



Firm principals (from L to R): Doug Harnsberger, Richard Ford, Walter Redfearn, Lee Shadbolt, Patricia Taylor, Robert Mills, and Dominic Venuto.

Lee Brauer Photography

Remaking History

Commonwealth Architects is saving urban centers and bringing new life to historic buildings across Virginia.

By Deborah Abbey Kelly

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Commonwealth Architects started with a big idea in 1999: bring together architects with a passion for restoration and help rescue Richmond's ample inventory of abandoned historic buildings from demolition by neglect. In just six years, that mission has succeeded beyond the expectations of the firm's founders, aided by a fortunate confluence of events that included the rise of historic investment tax credits and a real estate boom fueled by attractive interest rates.

"Some of it is pure, dumb luck," says founding principal Robert Mills, AIA, with characteristic modesty, as he describes how he and Doug Harnsberger, AIA, an architect and architectural historian, launched the practice after working together on Richmond's Commission of Architectural Review. "We were in the right place at the right time."

Commonwealth's focus on urban revitalization and adaptive reuse, combined with the principals' project history and network of clients developed over decades of practice in Richmond, soon attracted a diverse array of high-profile commissions. They included St. John's Church (Richmond's oldest, built in 1741), Anthem Southeast, the Superior Building, Shockoe Place, Cary Court Park & Shop, and the conversion of Stuart Circle Hospital on Monument Avenue into luxury apartments and office suites.

The firm grew quickly, from about 10 staffers in its first year to 40 today. They've diversified beyond their initial concentration on historic properties, offering a full range of architecture, landscape design, interior design, and urban planning services. Still, adaptive reuse projects represent 65 percent of their business.

The 2001 project for insurance giant Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield triggered Commonwealth's early leap to a mid-sized firm that could take on large-scale projects. That growth was a goal from the outset. "What surprised us was how quickly it happened," Harnsberger says.

Currently on the boards are some of the most significant projects they've tackled to date. The largest is the \$80 million restoration and reuse of the downtown Miller & Rhoads department store, built in 1924, into a complex including 140 condominiums, a 250-room Hilton Hotel, retail shops, and a restaurant. They're also converting the once-grand Hotel John Marshall into upscale apartments and retail shops, with a restaurant and rooftop swimming pool. Nearby, Commonwealth is guiding the renovation of the Berry-Burk building into 32 apartments or condominiums, with retail on the lower floors. "The last thing you want to see is buildings of that quality torn down," Mills says. "Think what it would cost to replicate these buildings today. We couldn't afford it."

State and federal historic investment tax credits that typically save developers one-third of a project's rehab costs have helped drive the firm's growth. "They've really been our engine," says interior designer Dominic Venuto, a third principal who signed on a few months after the firm's formation. The tax credits mean it's often cheaper to rehabilitate than build from scratch. "We feel that the recycling of existing buildings is the ultimate sustainable solution," Mills says, since it entices people back to cities and limits suburban sprawl.

Richmond's downtown rehab explosion has just about tapped out the available historical properties that are both eli-

gible for tax credits and attractive to developers, Harnsberger says. But plenty of other historic resources exist throughout Virginia and the mid-Atlantic, which is the firm's market area.

Commonwealth is actively pursuing those opportunities with growing success. They're providing full architectural services for Lynchburg's Academy of Fine Arts Performing Arts Center, which includes rehabilitation of the landmark Academy of Music Theater and new construction projects that will incorporate four existing buildings into a two-acre cultural center with a pedestrian courtyard, fountain, and other landscaping features.

Before forming Commonwealth, Mills headed the architecture studio for the Richmond office of the Washington, D.C., firm Ai. When Ai closed its Richmond office, Mills teamed up with Harnsberger, a solo practitioner specializing in historic preservation. Harnsberger had worked for several large firms and spent five years as historical architect for the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, the agency that decides whether proposed projects are eligible for state historic tax credits. Venuto, another Ai alum, added his interior and office design talents a short time later. Now the firm is managed by seven principals.

From Commonwealth's Shockoe Slip offices, appropriately located in a restored 19th-century commodities exchange warehouse, Mills talks about the challenges to come. While Richmond's reclamation of its urban core has been impressive, more work remains to be done, he says. State and national leaders need to create investment tax credits for infill projects in historic districts, such as the six-story, historically compatible building slated for construction in the vacant space between the Hotel John Marshall and the Berry-Burk building. Such projects enable cities to "get rid of the broken teeth," Mills says.

Still, Richmond's continuing urban rebirth fulfills both professional and personal goals for Commonwealth's founders. "We're proud that we've been able to develop a niche," Mills says, "and do what we love ... combine history and architecture."

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The \$80 million conversion of Miller & Rhoads from a vacant department store to 110 condominiums and a Hilton Hotel is expected to help boost Richmond tourism.

On the Drawing Board

Commonwealth Architects is working on some of its largest projects to date in Richmond and cities across Virginia. Included among them:

Miller & Rhoads conversion – This \$80 million mixed-use project, covering an entire city block along Richmond's East Broad Street between 5th and 6th streets, will transform the abandoned department store into a 250-room Hilton Hotel, 110 luxury condominiums, retail shopping, a restaurant, and landscaped pedestrian walkways and sidewalk cafés. Completion is scheduled for 2008.

Hotel John Marshall adaptive reuse – This former grand hotel and conference facility, built in 1928 at 5th and Franklin streets in Richmond, is slated for conversion to a \$50 million, mixed-use project that will return the property to its former elegance. Plans call for 178 apartments, retail shops, and a restaurant. Located within the state and federal Grace Street Historic District, the complex is taking advantage of state and federal investment tax credits. Completion is projected for 2007.

Chamberlin Hotel rehabilitation and adaptive reuse – Located at Fort Monroe in Hampton, this majestic, 1928 structure, with 280 rooms on five acres, will be reborn as a \$50 million assisted living facility with beautiful views of Hampton Roads Harbor. A parking lot will become a 393-space parking deck, and a new, architecturally compatible building will be added. The projected completion date is 2007.

Academy of Fine Arts Performing Arts Center – Originally built in 1905, this facility in Lynchburg will be the centerpiece of a regional performing arts center. The project includes the rehabilitation of the historic Academy of Music Theater and will cover two acres spanning two blocks of Main Street.

Berry-Burk conversion – The building, which operated as a clothing store from 1928 to 1989 on Grace Street in downtown Richmond, will become 32 upscale apartments or condominiums, with retail shops at street level. The transom windows will be returned, the canopy will be renovated, damaged terra cotta and limestone will be repaired, and a parking area will be built in the basement. Completion is scheduled for 2006.

– Deborah Abbey Kelly



The former Hotel John Marshall (above) is being converted to an apartment building with retail shops and a restaurant.