

Preserving the Past, Planning the Future

Ratio Architects founder Bill Browne has a respect for the past and an entrepreneurial spirit that keeps the company growing

— Craig A. Shutt



Bill Browne, FAIA, LEED AP

Bill Browne wasted little time opening his own architectural firm, Ratio Architects, after gaining his Master's degree in architecture. Starting as a renovation specialist, the firm today, 30 years later, has grown to become a key Midwestern player in a variety of building categories. Its success has grown because Browne wasn't afraid to ask the question, "What's the worst that can happen?"

"I was an impatient 26-year-old kid," he explains. "All of us are impatient and want to control our own destinies at that age. I was willing to risk everything to go out on my own, but really, being so young, there wasn't much to risk. After all, what's the worst that can happen? If I failed, I'd just have to get a job somewhere."

Born and raised in Indianapolis, Browne graduated from the University of Illinois and attended a postgraduate program at the Preservation Institute in Nantucket, Mass. That program, affiliated with the University of Florida, led him to Gainesville for his Master's

work. He returned to Indianapolis and joined the Ehrenkrantz Group.

Two years later, he, his sister (an interior designer), two architectural classmates and an assistant opened their own development and architectural firm, leveraging renovation tax credits to generate project commissions. In 1985, Browne split off the architectural business, changing the name to Ratio Architects in 1987.

Past Informs the Future

Browne immediately gravitated toward renovation work. "I took every architectural history course I could in school, and I grew to have a great affinity for urban areas," he says. "I believe it's important for projects to have a connection to the past. The past informs the future. Contrasting a city's past with its current style is what makes a city interesting."

He leveraged that interest by specializing in renovation projects, then designing "contextual additions" to historic buildings. The firm then began doing projects in which it stripped a building to its framework and rebuilt it. That led to commissions on new projects.

Frequently, Ratio served as associate architect to a larger, national firm on major projects. "We gained knowledge by partnering with others rather than working at large firms," he explains. "That allowed us to come out of the box doing fairly large projects."

Thriving On Complexity

Large, complex projects are his favorites, he notes. "I love complicated, robust construction projects," he says. "I love urban, campus-type projects surrounded by buildings, with a lot of restraints that require a lot of thinking and complex designs. I thrive



The Ivy Tech Community College campus in Elkhart, Ind., was designed by the design-build team of Ratio Architects and the Hagerman Group. The \$16.8-million academic building and community center, which is clad in architectural precast concrete panels, achieved Silver LEED certification. Photos courtesy of MV2 Photography



Ratio Architects created a north end-zone addition to the venerable Memorial Stadium on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University using precast concrete panels to create a Gothic style that blended with the limestone-clad buildings throughout the campus. Grandstand bleacher seating also was replaced with permanent precast concrete seating.

on the projects that are in the public eye, with a lot of scrutiny and a lot of constituents to please.”

Those aren’t everyone’s idea of a fun time, he acknowledges. “It sounds insane, and it can be,” he laughs. “But I enjoy finding ways to please a variety of people and creating solutions that work on political, economic, and design levels. Those are complicated puzzles, and that’s what I love being a part of. It requires a team of people to play that game and win it.”

Browne’s early work with larger companies made him aware of the value of creating strong alliances. “Once I opened my office in Indianapolis, I realized that it wasn’t just about what you knew, it was about who you knew,” he says. “Having a network is

critical, especially if you want to build a national practice.”

Those alliances began with Hugh Hochberg, principal at the Coxe Group, a Seattle-based architecture and engineering consulting firm. “We’ve developed a wonderful business and personal relationship. Without that involvement, we would not have been able to do what we’ve done today,” he says. But he hasn’t tried to replicate that company’s success, he notes. “Rather than model ourselves on anyone, we learn from all our associations and take ideas that work.”

That effort is aided by a corporate roundtable program in which Browne participates. The 15 noncompetitive design firms around the country gather twice a year to share balance

sheets and “horror stories,” he says. “Those associations are about learning new ideas rather than trying to replicate their approach.”

Browne also participates in local organizations, particularly the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission, where he has served for 20 years as the mayoral-appointed president. “I take preservation very seriously,” he says. “And it’s important to me overall to give back to the community that has been so good to me. It takes a lot of people to make a city vibrant, and I like to tap into other people’s passions. That vitality is not all driven by the work we do as architects, even though we like to think it is. Participating keeps us from getting into our own little world and thinking we are



The new Residence Hall at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terre Haute, Ind., completed in 2012, features architectural precast concrete insulated panels embedded with thin brick. The 70,000-square-foot, 240-bed facility was the first facility on campus to achieve Silver LEED certification.

driving everything.”

His passion for preservation also makes him a strong believer in sustainable design. “It’s a natural outgrowth of preservation,” he says. “It’s an incredibly important concept, since 75% of all energy is used by buildings. I’m pleased to see that our profession has embraced sustainability and I hope we continue that to a large degree. It’s no longer a matter of choice or a topic of conversation; it’s just expected that we will do as much as we can. I’m hoping that it leads us to net-zero buildings in the near future.”

Project Variety

Higher-education and community-college projects are two types that often encourage sustainable design and seek high LEED certifications. Ratio made those categories a key focus in anticipation of other markets declining in the late 1980s. That led to work in categories such as life sciences, office buildings, residential, and cultural centers.

“Our diversity has given us a wonderful variety of work,” he says. “Each provides different challenges but has important implications for the communities and people they serve. That dichotomy and richness fuels our organization. If we only did one type of project, we wouldn’t be able to attract and keep the high-quality talent we do.”

That variety has led the firm to specify precast concrete on a range

of building types. They include the high-tech façade for the Ivy Tech Community College in Elkhart, Ind., the gothic-style façade on the end-zone addition at Indiana University’s Memorial Stadium in Bloomington, Ind., and a thin-brick-clad residence hall at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terre Haute, Ind.

“Precast concrete has come a long way, and it’s made architects think differently about façades.” Replicating limestone can be a tough sell in a major limestone-quarrying area such as Indiana, he notes, but limestone doesn’t offer the speed, flexibility, and durability of precast concrete. “Precast has become an incredibly exciting material, because it’s so plastic and affordable. Designers can achieve so much more with it today. There are still challenges in reproducing stone’s variegated patinas, but the advancements have been amazing.”

Opportunistic Expansion

Ratio’s diversity and openness to new ideas has led to expansions in recent years, in opportunistic but controlled ways. “We’ve been successful in Indiana, but there’s only so much business to go around,” he explains. “The only way to grow is to increase the pool.” That led to new offices in Champaign, Ill., in 2004, Raleigh, N.C., in 2010, and a strategic alliance with Chicago-based SMDP in 2011.

Gaining a foothold in Chicago was a key move. “We needed a presence in a top-tier city to be considered a national firm.”

It also gave the company entry into Asian markets, through SMDP’s projects in China and Korea. Ratio has strengthened those ties through an agreement with Zhejiang University Design Institute in Hangzhou, China. “I look at the top 50 firms, and 35% or more of their business comes from international markets,” he says. “I had to ask what I could with that information.”

His goal, he says, is to create a company that’s substantial and successful enough to maintain its viability without his participation. “I want to build this business so it can buy me out and continue to have a life of its own. I want Ratio to have a legacy as a business that can carry on for its people as much as design buildings that will outlive us.”

Expanding into Chicago and looking overseas are risky ventures in this economy, he admits. “I’d been thinking about it for awhile, but these opportunities suddenly arose, and I took them.”

His entrepreneurial spirit makes such risks worth trying. “After all,” he says, “what’s the worst that can happen?” **A**