

# 2007 leadership awards

*our three winning firms find originality and humanity  
in architectural traditions of the past.*



Paul Elledge Photography

## hall of fame:

### stuart cohen, faia, and julie hacker, aia

*stuart cohen & julie hacker architects  
evanston, ill.*

within familiar forms, a chicago-area firm makes  
room for infinite invention.

by meghan drueding

No one would call Stuart Cohen, FAIA, or Julie Hacker, AIA, shy. The encyclopedic Cohen, a former professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, never seems more comfortable than when eloquently expounding on all things architectural. Hacker, his wife and business partner, asserts her views on design with the same intensity she applies to competing in triathlons. The Evanston, Ill.-based couple make a formidable duo—a fact their elegant body of work, mostly concentrated in Chicago's leafy North Shore suburbs, ably demonstrates. Informed by both modern and classical principles, their traditionally styled homes inhabit these genteel neighborhoods like fine pieces of furniture.

Cohen's penchant for challenging the status quo emerged in the 1970s, when he and six others joined forces to revive Chicago's architectural culture by staging bold exhibitions and symposia. The group—comprising Cohen; Tom Beeby, FAIA; Larry Booth, FAIA; James Ingo Freed; Jim Nagle, FAIA; Stanley Tigerman, FAIA; and Ben Weese, FAIA—

called itself the Chicago Seven, after the 1960s political radicals. At the time, Cornell University-educated Cohen—a veteran of the offices of Richard Meier and Philip Johnson—was experimenting with postmodern work. During the 1980s, he practiced with fellow Chicago architect Anders Nereim while also teaching at UIC and raising two daughters from his first marriage.

Meanwhile Hacker, who studied modern dance at Wesleyan University and in New York City, had returned to her native Chicago for architecture school at UIC. She worked in the offices of Booth and Beeby, moving to Cohen and Nereim's firm after she and Cohen married in 1986. "I thought Stuart just had this really interesting way of looking at space," she says. Nereim and Cohen eventually parted ways, and in 1991 Stuart Cohen & Julie Hacker Architects was formed.

According to Cohen, the pair "backed into" the rigorous, traditionally rooted work they do today. He and Nereim had designed a Chicago remodel—the Carrigan Townhouse—that



Jon Miller/Hedrich Blessing

Julie Hacker and Stuart Cohen's work ages remarkably well. A Glencoe, Ill., residence (above and following page) built 17 years ago still looks fresh. It uses dormers to illuminate spaces from above, one of the firm's favorite natural lighting strategies.



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used generous amounts of trimwork to delineate interior spaces. As Cohen and Hacker's partnership gained strength, they delved deeper into this idea of defining rooms within rooms by using trim, beams, columns, and ceiling height changes. The notion of juxtaposing modern spatial concepts with traditional detailing fascinated them, and with each project they gained confidence that this path was right for them. They also realized that they loved designing houses—both remodels and new construction. "For me, on the list of 20th-century architecture, so many of the high points were houses," Cohen says. "The thought that somehow houses were an art form always appealed to me." In time, custom residential projects became their exclusive focus.

### guiding principles

When their son was born in 1995, Cohen and Hacker moved their practice from downtown Chicago to be closer to their Evanston condominium. Now their commute consists of a five-minute drive or 15-minute walk to the office—a former Oriental rug warehouse on a side street. Homey painted-wood furnishings and sunlight streaming in through an east-facing storefront window help give the open studio a casual vibe. "I always wanted

an office where you could have intellectual discussions," Cohen explains. He and Hacker are quick to cite the skill and importance of their staff, who appreciate the encouraging atmosphere. "The level of communication in the office now is the best it's ever been," says designer Gary Shumaker.

Informality aside, the six-person staff faces a demanding work load. The firm creates about 50 sheets of drawings for a typical project and up to 90 for a particularly large commission. It builds numerous foam-board models in addition to computer ones. Like most successful architecture, Cohen and Hacker's completed residences seem effortless, but the designs behind them tend to be quite complex. All the drawings and models help the two keep each little piece of the building process under control.

Certain elements appear in each of their houses: classical axial layouts, custom trim that organizes spaces, views through glass cabinetry or French doors into other rooms. Influences as diverse as Michelangelo, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Edwin Lutyens, and Cohen's Cornell professor, Colin Rowe, affect the work in ways that aren't always obvious. "I think of all the trimwork we do, and the way it works spatially comes out of



Photos: Jon Miller/Hedrich Blessing

At a limestone-clad house in Highland Park, Ill., an L-shaped plan and a wide front gable help minimize the building's size—a common request from Cohen and Hacker's clients. Inside, secondary spaces, including the master dressing room (above), receive as much attention to detail as the main living areas do.



Cohen and Hacker deploy trim as an organizing device in every project, including this remodel of a Georgian house in Evanston, Ill. "On the remodeling side, we will always begin with the language of the house," Cohen says.



Photos: Jon Miller/Hedrich Blessing

Frank Lloyd Wright," Cohen says. "Substitute Georgian moldings for flat boards ... the moldings either define spaces or connect them to one another."

Though the firm designs buildings rooted in various historical idioms—Shingle-style and English Tudor new houses and a Prairie-style remodel are a few recent examples—each project represents a new exploration into how older styles can be pushed to accommodate modernist affinities for natural light and open floor plans. "For me, Corbu was so monumental. How can you pretend it never happened?" Cohen asks. "We could," Hacker adds, "but it wouldn't be as interesting."

Her dance background shows in the way both architects choreograph space to enhance clients' daily experiences. Entry halls, for example, direct users into the heart of a house with a strategically placed column or curve, while using sight lines to deliver an

understanding of the house as a whole.

Ideally, "when you're in a space, you understand where you are and where you might go," she says. "But you're seeing the bigger picture at the same time. That's always been a mark for me of a great piece of work—in art, dance, architecture, anything. So you don't just experience fragments."

## house proud

Cohen and Hacker seem to have entered into a groove with their work. Every new project presents a design situation that challenges and compels them. But, when they stop to think about it, they do feel somewhat marginalized by the architectural establishment because they work in a traditional vein. "I think most people want to feel the same about their house now as they will in 10 to 20 years," Cohen says, explaining his and Hacker's commitment to picturesque architecture. "People want things



they are comfortable with and familiar with in terms of the architecture—things that exude warmth and comfort and security. That's not necessarily true for office buildings or boutiques, but it's what they want to come home to." In a pleasant surprise for both of them, the respected local architecture writer Jay Pridmore included their 2006 Shingle House (shown at right) in a list of "Ten Modern Masterpieces" in the September 2007 issue of *Chicago* magazine, placing the stone-and-shingled cottage alongside structures by such heavyweights as Gehry Partners and Murphy/Jahn. "Spaces overlap, so the room you're in depends essentially on what you're looking at," Pridmore writes of the house. "That's Mies, Corbu, even Frank Lloyd Wright."

Though the *Chicago* piece is highly complimentary, it barely mentions Hacker—a fact that upsets both her and Cohen. They design as a team, using a routine that plays to each of their strengths. Cohen does the initial drawings, establishing a general vision for what the house might look like. Then Hacker, the more detail-oriented of the two, analyzes it for geometric inconsistencies and other potential pitfalls, pounding the design into shape. "I like coming in and attacking it," she says.

Both partners stay heavily involved throughout the construction process, in most cases visiting sites and meeting with clients together. "They really listened to me and gave me good feedback," says one recent client. "They complement each other so extremely well."

Back at the office, Cohen and Hacker divide responsibilities: He handles contracts and marketing, while she runs the business and human resources side of the practice. The pair currently has several houses in design or under construction, including one that features such sustainable design elements as advanced framing, high-efficiency systems, and closed-cell spray-foam insulation. "The



solar orientation and cross-ventilation is stuff we've been doing all these years," Cohen says. He also recently finished writing *Great Houses of Chicago, 1871–1921* with co-author Susan Benjamin, to be published by Acanthus Press in spring 2008.

An earlier book of his, *North Shore Chicago: Houses of the Lakefront Suburbs, 1890–1940* (Acanthus Press, 2004), also co-written with Benjamin, highlighted grand mansions by the likes of David Adler, Howard Van Doren Shaw, and Daniel Burnham. In their two decades of practice together, Cohen and Hacker have assembled a portfolio worthy of these illustrious predecessors. The firm's houses quietly enrich streetscapes, neighborhoods, and the lives of those lucky enough to inhabit them. *ra*

The walls of windows, double-sided glass cabinets, and framed views into other rooms that enrich this Glencoe, Ill., house appear throughout the firm's work. The architects tucked the home's entry into a corner niche, sheltering it from the elements.