

## James Logan Abell, FAIA Honored with 2014 AIA Thomas Jefferson Award for Public Architecture

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The 2014 national AIA **Thomas Jefferson Award for Public Architecture** honors **James Logan Abell, FAIA**, an architect who has dedicated a 40-year career to producing public architecture that inventively incorporates contextual vernacular traditions into historic preservation and adaptive reuse projects. Abell, the Category One recipient, and the other 2014 Thomas Jefferson Awards recipients are celebrated for their commitment to public architecture as an integral part of the nation's cultural heritage.

Abell's interest in public architecture began in 1974 when, as an architecture student at Arizona State University (ASU), he won a fellowship to travel and work in Northampton, England. This experience involved some historic renovation work, but it also gave him a chance to work on the design of Weston Favell Centre, a huge mixed-use civic center, and marked the beginning of a career-long focus in urbanism.

In 1979 he founded **Abell Architects** in Tempe, Ariz. Through his practice, he served on school advisory councils, supported historic-preservation initiatives, and served on the City of Tempe's Development Review Commission for 10 years during a critical period of revitalization for Old Town Tempe. Also a champion of housing issues, in 1988 Abell became a local team leader for the AIA's Search for Shelter national design charrette in Phoenix. In this public outreach project, which occurred simultaneously in 26 American cities, Abell led a group of ASU students to examine ways to renovate abandoned buildings in downtown Phoenix into housing for people transitioning out of homelessness.

Abell's firm eventually designed and built one such project, the Casa Teresa Home. Abell also served for three years on the AIA's Affordable Housing Task Force, and as the group's chair presented on the

subject at the AIA Grassroots conference, and at regional seminars in Kentucky, Missouri, and California.

In a letter supporting Abell's nomination, Gerald McSheffrey, AIA, professor emeritus and former dean of ASU's College of Architecture, recalls that public agencies across the U.S. began seeking Abell's expertise for workshops on public housing after the publication of Casa Teresa in *Progressive Architecture* magazine. "Moreover, I know of no other architect tapped by [the] National AIA to give testimony to the U.S. Congress on this aspect of socially responsible architecture," McSheffrey wrote.

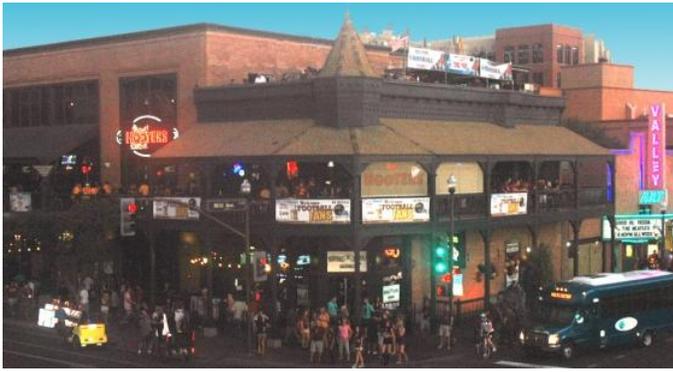
As his career developed, Abell embraced historic preservation, focusing especially on dilapidated downtowns. In Tempe, his renovation studies for the Laird Building (built in 1893) and the historic Tempe Beach Park (built in 1905) "became the key for turning Old Town Tempe into a livable, walkable downtown," according to Dave Fackler, redevelopment director for the City of Tempe from 1979 to 2003.

"These projects in the historic center of Tempe showed the best in adaptive reuse and sustainable regeneration of existing buildings for public use," wrote Marlene Imirzian, FAIA, 2013 chair of the AIA Committee on Design and fellow Arizona-based architect, in a letter supporting Abell's nomination.



▲ McClintock High School's multi-purpose building is one example of Abell's budget-conforming architecture that is artfully elevated through the use of color, texture, form, and variety.

Constructed at nearly half the cost of similar buildings in the school district, it was immediately dubbed "**The Lego Building**" by high school students in 1992.



▲ *Historic Preservation with extended use for 1893 Laird Building in Old Town Tempe, AZ*

In Phoenix, he renovated the Lambert-Miller Gallery, a project Phoenix Mayor Margaret Hance described as the *“most dramatic downtown renovation of the decade,”* in conferring a Mayor’s Design Award for public enhancement.

Abell’s contributions to the public realm include many elementary, middle, and high school buildings. Over time, Abell’s firm became known for its expertise in reuse and renovation, specifically of older school buildings, and a focus on school campus master planning emerged as a natural extension. Eventually Abell co-authored the ASU campus land-use master plan, which combined master planning educational facilities totaling \$200 million, and developed a preservation philosophy for the first time in ASU’s history. This project identified cultural resources such as ASU’s Moeur Building, a Federal Moderne structure dating back to 1937, for reuse and preservation. The renovation of the Moeur Building included the repurposing of an adjacent space (formerly a parking lot) into *“the most beloved outdoor space on campus,”* according to Russ Nelson, who served as ASU’s president from 1981 to 1989.

Over time, Abell began to articulate an approach to public architecture focused on local materials and Southwestern building traditions. His use of locally-sourced clay and concrete masonry materials turned him into an authority on Sonoran Desert building design, a topic on which he has lectured before arts groups and civic bodies, and at AIA Architecture Week events.

During lectures, Abell always stressed the need for public activism on the part of architects to craft a humane public realm in school facilities, municipal

structures, and vital downtowns. His frequent lectures eventually led to a position as visiting professor at ASU’s College of Architecture, where he taught from 1983 until 1999. More recently, from 2004 to 2008, he was a visiting professor at the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture.

Outside the Southwest, Abell has worked with stakeholders to identify design expressions unique and appropriate to their region, mainly through the AIA’s Regional and Urban Design Assistance Teams (R/UDATs). Abell first became involved with the R/UDATs in 1975 as a student in Phoenix. He became a consistent presence in the AIA’s regional and urban design committee in the mid-1980s, and eventually led his first design assistance team in 1994. He has since participated in community design charrettes in Arizona, Texas, Ohio, Utah, & Vermont, earning the rare AIA **Kemper Award** in 2010 for his efforts.

Having worked with Abell as leader of an R/UDAT in Vermont, Paul Monette, mayor of Newport, Vt., praised Abell’s ability to understand the community and foster positive dialogue. *“More than a talented architect and public advocate of responsive architecture, he is a ‘visionary citizen of democracy,’ bringing citizens of all walks of life together to dream, collaborate, plan, and take action to improve our nation’s communities,”* Monette wrote in a recommendation letter. Ω



▲ *Carminati Elementary School expresses Sonoran materials, celebrates local craftsmanship, and creates delight through use of color, pattern and texture while meeting limited budget requirements.* ▼

