As I prepared to enter Cooper Union in the fall of 1975, I was certain that, having attended a liberal arts college, having had some experience in architectural studies, having worked in an architectural office for a year and having even done some construction work, I would no doubt accelerate and breeze through the program and earn my degree in record time. On registration day, I as much as told John Hejduk this in explaining why I thought I should be placed in the third year to start, as opposed to the second year placement I was offered. Obviously amused, he suggested in his slow and deliberate Bronx accent that I give it a few weeks and then get back to him. By the end of my first week, I was clueless as to how I had been accepted to the school at all and proceeded to go through most of the first couple of years deathly afraid that someone would realize that they had indeed made a mistake in admitting me.

Everyone was so much more talented than I was. They drew like a dream. And they seemed to share in common an understanding of this secret language, “architectonics,” to which I could only relate by partial osmosis. Daunted but not defeated, I continued to plod along, searching for my own voice, suspicious that it did not reside simply in formal exploration. Until, finally, I found myself in third year under the gentle and wise tutelage of Richard Henderson. In the crucible of learning which is the “analysis” project, I found the expression of meaning to which I have come to believe the language of architecture aims. It was a revelation and a salvation, and it placed me into a journey and exploration which sustains my work as an architect to this day.

What has developed, through my projects, my teaching, lecturing and my writing, is the realization that, like all art forms, architecture—all design—is an act of interpretation. We translate content into narratives, narratives into form, form into experience. We move from abstraction to representation and from representation to embodiment, which is itself an abstract re-interpretation of content in a new form.

In our practice, my co-principals, Paul Alter (another Cooper Union alumnus) and Jo Ann Secor, our gifted staff and I seek opportunities to unearth narratives, to dig for meaning: through design, to tell the stories inherent and innate to each unique situation. We view every aspect of a project, from the largest scale planning concept, to the smallest detail, as rife with interpretive potential. We ignore the arbitrary boundaries between disciplines, determining in each case to what extent it is in buildings, objects, interiors, exhibitions, landscape, graphics or media that the strongest communicative power lies. We seamlessly integrate mediums as the project’s themes and circumstances dictate. In all of these, the process of analysis and ideation—which we often characterize as: listen/learn/distill/create—is the same.

“Design as interpretation” is an approach and a belief that is continuing to evolve in my work. I am pursuing it in our projects, in a new book I am working on with The University of Leicester in England (where I am an honorary visiting fellow), and in preparing lectures and curricula. It leads us to projects wherein we can up-end conventional definitions of program and site and meld modes of communication. It aims at enlightening and enhancing understandings of the human condition.

I have been fortunate in having my work recognized and in having honors, awards and titles bestowed. But none have been as meaningful or gratifying as two specific events, both, involving Cooper Union. The first was when I got a call from Dean Hejduk, in which he said, “Skolnick, I need you to fill in and come teach fourth-year studio.” The second was two years ago, when I stood on the stage of The Great Hall and received the Presidential Citation from President George Campbell Jr. and Dean Anthony Vidler. I was overwhelmed with mixed emotions, all centered around gratitude. Grateful for having been accepted to Cooper Union in the first place, for not having been kicked out, for not accelerating through the program as I had first wished. But most of all, grateful for how my time at Cooper Union helped me to carve out a path, a journey, which is endlessly stimulating and renewing.

Lee H. Skolnick (AR’79)

From top to bottom: Global Crossing Headquarters in NY, NY; private residence, North Haven, NY; and Creative Discovery Museum in Chattanooga, TN.