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## What's the big idea?

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By BOB KEYES, Portland Press Herald Writer

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YARMOUTH - Mitchell Rasor has a mantra: No pain, no Maine. As a young designer, landscape architect and multi-media artist, the 38-year Rasor understands how difficult it is for someone like him to make a living in a place like Maine.

"You can succeed, but extra effort is required," said Rasor, who runs MRLD, which he describes as "a scrappy Generation X design office" in Yarmouth. "You have to go the extra nine yards to make it work here, and that is what we are doing. I can relate to people in The County, who make wreaths and work three jobs to make ends meet."

Rasor embodies that notion. No simple shoebox holds him in.

You can call him a landscape architect, but that tells only part of his story. He's also a designer, but that doesn't account for his accomplishments as a musician.

He's a Web master, writer, sculptor, photographer and all-around 21st-century Renaissance man.

His work is visible throughout greater Portland. Rasor designed the sculpture courtyard at the Preble Street Teen Center on Cumberland Avenue, the park at Bug Light in South Portland and is working on the first phase of the Clark's Pond Watershed Trail in South Portland.

Among his recent projects was the new Presumpscot Estuary exhibition at the Maine Audubon Environmental Center in Falmouth. He redesigned the space, using the column grid of the building as a tidal clock to explain and amplify the tidal cycle of the adjacent estuary.

"He's absolutely ingenious in his thinking," said Portland actor Tavia Gilbert, who hired Rasor to design her Web site



Staff photo by Jack Milton

Mitchell Rasor's creative solutions across a range of disciplines have won him kudos from many corners, from prestigious architecture associations to music critics. In addition to leading a "scrappy Generation X design office" in Yarmouth, he dabbles in writing, photography and sculpture. And he is working on a new music CD for release in 2007.

and ended up becoming his friend.

"He has reached a level of trust in his own creative impulses, he gives himself permission to think and create as he wants. In a place like Maine, people like Mitchell can have a real impact and expand the aesthetic sense of the place."

A one-time indie-rock hero who never completed high school but still managed to get a Harvard education, Rasor settled in Yarmouth to raise his family and pursue his passion for design that incorporates elements of ecology, landscape urbanism, public art, architecture and affordable housing.

He loves designing public spaces and is especially interested in projects that serve people in need.

He and his wife came to Portland to visit more than a decade ago, fell in love with the place and opted to make their stand here. They live with their twin girls in a house just off Main Street that's attached to the MRLD office, which Rasor designed and built to blend in with the existing structure.

He opened his office six years ago and now is considered one of Maine's bright young minds.

Rasor and MRLD were part of the winning team in the 2006 Maine AIA Design Excellence Awards for their work on the Preble Street Resource Center, completed in conjunction with Portland architect Jim Sterling.

Rasor's firm also won the Maine Association of Planners project of the year for its design of Lupine Terrace in Camden, a work-force housing project. The New England American Planning Associates just named Lupine Terrace its project of the year.

In 2004, the Museum of Modern Art in New York named him one of America's top 20 emerging young architects, and Boston Society of Architects selected him as one of four jurors to judge its 2006 Honor Awards.

#### 'COMPLEXITIES AND QUIRKS'

His work stands as a leading example of the elusive creative economy that Maine politicians and policymakers like to promote, and he represents a new generation of Maine thinkers.

Rasor's approach is always less is more - he likes to accent what's already there, instead of reinventing and rebuilding.

"Every project, be it a garden, a plaza or an urban design, has complexities and quirks, and you don't want to smooth off the rough edges, limiting the potential for something unexpected," said Rasor.

"There is always a process of exploration and then refinement, or maybe a better word is definement."

Rasor is part of a growing cadre of young designers in greater Portland who are leaving their mark by bringing new sensibilities to community design, said Sterling, the Portland architect who tapped Rasor's expertise on the Preble Street project.

He didn't know Rasor before the two collaborated on the resource center. Sterling called Rasor to help with the courtyard because he was impressed with Rasor's credentials.

"I got this fantastic resume and portfolio of work. I thought, 'This guy is amazing.' Turns out, he was in Yarmouth, which startled me," Sterling said.

"I thought he was in Boston or Cambridge or some place like that."

Rasor brought sensitivity, balance and understanding to the project, Sterling said.

The courtyard serves a specific purpose for clients of the resource center. But it's also very much a public space, part of the fabric of



Staff photo by Jack Milton

Mitchell Rasor shows a project to visiting architects Geo Johnston, left, and John Puff. Rasor and his design firm, MRLD, teamed with Portland architect Jim Sterling to win a 2006 Maine AIA Design Excellence Award for their work on the Preble Street Resource Center.

#### BIO

MITCHELL RASOR

AGE: 38

RESIDENCE: Yarmouth

FAMILY: Wife, Landis Hudson; twin daughters, Pie and Lulu.

EDUCATION: Harvard University, master of landscape architecture, 1994; Oberlin College, English and environmental arts, 1989; Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, 1988; Institute for American Studies, Aix-en-Provence, France, 1987.

QUOTE: "I realize that for the field I am in, I'm just really on the threshold of my most productive years of my life."

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downtown Portland, Sterling said.

"The courtyard was crucial, because it was so public. People drive by it on the way to work," Sterling said.

In awarding the AIA Maine Design Excellence Award, jurors said of the project, "It is an exceptional urban response to a challenging program using modest means. The project creatively reuses existing structures and incorporates such details as the bright colored lanterns to create a sense of welcome and presence."

Through MRLD, Razor tries to bring together different disciplines and blend boundaries.

It hasn't been easy.

"The main challenge of a Generation X designer in Maine is developing the trust of decision makers to win commissions, particularly for my office, which does not provide bland solutions. Young designers also tend to have small-budget projects. You have to be creative with what you are given," he said.

#### A NASCAR TRACK FOR BRUNSWICK

A good example of his bold solutions came when he was asked to suggest ideas for the future use of Brunswick Naval Air Station in Brunswick, following the base closure.

Among his ideas: Moving the American base at Guantanamo Bay to Brunswick to attract defense dollars and foster "greater national and international accountability for the war on terror."

His other idea was building a NASCAR race track.

"Both ideas take advantage of existing infrastructure, site access and the market," he said.

Because of the fluid and diverse nature of his work, Razor cobbles together a staff of coworkers that grows and shrinks depending on the size and complexities of his projects. The come-and-go nature of the work suits his colleagues, said Razor, noting that many of them, like him, pursue many professional interests.

"On any given day, we might be doing some Web design, designing a garden, working on a master plan for a city, or doing some editing or writing. It changes all the time," said Razor.

The approach satisfies his lifestyle, but creates economic challenges, he said.

"Maine has a small economy and a large boomer population, which puts the squeeze on younger designers like myself, not just trying to make a living, but trying to make an impact," he said.

"This is important for all of Maine, because we need an inclusive economy allowing new ideas to enter the mainstream."

Razor juggles many things at once. He recently mounted an exhibition of his photography. He also dabbles in filmmaking and sculpture.

#### AND THEN THERE'S THE MUSIC

His largest outside interest is music. Razor has released an astounding 18 albums and CDs on various music labels in the United States and overseas. He has been in bands, toured and won praise from mainstream and indie-rock press.

Presently, Razor is working on a new CD for release in 2007.

For Razor, music remains art for art's sake - something he does strictly for personal pleasure.

Among his biggest fans is Portland businessman Percy Wheeler.

Wheeler, who is married to Gilbert, runs a Bramhall Square bike shop, Percy Cycles. He hired Razor to design his Web site, and ended up getting much more.

Razor helped Wheeler through a long process of searching for a new location for the shop, drawing up floor plans and ideas and encouraging him each step of the way.

In the end, Wheeler decided to expand next door to his existing shop. Razor designed the space, suggested colors and helped create display walls. He worked with Wheeler on the concept and overall vibe, even getting involved in planning the shop's grand opening.

He encouraged Wheeler to aim for something other than a traditional bike shop, urging him to create a sense of community as well.

Wheeler followed the advice.

Percy Cycles also doubles as an art gallery and community gathering spot, with seats in the window and free coffee, so people can watch the action outside on Congress Street.

"He thinks people first and commerce second," said Wheeler.

"We need more designers like him downtown. He thinks outside the box, and it's not always going to be that same monotony."

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