

Improving Trenton by Design

Clarke's firm has shaped Mercer County in many ways

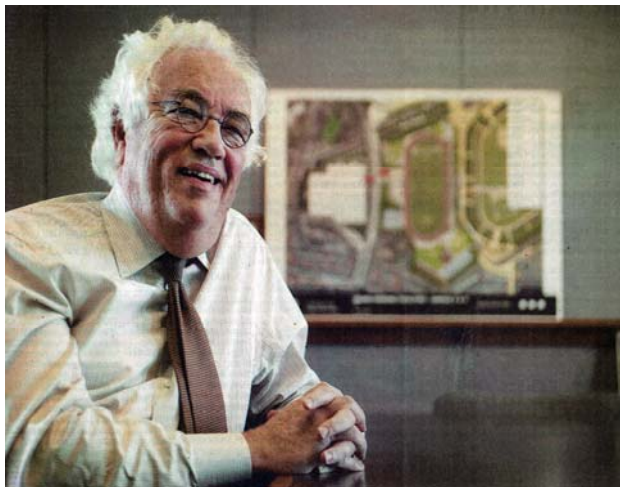
By Beth Fand Incollongo

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Trenton looked different before John Clarke came along.

Before the architect and urban planner founded Clarke Caton Hintz, the city didn't have a baseball stadium.

The Golden Swan, a string of mixed-use buildings on South Warren Street, was decaying and eventually abandoned, the historic Roebling mansion on West State Street was desperately in need of renovation and the cracker factory couldn't have aspired to offer crackers, let alone uniquely designed condos.



John Clarke and his Clarke Caton Hintz architecture and planning firm have influenced Mercer County on many fronts – not just by helping to shape the look and the uses of the area's land and buildings, but by giving something back to the community through volunteer efforts.

During the past three decades, Clarke's firm, which offers architecture, planning and landscape architecture, has left its mark all over Mercer County — not just by helping to shape its look and the uses

of its land and buildings, but by giving something back to the community through volunteer efforts.

Now, the firm whose staff has grown from three to 35 is returning to its roots. This month, Clarke

Caton Hintz will officially outgrow its offices in a train station on the outskirts of West Trenton and settle back into the heart of the city, taking up residence on the third floor of the Masonic Temple on Barrack Street.

John P. Clarke

The firm will rent the 14,000-square-foot downtown space not far from the West State Street offices where it was born, but will pay for the renovations it will make to the circa 1927 building, Clarke said — including measures to make its third floor compliant with LEED, or "green," standards.

Once it arrives, the firm will also bring home its philosophy of supporting its community an interest that has inspired its seven partners, during the years, to give their time to local organizations including Passage Theatre, New Jersey Smart Growth Alliance, Habitat for Humanity and the Route 29 Scenic Byways Committee.

Clarke has been on the board of Isles, a Trenton community development and environmental organization, and will join the board of the Trenton Downtown Association when the firm opens its doors there.

And now that its offices will be nearby, he plans to invite students from Trenton High School to intern at the company.

Because the architecture field is underrepresented on TV, it's hard to get teenagers

"The work we do in planning helps to inform our architecture, and that works conversely, as well."

interested, Clarke said. At the same time, he said, minorities are underrepresented in America's architecture firms.

Clarke hopes his internship program will be an impetus for change.

"For kids who have artistic talent but don't intend to become painters — if they'd like to make a living — then this is a good thing," he said.

It's certainly been a successful journey for Clarke, who was inspired as a child when he visited the Connecticut estate where his father worked as a gardener and saw architect Eliot Noyes building an addition to the home.

"I watched that happen, and I thought that was pretty cool," the 66-year-old recalled.

A product of Cooper Union and Columbia University Planning School who taught architectural design at the University of Virginia, Clarke then worked for the Richard Nixon White House. As part of the Presidential Commission on Pennsylvania Avenue, he helped create a long-term plan to rehabilitate the street.

"There were some funny, liberal things Nixon did as president," Clarke said, "and that was one of them."

From there, Clarke replaced a college classmate as director of planning and development for the City of Trenton. When he left that job, he and two partners — including Philip Caton, who is still on board — formed the firm that became Clarke Caton Hintz.

From the beginning, the firm was different.

"It's unusual in New Jersey to have a firm that participates in both planning and architecture at the level that we practice it," Clarke said. "The work we do in planning helps to inform our architecture, and that works conversely, as well."

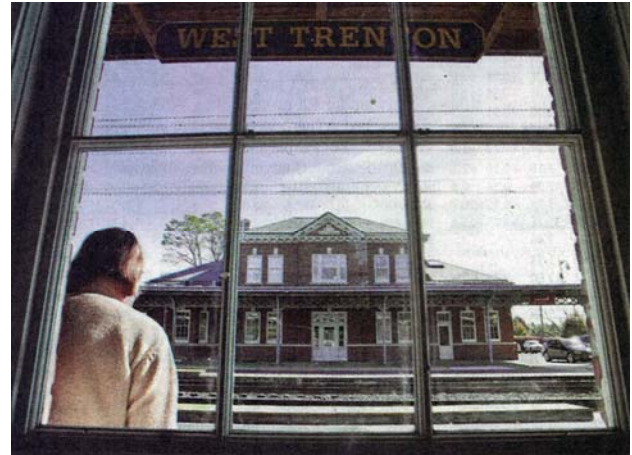
The firm tends to divide its work evenly between private and public projects, and is retained as a planning consultant by about 20 New Jersey municipalities at any given time.

It also stands out from the pack because it does 90 percent of its work in its home state and the rest of its projects nearby, rather than seeking jobs throughout the nation.

Moreover, the firm is a rare breed because it's never adopted a specialty, such as designing strictly

schools, hospitals or stadiums — although it's done its share of each.

And that's one reason the firm has continued to grow during the most "onerous" recession Clarke remembers, one that is increasing competition when



The offices of architecture and planning firm Clarke Caton Hintz, as seen from across the railroad tracks through a window in the West Trenton train station. The firm plans to settle back into the heart of Trenton, taking up residence on the third floor of the Masonic Temple on Barrack Street.

a project is up for grabs and putting many architects out of work.

But it's surely not the only reason for the firm's ability to weather not only a bad economy but changes in its own field, such as the replacement of hand-drawn designs with those generated by computers. Clarke Caton Hintz is most at home when it's breathing new life into a deteriorating urban area, and that works for Trenton, Clarke said.

"The thing about us that is particular is this interest in rethinking, re-establishing urban places," he said.

He added that his firm's signature look is to have no signature look at all.

"We've always tried to do buildings that relate to the context, to where they are," he said. "As a result, we have no preconceived notion of what the building ought to look like, and our styles vary a lot."

The firm's string of unique offices tell that story, as does Clarke's Hopewell Township home, which he designed in the mid-1990s, and which stands apart within its development.

Clarke took his inspiration from the farm that once occupied the land and built a little "village" consisting of an 1,850-square-foot, single-floor main

living space designed with the movement of natural light in mind; a detached guest house that's meant to feel like a retreat, with a wood stove and wood-burning fireplace; and a separate garage.

Clarke also designed a large garden that he has treated as a series of "rooms."

His work on the house offers a sense of the way he designs projects for clients, the married father of two, grandfather of three and avid sea kayaker told *The Times* in 1996.

"What we are doing is trying to find a way to take traditional building forms and use them in contemporary buildings," he said then. "We blur the line between what is traditional and what is modern, and we hope to create a building which is timeless in character. It's traditional, but with a desire to say something about the times we live in."

His firm's contributions to Mercer County, New Jersey and the tri-state area are significant and plentiful, and have garnered more than 100 awards, including a designation as Architecture Firm of the Year by the New Jersey chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

In Trenton, Clarke Caton Hintz designed the Mercer County Civil Courts building at South Broad and Livingston streets and Capital Center, a 336,000-square-foot, mixed-use retail and office complex that fills a city block along the Trenton Commons pedestrian mall. It also renovated homes in the Mill Hill historic district.

Outside the city, the firm has undertaken extraordinarily visible projects, including the recent design of a parking garage and public park at Yankee Stadium.

It was also the planner and designer for the former Military Ocean Terminal in Bayonne, a 430-acre site that, when complete in 30 years, will hold 7,000 homes, along with maritime uses.

And the firm drafted the redevelopment plan for Asbury Park, which has been "stalled by the recession" but will happen, Clarke said, because the city "has a lot of vacant land on the Atlantic Ocean, and they're just not making any more of that."

Clarke seems just as confident that his firm's success will continue even as he begins to farm out his responsibilities there so he can work a bit less as he moves toward semiretirement.



The Masonic Temple on Barrack Street in Trenton.

Clarke expects the firm to continue its intentionally slow growth – "better than big surges and then big collapses," he said – and to start doing more work in the states that surround New Jersey.

All that will happen, he said, despite the recession.

"Those bubbles happen, and this one, too, will pass," Clarke said. "The economy will get back, and we will prevail."