AN MBJ FOCUS: ARCHITECTS & ENGINEERS

Mississippi kind of grows on you

>> Architect came to MSU for two-year teaching stint more than 13 years ago

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John Poros came to Mississippi State University to serve two years as a visiting professor in the College of Architecture, Art & Design. That was 13 years ago and the Silver Spring, Md., native is happily ensconced as an associate professor of architecture and as director of the Carl Small Town Center. He moved to MSU from Philadelphia, Pa., where he worked with the architectural firm of Kieran Timberlake Associates, an internationally known firm that is currently designing the American Embassy in London.

"When I was at Kieran Timberlake, we mostly did college and university work. I worked on designs for Yale and Temple University," he said. "One of my bosses gave me a lecture at MSU and I was impressed with it. The MSU dean asked if anyone at our firm would be interested in visiting to teach for two years. I came and stayed."

Poros met his wife, Leslie Scroynce, in Mississippi. She teaches at Mississippi University for Women and they live in Columbus with their nine-year-old daughter, Isadora.

He might have become a mathematician because both his parents worked in that discipline for NASA. However, the design bug bit Poros early when a good friend in eighth grade showed him house plans he was drawing for a drafting class. "I realized this field had both engineering and design," he recalls. "And I was always drawing."

After graduation from Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., Poros earned a bachelor's degree from Columbia University and a graduate degree in architecture from Harvard University's School of Design. The 48-year-old professor says the field he chose has not disappointed him. "In architecture there's always something new and interesting to do," he said. "I never considered anything else but was very well suited to it."

The most rewarding thing about working with the people of Mississippi and trying to make things better for them and seeing that light bulb go off when students get it."

In 1979 the Carl Small Town Center was established within MSU's College of Architecture with an endowment from Viking Range founder Fred Carl. Poros fully supports the center's mission of working to strengthen communities and promote a prosperous and sustainable future by raising awareness of the physical environment through research and excellence in design.

"I really like traveling around the state and seeing the extraordinary things, the riches we have," he said. "We're seeing how quality of life is becoming such a critical component of economic development; what a town looks like and its amenities have a lot to do with being able to bring in businesses and the kind of workers we need now."

In addition to the Carl endowment, the center is funded through grants from foundations such as the Chinholson Foundation in Laurel, the CREATE Foundation in Tupelo and the Hearin Foundation in Jackson. The past two years have been very competitive for foundation grants and Poros says it's important to find grants in other areas of the state to work with the center.

"Funding is a challenge, and sometimes it's hard for people to see beyond their current situation and look ahead ten or twenty years for solutions to problems they have," he said. "To help these towns find the funding they need to do what they need to do or find ways to work with us is a difficult."

He feels the connection of good design to economic development is obvious, and regional cooperation is the wave of the future. "We see regional planning as important. We've seen how great things happen when areas do this," he said. "How you plan is a good example, and we're seeing more of that. People are really starting to understand that. We'd like to see more of this rather than towns being in competition with other towns."

As an architect, Poros wants to push a regional approach in terms of physical environment with planned growth that prevents urban sprawl. "We need to preserve the beautiful rural characteristics of an area but identify ways for communities to grow," he said. "I really enjoy working with the small towns of Mississippi."

Although it's difficult for him to imagine doing anything else, Poros says he would probably be an industrial designer if he weren't an architect. "I would still be a designer of some kind," he said.

When not working, he's busy working on the family's 1960s era home in Columbus in a neighborhood of architect-designed mid-Twentieth Century homes. He also collects waterfowl, a hobby that began with a gift from his wife, and is a self-described coffee junkie who roasts and manually grinds his own coffee beans.