

2014 AIA Architecture Firm Award Recipient

Eskew+Dumez+Ripple | 2014 AIA Architecture Firm Award Recipient

By Zach Mortice, Managing Editor, AIArchitect

The American Institute of Architects Board of Directors on Dec. 12 bestowed the 2014 AIA Architecture Firm Award to [Eskew+Dumez+Ripple](#) the New Orleans firm that uses rigorously crafted Modernism to repair, restore, and enhance the unique cultural and historic context of their city. The AIA Architecture Firm Award, given annually, is the highest honor the AIA bestows on an architecture firm, and recognizes a practice that has consistently produced distinguished architecture for at least 10 years. Eskew+Dumez+Ripple will be honored at the AIA 2014 National Convention and Design Exposition in Chicago.

The award comes at a somber time for the firm. Just two days before the board's decision, firm cofounder [Allen Eskew, FAIA](#), died unexpectedly.

"It's incredibly bittersweet," said firm cofounder Steven Dumez, FAIA, after being called by AIA President Mickey Jacob, FAIA, to congratulate the firm on their honor. "Allen was tremendously proud of what we were all able to collectively build as a firm, so I speak for him and the rest of the firm when I say we're extremely grateful that we have the opportunity to reflect on what we've been able to accomplish."

Of a place

In some ways, architecture seems to become a more globalized, multinational business every year. With each mega-firm merger and skyline-piercing ultra-scraper, the profession seems to move away from its roots as a class of artisans trained to design and build with the earth and materials around them, creating spaces in a place, but also literally of a place.

A group of proud New Orleans architects, Eskew+Dumez+Ripple (EDR) makes Gulf Coast architecture that's Modern, but innately attuned to the lifestyle, pace, climate, and cultural context of its city. Curators and preservers of this culture, the firm's major cultural commissions document New Orleans' long and diverse multiethnic history in built form. Since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the firm has taken on an important role as a civic leader charged with repairing the wounded urban fabric of the city. Their efforts, like their [Reinventing the Crescent: New Orleans Riverfront Development Plan](#), seek to build the city back better, recognizing that the violence of the storm laid bare many existing problems that were allowed to fester in the dark, unobserved.

"Eskew+Dumez+Ripple lead a deeply nuanced practice born out of a critical engagement with their own surroundings, an exemplary approach that allows them to deal with an incredibly rich level of cultural specificity," wrote AIA Gold Medalist Thom Mayne, FAIA, in a recommendation letter. Speaking of the firm's Reinventing the Crescent plan, he continued, "This careful and collaborative pursuit of civic solutions, which are at once pragmatic, environmentally responsible, and deeply context-driven, exemplifies the firm's singular methodology, and is an outstanding example of the best aspects of American architecture."

Born of Louisiana, but not beholden

Founded less than 25 years ago, EDR is perhaps the most celebrated architecture firm in its region. EDR had only 22 employees eight years ago when the city was struck by Katrina, but today comprises more than double this number, including three partners: Allen Eskew, Steven Dumez, and Mark Ripple, AIA. Part of the firm's success is derived from EDR's commitment to build firm culture around mentorship and the development of the next generation of architects. These efforts have earned them two [AIA National IDP Firm Awards](#).

“As a practicing architect and department head of the Fay Jones School of Architecture at the University of Arkansas, I know the education of an architect does not, and must not, end with receiving a degree,” wrote Marlon Blackwell, FAIA, in a recommendation letter. “It takes the tireless effort of firms like Eskew+Dumez+Ripple to construct a positive working environment within their offices that develop skills, disciplines, and deep values to empower every intern to achieve their own measure of success and purpose.”

EDR’s wide range of civic involvement is marked by long-term patience and commitment. It has participated in any number of committees and initiatives intent on rebuilding New Orleans: the Bring New Orleans Back Commission Urban Planning Committee, the Sustainable Restoration Plan for the Holy Cross/Lower 9th Ward neighborhood, the New Orleans AIA Sustainable Design Assessment Team (SDAT), the New Orleans Civic Center Planning Task Force, and more.

“The firm’s active civic leadership provides a stimulus for thoughtful urban reconstruction as the city heals,” wrote Julie Snow, FAIA, of Julie Snow Architects in a letter of recommendation. “This kind of leadership demands a generosity of time, a patience for the public process, and a lack of self-interest that is worthy of recognition.”

Early on in the city’s recovery from Katrina, EDR realized that the endless array of committees, meetings, and councils were not as much about design as they were an opportunity for collective group therapy at a citywide scale. EDR planted itself at the center of these pained discussions, offering up design as a restorative tool and pledging to rebuild New Orleans in a way that would overcome its faults and accentuate its unique and comparatively ancient history and culture.

And for all its formal Modernist motifs, smooth surfaces, and right angles, the architecture of EDR takes its strongest precedent from New Orleans’ nearly 300 years of architectural history. Vernacular, wide, expansive porches, bungalow shotgun houses, and industrial warehouse spaces are in its design genetic code.

Reed Kroloff, director of the Cranbrook Academy of Art and former dean of Tulane’s architecture school, describes EDR’s architecture: “Rather than embracing the fundamental abstraction of Modernism as a point of departure and then inflecting it quietly toward the context of New Orleans, EDR revels in the complicated reality of New Orleans, and then abstracts it to create a Modern architecture that transcends its very particular place, an architecture that may be born of Louisiana, but not necessarily beholden to it.”

This intersection of old and new is a common theme in the firm’s use of materials. EDR is equally at home with contemporary components: glass curtain walls enriched by layers of sunscreens or ghostly blue lighting emitted from cold cathode tubes. But they can also delight in low-tech, simple materials, crafting entire projects out of plywood, for example, meticulously and lovingly folded with a smart asymmetricality. At their Shaw Center for the Arts in Baton Rouge, La., EDR (with Schwartz/Silver Architects) wrap a new glass and aluminum performing arts center around a brick 1930s adaptively reused parking garage, creating a symbiotic relationship that heightens the expression of each set of materials, old and new.

While EDR has done well with Modernism in a place generally considered architecturally conservative, this formal approach begins in a very rigorously Modernist way. The simple cube is the common denominator of their designs. EDR projects are often variations on a cube—hollowed out, sliced off, tilted, extended, cantilevered. This emphasis on a basic unit of geometry makes their architecture readable and comprehensible, offering up its aesthetic delights freely and unselfconsciously.

“Enlightened contextualism”

From their perch on the 31st floor of an office building near the French Quarter, EDR can see a dozen of their projects splayed across their native city, according to *ARCHITECT Magazine*. A few of their most notable projects include:

Reinventing the Crescent: New Orleans Riverfront Development Plan, a 2012 AIA Honor Award recipient that adds a series of public spaces and residences to a six-mile stretch of the Mississippi River, re-urbanizing it and reconnecting it to the city.

Louisiana State History Museum in Baton Rouge, a faintly distorted cube that welcomes visitors with a large covered-porch entry pavilion, framing exquisite views of Louisiana's Art Deco state capitol.

930 Poydras Residential Tower in New Orleans, which groups together public programs and amenities for this sleek Modernist monolith midway through the building in a "sky lobby" that slyly cantilevers out over the French Quarter.

Make It Right L9 Prototype House in New Orleans, a breezy Modernist house that recalls vernacular shotgun bungalows, updated with solar water heaters, solar power collectors, a rainwater cistern, and more sustainability and energy efficiency systems that can reduce operating costs, increasing affordability for low-income residents.

Prospect.1 Welcome Center in New Orleans, a welcome center in an empty historic warehouse used for an international art biennial. Made entirely out of plywood at a cost of only \$28,000, the welcome center showcases a wide range of architectural expressions of wood, contrasting a glowing, pristine heart within a wood structure etched and weathered with age.

James Polshek, FAIA, whose firm Polshek and Partners received the AIA Firm Award, has called EDR's architecture part of the American tradition of "enlightened contextualism," an example that shows for all to see that thoroughly contemporary architecture can be a healing, restorative presence for a city in desperate need of design solutions.

[Go to the December 13, 2013 issue of AIArchitect](#)

[Go to the current issue of AIArchitect](#)

[Visit the AIA Honors and Awards Web site](#)

Photo Credit

- Reinventing the Crescent Master Plan in New Orleans. Image courtesy of Eskew+Dumez+Ripple.
- Louisiana State History Museum in Baton Rouge, La. Image courtesy of Timothy Hursley.
- 930 Poydras Tower in New Orleans. Image courtesy of Timothy Hursley.
- Shaw Center for the Arts in Baton Rouge, La. Image courtesy of Timothy Hursley.
- Prospect.1 Welcome Center in New Orleans. Image courtesy of Will Crocker.

Eskew+Dumez+Ripple

2014 Gold Medal and Architecture Firm Award Advisory Jury

- Elizabeth Chu Richter, FAIA, Chair
- Richter Architects
- Corpus Christi
- Steven K. Alspaugh, AIA
- Schmidt Associates, Inc.
- Indianapolis
- Peter Q. Bohlin, FAIA
- Bohlin Cywinski Jackson
- Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania

- Linna Jane Frederick, FAIA
- Frederick & Frederick Architects
- Washington, D.C.

- Raymond F. Kogan, AIA
- Kogan & Company
- Arlington, Virginia

- Thomas W. Kundig, FAIA
- Olson Kundig Architects
- Seattle