

Lead design architect revisits NIEHS

By Eddy Ball

More than three decades after completion of the main building at NIEHS, lead design architect Richard Banks returned to NIEHS May 19, for the first time since its completion, to see how his brainchild has flourished over the years.

NIEHS Special Assistant for Community Engagement and Outreach John Schelp organized the visit and hosted Banks and his family on a tour of the building and grounds.

Over lunch in the NIEHS cafeteria, Banks, his wife Marilyn, and son Erik talked with a small group of NIEHS employees about his concept for building 101, also known as the Rall building, and the support he enjoyed from former NIEHS Director David Rall, M.D., Ph.D., during design and construction of the project.

"He was a great champion of the design of this building," Banks said. "He was behind it all the way."

Lobbying for innovation

According to Banks, it was an uphill struggle to retain several elements that usually weren't a part of government buildings at the time, especially the interstitial spaces between floors that give facilities staff access to utilities without disrupting work in the offices and labs above and below.

"The mandate was flexibility, and our response was a systems building, modular in concept, that optimized floor plan changes with a minimum of downtime," he said. All the fixed service elements - fire stairs, elevators, and the main vertical mechanical shafts - are located outside the occupied spaces. The building's aesthetic is a direct response to its function and environmental setting.

"We proved to them [our government contract officers] that it would be much more economical to do away with the corridors behind the labs and service them from above," Banks said. "They were very skeptical about it..., [but] finally they came over to our side."

The interstitial space wasn't the only disagreement between Banks and contract officers at the Government Services Administration. The mall area that runs the entire length of the 334,000 square foot building also raised eyebrows in Washington, D.C., as did the striking copper laminate wall in the main lobby, and the exposed aggregate precast concrete panels used to clad the exterior.

Banks said he spent months analyzing the functions at NIEHS. His design team performed extensive life cycle cost analyses and value engineering studies throughout the entire design process. Among the innovations he introduced to the young institute were centralized glassware and media operations, and mail distribution, both located along the mall area. He argued for the mall and exterior designs, because he wanted the building to leave a lasting impression on occupants and visitors for years to come.

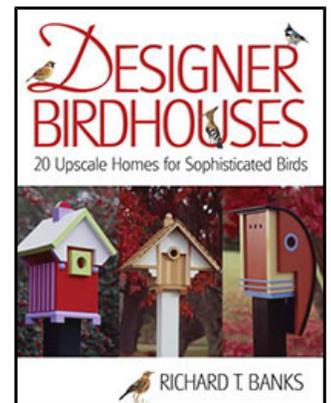
A satisfying look back

Following an award-winning, 40-year career that took him to major projects in Saudi Arabia, and saw him rise to president of Urbahn Associates, presently Urbahn Architects, his family moved to Pinehurst, North Carolina, just south of Raleigh, in 1996.

In his semiretirement, Banks pursues his passion for painting and still practices architecture, but on a specialized scale. His company, Richard T. Banks Architect, designs and builds intricately crafted birdhouses. In 2008, Lark Books published a book on his work, "Designer Birdhouses: 20 Upscale Homes for Sophisticated Birds." He is currently working on books on aging and health, and the relationship between neuroscience and art.



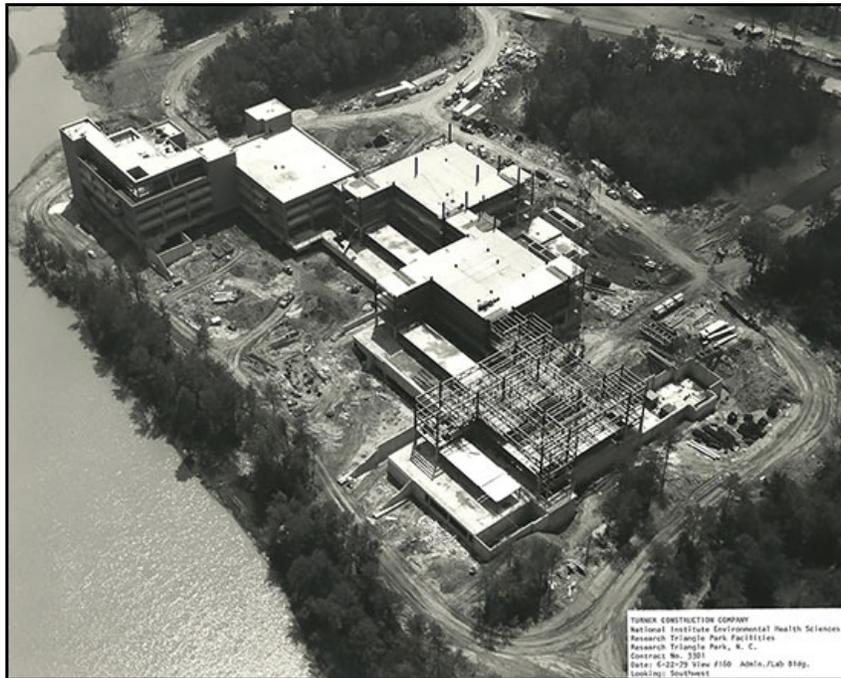
From left, Schelp joined Richard, Marilyn, and Erik Banks on the balcony outside the office of NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D. As Banks scanned the landscape, he was able to see how his former firm's master plan for the campus came to life. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



On a considerably smaller scale, Banks is still turning heads and winning praises with his designs. (Photo courtesy of Richard Banks)

Banks said he was gratified to see how well his creation has aged. When it was built, the NIEHS laboratory and administration building was so far ahead of its time that location scouts for Woody Allen's science fiction parody "Sleeper" seriously considered it as a set for the film.

"For a building that's [almost] 40 years old, I am shocked by how good a condition it's in," Banks said of his progeny. "Usually, you don't find that in a government building."



By the summer of 1979, construction was well underway, and NIEHS employees looked forward to moving from the old North Campus into the new facility. (Photo courtesy of NIEHS)



Banks designed the building to work with the environment, a quality that has kept the building fresh more than three decades after its construction. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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