

# rising star: gray organschi architecture new haven, conn.

gray organschi's houses define the luxury of scarcity: creating richness with simple moves.

by cheryl weber, lead ap



Matt Greenslade

Lisa Gray and Alan Organschi converted a downtown New Haven warehouse into their 6,500-square-foot headquarters, including a workshop.

When we called Lisa Gray, AIA, and Alan Organschi to talk about their Rising Star award, it took a while for the married couple to start discussing their current work. There were so many tangential topics to touch on, from the relationship between building design and the matriarchal social structure in Indonesia's Sumatra, where Gray spent seven months on a Fulbright scholarship after graduating from Yale School of Architecture in 1987, to the impact of urbanization on the craft tradition there. Organschi talked about the late Italian architect Giovanni Michelucci's expressive Church of the Autostrada, a monument to the workers who built the highway through the mountains connecting Milan and Naples.

As co-editor in the late 1980s of *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal*, Organschi had interviewed Michelucci and invited to him to lecture at the school. With postmodernism in full swing, he recalls, architecture was

about image and iconography, not the technology of assembling buildings. "In his book *Contradiction and Complexity in Architecture*, Robert Venturi had denigrated Michelucci's church—he said it was too picturesque," Organschi says. "But in a later edition, he added a footnote that he'd visited the building, and that it was actually incredible. That encapsulated everything we were trying to comment on at that moment. Architects were so preoccupied with the representation of architecture that they were willing to stake their critique on pictures rather than experiencing it."

What does this have to do with a 17-year-old firm in New Haven, Conn.? A lot, as it turns out. Gray and Organschi, New England natives who met at Yale, are obsessed with the relationship between design ideas and how they are executed, often combining detailed hand work with building-scale fabrication processes that let them reinvent what architecture can be, and how it might go together. Their make-it-happen method-



Photos: Robert Benson Photography



Built on a forested slope, the Hillside House's post-and-beam wings sit against stone retaining walls, minimizing the visual and site impact.

A play on traditional New England sheds, the Guilford Cottage typifies Gray Organschi's talent for turning site constraints into a cool architectural idea.



Bo Crockett/Gray Organschi Architecture

ology gives their work its unique character. It also suits the times we live in, freeing them from some of the conventions that bog down building and opening the door to tight budgets and delicate sites.

But these techniques are just a means to an end. The pair is less interested in expressing craftsmanship, technology, or structure than in how planes and forms interact with light and the landscape, and do so with the quietest moves. In fact, they don't use the word craft. "When Alan and I opened our firm, we were very attracted to the idea of building things really well and thoughtfully, but not in an intentionally one-off way," says Gray, who also oversees Gray Design, the firm's interior design arm. "Over time we became more interested in the ability to preplan and prefabricate to create something unique but replicable."

### research based

Building has always been Gray Organschi's ethical and creative center. Organschi put himself through school doing carpentry and making furniture. Building at a small scale, he was fascinated by all the steps that can compromise design. "It's hard to muster all the economic,

political, social, and manpower forces to create a building with a really good idea behind it," says Organschi, who teaches a housing studio at Yale. "It's not like being a painter with a paintbrush. You're shooting for this high level of energy that conveys the goals, whatever they are." Occupying the street level of the firm's three-story former warehouse is Jig Designbuild, an offshoot fabrication and construction company. The six architects working on the upper floors aren't just drawing pictures; they're going into the workshop to design the assembly systems, though CNC milling and other production work usually is outsourced.

Well-known and respected among the New Haven intelligentsia, Organschi and Gray are admired for their common touch. "Their work is not cosmopolitan, pretentious, or overly abstract; it's real," says Joeb Moore, AIA, principal of Joeb Moore + Partners Architects in Greenwich, Conn. "The way they promote their work is that it's all about matter-of-fact materials and assemblies and the forms that emerge from them. But it's more than that. There's an earnestness, directness, and playfulness with the history of architectural form that anyone

Curving birch plywood planes respond to the acoustical and spatial challenges of Firehouse 12, which houses an apartment, music studio, and performance space.



Photos: Robert Benson Photography



looking at their work will sense."

An 875-square-foot cottage in Guilford, Conn., illustrates the blend of pragmatism and Yankee ingenuity embedded in their projects. Strict height and size limitations gave form to a precise accessory dwelling that does many things simultaneously: It edits out undesirable views while admitting others through glass corners and eaves, and a tipped up skylight creates head room in the loft. In addition to mass-produced sliding glass doors, its collage of assembly systems includes frameless glass templated and produced off-site, then glazed into a framing and trim system the architects designed. A plywood ceiling, folded like origami, was digitally designed to produce simple, flat planes that could be sheathed with conventional bamboo flooring. The architects also engineered an attachment system for installing the single-pitch sod roof on a traditional steep angle.

Their working philosophy goes beyond overt notions of sustainability. "There are so many things you can't account for that make up the cost of building: How do you move the plywood from point to point? Is it better to paint the siding after

it's up or before it's assembled?" Organschi says. "This is what big architecture firms are doing with huge projects like skyscrapers. When you bring that level of thought and detail to smaller-scale work, it results in a better building." Yet, he adds, "the balancing act we're working toward is not to overarticulate. We want to find the wonder of architecture without making the building feel like it's trying to stand in the spotlight."

The firm currently is thriving on a mix of residential and institutional work, including an eco-focused charter school. Says Gray, "It feels to us as though the practice of architecture is a very broad project, and we feel lucky to be involved with an endeavor that's so complicated and a core group of people who are skilled. We're not on the cusp of new stuff, but appropriately bringing our resources to a good mix of projects."

Indeed, their interest in research will carry them along for the next 20 years. "What I like about them is that embedded in their thinking is a long-range project for their office," Moore says. "They have a clear thesis statement about what their work is. That's extremely difficult to do, and they are true to it." **ra**



Photos: Bo Crockett/Gray Organschi Architecture

Roofed poolside sofas, produced in various shops and assembled on site, transform into off-season lanterns. The screens are made of latticed white cedar and translucent polycarbonate.



Photos: Bo Crockett/Gray Organschi Architecture



The architects orchestrated all the material handling for the Depot House, from the prepainted wood siding to the fabricated stairs. Its simple barn forms sit on top of the former train depot's rubble and cinderblock foundation.