

Light on the land: Turnbull Griffin Haesloop's site-sensitive houses build on a virtuoso's foundation

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Mary Griffin, AIA, and Eric Haesloop, AIA, had some big shoes to fill when they took over the leadership of San Francisco's William Turnbull Associates six years ago. Though both had been with the firm for more than a decade, Griffin as a partner and Haesloop as an associate, the firm's guiding force was its founder, William Turnbull Jr., FAIA. First known for his work with Charles Moore, FAIA, Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA, and Richard Whitaker (MLTW/Moore-Turnbull) at the groundbreaking 1960s development The Sea Ranch, Turnbull had established himself as a pillar of Bay Area Modernism. His innate understanding of the relationship between land and buildings earned him--and his subsequent firms, MLTW/Turnbull Associates and William Turnbull Associates--worldwide recognition.

But cancer took Turnbull's life in 1997. Before his death he worked out a transition plan with Griffin (who was also his wife) and Haesloop. They changed the firm's name to Turnbull Griffin Haesloop, and Haesloop became a partner. The new principals weren't worried about the projects they already had under way; it was the future that troubled them. "When Bill died we knew we'd see the projects we were working on through," says Haesloop. "The challenge was to see if we could bring in new business after that work was finished."

Now they know. Well into its life as Turnbull Griffin Haesloop, the firm is thriving. While Griffin and Haesloop never stray from Turnbull's tradition of fusing architecture with the natural environment, they're forging new paths to get there. "They're one of the few firms to come out of an office of such note and break new ground," says Joseph Rosa, architecture and design curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "You can see it in their detailing. They're building on the vocabulary of the past and taking it incrementally forward."

size and shape

Both Griffin and Haesloop first learned of Turnbull and his work in college architectural history classes. Haesloop graduated from Washington University and Yale, then spent three years at Cesar Pelli & Associates in New Haven, Conn. He heard about an opening at William Turnbull Associates through a friend and began working there in 1985. That same year Griffin, who had followed her degrees from Brown and MIT with a job at Hartman-Cox Architects in Washington, D.C., married Turnbull and joined the firm in San Francisco. The fact that all three started their careers at large, institutional firms--Turnbull put in time at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill during the 1960s--isn't lost on Haesloop. "We all got this very good training at larger firms," he says.

William Turnbull Associates seemed minute by comparison--at its largest, the staff numbered about 30 people. Even that, though, was too many for comfort. "It was hard on the office; we weren't set up to be big," Haesloop says. When the reins passed to him and Griffin, they decided to limit Turnbull Griffin Haesloop's size to between 10 and 15 people. Though they'd both collaborated with Turnbull, they'd rarely worked on projects together--Griffin oversaw the firm's small institutional projects, while Haesloop did most of the houses. That changed with the firm's new incarnation. "We wanted to be designing all of the projects ourselves," says Griffin. "That's what we were good at and wanted to do, and that's why we stayed small. We both actively design each project, with very few exceptions."

Along with houses, Griffin and Haesloop specialize in small institutional work like schools and churches. They've taken a cue from Turnbull and kept their principal rates relatively low to ensure they can each spend as much time as they want on a project without pushing it over budget. A wide table sits between the partners' desks in their Berkeley, Calif., office, embodying the shared nature of their work. The setup allows them to quickly sketch ideas for each other,

facilitating the mind-meld that needs to happen in a truly collaborative design process.

fresh start

That's right: The office of Turnbull Griffin Haesloop is now in Berkeley, not San Francisco. The firm had occupied a prime, picturesque space on one of San Francisco's Embarcadero piers for 30 years. In July 1999 the landlord, the Port of San Francisco, told Griffin and Haesloop they'd have to move out. The pilings holding up the pier were rotting, and the Port planned to renovate and rent the building to a deep-pocketed dot-com. Rents in the city had skyrocketed, and the partners scrambled to find a new office. "We were in crisis mode," admits Griffin. Not only did they have to give up a beautiful space, low rent, and a high-profile location, they also had to figure out what to do with three decades' worth of drawings, models, and plans.

Finally they found a building in Berkeley's trendy Fourth Street warehouse district that was ready to go. The rent was reasonable, the location manageable, and the building, a converted machine shop, had an open, industrial feel that worked for an architect's office. The firm relocated there in September 2000. While leaving their longtime office was a wrenching experience for the entire staff, three years later they appreciate their new digs. Most of Turnbull's drawings that were stored in the old pier space went to the archives at the University of California, Berkeley, and thousands of other documents were either filed or discarded. "The move forced us to clean up," Griffin says. "The old space wasn't designed for computers--the office now works for the way we work today."

Perhaps most important, the new location symbolizes the firm's change in leadership. Haesloop and Griffin aren't trying to imitate Turnbull--they're pursuing their own design goals that have evolved out of things he taught them. And their new address, while not a change they sought out, underlines their blossoming independence.

second-home specialists

Of course, the partners are also getting that message out through their work. "Their philosophy is similar to ours in that the designs come from the dreams of the client," says William H. Grover, FAIA, a partner at Centerbrook Architects in Centerbrook, Conn., one of Moore's successor firms. "It's not a 'look at me' kind of architecture," Griffin explains. "It's about people experiencing and inhabiting the site and being in these places." This focus on the clients rather than

themselves has helped her and Haesloop make a smooth transition from designing with Turnbull. Most of their residential jobs consist of new homes rather than remodels, and a large percentage happen in rural, weekend-retreat areas such as Napa and Sonoma counties. They've got five weekend homes in various stages of design and construction at Sea Ranch alone.

Even the full-time houses Haesloop and Griffin design have vacation-home auras about them. A primary house under construction in the Bay Area suburb of Atherton, for example, has an open, informal plan. "At the Atherton house, the client specifically wanted it to feel like a weekend residence," says Haesloop. When a project actually is a vacation home, the architecture becomes still more footloose. "People let you do things you wouldn't do in a full-time house," Griffin says. "We're getting ready to build a house at Sea Ranch in which the master bedroom is detached from the main house." Second homes keep staff interior designer Margaret Simon (Turnbull's sister) busy, because clients are less likely to already own furniture for them than for year-round residences.

As Griffin and Haesloop team up on more and more houses, they're investigating different ways of solving the same design problems. "Often there's a series or theme," says Griffin. "We do a lot of 'bar' buildings that are long and narrow, and we keep refining them every time. Or, we'll do a series of houses that are pulled apart." Both strategies help bring natural light into a home and can also serve to marry a house to its site, a key William Turnbull and now Turnbull Griffin Haesloop concept. "A lot of it is about reading what the landscape is doing," says Haesloop. "I learned much of that from Bill--he was really, really good at it."

new identity

But the landscape has changed since Turnbull's time, and the firm has adjusted accordingly. Sea Ranch, for one, is no longer an empty wilderness. "The condition at Sea Ranch has changed; it's gotten so built up," says Griffin. "There's no big sweep of coast to open a house up to. Now we're trying to create an inner world." Despite the different building environment, they are endeavoring to bring back the old Sea Ranch's modest, one-with-nature spirit, which suffered during the excessive 1980s and '90s. "A lot of the lessons of the original Sea Ranch are not the things that people picked up on," Haesloop says. "That notion of working into the land, of thinking about old agricultural buildings that sit so comfortably on the land--like Postmodernism or even Miesian architecture, it doesn't work when you just take the superficial aspects."

Building codes, too, have altered significantly in recent years. The firm just completed an oceanfront residence on the site of a burned-down house by Bay Area hero William Wurster, FAIA (see photos, pages 57 and 58). The other, low-lying houses along the beach, done in the 1950s and '60s by such luminaries as Wurster, MLTW/Moore-Turnbull, and Joseph Esherick, FAIA, hunker down into their sites. The latest FEMA flood regulations for the area require all newly built houses to be placed on stilts, so Haesloop and Griffin had to look up instead. They broke down the home's massing with an H-shaped plan that responds to the specific wind and sun conditions at the site. The project fits seamlessly into the community, even though it's several feet taller than its neighbors. The architects used the building to embrace the site, as Turnbull would have, but they did so with a situation and a strategy that were entirely theirs.

William Turnbull Associates was known for its skillful use of wood on interiors and exteriors, and Turnbull Griffin Haesloop is keeping that tradition alive. But the high price of the once-inexpensive commodity has dictated a more diverse palette. "Wood has become precious," says Haesloop. So rather than trim out an entire house in wood, as they once did, they'll specify Sheetrock for the bedroom walls and save wood for the high-impact central living spaces. Earthquake codes, which often require wood to be reinforced with metal, have made the weightless quality that distinguishes the firm's details harder to achieve. "One of the things we're always wrestling with is staying thin and light while complying with seismic codes," Haesloop adds. "The way we build is always evolving."

They've had one chance to delve deeply into full-on sustainable design: the 1998 Long Meadow Ranch Winery in St. Helena, Calif., one of the last projects Turnbull worked on. The building features rammed earth walls, a nighttime cooling system, and recycled timbers. But on other projects they take smaller steps, such as siting a house for passive cooling and heating, hiring local fabricators to minimize the fuel needed for transportation, and suggesting sustainable materials and systems to clients. Turnbull's environmental stewardship took root in building design and placement; Griffin and Haesloop's desire to make buildings themselves function sustainably represents a natural progression.

strong foundation

Just as Turnbull Griffin Haesloop made the best of their expulsion from the old office, they're trying to stay optimistic in an economic downturn that's hit the Bay Area particularly hard. Like every architect in this part of the country, the

partners have had projects go on hold. "It's a great time to build," Haesloop points out. "Contractors and subs are available when you need them." But he and Griffin are actually busier in a bad economy than they'd normally be, because more of their work than usual is in the design phase rather than under construction. They've wisely resisted the temptation to take on project types that they know they're not suited for just to pay the bills.

Though the firm doesn't do many remodels, it's in the thick of a significant one: a renovation of Griffin's historic, Gothic-Victorian-style house in Sausalito, across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. Built in 1869, her home is the town's oldest residence. This is no radical remodel--it's a subtle opening-up of rooms and cross-views, a way of bringing the house into the modern world. The changes make sense for the way Griffin and her children live today. "I wanted to be really respectful and make the house feel as if it could always have been this way," says Griffin. "I'm giving it its next 100 years of life."

She and Haesloop bring the same sensitivity to William Turnbull's legacy and the practice they now rightfully call their own.

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