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Boston Designer Series: Alan Joslin, Architect

## Elegant Frugality for the Performing Arts

by RICHARD CAMPBELL  
Special to *The Epoch Times*

This interview is the first of a series focusing on Boston metro area designers. Mr. Joslin is the principal of Epstein Joslin Architects, a Cambridge architecture firm that he and his wife, Deborah Epstein, formed in 2002. The firm is known for fine homes and concert halls. His design work has received multiple AIA (American Institute of Architects) awards and many local and national awards for excellence in design.

Prior to forming EJA, Alan was a principal at William Rawn Associates where, for 17 years as Principal-in-Charge of Design and/or Project Architect, he oversaw the design of more than a few New England landmarks, including Ozawa Hall for the

Boston Symphony.

He received a Master of Architecture and also a Bachelor of Science in Art and Design degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with associated study at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design and at the International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design, in Urbino, Italy. He now teaches architectural design at MIT.

EPOCH TIMES: The way I came to your work was by attending the production of "The Ice Breaker" at the New Repertory Theatre, for which you created the beautiful adobe house set. Is set design kind of a rarity for architects?

Alan Joslin (AJ): "Well I think it's generally more popular with painters, though I know a number of architects that have dabbled with it. I came into stage design following architecture school, admiring the stage work of my director/actress sister-in-law, Judy Braha, at the now defunct New Ehrlich Theatre at the BCA. I asked to try my hand on a show, became addicted

(Left) Strathmore Hall: Home of The Baltimore Symphony. Alan Joslin, as a Principal-in-Charge of Design with William Rawn Associates, Architects, Inc. Strathmore Photographs by Ron Solomon

to the fast-paced design world, and ended up spending more than two years designing for the theater. When, David Zoffoli, a fabulous actor/friend from that period, and director of "Ice Breaker" invited me to join him again, 20 years later, I couldn't say no."

EPOCH TIMES: Tell us about how stage design and architecture feed into each other.

AJ: "I have learned a great deal from stage design that I now use in architecture. First, perspective view is fundamentally important in communicating the ideas of a building. Set designers know this because their work must address the very particular vantage points of the audience. Architects can forget this visual reality and get very lost in the abstract concepts of their design, losing sight of how the building presents itself, how light works, and from that, how the building feels and communicates to the inhabitant."

EPOCH TIMES: Many of your buildings are public spaces, oftentimes utilized for the performing arts. How does that affect the way you design?

AJ: "I see buildings as playing a role in the telling of a story. That story tends to be an articulation of the worldview to which the builder and/or user group aspires. We start with the ideas, or mission of the institution as the text of the story, and then we shape the building as the backdrop to the rituals it must support."

EPOCH TIMES: I understand that Deborah has quite a background in creating environments. How has she influenced your designs over the past 20 years?

AJ: "We respect the interests and skills of each other. But in particular, Deborah has an insatiable passion in the use of exotic materials and fine craftsmanship. In fact, on a family trip to Italy she made us all visit the mountains of Carrara, from where

Michelangelo's marble was quarried. She has a very direct connection with the emotional and poetic energy [that] materials, textures, and color bring to the experience of environments. I love piggy-backing this attention of hers into our collaborative projects."

EPOCH TIMES: The Strathmore Music Center, second home of The Baltimore Symphony, is one of your full-blown performing arts centers. How did working in this particular environment impact your interior work?

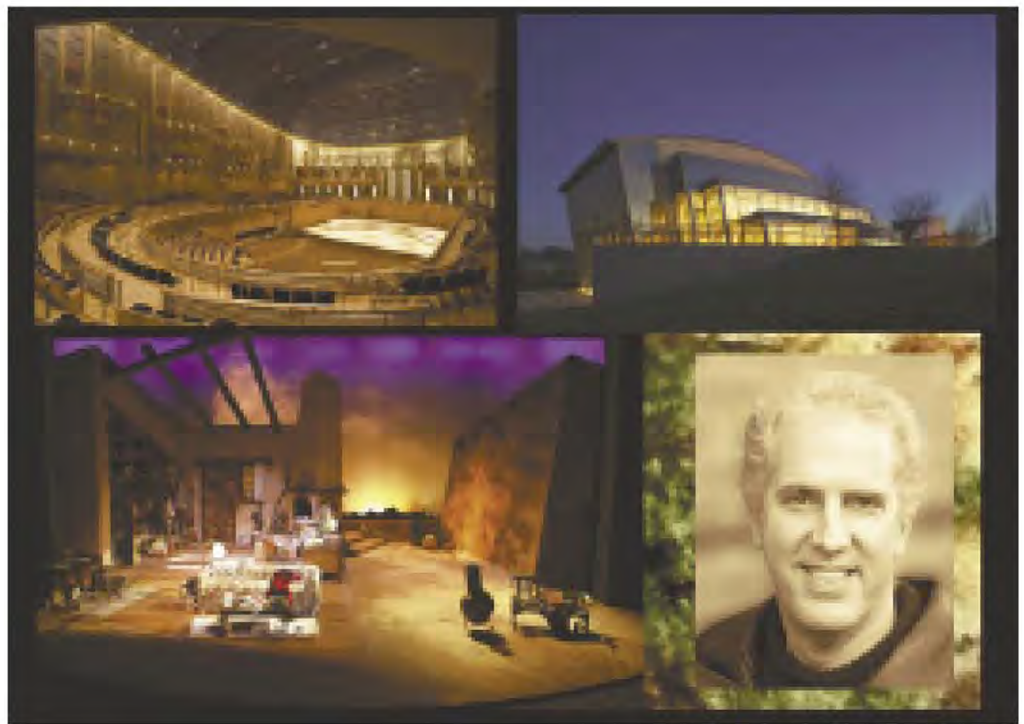
AJ: "The trick here was how to make a big building comfortable in an intimate environment. Strathmore Hall is an outdoor arts park, so we worked hard to make a curvaceous form, set low onto a steep hillside, fit softly into its landscape setting. However, that same curvaceous form was also chosen to directly reflect the interior acoustic and spatial needs of a 2,200-seat concert hall."

EPOCH TIMES: When you are building a stage that can be used for dance, music, theater, and other presentations, explain the differences in design.

AJ: "The acoustic and technical design requirements in spaces for music are so different to those of dance or theater. For example, the sound in a classical music hall should be wonderfully warm and reverberant, a bit like singing in a shower, whereas if theater should take place in such an environment, this reverberation would garble the articulation of words. In theater, you want to hear just the direct sound of the voice. On the other hand, dance can survive well in either of the environments, so long as all seats allow good views of the dancers' feet."

EPOCH TIMES: What was your favorite performance in a building you designed?

AJ: "Randall Thompson's 'Alleluia' in Ozawa Hall, at Tanglewood, for the BSO in 1994 just before it was open to the public. The piece was originally written for the Tanglewood Music Center, and since that time it has traditionally been sung by the students, beginning their summer tenure as a music community. It is thus emotionally charged to begin with and as the first piece of music performed in the new hall, I was deeply moved. Again, performed at Opening Night, I turned with joy to the acoustician, Larry Kirkegaard,



Set for "The Ice Breaker" and Architect's portrait.

sitting next to me, and saw tears filling his eyes. It was a shared moment I will never forget."

EPOCH TIMES: In Rockport, you are working on a chamber music hall that blends into a charming New England harbor. The pictures here say it all, but tell us about the process.

AJ: "Twenty-seven firms submitted their qualifications for the project and it came down to four interviewed firms, of which we were one. We suggested a concert hall organized on the Main Street level with a large glass wall behind the stage looking out to the harbor, thus merging community with the play of music, light (colorful sunsets), and water during the concerts. We also suggested recreating and enhancing an historic upper-floor meeting room as both a cultural and civic amenity to the Music Festival and the Town of Rockport. But most importantly, this approach also allowed a big building to step down in scale to the harbor and fit into the charming village atmosphere."

EPOCH TIMES: Let's say that a college or school comes to your firm for a design project, and you do a consultation, and the firm is hired for the job. How do you begin?

AJ: "We usually get a job by invitation and interview. We begin the process with an intensive two- or three-day, on-the-site interview and work session to learn all as-

pects of the organization and the site. Once we absorb all we can, then and only then do we develop sketches and ideas, on site, for immediate reactions and fine-tuning. By the end of two or three days we know them, and they know us. For the Rockport Chamber Festival project we also organized tours, listening to concerts at many halls, and testing with the design committee forms appropriate to their program. It helped us develop with the client a common nomenclature for later evaluations of our design collaboration."

EPOCH TIMES: Explain the term "elegant frugality," which I ran into looking at the tenets of your design philosophy.

AJ: "It's a real Yankee attitude. I wish I had coined it, but credit is owed to Bill LeMessurier, a renowned structural engineer and collaborator at Ozawa Hall. It quickly became our mantra. "Basically it means designing directly to the needs of the building, removing all that is superfluous, and composing what is there with a proportional elegance. What comes out of it is so connected to its purpose, and hopefully very beautiful, much like the work of the Shakers. We seek economy, purpose, and beauty."

*Richard Campbell is a playwright from Boston Mass. View his writings and graphics at <http://home.earthlink.net/~photocafe>.*