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## Noted Architects Bill and Chris Sharples ’77: Success Built on a Benchmark Foundation



*Bill Sharples*



*Chris Sharples*

**B**ill Sharples ’77 and Chris Sharples ’77 are twin brothers and principals in the award-winning architectural firm SHoP Architects based in New York City. The focus of their story could be SHoP’s fascinating projects around the world that range from the magnificent Barclays Center arena in Brooklyn and the inventive Botswana Innovation Hub in Gaborone, Botswana to the skinny skyscraper condominium complex in New York set to climb above the Empire State Building and the East River waterfront transformation. It could also be the rise of their highly-recognized firm that includes seven principals and more than 100 employees in a span of 17 years. The brothers, however, prefer to look at their education and focus on how the

experiences they had in school laid the foundation for where they are today.

Bill and Chris attended Benchmark School for a summer and one year; yet that relatively brief time had a tremendous impact on them both. Chris explains, “I remember my first day at Benchmark. Mrs. Elliott was my teacher and she asked me what I was interested in. I told her history and that I had just seen the movie *A Bridge Too Far*. She suggested that I read the book. It was about an inch thick, and I had never even considered reading something of that level. She said to give it a try and I did. That’s when I started to try to figure out this whole process of learning. I was learning to read and learning to comprehend what I read. Benchmark began that trip down the road in terms of finding things and

processes that would allow us to unlock our creative knowledge.”

Bill adds, “It [learning] is not a linear process and that’s the challenge with education today. People follow a linear path and they hope that at the end of the day you get what you want. What Benchmark managed to do for us in a short time was give us ‘the sky is the limit.’ Not only getting over our weaknesses, but learning how to learn opened a lot of perspectives for us in terms of how we would proceed. We were specific in terms of our interests in college, but it wasn’t for years after college and then going onto graduate school that we realized we didn’t have to commit to anything. We focused on what interested us.”



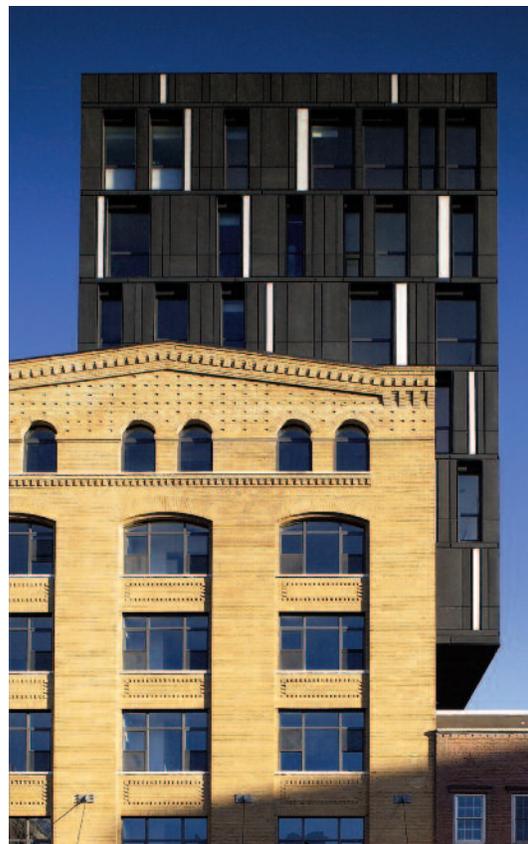
*Located in the heart of Brooklyn, Barclays Center is a state-of-the-art arena and home to the NBA’s Brooklyn Nets.  
Bruce Damonte Photography*



Chris emphasizes that SHoP Architects was built on the concept that there isn't one way or one path. While everyone at SHoP may have studied architecture, fine arts, or even political science in graduate school, they also are physicists, biologists, English majors, and musicians. "We look for all of these other disciplines to help us think about how to grow the concept of the city. I think Benchmark is all about that. Every student has their own design space or learning space and they have to cultivate that. There isn't one size fits all. When we left Benchmark we realized that we could craft our own educational experience."

The Sharples brothers left Benchmark for Westtown School. Then Bill headed to Penn State to major in architectural engineering, while Chris attended Dickinson College to study history and fine arts. They both went on to Columbia University to earn their Master of Architecture degrees and both graduated with honors for excellence in design. They lecture, exhibit, and teach extensively. Bill has served as a Louis I. Kahn Assistant Visiting Professor for Architectural Design

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*Above: This rendition of the "skinny skyscraper," which will be located in the heart of midtown on West 57th Street, shows the residential tower soaring above the city.  
Courtesy of SHoP Architects*

*Left: The Porter House, located in Manhattan's meat-packing district, is the renovation and conversion of a warehouse to residential condominiums. The contemporary 20,000 sq. ft. addition pictured in the background is an interesting contrast to the original 100-year-old building.*

R. Seong Photography

## Bill and Chris Sharples '77

at the Yale School of Architecture and is currently teaching at Cornell University. Chris is currently a professor at Cornell University, and has taught at Yale, Parsons, and at the University of Virginia as Shure Professor of Architecture.

SHoP started with small public works projects, such as Mitchell Park, five acres of open space in Greenport, New York. The challenge was to revitalize the area. Skeptics said a park would never create more jobs. “We’ve found that it does,” Chris says. “The park attracted parents and their children, then markets sprouted up, and businesses began to move in and real estate values went up.”

Their next project teamed them with acclaimed British architect Sir Richard Rogers, who ironically also struggled with reading. That plan, a master plan for a new waterfront esplanade on the East River, is a public space that revitalizes and reconnects Lower Manhattan to an incredible waterfront.

SHoP’s client list is long and varied, ranging from Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin to rapper Jay-Z to Detroit billionaire Dan Gilbert. “I remember our first meeting with Larry and Sergey,” Bill relates. “Larry’s first question was, ‘Why do buildings have to cost so much?’ It wasn’t, ‘What is the design going to look like?’ And then you work with someone like Jay-Z who is all about substance and materiality. Every project is different and it requires us to engage people on so many different levels. Some people don’t understand what architecture is about and we develop tools and visualization skills that allow everybody to be able to access the work.”

“Where it gets really exciting is when we are working in countries where they are still developing,” Bill adds. “We are working on projects in Africa. The transfer of knowledge is amazing. It gives us the opportunity to not only go in and



*SHoP was commissioned by the City of New York to transform a neglected stretch of land on the waterfront into a revitalized area that will provide recreation and community activities. Courtesy of SHoP Architects*

build the project, but actually engage the academy, whether it’s universities where we are teaching shops or inviting high school students in. For us it’s the most energizing thing about what we do. At the end of the day, the architecture is a result of the effort, but what’s most important to us is how you get there. For us that’s where all of the energy and excitement is.”

The team is now launching more residential projects. They have the luxury condo high-rise, but Chris notes that they are working on affordable housing as well using high-rise modular construction. The key, he explains, is creating something that looks like luxury, but is affordable and well-crafted.

Chris is enthusiastic about the great variety of their projects: “Our projects are very diverse. We are planning on the level of just not creating neighborhoods, but understanding the functions of what a sustainable city needs to be as the population on our planet will grow by yet another billion people in the next 15 years. These are big questions and challenges. We are very lucky and privileged to have the opportunity to put pen to paper and try to develop some solutions.”