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AIA VOICES

NATIVE PRACTICES | CONTEXT AND CRAFT IN A CAPITAL CITY

Bill Bonstra, FAIA, and David Haresign, FAIA, are the partners of Washington, D.C.-based Bonstra | Haresign Architects, an award-winning firm that practices almost exclusively inside the Beltway. It's a point of pride for both of them, who see a special responsibility in working in the nation's capital. "Given the unique nature of our work, and the historic urban context within which we work," they say, "we are first an architecture firm, with strong preservation and planning capabilities."

ALTHOUGH WASHINGTON, D.C., MAY NOT HAVE A LONG LEGACY of industrial buildings like Chicago or Baltimore, it does have a rich history of architecture. Historic context is an important part of our work, and we call ourselves "contextual modernists." Sure, we're two architects and each of us may approach each project differently. But at the end of the day we are committed to designing buildings that fit into and enhance this city.

Our work is commercial grade—and there are financial goals to working with developers here, with multifamily residential and mixed-use design. We also do single-family and other specialty design such as the renovation of historic churches. The thing that unifies projects like these is how personal it is to design places where people live, no matter the scale. Taking great care in the material choices, the fittings, and how spaces reflect how people want to live and their outlook on the future is

part of the equation in all cases.

Churches are similar to single-family homes. The congregation is a single family—and it involves some very personal conversations about hopes and aspirations. What comes out of it is an intimate design, and the spaces speak about that family. Smaller-scale projects are also a great training ground for the younger architects in our office to work with one of us directly on the art and craft of architecture.

We search for ways to take a conventional element, like a railing, and do something special with it. Or take a multifamily building façade and create something reflecting the modern values of its occupants. How can we design one of those in a thoughtful way, in which details matter? Craft is about specific moves that demonstrate intent and that transcend scale and building typologies.

We feel fortunate that we practice in Washington, D.C., where there's ongoing and tremendous growth opportunities, particularly related to mixed-use and residential work. In our experience, doing urban work—infill, repurposing, and modernization—is the ultimate sustainable strategy. We have an infrastructure that can accommodate more people and building projects than currently exist. It's rewarding and we work harmoniously with a family of other design firms—design firms like ours with similar goals. —As told to William Richards [AIA](#)

