

THE PHOENIX

Real time savers

Whither wristwatches?

By GEORGIANA COHEN | December 17, 2008



Breaking news: scientists have eradicated the social malady known as "watch tan." The cure, of course, was the advent of the cell phone. With more and more people flipping open their Razrs and such to check the time, rather than consulting a quaint mechanized bundle of quartz or springs and gears fastened to their arms by leather straps, it's only a matter of time before the wristwatch becomes a vintage affectation rather than a critical accessory.

Enter Keith Moskow and Robert Linn, principals of the Boston architectural firm Moskow Linn, whose projects include the recently dedicated 9/11 memorial at Logan International Airport. The two have launched the Thousand Watch Project in hope of creating a monument that will prove — wait for it — timeless.

When Moskow graduated from college in 1983, his parents gave him a nice watch, which shortly took a fatal bath in the washing machine. But he held onto it, and to other broken watches, through two and a half decades and half a dozen moves. Looking over the amassed collection, he wondered: why? Then he noticed none of his younger employees even wore a wristwatch. The era of the wristwatch, which began less than a century ago, seemed to be winding its way toward obscurity.

"With cell phones," he says, "it's reverting back to pocket watches, in a funny way."

A few years ago, Moskow — who became a loyal Swatch man after traveling to Switzerland in the mid 1980s — put his old watches in a cigar box and brought them into the office. Linn then brought in a broken watch his late father had given him. The collection began humbly, but when it reached 30, the partners — inspired by the guy who traded up from a red paper clip to a house, and the intrigue of Institute of Contemporary Art director Jill Medvedow — decided to "go viral." This past summer, they built a Thousand Watch Project Web site (moskowlinn.com/tkwp) and posted ads on Craigslist pages around the world soliciting other people's watches.

"Every three or four days we get a watch in the mail," says Moskow. "It's the highlight of the day."

Each watch is then tagged, inscribed with a short donor-supplied epitaph, photographed, and uploaded to the Web page. "A kind heart," reads one. "Used for timed writing exercises," reads another. Several dozen of the watches in the collection, which now numbers just shy of 400, were donated by "J.R.," a retired jeweler who met Moskow in the parking lot of Somerville's Home Depot to dump off all the watches he'd been unable to repair over the years.

One of the more interesting submissions came from an Australian man who heard about the project on the radio and sent in a watch that had recently stopped running, 30 years after he acquired it while backpacking in Europe.

"I couldn't bear the thought of my watch ending up on a rubbish tip somewhere, and I thought your project would bring its usefulness as a timepiece to [a] dignified end," wrote Shane Hughes. "RIP, you'll always remind me of my youth," read his watch's epitaph.

When the collection reaches a thousand, Moskow and Linn plan to exhibit the watches dangling from the linings of 20 trench coats, in the tradition of the archetypal hot-merchandise street vendor, before donating the collection to the Smithsonian. Not that the Smithsonian sees it coming.

"Something tells me it's weird enough that they might like it," says Moskow.

But this is more than just a collection. Moskow hopes to answer the question of why it is difficult for people to throw out their old wristwatches. One theory is that, since the watch rests so close to the skin, "it becomes a part of you." But maybe it's not about the watch. Maybe it's about all the moments of one's life those hands ticked down, and that's why it's hard to let go.

Whatever the case, while the wristwatch may take a licking, thanks to Moskow and Linn, its legacy will keep on ticking.

You can immortalize your own watch by mailing it to:
Moskow Linn Architects, 88 Broad Street, Boston, MA 02110.
See moskowlinn.com/tkwp for details.