When production home builders roll out their next “idea home of the year,” chances are that it reflects and imitates

our custom homes from five years ago. These, and so many more, are the conversations of our symposium, making it such a success every year, and I leave this symposium, this reunion, a little better for it. And I leave feeling very proud of this small but influential sector of the architecture profession.

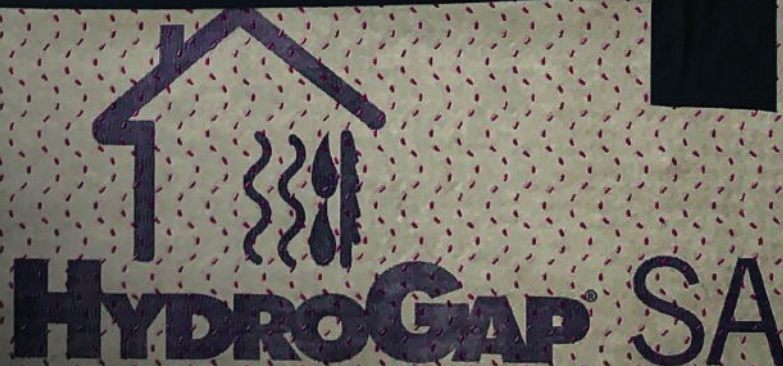
See you next year in Salt Lake City.—*Mark Asher, AIA, CRAN Advisory Group*

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