

Battling The Beaux-Arts: The Student Campaign for Modernism at the University of California

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INTRODUCTION

When Warren Perry became director of the architecture school at the University of California at Berkeley in 1927, it was considered one of the more progressive and prestigious programs in the nation. Students came as far as New York and Boston for a rigorous curriculum based on the methods of the Parisian Ecole des Beaux-Arts and to have contact with notable Bay Area architects such as John Galen Howard and Bernard Maybeck. Graduates of the program expected and often received positions with leading architectural firms in the nation. Yet by the time Perry stepped down as dean in 1950 the school was no longer on the vanguard of architectural education and had lost much of its reputation. While many of the leading architecture schools in the United States had overhauled their programs between 1930 and 1950, Berkeley remained committed to the ideals and design strategies of the Ecole.¹

The history of architectural education in the United States during the middle third of the twentieth century often focuses on those schools that were the earliest to shift from the methods of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts to those advocated by modernist architects. This essay, however, examines an institution that clung to the aesthetic vision of the Ecole and how that course of action eventually soured relations between students and faculty at Berkeley. More importantly, this essay examines the part that discontented students played in the transformation of architectural education at Berkeley. While changes in curriculum at most schools were triggered from above by administrators and professors, architecture students at Berkeley played a more significant role in the hiring of William Wurster, a committed modernist, as dean in 1950. Presaging the more radical student protests at Berkeley in the 1960s, architecture students in the 1930s and 1940s challenged their professors in the studios and vigorously campaigned for a new curriculum in meetings with top university administrators.

Yet the events at Berkeley can be seen as another demonstration of the enormous power that department chairpersons maintained over schools of architecture. For more than two

decades, students and younger faculty had demanded a curriculum that stressed the architect's role in addressing contemporary social problems. Yet Perry still managed to block any major deviation from Beaux-Arts methods. Like the changes instituted by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology or those by Walter Gropius at Harvard, wholesale changes could only be made at Berkeley with the installation of a new dean.²

THE BEAUX-ARTS AT BERKELEY

The methods of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts were brought to Berkeley by its first dean, John Galen Howard. Howard came to the Bay Area in 1901 to help prepare a master plan for the university. In 1903, the university made Howard its Supervising Architect, responsible for the design of campus buildings, as well as its initial professor of architecture.



Fig. 1. Several members of Tau Sigma Delta, an architectural fraternity. Warren Perry is seated on the far left, John Galen Howard is seated at center.

Howard had been trained at the Ecole in the 1890s and used this experience as a model to form the new architecture program. Students received classroom education in architectural theory and history, but spent most of their time working in an atelier located at Howard's San Francisco office. By the 1910s, Howard had established a value system for student advancement, a method derived from the Ecole. In this system students earned for each assignment a certain number of points awarded on how their work ranked against that of their classmates. Howard's studio assignments were similarly borrowed from the Ecole. Students at Berkeley in the 1910s regularly found themselves designing grandiose projects, such as state capitols, railway stations and casinos.³

When Howard was fired by the U.C. Regents in 1927, he was succeeded as dean by his protege, Warren Perry. Perry attended the school as an undergraduate between 1904 and 1907 and worked as a draftsman in Howard's office. Howard persuaded Perry to enroll in the Ecole and helped pay for his expenses while in Paris. When he returned to Berkeley in 1911, he was hired as an instructor in architecture, and in time became a professor. Even though Howard had lost the deanship, Perry candidly admitted that his mentor directed the school's activities between 1927 and 1931. When Howard died in 1931, Perry remained deeply committed to the pedagogical methods installed by Howard.⁴ Much of this can be ascribed to Perry's unquestioning veneration of Howard. Perry often referred to Howard as "his angel" because he assisted him in his attempt to enroll in the Ecole. In an article written in 1935 about Howard, Perry said that as undergraduates, he and his classmates "realized that kind heaven . . . set us down at the feet of one of the truly great figures of his time in the architectural world."⁵ One of Perry's "happiest memories" is when he and Howard lived together in Florence in the spring of 1911 "in a little old house overlooking the Arno."⁶

Not only did Perry preserve the Beaux-Arts oriented curriculum established by Howard, he tried to keep the school's cultural milieu as a tribute to his mentor. The daily life of architecture students during Howard's deanship was an exercise in Francophilia. Perry tried to keep alive the spirit of his undergraduate days, which he described in glowing terms:

The glamour of the Quartier Latin and of the L'Ecole hung over us. We wore linen smocks imported from France and spoke glibly of "equisse, charettes and rendus": Guadet's *Eléments de Théorie de l'architecture* was our Bible which we absorbed from the original with quantities of delicious tea before the smoldering logs of the great fireplace in the Howard's house on the hill.⁷

Perry continued this tradition into the 1940s. Seniors and graduate students were invited to Perry's house on Friday afternoon for tea. Students remember sitting near the fireplace in his home, discussing recent cultural events and hearing stories about the Ecole.⁸ Former student Vernon DeMars remembered that Perry would often lapse into French when

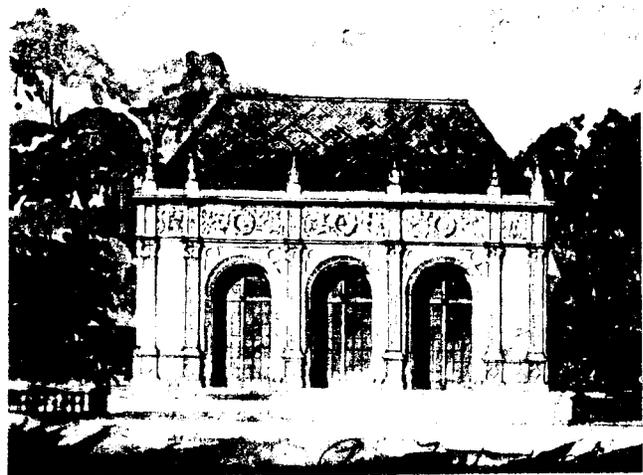


Fig. 2. This 1923 design of a pump room is a characteristic example of much of student work in the 1920s.

describing a project or what made for a successful design.⁹

As architects trained in the Beaux-Arts tradition, architectural history was critical to the curriculum. Students were expected to refer to their architectural history notes as they completed studio projects. There were two sections to history courses at Berkeley: classroom lectures and rendering. Perry or his colleague, William Charles Hays, also trained at the Ecole, would show lantern slides of Greek or Roman architecture and extol the virtues of various designers. Later in the week, students would practice drawing the ornamentation they had seen in lecture. An assignment might be to draw ancient Greek egg-and-dart molding or a door detail from a Renaissance palace.¹⁰

Architectural history classes were a staple in the department from the beginning. John Galen Howard was noted for his charismatic lecturing style and attracted many students outside the architecture school. His contemporaries recall that Howard knew little about the buildings that appeared in his lectures and was more interested discussing his emotional response to architectural form. Howard composed long poems about noted architects—which he would read in lecture while showing slides of the architect's work.¹¹ Perry, Hays and other instructors took over the architectural history course after Howard's death, often using the same slides and a similar approach in lecture. The class was broken up into three consecutive courses, the ancient Greek and Roman, Medieval, and Renaissance. Until 1950, architectural history at Berkeley all but ended with the Renaissance. At times the work of the late nineteenth century architect Henry Hobson Richardson was presented, but he was explained only as a Romanesque revivalist. More recent architects like Frank Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe were not included in the survey. Perry ignored these figures and other modernists because they did not rely on traditional architectural forms. He once said, "if you started to give a course on the Bauhaus, you'd be faced with a collection of things that were different from anything else, and different from each other with little or no aesthetic value."¹²

Of course Berkeley was not the only university to concentrate on the classical tradition. During the 1920s and into the 1930s architectural history courses at Harvard, Yale and Princeton had a similarly selective approach. At Columbia in the late 1920s, students were introduced to modern architecture very late into the course. One student recalled, "We were almost taken in, as if we were going to be told some dirty stories. 'We'll tell you about it, but forget it. . .'"¹³ Yet most schools revamped their architectural history courses when they began to abandon Beaux-Arts educational methods. Yale University in the early 1940s opted to arrange the course by individual studies of a building type. Under the direction of Walter Gropius, Harvard in the late 1930s made architectural history an elective course. Gropius let only advanced students who had mastered the rudiments of design take the course; impressionable younger members of the class, he feared, might be seduced and use historical forms in their own projects.¹⁴ Berkeley, however, remained wedded to the Beaux-Arts approach to history.¹⁵

STUDENTS COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE CURRICULUM

Perry's tenure as dean was marked by increasingly frequent

disagreements with students and younger members of the faculty over the school's curriculum. The disputes began as early as the 1920s, as examples of the modern movement began to surface in the architectural press. In the 1920s and early 1930s, students only took their complaints to the Berkeley faculty and Perry. But as their dissatisfaction escalated in the mid and late 1930s and the 1940s, students were bold enough to protest to top university officials. It is important to note that this disagreement not only distressed Perry because students were turning away from Beaux-Arts influenced design. The vehemence of student complaints also signaled an end to a type of program where the students and faculty shared an atelier-like camaraderie like that Perry had felt under Howard. As one design student of the 1940s summed up the situation: "The students wouldn't back down anymore. They wouldn't put up with putting classical columns in everything they designed. Everyone had enough of the old school."¹⁶

One of the earliest assaults on Beaux-Arts training occurred in 1927. A gifted student submitted an entry to a school competition that borrowed liberally from Bertram Goodhue's design for the Los Angeles Public Library of 1924. Though some architecture professors denigrated the design, the judges of the competition awarded the entry first

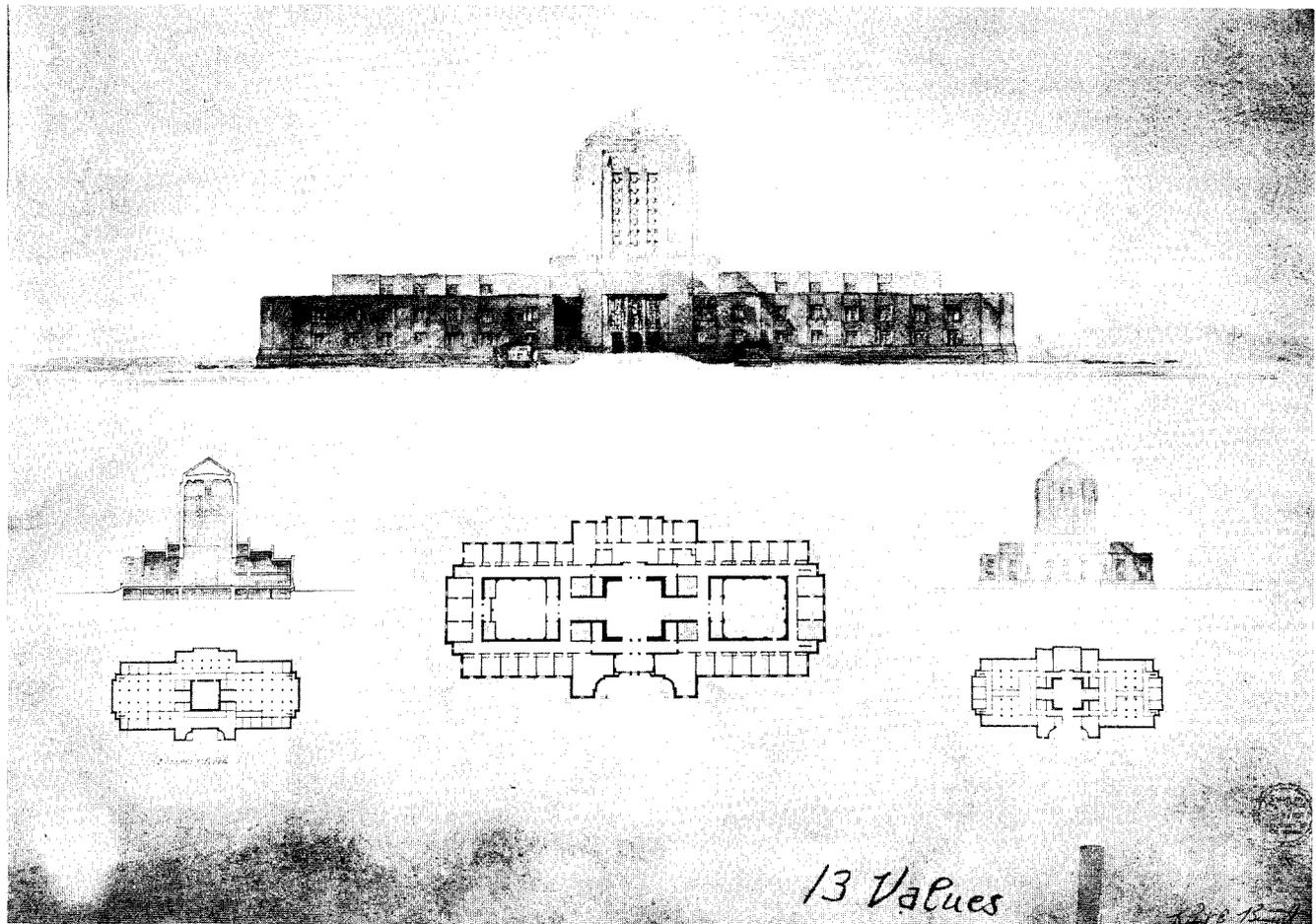


Fig 3. Though not the 1927 design that DeMars describes above, this public building designed in 1936 by student Robert Bennett demonstrates the influence of Bertram Goodhue on Berkeley students.

place. Vernon DeMars remembers: "So that was a signal. . . And I saw overnight almost, the ones who had been holding back, thinking that to get through this course and get a better grade 'I'd better have more columns'" [then began to incorporate modern forms in their designs].¹⁷ It is not surprising that one of the first influential modern buildings for Berkeley students would be located in California. Several students in the architecture school in the late 1920s had seen Goodhue's work first hand and had enthusiastically described the building to other students.

DeMars also remembers that students in the last years of the 1920s were beginning to question the type of studio projects assigned by Perry and other Berkeley professors:

I think after that we got persuaded that doing an elaborate palace for a foreign minister on a lake in the Swiss Alps was not— We began to be aware there were real problems in the world. Somehow we found out there was a Frank Lloyd Wright, and we saw the magazines. Something seemed wrong about having functional things like shutters nailed to each side of the windows of your little houses. Why did you have them at all if you weren't going to use them?¹⁸

Students enrolled after 1930 continued to read about

modernism in the architectural press and see the examples of modernist design in the Bay Area. Several students had read Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson's *The International Style* not long after it was published. Others were familiar with Louis Sullivan's *The Autobiography of an Idea*, Frank Lloyd Wright's autobiography and Lewis Mumford's work in the *New Yorker*. Later, a group of students began to invite guest speakers to the architecture school to discuss contemporary trends in modern architecture. It was in this group that students began to hear about changes ongoing at other universities. Copies of projects from students at Harvard and other schools were discussed.¹⁹ Students also noted changes in the San Francisco skyline. By the mid-1930s, there were a number of new buildings in the city that heralded the advance of modernism. One of the earliest examples was the Pacific Telephone Building at 140 New Montgomery Street, built in 1925. A design influenced by Eliel Saarinen's second place entry in the Chicago Tribune Tower competition, facets of the Telephone Building and others like it were often reproduced in studio projects.²⁰

Students traveled across the San Francisco Bay to see Wurster's domestic buildings.²¹ Others visited Wurster himself at his San Francisco office.²² No student interviewed for this essay remembered being interested in Perry's de-

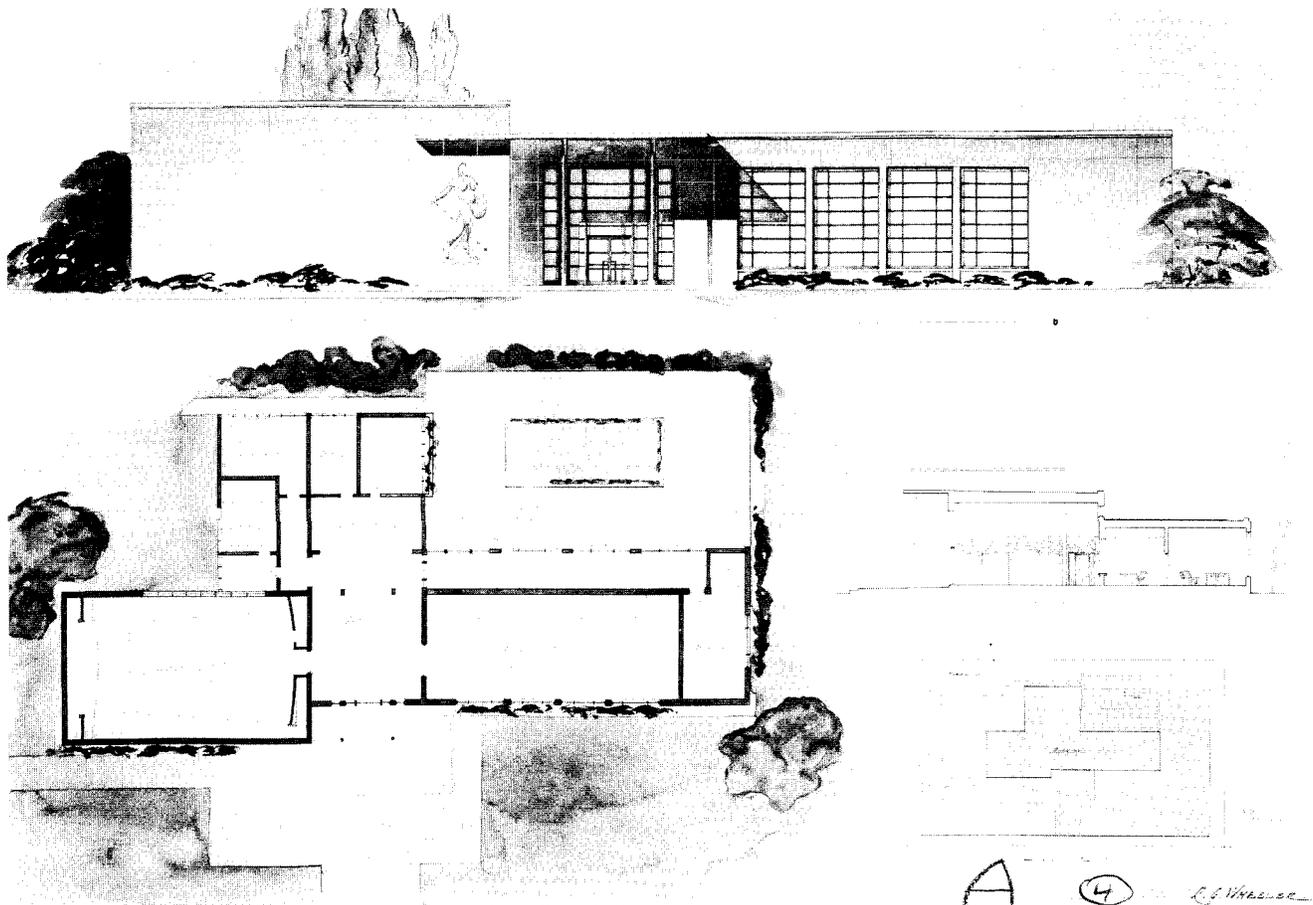


Fig. 4. By 1939, the date of this drawing by student R.G. Wheeler, students at Berkeley were becoming more adventurous in their experiments in modernist design.

signs, or those of other professors educated along the lines of the Ecole. Perry's domestic projects were often completed in vaguely revivalist modes. Jack Kent, of the class of 1938, remembers that the students of his day felt they could learn little from Perry and other faculty members. Kent recalls:

We began to be sort of our own teachers without knowing it by the time we were at the end of our sophomore year, and we were in rebellion, blindly, stupidly, against poor Warren Perry and Stafford Jory (a faculty member hired by Howard in the 1920s). We just didn't love to do the things [they] loved to do.²³

After 1935, however, students were no longer willing to merely debate modernism with their professors. Students began to call for the school to incorporate the ideas of sociology, political science, and engineering into the basic studio curriculum and went over Perry's head to complain to university officials and leading Bay Area architects. These complaints seem to have given university president Robert Sproul his first indication that there was discord at the architecture school.

Robert Ratcliff, class of 1936, repeatedly called on Perry to make changes and to bring in professors who were amenable to modernism. Ratcliff remembers that he and Perry would have long meetings about possible departmental changes. Perry would promise to consider hiring a modernist or to do away with some aspect of the Beaux-Arts system but nothing concrete came out of the talks.²⁴

Finally Ratcliff decided to file a complaint with the university president's office. Few students would have had the temerity to take such a step, but Ratcliff had recently been elected a member of the Order of the Golden Bear, an organization of students who met regularly with Sproul and vice president Monroe Deutsch to advise them on the expectations of the student body at large. Ratcliff remembers:

The principal thing that I was concerned about was that the architectural school was lagging behind the rest of the world in recognizing that there had been some basic changes in the outlook of people toward modern architecture, what the next generation had to offer. . . . When we were seniors Warren Perry gave us a project: 'Design a palace in the manner of Peruzzi.' Peruzzi was a contemporary of Michelangelo! This was at the same time that the Bauhaus was going on, Mies van der Rohe. . . . We weren't exposed to this at all.²⁵

Sproul and Deutsch responded that they could do little about the curriculum and that changes would have to originate out of office of the dean of the architecture school. As a last recourse, Ratcliff met with Walter Steilberg, a prominent member of the school's alumni association. Steilberg agreed with the students and wrote a letter to the university asking it to induce Perry to alter the curriculum.²⁶

At around the same time, a group of juniors and seniors at U.C. Berkeley founded a small magazine that sought to educate students about modern architecture in the United



Fig. 5. Berkeley students at work in the 1940s.

States and Europe. The magazine, edited by student Arthur Brandon Howell, described changes at other universities and called on Berkeley administrators to similarly break away from the Beaux-Arts curriculum. Though it survived only for a few issues, it greatly disturbed some members of the architecture faculty.²⁷

In the 1940s younger members of the faculty also began to question the direction of the architecture program. For example, at a faculty meeting in September 1940, Professor Howard Moise had an argument with Perry over whether the curriculum should include a more sociological approach. Soon after the meeting, Moise wrote a letter of apology to Perry, saying that he was sorry that they were "so often on different sides of the fence." In the letter, Moise admitted that since his hiring he had grown "closer to the modern student who is certainly unhappy, disillusioned and worried about what the future holds for him."²⁸

THE INFLUX OF STUDENTS AFTER WORLD WAR II

The flood of new students entering the architecture school after World War II was the likely impetus behind Perry's resignation in 1948. Enrollment jumped from a pre-war level of approximately 140 to a high of 781 in 1947. The dramatic increase in enrollment forced Sproul to pay more attention to the department. Perry and the president's office were in constant contact, often wrangling over the budget and the hiring of new faculty. By 1949, Sproul and Deutsch felt that the architecture department was in dire need of innovative methods of instruction and management in order to contend with increased enrollment.²⁹

Students who had served in the war seemed to come back emboldened by their experience. Many had served as officers overseas and were more willing to challenge direction from the faculty.³⁰ In a memo to Sproul, Perry noted the "arrogance" of the new students:

Finally, I am afraid that I do not need to inform you there is an attitude on the part of the student body these days which is unlike anything I have ever known in my

long connection with the university. Possibly it derives from the large enrollment or from the source from which many of our new students come. It takes the form even in advanced classes, of belligerent or petty trouble making, loud talking, general lack of manners and often crystallizes in out-spoken criticism of conduct of a course.

PERRY STEPS DOWN

Throughout the late 1940s, students persistently complained to the president, the school's Department of Veteran Affairs and to alumni about the program. Sproul seems to have had a direct hand in shaping the design curriculum in the late 1940s. For example, on June 16, 1948, Sproul approved a course in Modern design for which students had long petitioned.³²

There are no indications that Sproul forced Perry to resign. However by 1943, Wurster, who was serving as dean of the architecture program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, began to correspond with Sproul. Wurster informed Sproul that he hoped he would someday run the program at Berkeley. Wurster carefully laid out his plans for reorganizing the school and bringing together architecture, landscape architecture and city and regional planning departments into a single College of Environmental Design.³³ Sproul likely saw Wurster as a promising candidate to run the school increasingly fraught with student dissent and organizational

difficulties. Sproul seems to have been willing to bide his time and wait until Perry wearied of his post. In his resignation letter of September 1948, Perry did indicate that he was no longer willing to put up with battles with students, faculty and university officials. He wrote, "Architecture in the West is entering a new and I believe far greater phase; this school above all others must keep pace with the development. A younger man with outstanding qualities of course should take over the administration and determine the new order."³⁴

Perry remained dean until 1950. He continued to teach design studios and architectural history for four additional years, until he was 70 years old. When Perry left in 1954, he had been employed by U.C. Berkeley for forty-three years and, beginning as a student, had been involved in the activities of the architecture school for fifty-one years.³⁵ After 1950, Wurster quickly overhauled the school along the modernist lines he described to Sproul seven years earlier. The curriculum soon felt the influence of sociology, mathematics and building technology. To teach architectural history, he hired James Ackerman, who emphasized how buildings reflected cultural, social and political practices.³⁶

CONCLUSION

The events at Berkeley thus resembles and differs from the traditional narrative of how architecture schools adopted modernism in the middle third of the twentieth century. It is like the transitions at Harvard and Columbia because significant shifts could only be completed by replacing the leadership of the department with a strong-willed personality who was dedicated to modernist ideals. But it is distinct from the traditional narrative of this process because students were so vocal in calling for change. The fact that modernism had long been accepted by leaders in architectural practice as well as at the most prestigious architecture schools contributed greatly to their discontent. In sum, the findings of this paper suggest that it is likely that changes in the organization of American architectural schools in the mid twentieth century did not occur in a geographic or administrative vacuum. Additional work is needed to understand the role that students played in the transformation of architectural education on the national level and the way in which changes at an architecture school are related to events at other universities.

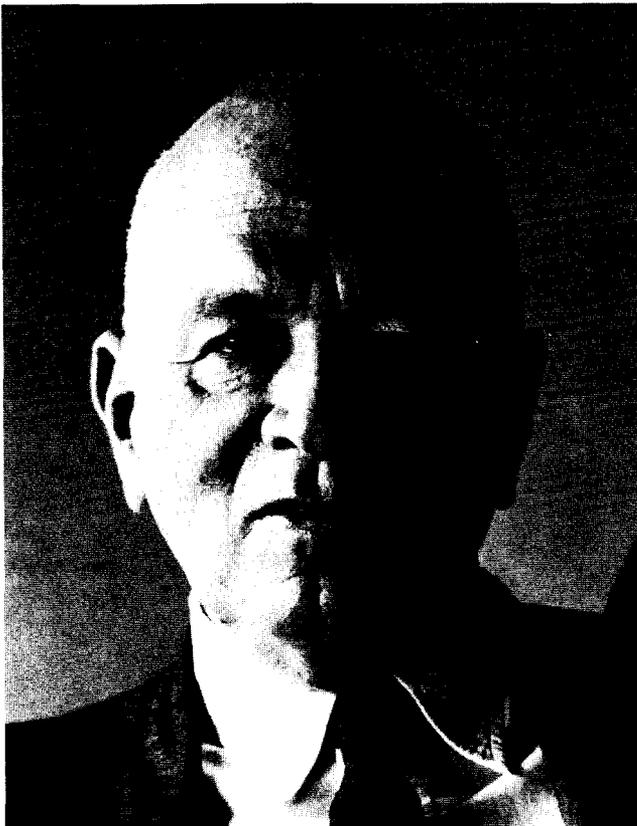


Fig. 6. William Wurster.

NOTES

¹ There is little published work about the history of the architecture department at the University of California, Berkeley. A recent contribution is Sally Woodbridge, "Building the Ark," in *En Charette/On Deadline: An Architectural History of North Gate Hall, University of California, Berkeley* (Berkeley: Graduate School of Journalism, 1993). Also helpful for the early years of the program is: Joan Draper, "The Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Architectural Profession in the United States: The Case of John Galen Howard," in *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, ed. Spiro Kostof (New York: Oxford

- University Press, 1977), 209-235. Much of the information on architectural education at Berkeley is compiled from newly released office files of deans Warren Perry and William Wurster, oral histories completed by the Regional Oral History Project, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley as well as my own interviews with those who attended Berkeley before 1950. Three of the notable summaries of architectural education in the United States in the twentieth century are: Gwendolyn Wright and Janet Parks, eds., *The History of History in American Schools of Architecture, 1865-1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); J.A. Chewning, "The Teaching of Architectural History during the Advent of Modernism, 1920s-1950s," in *The Architectural Historian in America, Studies in the History of Art, 35*, ed. Elisabeth Blair MacDougall (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990); and Richard Oliver, ed., *The Making of an Architect: 1881-1981* (New York: Rizzoli, 1981).
- ² For more on Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, see Winfried Nerdinger, "From Bauhaus to Harvard: Walter Gropius and the Use of History" in Wright, *History of History in American Schools of Architecture*, 89-98; and Kevin Harrington, "Aphorisms, Axioms & Anonymous Heroes: The History of Architecture in Mies's Curriculum at the Illinois Institute of Technology," in Wright, *History of History in American Schools of Architecture*, 99-110.
 - ³ Draper, "The Ecole des Beaux-Arts," 219-235.
 - ⁴ Warren Perry's career has received no scholarly attention. The best published source is a lengthy interview with Perry in the oral history: Julia Morgan, *Architectural History* (Berkeley, University of California Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California, 1976), 187b-225.
 - ⁵ Warren Perry, "The School of Architecture at Berkeley Has Completed Its Twenty-Second Year," *The Journal of the State Association of California Architects, Southern Section* (August 9, 1935), 4.
 - ⁶ Warren Perry in Julia Morgan, *Architectural History*, 199.
 - ⁷ Perry, "The School of Architecture," 5.
 - ⁸ Don Hays, interview with author, Berkeley, California, 24 April, 1993.
 - ⁹ Vernon DeMars, interview with author, Oakland, California, 28 March 1993.
 - ¹⁰ William Charles Hays, *Order, Taste and Grace in Architecture* (Berkeley, University of California Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California, 1968), 127-129.
 - ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 125-127.
 - ¹² Perry, *School of Architecture*, 219.
 - ¹³ Morris Lapidus quoted in Rosemarie Haag Bletter, "Modernism Rears its Head—The Twenties and Thirties," in *The Making of an Architect*, 103.
 - ¹⁴ Wright, "History for Architects," in *History of History in American Schools of Architecture*, 30-32.
 - ¹⁵ See memos on course offerings and collected architectural history exams, Warren Perry office files (not cataloged). Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
 - ¹⁶ George Kern, interview with author, Berkeley, California, April 21, 1993.
 - ¹⁷ Vernon DeMars, *A Life in Architecture: Indian Dancing, Migrant Housing, Telesis. Design for Urban Living, Theater, Teaching*. (Berkeley: University of California Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California, 1992), 54.
 - ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.
 - ¹⁹ Robert Ratcliff, interview with author, Berkeley, California, 22 March 1993.
 - ²⁰ DeMars, *A Life in Architecture*, 60-61.
 - ²¹ Kent in DeMars, *A Life in Architecture*, 157.
 - ²² Roger Montgomery, "William Wilson Wurster and the College of the Environmental Design," *College of the Environmental Design News* (Fall 1994), 5.
 - ²³ Kent in DeMars, *A Life in Architecture*, 148.
 - ²⁴ Robert Ratcliff interview and Robert Ratcliff, *The Ratcliff Architects, in Berkeley Since 1909*, (Berkeley: University of California Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California, 1990), 100-102.
 - ²⁵ Ratcliff, *The Ratcliff Architects*, 100.
 - ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.
 - ²⁷ Robert Ratcliff interview.
 - ²⁸ Letter from Howard Moise to Perry, 11 September 1940, Warren Perry papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
 - ²⁹ Figures are from *The Architect at Mid-Century: Evolution and Achievement*, ed. Turpin Bannister (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1954), table 56. Memos from the president's office concerning the operation of the school are contained in the University Archives, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
 - ³⁰ Phone interview with Henry Lagorio, 29 December 1994; Montgomery, "William Wilson Wurster," 6.
 - ³¹ Memo from Perry to Sproul, 30 November 1949, University Archives.
 - ³² Memo from Sproul to the College of Letters and Science Dean Alva R. Davis, 16 June 1948, Sproul papers.
 - ³³ William Wurster, *College of Environmental Design. University of California, Campus Planning, and Architectural Practice*, (Berkeley University of California Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California, 1964), 136-140; Montgomery, "William Wilson Wurster," 6.
 - ³⁴ Perry to Sproul, 30 August 1948, Warren Perry papers.
 - ³⁵ Perry in Julia Morgan, *Architectural History*, 200 and 223.
 - ³⁶ For more on Wurster's term at U.C. Berkeley, see Wright, "History for Architects," in *History of History in American Schools of Architecture*, 35-36; Richard C. Peters, "W W Wurster," *Journal of Architectural Education*, 33 (November, 1979), 36-41 and William Wurster, *College of Environmental Design*, i-viii.