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full circle

architect barry berkus is returning to his first love: design for design's sake.

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When a publisher approached Barry Berkus several years ago with the opportunity to immortalize his 40 years of architectural achievement in a book, he could barely suppress a yawn. Sure, he's duly proud of his accomplishments and he certainly has a healthy appetite for recognition. But for someone who thrives on new challenges, a passive portfolio of greatest hits just didn't move his muse. So, Berkus, who knows how to woo a client to his way of thinking, countered with another, more ambitious idea: What about a meditation on the nature of creativity?

Architecture/Art, Parallels/Connections, published by Images House, comes to bookstores and Internet sites in March. For Berkus, a dominant force in production housing and a leading collector of contemporary art, it's an intellectual autobiography of sorts, tracing the ways in which each experience has informed another in his career. What he doesn't address in the book is how each has accounted for some of his greatest gains and most devastating losses, both professionally and personally. Although he acknowledges the past, he doesn't care to linger there. He'd much rather set his sights on the road ahead.

The Wizard Of Ideas

Not everyone loves Berkus' architecture. It's not for the faint of heart. There's nothing dainty or reticent about it. It's chunky and muscular--plunked into place with bold strokes of hubris tempered by humor. It takes risks; it makes guesses about the future and how our lifestyles might change. It experiments with materials and forms. It reinvents the wheel at every turn. Even if you don't admire the outcome, you can't deny the vigorous life force it projects.

This combination of verve and nerve accounts for why many who know the man and his work consider Berkus a genius. He's the one magazines, manufacturers, and builders call when they want to tackle something in housing that's never been done. His ability not only to make connections between art and architecture, but to synthesize all he's absorbed from his extensive travels, the books, newspapers, and magazines he reads, the talented people he knows, into original and often important ideas about housing is largely responsible for his acclaim. Those ideas have resulted in many notable accomplishments for him and others, but they've also inspired Berkus to reach for a few stars just beyond his grasp.

He claims a number of impressive firsts for his firm: the first national architecture firm specializing in housing, the first international housing firm, and the first housing firm to go public. It's a tremendous trio of successes.

Unfortunately, something else has come to Berkus in threes: bankruptcy. The disappointments might have caused lesser spirits to give up the ghost, but that indomitable life force just assimilates the lessons learned and comes up with a new trajectory for the future, a new star to steer by. Indeed, his latest path may be the best. Pared down to the essentials, a design practice that takes plans only through the conceptual stage, he's come full circle to what he cares about most: the art of ideas.

A Quick Draw

The child of a mother he describes as "brilliant and creative" and a father who was "critical and conservative," Berkus encountered professional success almost from the moment he put pencil to paper. Born in 1935 and raised in Pasadena, Calif., he grew up admiring firsthand the Southern California work of Greene and Greene, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Case Study Modernists. However, when he first began college at the University of Southern California, Santa Barbara, his father's practical side ruled his course of study. He majored in economics. Somewhere along the way, Berkus took a hard, right-brain turn into design and transferred to the architecture school at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. "Architecture was a snap decision," he says, "but one I've never once regretted."

Working part-time in the offices of the housing firm L.C. Major while finishing school ignited his passion for residential architecture and honed a skill that contributed greatly to his prosperity. "I learned how to draw quickly," he explains. "I drew houses in 40 hours." Berkus' speed and talent so impressed Major he offered him the Southern California office when he was just 21. Berkus started his own firm instead, with partner Donald Haskin. A year later he was flying solo.

Also at 21, he married Gail Hanks, whom he had met in high school. By 25, he had three children, Jeffrey, Carey, and Steven, and his own design firm, specializing in production housing. It was exactly what he wanted to do, but he knew he was jeopardizing his reputation among his peers.

"When we started, housing was looked down upon," he recalls. "I lead a design panel at the National Association of Home Builders, but I couldn't do one at the American Institute of Architects. Not until Sea Ranch, Reston, Columbia, West Lake, Irvine, Hilton Head did people become interested in housing. They became interested in making a place."

Not only did many architects consider housing beneath them, they were also convinced they couldn't make a living at it. But Berkus' prodigious ability to produce plans turned the odds in his favor. "Housing as a product has to move on and off the boards quickly because it doesn't pay very well," he says.

The boards at Barry A. Berkus, AIA, were smoking by the late 1960s and production housing felt the heat. Walls came tumbling down between public rooms, entry halls began to soar, and master bedrooms swelled into suites. "We made a conscious decision to bring volume and spaciousness to builder houses," he says. "Floor plans of the 1950s were so

rigid."

He pushed for more open and flexible floor plans, reflecting the ways in which families and lifestyles were changing. His design for the 1968 development of Harbor View, in Newport Beach, Calif., was a big hit. "The houses had a room in back of the garage that could be a playroom, office, or in-law suite. And it was all built on 60-foot lots—a breakthrough at the time," he says. "Those houses sold for \$29,000; today, they go for \$750,000 to \$1 million." The "bonus room" is now a fixture of builder houses everywhere.

On the strength of projects like Harbor View, Berkus' renown, and consequently his business, grew beyond even his seemingly boundless imagination. At its height, his firm had more than 200 architects, and satellite offices in San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Washington, Atlanta, Miami, Tokyo, and Kuala Lumpur. Berkus was planning houses, communities, and towns across the country; he was designing high-end, one-of-a-kind custom homes for big-name clients; he was teaching the Japanese how to design and build quick, efficient production housing; and he was working with UCLA's School of Planning on an affordable, modular housing project. He was invited to speak at housing events everywhere, and each time he did, he picked up another job.

Meanwhile, he had moved his family from smog-choked Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, purchased 22 acres of cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and built his own Shangri-la—a dream house, art gallery, and equestrian compound in a development called Hope Ranch. He thought he was in heaven.

Paradise Lost

The bigger they are, the harder they fall. With his now public firm deep into so many markets and his entrepreneurial deals struck on the risky side, Berkus was particularly vulnerable to an economic lurch. "The Oil Crisis took me out," he says, succinctly. "All our clients went broke."

He sold the firm and, with it, the ability to practice under his own name. After eight years at idyllic Hope Ranch, he was forced to sell the home he and his family loved so dearly. With the proceeds, he purchased the right to use his name for business purposes again. "Shangri-la for my name—not a bad deal," he says.

He recouped and went on to design some of his best work in both production and custom housing, and he accumulated a long list of "idea houses" for magazines and building material manufacturers. His builder houses brought high living and wide choices to middle-income buyers. "A lot of the forms and ideas I had doing custom homes made their way back to the production house," he says. In his production work, Berkus pioneered sitting rooms in master bedrooms and fireplaces in master baths, double master suites, loft spaces, and home offices. And he continued to draw more adaptable floor plans, like the flexible modules in the high-density townhouses at Tanglewood, in Cerritos, Calif., in 1979 no lot was locked into any one plan.

In other projects, his zoned floor plans gave one side of the house to parents and the other to children, with a wide open middle in which to reunite. "We thought the way to bring the family together was to remove walls." Today, nearly every new house has a "family room."

The sheer ubiquity of his name on plans across the country caused his next business failure. "In 1972, Ralph Nader began talking about how people should be guaranteed defect-free housing. So, attorneys began going to homeowners' associations and encouraging litigation. That litigation grew through the '80s," he explains. "We had done more housing than anyone in the country. We ended up spending \$50,000 to \$70,000 a month defending ourselves, on top of \$20,000 a month in insurance, and a \$100,000 deductible."

On the heels of that hit came yet another. The savings-and-loan crisis caused a tax-law change, and several loans Berkus had cosigned for family members were suddenly called in. He lost some of his favorite works of art in the aftermath.

Back to Basics

His twin companies, B3 and Berkus Design Studio, now number 32 architects. He occupies office space on an old college campus on a hillside overlooking the city of Santa Barbara and the ocean beyond. And there's plenty of impressive work on the boards.

B3, which Berkus holds in partnership with David Van Hoy, Tom Greer, Arthur Sturz, and Thom McMahon, is blasting through a wide range of plans, from a mixed-use residential project in Los Angeles' Playa Vista development to a town plan for Newtown, Conn. Berkus Design Studio handles his custom home and pro bono projects, including a house in Big Horn, Calif., he thinks will be his best custom work yet and a new complex for the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden that's very close to his heart.

Unlike Frank Lloyd Wright, known for a few business setbacks of his own, Berkus has never had much problem generating clients. His gregarious nature and compelling visions make him a rainmaker of the first order. And so, tentatively but optimistically, he believes he's back on track. He's hired an in-house lawyer to sweep up the last of the lawsuits, reducing his monthly insurance premiums from \$20,000 to less than \$5,000. And to limit his liability for the future, he doesn't do working drawings on anything but the custom homes.

He feels he's learned some important lessons, and yet, to a certain extent, he's really just a casualty of his own success. "You know, the signature architects don't do that many buildings. The risk they're taking isn't going to be repeated," he explains. "Housing architects are creating a much bigger fabric and taking a much bigger risk."

Of course, life without at least some risk doesn't appeal to Berkus. He still mountain bikes an hour and a half up the steep hills around Santa Barbara each weekend, just for the 12-minute downhill fly. But the professional risks he seeks now are creative ones. In his custom homes, he aspires to come as close to fine art as he can, like those signature architects. (He especially admires Frank Gehry.) And in his production homes, he's pushing to give owners even more freedom and flexibility. In his design for 1997's Home of the Future, cosponsored by our sister publication, Builder magazine, he developed his most adaptable floor plan to date. In it, movable interior walls allow homeowners to change the layout of rooms at will, and mobile modules enable them to add new rooms when needed.

As always, the ideas just keep coming. He's very interested in bringing housing back into the city. He has several in-city loft and mixed-use projects on the boards right now, and he intends to walk the walk himself: He's purchased a tear-down lot in downtown Santa Barbara where he plans to design an infill home for himself and his wife. He's looking for a sense of community, but he wants the real thing.

And so, to anyone who'll listen, he's also speaking out against what he calls the cult of New Urbanism. He believes the past can serve as a useful springboard to new ideas but not a viable town plan. "New Urbanism doesn't respond to today's needs. Porches were great when people had to sit outside for breezes before we had air-conditioning, but no one is sitting out on those porches now," he says. "It's a great wake-up call, but it has nothing to do with the way we live today. There's a lot more to thinking about how we live than the geometry of street and house."