
Höweler + Yoon Casts Off Traditional Disciplinary Blinders and Looks at the Big Picture

The Boston-based firm, founded by Eric Höweler and J. Meejin Yoon, relies on research, experimentation, and collaboration with people outside the architecture world.

by [James McCown \(https://www.metropolismag.com/author/jamesmccown/\)](https://www.metropolismag.com/author/jamesmccown/)

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(https://www.metropolismag.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/book_6.jpg)

Designed by Höweler + Yoon, the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at the University of Virginia is currently under construction. Seen here: A mock-up of the memorial's concave granite stone face.

Courtesy Höweler + Yoon/Stone Fabricator Quarra Stone Company

In August 2017, Eric Höweler and J. Meejin Yoon were in the midst of designing a memorial on the grounds of the University of Virginia (UVA). The intention was to acknowledge the labor of more than 4,000 slaves who built Thomas Jefferson's exquisite Rotunda and flanking pavilions, and who toiled at the university from 1817 through the Civil War. The architects were working with historians, faculty, students, and other stakeholders to determine what form the project would take. Then, like a bad dream, a mob of white nationalists descended upon UVA and nearby down- town Charlottesville, wreaking havoc and wielding torches in front of the Rotunda.

"It was awful," Höweler recalls. But, he adds, UVA is brave enough to face its own past, as one of the first universities to erect a monument admitting its role in slavery.

The memorial commission is typical of Höweler and Yoon's namesake practice (<http://www.howeleryoon.com/>) in that it relies on research, experimentation, and collaboration with people outside the architecture world. "If our studio could function like an academic institution, that would be great," Höweler says. "Architects need to keep attitudes like students—still hungry, still curious, still experimental."

Höweler + Yoon is a 25-person firm working out of an L-shaped studio in the heart of Boston's trendy Leather District. At first glance it appears not unlike other high-end design outfits in Beantown—a multiethnic staff, muted background conversations in English and Chinese, lots of black sweaters, pristine architectural models set against white walls and bleached wood floors. But its body of work exudes a curiosity that links projects as disparate as office buildings in China, a floating interactive pedestrian walkway on Philadelphia's Schuylkill River, and even urban furniture like Swing Time, a series of interactive LED-lit swings installed on The Lawn on D, a park in South Boston's booming Innovation District.



(https://www.metropolismag.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/book_4.jpg)

The memorial was conceived in collaboration with faculty, students, and professionals like Gregg Bleam Landscape Architect. “The students really wanted the name ‘Enslaved Laborers,’” principal J. Meejin Yoon says.

Courtesy Höweler + Yoon

“Charles and Ray Eames are our heroes,” Yoon says. “It’s about the totality of what they did, designing without boundaries.”

Höweler was born in Cali, Colombia, to Chinese and Dutch parents, but spent his formative years in Bangkok, while Yoon’s family left Seoul for Virginia when she was a small child. The two met as architecture students at Cornell and married in 2002, but they chafe at the idea of being called an “architecture power couple.” They nonetheless occupy rarefied positions in design academia. Formerly the head of MIT’s Department of Architecture, Yoon was made dean of the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning at Cornell University in 2018. Höweler is an associate professor of architecture at the [Harvard University Graduate School of Design](https://www.metropolismag.com/tag/harvard-gsd/) (<https://www.metropolismag.com/tag/harvard-gsd/>), an institution with a tradition of melding architecture education with planning and urban design. “I tell my students ‘Take the master out of the master plan,’” he says. “Give up a little bit. Understand what you can and can’t control.”

“They’re a firm with a small head count, but they can access the resources of Cornell, Harvard, and MIT,” says Victor Vizgaitis, a principal at local giant Sasaki Associates (<http://www.sasaki.com/>) and Höweler + Yoon’s collaborator on 212 Stuart Street, an in-progress 19-story tower bordering Boston’s Bay Village neighborhood. “They blur the lines between academia and practice.”



(https://www.metropolismag.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/book_2.jpg)

At 19 stories and with 126 apartments, 212 Stuart Street will occupy Höweler + Yoon's largest footprint in Boston when it wraps in 2021. The design, which finds the firm working with Sasaki Associates, features scalloped panels on its facade that are a playful twist on the city's signature bow-front town houses.

Courtesy © Luxigon

The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers—the UVA project—is under construction and slated to be completed in the fall and dedicated next spring. Among a handful of core collaborators (including [Gregg Bleam Landscape Architect](https://www.gbla.net/) (<https://www.gbla.net/>), which helped establish the siting), Höweler + Yoon consulted with [Mabel O. Wilson](https://www.arch.columbia.edu/faculty/34-mabel-o-wilson) (<https://www.arch.columbia.edu/faculty/34-mabel-o-wilson>), an African-American historian and designer who teaches at Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. “Mabel helped us discover things like there was something in the slave culture called a ‘ring shout’—a circular space for dancing and singing,” Yoon says. “That helped us arrive at the circular shape.”

Located on the Triangle of Grass, which is within UVA's UNESCO World Heritage Site, the memorial is an open, 80-foot-diameter granite circle and is concave, like a bowl, making it a poignant foil to the Rotunda's dome—also 80 feet across, but convex. Etched on the stone face are the names and likenesses of slaves—some known, like Isabella Gibbons, others forever anonymous. “We did extensive community outreach to students, faculty, and others, asking, ‘What do you aspire to?’” Wilson recalls. “All of them said to ‘name names.’ And so we did. One was Gibbons, who lived at UVA and was a professor's slave. She went on to become a teacher.”

Closer to home is the Sean Collier Memorial, a series of dramatic granite arches in the heart of MIT's campus. Completed in 2015, the structure commemorates the MIT police officer who was killed trying to apprehend the suspects in the Boston Marathon bombing. It is an exercise in stone compression, not unlike a Gothic cathedral. Höweler + Yoon often borrows, and sometimes upends, historical building motifs; in this case, the placement of the keystone initiated the erection sequence, a counterintuitive process made possible through digital technology. It is classic Höweler + Yoon: a marriage of methods from the past and present, a design informed by history but very much of the moment.

The Stuart Street residential tower, meanwhile, promises to be Höweler + Yoon's biggest, and most assured, building yet. Just as at UVA, the firm conceived a design schema that is an inversion—the high-rise has concave scalloping that contrasts with the city's famed convex bow-front townhouses. The design is also stacked, breaking down its scale and avoiding a single massive, extruded form. “The scale of Bay Village is very modest, and we learned from that but made the building of the moment,” explains Höweler.

Far from being prima donna architects, Höweler and Yoon are friendly and self-aware. “We don't aspire to have mastery of everything,” he says. “We just aspire to be curious about everything.”

Sean Collier Memorial

Courtesy John Horner

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