

PROTECTING THE SUBLIME ART OF HISTORY



PRESIDENT OBAMA APPOINTS ALUM MILFORD WAYNE DONALDSON
TO LEAD NATIONAL PRESERVATION COUNCIL

BY JO ANN LLOYD

WHEN HE OPENED HIS FIRST OFFICE in San Diego in 1978, architect Milford Wayne Donaldson (**Bachelor of Architecture, BS, Engineering, 1967**) vowed to retire at 45. He's missed that deadline by more than two decades, and at 67, he's still not ready to quit.

In fact, last May, he received a new, impressive title, when President Barack Obama appointed him chairman of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

Donaldson said he couldn't turn the offer down, even though the pay is minimal (actually, zero) and the responsibility awesome. "It took my breath away to hear President Obama had appointed me," he said.

Donaldson is the first architect to serve as chair in the 45-year history of the council, the nation's lead agency on historic preservation. It is not a full-time position, so he retains his

But his interest in old buildings persisted.

"Downtown San Diego was a mess," he said. "After the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, things started to take off, but San Diego got a late start."

Fearing demolition and redevelopment, Donaldson and other downtown business owners created the Historic Gaslamp Quarter to preserve San Diego's most historic buildings.

"I opened a one-room office and hired one employee," Donaldson said. "There were 25 porn shops, three rescue missions, and the businesses had security gates across their entrances. This wasn't a place I would normally open an architectural office, but it reminded me of older parts of European cities."

There was more work in the area than he could handle, and none of the contractors he found had good working knowledge of preservation techniques. So Donaldson earned his

DONALDSON WILL FOCUS ON RENEWABLE ENERGY AND PROTECTING THE COUNTRY'S HISTORICAL RESOURCES AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

job as California's State Historic Preservation Officer, which former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger named him in 2004.

Known for his award-winning historic preservation work, Donaldson didn't start out yearning to renovate old buildings. While an undergraduate at Uppsala University in Sweden, he got into inflatable structures and even lived in an inflatable "biostructure" one summer. Studying for a master's degree in Scotland, he focused on cutting-edge technology, working with living structures that could move, create food and oxygen, and take care of bio-waste.

But those years in Europe exposed Donaldson to buildings hundreds of years old. "The oldest building at Uppsala University," Donaldson said, "was built in 1532 – 40 years after Columbus landed." Remembering that building's marble steps, he said, "They had probably been repaired several times – but with the same type of marble. That was my first unconscious awareness moving me toward preservation. It was sublime."

Donaldson returned to the U.S. in 1972. Six years later, he opened his own business and still practiced with inflatables.

contractor's license and opened Sixteen Penny Construction. His reputation and company grew, with jobs ranging from renovating a 1700s adobe structure to mid-century modern, and everything in between.

In his new role with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, he has lofty goals. He wants to focus on renewable energy while also protecting the country's historical resources and cultural landscapes.

He continues to build good working relationships with the American Indians and tribal communities. And he aims to reach out to diverse communities and young Americans to engage the next generation of American preservation.

Donaldson credits Cal Poly with changing the way he thinks about life. "I always wanted to be an architect, mostly because of the buildings I saw," he said. "Cal Poly gave me a holistic way of thinking."

A modest man, Donaldson insists he has been blessed. "I was in the right place at the right time."

And about that retirement? Well, it'll just have to wait. □