From the Ark to architectural success

Few Berkeley buildings have engendered as much loyalty among their resident faculty and students as North Gate Hall. Home to the architecture department from 1906 to 1964 (and now journalism), the redwood structure recalls the shingled homes that once dotted Berkeley’s hills and exemplifies simplicity and harmony with nature. It’s the kind of place one can’t help but love.

**Harold Burns ’50** is among the generations of architecture students whose affection for the “Ark,” as the hall was commonly called, runs deep. It was in this intimate space that he spent countless hours meeting the demands of his studies, forming the ideals that would shape his career, and making lifelong friends. These memories prompted him to make a generous bequest gift to Berkeley last year.

“I met so many nice and interesting people who are still my good friends,” says Harold. “The old Ark made us feel like family. We’d work 12 hours a day for three hours of credit, but then we could sit on the patio and play bridge.”

Harold, who grew up in southeast Louisiana, served in the U.S. Navy from 1944–46. He trained in San Diego, then toured the Pacific aboard the USS Simon Newcomb (AGSC-14), a minesweeper converted into a coastal survey ship. He attended Louisiana State University on the G.I. Bill from 1946–47, then transferred to Berkeley.

While studying architecture, he lived in the perfect lab — a house designed by Bernard Maybeck, a luminary of American architecture whose hallmark features include bright colors, handcrafted details, and integration with the landscape. Maybeck, in his 70s at that time, lived around the corner.

“I often saw Mr. Maybeck working in his garden, but was so in awe I couldn't get up the courage to introduce myself,” says Harold. “One of the great regrets of my life.”

Another regret? Not saving a piece of cardboard he’d found with Maybeck’s handwritten instructions and color samples for painting the kitchen red and blue. “I hung it on the wall of my room but didn’t ask my landlady if I could have it when I moved out,” Harold says.

While Harold missed the chance to rub elbows with Maybeck, he made up for it through daily interactions with his classmates and professors. He particularly remembers charrettes, assignments in which professors gave students 24 hours to solve an architectural problem. Harold and his friends would first fill up on 25-cent martinis and $1.50 meals at a favorite Oakland eatery, then hunker down in the Ark until the moment their drawings were due.

“It was a lot of pressure,” he recalls, “but the fun part was peeking through a large crack in the exhibit hall door to see if my design was on the wall.”

Harold eventually established his own firm in New Orleans — grounded in what he learned at Berkeley.

“I always felt that Bay Area architecture was personal, livable — not grand or pretentious, but built at human scale,” he says. Those principles influenced his practice, which focused on architectural problem solving.

Not only will students get essential financial support for their education,” says Wolch, “they will also be inspired by Harold’s architectural designs, which stood at the vanguard of the mid-century modern movement.”

Harold says he wants today’s young undergraduates to benefit from the university as he did. “I would tell a young person who’s as dedicated as I was to see things you’ve never seen before, understand things you’ve never experienced before,” he says.

Since his first exposure to Asian art in San Francisco, Harold has avidly collected Japanese prints, black ink sumi by well-known Berkeley professor Chiura Obata, and works by local artists. He is also devoted to the opera, ballet, symphony, and museums. When asked why he made Berkeley a significant beneficiary of his generosity, he said, “I’m a Golden Bear — Berkeley was generous to me — that’s why! I am most grateful for my Berkeley experience. It directed my whole thereafter.”

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Proceeds from the sale of the property will be used to establish the Harold Hugh Burns Scholarship, in honor of his parents, in the College of Environmental Design (CED). Dean Jennifer Wolch says that once the scholarship is endowed, it will annually support about five CED students, with preference given to those who live outside of California.