

"MY FIRST PROJECT"

Every architect has at least one "First Project" from which some knowledge or memorable experience has been gained. It may have been eye-opening or affirming, delightful or terrifying, a success or a failure, but there's a good chance it was memorable.

There are many first-project possibilities – that first tentative backyard project, before you even realized that you wanted to be an architect; your first student project; the first time you were put in charge of a building project; or that first, precious commission after you hung out your shingle. The project might have been built, or it may remain only as a set of sketches and a memory. Believing that there are hundreds of untold stories, and some drawings and photographs, Perspectives asked architects, interns and students to submit these stories and share them with our readers.

These are their stories.

1 **FRUITION**
ANTHONY PROVENZANO,
B.ARCH., OAA

PROLOGUE

In 1993 I was a student intern at Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects (KPMB), keepers of an extensive architectural library. It was common for staff to have a few library books beside their desks and my own small obsession was a 1992 publication on David Chipperfield's early works, bookmarked at the Brooke Street Equipment Store.

In 1997, two years after graduating, I was still working at KPMB, when I decided to visit two of my dear friends/university flatmates that had moved to the UK. I even sent a resume to David Chipperfield's office on the off-chance that I could get an interview while I was there.

I never heard from Chipperfield's office, but I made it a point to see the Brooke Street Equipment Store, where two things

surprised me. First it was a lot smaller than the photos made it appear. Second it had a stunning ceiling with nothing in it. It was a completely flat gypsum wallboard ceiling, without recessed lights, mechanical diffusers, sprinkler heads, exit signs, smoke alarms or anything. It was a pure, unadorned, flat, white plane. And it was beautiful.

A day after returning from my UK excursion, I met some friends for dinner at Bar Italia, a restaurant that we frequented in those days. One of the servers, with whom I had become friends, was ecstatic to see me. Initially I thought it was because I had been away for 10 days, but after giving me a big hug, she clarified her motives: "I've just signed a lease on a space down the street. I'm opening a juice bar and I want you to design it."

THE COMMISSION

Expecting to hear, "Hello, how was your vacation?" I was slightly overwhelmed, but managed to ask: "Where is the site?" and "What's your budget?"

"It's down the street at Palmerston and College, it's about 820 square feet and, as for the money, not including furniture, \$20,000 to renovate."

My next thought was, "clearly I'm not getting a fee" but what I said was, "I need to see the space, maybe something can be done." Eventually I said, "Listen, that's not a lot of money to do much of anything, if I don't take a fee and I call in some personal favours from connections, something interesting *might* be possible – but I'm including one absolute, non-negotiable proviso: you have no say in the design. I'll make sure it works for you and for your business, but as for what it looks like – that's my call, on everything."

And she (and her short-term business partner) agreed.

THE PROJECT

After the initial site visit, I pressed my head against the front window and looked inside, trying to imagine what the space could be, and all that came to mind was



a white ceiling plane, unadorned, like the Equipment Store in London.

With great diligence, I drew up a scheme that had a central bar area, a lounge area in the back and approximately 40 seats. I worked closely with the client to ensure that everything would work really well, which was a priority for me especially in light of my aesthetic directions. All of the approvals and permits were obtained, but my main preoccupation was the unadorned ceiling plane, floating over the bar. I had added three up-lights on the wall under the ceiling plane to illuminate it. The up-lights were on dimmers with coloured gels so that, depending on mood, you could alter the ceiling plane's light characteristics by changing the colour and intensity.

The clients acted as their own general contractor. Given the \$20,000 budget and the scope of work, there was never a real alternative. They hired friends of mine – a millworker to build the bar, an electrician and a wood flooring supplier

– everything at “friendly rates” and with the clients adding “sweat equity.” At times, I found myself pitching in too, painting, repainting and even paying for the paint, to get things looking right. On more than one occasion the client expressed admiration for what it is that an architect does, however I suspect many in my professional cohort would argue that working for free and contributing to construction costs is not really what an architect does.

THE OUTCOME

To be honest, the reason I excluded client approvals for the design of the space was to streamline the process. My belief was that, given the tight budget and schedule, external influences, such as the client's opinion, couldn't be allowed. And it *did* streamline things, since the design did not change from the onset. But it also created a tsunami of anxiety. In fact, right before the juice bar opened it hit me that I liked this new place, my

friends liked this new place, but would the paying public like it? Had I blown my first commission?

It all worked out. Everyone loved the place. When *Now* magazine reviewed Fruition (a rare thing for a little juice bar) they said they liked the “very *Wallpaper-type*” space. (A big compliment in 1997). Aside from some growing pains in the beginning, my client had a successful run before selling the business.

EPILOGUE

Two things happened. One, after selling the business, the client initially wanted to go to architecture school but since I wanted no part in accidentally making another architect, I persuaded her to take interior design instead. Two, throughout my professional career, I have maintained a small library of five or six books next to whichever desk I am working at, for those moments when my creativity needs to be stoked. The 1992 Chipperfield monograph is on top of the pile.

ALL IMAGES SUPPLIED BY AND CREDITED TO CONTRIBUTOR, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.