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Remarks Regarding History of the School of Architecture, Syracuse University

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Paul Malo, Professor Emeritus Slocum Hall 17 March 1994

This is the hundred and twentieth anniversary of Architecture at Syracuse University. We are one of the oldest schools in the nation.[1]

Syracuse University, during its first academic year, 1872-73, invited Dr. George Fisk Comfort, a native of Syracuse who had studied abroad, and whose advocacy gave impetus to founding of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, to give a series of lectures on the Fine Arts.[2] Due largely to his influence, the next fall, in autumn of 1873, the first College of Fine Arts in the United States was established at Syracuse University. At the beginning it had two departments: Painting and Architecture.

From the outset, the stated mission of Architecture program was to give "systematic and progressive instruction in the theory, history and practice of Architecture." A four-year program awarded the Bachelor of Architecture degree, the first in the nation.

Which came first, the school or the architect? Do schools make architects, or architects make schools? The egg and chicken are interdependent. The Architecture program at Syracuse did not begin, as we might think, by the University administration engaging a faculty of teachers of Architecture. There were none. From the outset, the program was built upon participation of practicing architects, who contributed their time and effort, *gratis*.[3] The architects considered it their professional obligation to continue the profession, by passing on to a coming generation the benefit of their experience.[4]

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1 As I recall, ours was the fourth program in the nation. Ours was the first created by a wholly private university, as the others were public-supported Land Grant institutions.

2 Much of the early history of the School was summarized in two articles by the distinguished alumnus, Dwight James Baum, architect of Hendricks Chapel and the Maxwell School buildings. "How Should We Teach Architecture" appeared in *Architecture*, v. 72, November 19, 1935; "Architectural Training at Syracuse" appeared in *Pencil Points*, v. 21, February 1940.

3 Professors on the Architecture faculty were also expected to contribute professional services to the University *gratis*. Many campus buildings were designed by faculty without fee.

4 This notion prevailed until fairly recent times. Only towards the end of the twentieth century did American schools of architecture typically become almost

EDUCATION FOR ARCHITECTURE AT SYRACUSE [1873 - 1963]

Since the study of architecture was begun here in 1873, having been preceded a few years by the introduction of courses at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Illinois and Cornell University, its character has changed in a number of ways. With each change something has been gained—and something has also been lost. This summary will present one observer's conclusions, without, it is hoped, unduly emphasizing the illusion of "the good old days" or the illusion of "progress." It will not attempt to resolve problems of long standing, about which opinions differ to this day.

Although the profession of the "master builder" is very old it has been divided into specialized fields only in modern times. The profession of architecture is distinct from that of civil engineering now, yet 150 years ago the practice of Latrobe embraced both. As late as the 1870's an architect was not readily distinguishable from a builder, nor was the nature of his services clearly established, and only in the 20th Century have legal requirements for architectural practice been put into effect. Before collegiate schools began to teach architecture the profession was filled by men who had gained experience in building construction or in working under established architects; often they had received a liberal college education as well. A few had studied in European schools of architecture or technology, and it was they who, in large measure, established the curricula of American schools upon the principles and methods of the Polytechnic at Karlsruhe, the Bau-Akademie at Berlin and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Paris. European courses were not adopted bodily, however; their features were combined with existing American college subjects and modified to suit professional practices—by practical men. At first architectural curricula in

American colleges took several different directions: 1) a liberal education with a few technical courses added, 2) a technical education based largely on German models, and 3) an education largely oriented toward the fine arts, as at Syracuse. Before long the "art and science of design" exemplified by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts assumed an important place in most of the schools. These elements, to which were added features of American engineering education, were fairly well blended in the curricula of the nine collegiate schools of architecture in the United States by the end of the 19th Century. The degree of emphasis appropriate to each element is still disputed.

The College of Fine Arts—the first in the United States to grant a degree—was formed in 1873 and offered Courses in Painting and Architecture; later Music was added. Students enrolled in architecture were taught architectural drawing (which apparently included design), freehand drawing and painting, mathematics, construction, foreign languages, history, sciences and art history. Architectural subjects were taught at first by two volunteers, architects Archimedes Russell and Joseph Lyman Silsbee, both of whom were fine draftsmen and designers, as well as practical men then near the beginning of long and successful careers. Painting was also taught by practicing artists. This set a pattern which has persisted. The great majority of teachers since then have actively engaged in practice, being first of all architects devoted to the profession, who considered teaching as only one part, although an important one, of a whole career.

By the 1890's the number of Americans who had studied in Paris was such that a Society of Beaux-Arts Architects was founded in New York. The convictions of

these men and the influence of the institution which came to be called the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design (BAID) did much to modify architectural education and practice. It is now fashionable for persons with little actual knowledge of the BAID to condemn it in toto but in its time it fulfilled a useful purpose. The BAID was not a school itself; it organized a comprehensive program of design study which was widely used in architectural schools and by draftsmen in offices as well. It issued programs and held judgements, thus bringing students all across the country into direct competition with each other. This kind of competition helped raise the standards of poorer schools and develop a feeling of nation-wide solidarity among students. It also put a premium on concentrated design study, draftsmanship and techniques of presentation. The project or problem-solving method of study became firmly established; it characterizes most architectural education today. The "esquisse"—a nine-hour committal sketch—which initiated each design project, encouraged the student to analyze the basic elements of a problem and make an early choice of the direction he would follow in its solution and development. He was prepared to do this by preliminary research on the type of building involved, although the specifics of the program were not divulged until it was actually issued. The esquisse method had some drawbacks but its value was such that no adequate substitute has yet been found. Strong competitive feeling eventually led to excesses and abuses, so that in the 1930's when the BAID type of design study was rapidly declining, it was referred to as "architectural football."

Syracuse during these decades followed a pattern similar to that of many other schools, participating in the BAID competitions and receiving its share of the

awards; especially in the measured drawing category there were numerous medals. Probably among all of the teachers of this time Fred Lear most closely personified the Beaux-Arts ideal. The curriculum in 1925 gave great emphasis to architectural design, drawing and theory, but included a substantial amount of mathematics, construction, freehand drawing and history of architecture, with a smattering of other subjects, some of which, like stereotomy and history of ornament, reflected conditions then current, but have now become extinct.

The great depression of the 1930's, which brought the practice of architecture to a virtual halt for several years, also marked a turning point in education for the profession. The depression itself was not so much a cause as a time for the release of pressures which had been building up. European "modernism" in painting and architecture had been developing from early in the 20th Century but only small and superficial traces of it had appeared in American architecture. The German Bauhaus of the 1920's brought teachers of a new kind into the field of art education. "Abstract" artists, industrialists and architects sought a direct approach encompassing the new materials, techniques and objectives of industrial mass production, and making use of discoveries by "form psychologists." They attempted to break away completely from traditional concepts of art and architecture, although not from discipline. A new vocabulary of form and space was worked out at the Bauhaus before the rise to power of Adolf Hitler, and with the dispersal of its teachers by the reactionary art philosophy of the Third Reich its "basic design" approach began to modify architectural study in the United States. The teachings of Walter Gropius at Harvard University are so widely known that they need not be explained here.

The change from a four-year to a five-year curriculum at Syracuse took place in about the same way as at other schools. The four-year term of architectural study came increasingly under attack during the 1920's: if technical courses were adequate to meet the needs of an increasingly complex building technology there was insufficient time for academic subjects. Architectural study was too narrow, it was said; graduates lacked a balanced education. A number of colleges offered two specialized options——architecture and architectural engineering, later called design option and structural option. This helped achieve technical competence but it contributed little to educational balance. At a number of schools students were encouraged to elect additional studies and lengthen their course to five years. In the 1930's a five-year curriculum became mandatory; to the four years of technical studies was added a year of "general" study. The resulting four-to-one ratio has been a kind of "sacred cow" ever since.

In 1934 L. C. Dillenback came to Syracuse to teach architectural design; he was soon placed in charge of the Department of Architecture, which later became a School. He later became Dean of the College of Fine Arts and continued as Director of the School. The curriculum in architecture was revised completely and other important changes were made; at this time freehand drawing and design, history and theory of architecture, and structural systems, subjects which had formerly been studied in other divisions of the university, were brought into the School of Architecture and devoted exclusively to its students. Instead of studying the structure of bridges, for example, in a class with civil engineers, students now studied the structure of buildings in a class made up entirely of architects. Another major concept introduced by Dean Dillenback

[illegible] the fifth year should be one of transition from school to practice. [illegible]ticular, the practice problem and the thesis, each depending on a fusion [illegible]esign, construction and mechanical equipment, force the senior to use his initiative and to apply everything he has learned during the preceding four years to an individual job. The entry into professional practice after graduation has been well prepared.

The idea of accreditation took some time to germinate. For some time the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) had functioned as a unifying agency without any attempt to regulate its members, but in 1930 it secured a grant from the Carnegie Corporation to make a study of methods and standards of architectural education. This constituted a first step toward accreditation but final action was not taken until the mid 1940's with the formation of the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB). It gave equal representation to the ACSA, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB). Accredited schools are re-examined at five-year intervals, or at shorter intervals, in some cases. The NAAB has done much to encourage higher standards but it has been unable entirely to avoid adopting the average as a safe objective. It is difficult to achieve balance between experience and experimentation. One cannot be certain that the system will prove to be flexible enough to meet the needs of changing times; at least the NAAB is aware of the danger of becoming "frozen" and is trying to avoid it.

In recent years there have been strong indications that five years in college are not enough to prepare a student for architecture. For one thing, an ever-increasing number of people attend college, raising the level of education among the general public. The professional man must be educated as well as others, and in addition he must learn his specialty, which has become increasingly demanding. Since D. Kenneth Sargent became Dean of the School of Architecture in 1959 this problem has been attacked in two ways: the development of graduate programs—preferably for students with several years of practical experience—and introduction of a six-year option in collaboration with the College of Liberal Arts. Those who elect the six-year combined degree program receive an additional year of liberal subjects chosen from science, mathematics, philosophy, history, language and comparable fields. Since its inception the six-year program has gained wide acceptance and gives every indication of becoming the normal program at Syracuse. The following table offers a comparison between this curriculum and earlier ones.

	1873 (4 yrs)	1925 (4 yrs)	1963 (6 yrs)
Arch. Design, Drawing, Theory	23%	42%	32%
Freehand Drawing, Painting	19%	11%	6%
Mathematics, Construction	17%	19%	19%
Science	7%	1%	4%
Foreign Languages	17%	7%	-
English	-	4%	6%
History	7%	-	-
History of Architecture, Art	4%	10%	10%
Other academic subjects	6%	-	7%
Electives	-	-	11%
Mechanical Equipment	-	3%	3%
Specifications, Office Administration	-	3%	3%

Enrollment in architecture at Syracuse has always been relatively small. After the beginning years it remained between 20 and 30, rising to about 40 by the 1930's. Naturally, times of war and depression brought about fluctuations. By 1940 there were about 70 students but the advent of World War II quickly reduced the number to 20. After the war an influx of veterans raised the enrollment to about 150, approximately the present undergraduate total, which is maintained as a matter of policy. Graduate students in architecture, and especially in regional planning, now number 15 or 20.

A few personal conclusions about architectural education in the United States may be permitted. Generally studies have reflected the aims and standards of the whole profession, ocassionally leading and sometimes following. The last several decades, however, have brought changes of a more revolutionary nature than is commonly recognized. The profession of architecture and the schools have increasingly admitted to positions of leadership men oriented toward promotional and sensational, but superficial, ideals. Standards of architecture have become confused; fashionable "heroes" have received wide acclaim and attracted flocks of impressionable young men who have not had time to develop the maturity of judgement needed to distinguish theory (talk) from substantial and responsible achievement. This confusion comes at a time when gigantic building programs are anticipated—programs of a scale to challenge a profession in full health. I fear that things will get worse before they get better.

Harley J. McKee

Harley J. McKee, April 9, 1964.