

CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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Westport, CT office space with art collection.

## Roger Ferris

### *Essays in Modern Architecture*

By Cindy Clarke

**N**EW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT, by all accounts the quintessential New England village rooted in tradition, boasts white steepled charms, lushly manicured estates steeped in a rich colonial heritage and fieldstone walls, meandering, magnificently, through acres of pastoral landscapes, while safeguarding the homesteads that lie within. But there's a dichotomy of architectural expression here that defies any predetermined images the uninformed visitor may have. For tucked away in its Elysian fields is a bevy of mid-century modern houses that caused quite a stir in the 1940s and '50s when the Harvard Five came to town, with many still standing today to disrupt expectations. It is in this bucolic setting of juxtaposed buildings and glass boxes masquerading as houses that an aspiring architect, who moved to New Canaan from Dallas, Texas, with his family at age 14, found his inspiration. Dare we refer to him as the Harvard 6<sup>th</sup>?

"I was the kid who built twig towns in the backyard," admitted Roger Ferris, a graduate and Loeb Fellow of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, when I sat down with him in his striking Westport office. He built it too, of course, a marvel of modern design reflecting his free flowing vision and a clarity of purpose and art that first takes shape in a story.

Before he starts any project, he puts pen to paper. But not in the way you may think. His architectural narrative initially unfolds in a stream of consciousness blueprint that weaves in and out of time and place in a continuous flowing series of words, imagined images and ideas – visual, physical, associative, and subliminal – that are constantly moving forward in time. The details evolve on the page. The setting, grounded in an earthly landscape, remains constant, although it takes on new life and perspectives as the story emerges. The plot, revealed in its own time, is not as important as the outcome, which, by Ferris's

own admission, has to be "meaningful in every way." "Writing makes me think about it deeply. I have to verbalize it, visualize it and wait for it to unfold and explain itself in a more elaborate and detailed way before I start drawing. It has to have real depth before it becomes reality."

Nothing he does is by happenstance. He believes in understanding the foundation of a project from the ground up. He investigates each site physically and pragmatically, determining what informs it, its orientation to natural light, its relationship to the client and its end use, how to honor the land it will sit on. He resists the urge to draw his vision right away, instead imagining what it might be when completed.

"I don't have any preconceived notions when I meet with my clients," he said, preferring to respond to their needs and visualize what they want while they speak. "As architects, our work operates on many levels that take time to assert themselves." The results, uniquely voiced, speak



**Above;** New Canaan art estate with Phillip Johnson's Wiley House in foreground and private gallery in background with underground pool house showing at left. **Bottom;** Abstracted Red Barn guest house rendering currently under construction.



**Above;** South facing public facade of RBS building. **Below;** The interior private 2 acre courtyard on the 8th floor. **Right;** Rear view of the Bridge Clubhouse showing individual blades all framing distant water views.

for themselves. In his 30+ year reign as one of the most visionary contemporary architects in the world, his innovative design solutions, both commercial and residential, have turned heads, challenged imaginations and defied convention, while winning more than 70 regional and national awards and international citations for the work spearheaded by his firm.

He sees everything architecturally. So it's not surprising that his passion for designing free spirited, artistically poetic buildings reflect his attitude on life, imbuing each project with progressive architectural elements that herald a bright new future and emphasize a seamless, uncluttered communion with the natural world.

As a teenager he worked closely with American architect Victor Christ-Janer, who along with the Harvard Five helped define the Modernist architectural movement in New Canaan. Christ-Janer was also an educator, artist and inventor who applied his interests in art, art conservation, teaching, writing, and open space conservation to his work much as Ferris does today.

"I accompanied him on his lectures and in the field," said Ferris, an avid student of building whose admiration of Christ-Janer and his fellow architects is evident in both conversation and practice.

His restoration work on the Wiley House in New Canaan, originally designed by rule-shattering modernist Philip Johnson for Robert C. Wiley in 1953, followed the path first set out by its original architect, before going underground and outside the box in a new art barn, pool house and garage. The four-bedroom, 3,000 square foot house, described as a "strikingly simple composition of two rectangular boxes" on six acres of country heaven, had the feel of an art object when Frank Gallipoli, an avid collector of contemporary art, bought in 1994 after it languished on the



market because "nobody wanted anything to do with it."

Much of his art was too imposing to exhibit in a traditional residential setting so he contracted fellow art enthusiast Roger Ferris to design a private gallery on the property, along with other renovation work that was needed on the existing house. In keeping with the New England feel of the site, Ferris built the gallery, a study in understatement, meticulous and minimalist, on the foundations of the old barn, calling it the "perfect sculptural form" to house works of art that refused to be upstaged.

He also reimagined the circular pool and underground pool house – like the four bedrooms of the house which are nestled below living area between exposed stone walls, the pool house peeks out from under stone walls that link the reconstructed 19th century barn – renovated the main house and built a new garage, taking care to revive them as unified, site-specific works of art on a residential campus that hints at the projects Ferris is most at home with.

"The house was basically a simple glass box that we took apart and rebuilt to its original specifications. The old stone plinth became the



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common element that tied all the new buildings we added together. We carried the walls across the property and built the barn on top of them,” explained Ferris, who said he learns things from every project he undertakes and brings a repository of ideas and thought lessons with him to the next.

His recent project, a golf course clubhouse set on a former racetrack in Bridgehampton, similarly fueled his passion for boundary-breaking creativity while honoring the legacy of the site he was building on.

Ferris was commissioned by financier Bob Rubin to build an unconventionally informal clubhouse for the conventionally aristocratic game of golf, whose first elite private clubs in the United States made their high society debut in the Hamptons in the 1890s. That Rubin picked The Bridge as the site of his new break-all-the-rules golf club appealed to Ferris, not only for its craggy landscapes and the vistas of Sag Harbor and Shelter Island that surround it, but also for the stories that emerge from its past history as a famous celebrity racetrack, frequented by Paul Newman and other thrill-seeking speedsters.

He describes it as “the most outside-the-box club in the United States,” regaling me with free-wheeling images of its site-specific green design, literally and naturally sustainable, with minimal intervention into the preexisting landscape, self-regenerating with native grasses, shrubs and trees. The clubhouse, Zen-like in ambiance and built of harvested cypress and a mix of recycled materials, takes shape in bladelike forms like those of the busted turbine wheel Ferris found on a walk around the 300-acre property. Each “blade” creates the idea of movement as it forms a distinct function room and frames a particular view, letting in abundant natural light that negates the need for artificial daytime lighting. The front is all wood, with artfully designed trellises that

suggest the abstract warmth of a porch. Some of the interior walls are made from cool, sleek Corian.

Remnants of the racetrack itself add more whimsy inside the building in billboards, neon signs, movie posters and more. And the service dock, utilitarian by necessity but circular and sculptural in form, bears a deliberate resemblance to the holes found on the surrounding 18-hole course and is linked to the clubhouse through an underground tunnel. True to his intentions, everything he created here has meaning, past, present and future.

His eye for green building technologies is not limited to golf greens or residential home sites alone. His penchant for designing space that soars beyond expectations is showcased in the one million square foot state-of-the-art headquarters he and his firm collaborated on for Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) in Stamford. It accommodates upwards of 3,000 RBS employees and 2,000 of their cars, catering to their comfort and corporate culture with such innovative work spaces as an airy 100,000-sq-ft sixth-floor trading floor for up to 1,400 traders with two walls of floor-to-ceiling windows, a six-story glass atrium with escalators that connects the trading floor to the 11th floor and an “amenities floor” that hosts a one-acre roof garden with views of the adjacent Mill River, mahogany and granite surfaces, a full kitchen and 120-person dining facility, a 10,000-sq-ft fitness center with sauna and full locker room, a sports bar, coffee shops and restaurants.

He spent months contemplating the intricacies and efficiencies of Edinburgh’s imposing Scottish castle, the centuries-old centerpiece of Scotland’s capital city, before envisioning how the palatial US-based project would manifest into present day. He ultimately designed it as a European-style mid-rise office block 12 stories high that forms a J-shape with the majority of

the building’s five stories of above-grade parking camouflaged by the building’s wraparound design. And yes, it too stands as a castle, thoughtfully fortified with renewable energy sources and LEED-certified conservation-oriented technologies, in the middle of a world-class city.

Fascinated by our conversation, about conservation and building philosophies, design continuities and disruptions, creativity of thought and architectural inventions, writing, poetry, modern art, permanence and passages, I asked him what he was working on now. He showed me a rendering of a quintessential red barn he is building on one of the most spectacular properties on Connecticut’s treasured Gold Coast, which coincidentally was once the site of the \$7 million Labyrinth home built by one of the Harvard Five, John Johansen, before it was unceremoniously torn down to make way for a new home for celebrity owners Marlo Thomas and Phil Donahue.

Imagine a perfectly proportioned red barn, 1-½ stories in height, modeling the vernacular form and crimson color of a New England dairy farm barn, but with a contemporary twist. Instead of wood, Roger Ferris’s barn is a study in cement, painted red, from the siding to the roof, with louvered windows that belie their presence on either end to disappear from view. This straightforward design, box-like in its simplicity, is anything but.

I was thinking that his interpretation of this iconic red barn epitomizes the essence of Ferris’s work... timeless in nature, rife with meaning, site specific and profound, reflecting the duality of purpose and expression that he is inherently drawn to.

Is this the kind of legacy he would like to be known for? After feeling his passion for architectural storytelling and discovering that his mind works overtime when it comes to his projects, I shouldn’t have been at all surprised by his answer.

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I can’t wait to see where tomorrow’s new chapters take him. □