Spartan Means, Splendid Spaces

Elizabeth Whittaker’s beautiful buildings look expensive, but aren’t.

by CRAIG LAMBERT

In the summer of 1991, as a new North Carolina State University graduate in environmental design in architecture, Elizabeth Whittaker, M.Arch. ’99, wore a hard hat, pouring concrete over rebars at Arcosanti, a planned community in the Arizona desert designed by the celebrated architect Paolo Soleri. “It was a hippie-throwback place,” she recalls. “Living off the land in a progressive, communal atmosphere. A hilarious place.” Today, as principal of MERGE Architects, Inc. (www.mergearchitects.com) in Boston, Whittaker still dons a hard hat occasionally, but now she’s overseeing the pours, and the buildings under construction are her own designs.

The hard hat suggests the hands-on, intimate involvement with details of a project that Whittaker specializes in, a way of working that she calls “extreme collaboration.” It’s a modus operandi that took form in the early days of her firm, which she founded in 2003, when “we were flying by the seat of our pants, doing these small, quick, needs-to-be-built-in-three-weeks-for-$10-$20-dollars kind of projects,” she explains. “We would be inventing the construction details right in the shop or on site with the artists and craftsmen—the steel fabricators, woodworkers, structural engineers, concrete fabricators. Every architect collaborates; this is extreme only in that it is so immediate. We’re inventing it with the tradesmen. I’ve built a practice on learning from these people—it’s more inventive when there are more voices.”

At a health club in Woburn, Massachusetts, for example, MERGE worked closely with a structural engineer to construct an undulating interior wall by physically stacking up cylindrical Voss glass water bottles from Norway, creating a reinterpretation of the glass block wall. The clear bottles nicely embody the club’s mission of health and fitness.

For a small firm (there are three on staff), MERGE has designed and/or built a considerable number of structures in its eight years: 35 residential, 14 commercial, and four institutional projects. “We make
Montage things,” Whittaker declares.
“We’re not a firm that works on a lot of design competi-
tions.” MERGE has done plenty of local, smaller-scale,
super-fast projects: for example, design and build a loft residence or restaurant inte-
rior in six to nine months from date of hire.
“They’re fast-track projects because often the client is paying two mortgages, or the rent has kicked in,” Whittaker explains.
“The budgets are crazy tight, so we have to invent on the fly, very quickly.”

That spurs creativity. For the Yak & Yeti Nepalese/Indian restaurant in Somer-
ville, Massachusetts, for example, on a budget “smaller than zero,” MERGE made something out of nearly nothing. The owner hired them to draw up basic plans—“This guy didn’t come to us for high design,” says Whittaker, grinning—and had planned to hang framed pictures of Mount Everest and the Buddha on the walls. Instead, MERGE took one stun-
ning Everest photograph, made it into wallpaper, and bled it across three walls. They bought nine bare-bulb light sock-
ets for $1.50 each and had circular mounts custom made for them (about $150); these now light a dining room and represent the Nepalese notion of the “nine eyes of the Buddha.” Whittaker and her colleagues spent weeks on ladders installing a wall and ceiling made of thin, horizontal cotton straps stretched between and around upright poles; the project ended up a net loss for the firm, but “We enjoyed it,” she says. “The food is fantastic, the res-

Photographs and rendering courtesy of MERGE architects
Winter looms, but the artistic imagination can summon the warmer seasons. Porter University Professor Helen Vendler has turned her critical skills to Emily Dickinson, and by happy coincidence, Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries (Harvard University Press, $35) begins with a deceptively simple verse:

In the name of the Bee -
And of the Butterfly -
And of the Breeze - Amen!

Vendler’s interpretation follows.

The young Emily Dickinson, in a daguerreotype made in late 1846 or early 1847
It’s a Saturday night in San Francisco. Time feels tight for Susan Lieu ’07 and her older sister, Wendy, founders of Sôcôla Chocolatier. (Sôcôla, from the French chocolat, means “chocolate” in Vietnamese.) They must make 1,200 more truffles—pear pâte de fruit, yuzu ginger, jasmine tea, and burnt caramel with red Hawaiian sea salt. What sets the sisters’ confections apart are their inventive Eastern- and Western-inspired flavors, perfected confection, and playful packaging. These truffles—some with sassy names like Give It To Me Guava and Notorious H.O.G. (a play on the stage name of the late rapper The Notorious B.I.G.)—are tantalizing taste buds and winning prizes.

Sôcôla (www.socolachocolates.com)

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