



Taylor & Francis  
Taylor & Francis Group



ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGIATE  
SCHOOLS OF ARCHITECTURE

---

Gropius at Harvard

Author(s): Charles Burchard

Source: *Journal of Architectural Education (1947-1974)*, Vol. 14, No. 2, ACSA-AIA Seminar:  
The Teaching of Architecture (Autumn, 1959), pp. 23-25

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#) on behalf of the [Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1424016>

Accessed: 18/06/2014 22:04

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. and Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, Inc. are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Architectural Education (1947-1974)*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

or to think creatively; second, the mind must develop the ability to employ knowledge with judgment — or to apply creatively; and third, the mind must forever remain alert and fluid, to continue the ability to learn.

Complete understanding of this learning process is essential. Creative thinking is not a mystical or an isolated phenomenon; it can only be the result of orderly acquisition of factual knowledge basic to the broad objective. This discipline is fundamental to education although just how much factual knowledge and of what quality that would be selected is most difficult.

As one acquires more and more information and knowledge of previously successful solutions, there is always the danger of stultifying the imagination. Normal habits, accepted practice, and known answers often eliminate doubt, and without doubt, one of the strong reasons or inducements for inquiry is no longer present.

The ability to apply acquired knowledge with imagination and judgment is fundamentally necessary to every creative architect. Creative synthesis is pre-eminently the life blood of architectural education and architectural practice. It is in this phase of the training and practice of architecture — the realization and integration of the many, cut-up, specialized pieces unto a unified whole and total expression — that most of us fail.

Finally, if education does no more than instill a desire to continue to learn throughout life — to encourage an active and alert mind — then it has perhaps achieved its purpose. Too many have the misguided impression that education stops upon graduation; rather it is the beginning, the foundations — of continued growth. Passively obtained knowledge, under rigid direction, fails to develop or stimulate the mind and does not develop individual resourcefulness and integrity.

Certain things may be best taught in school; other things may be best learned in practice. A university is not a trade school. To me, it is far more important that the man be given a sound philosophy, direction, and convictions about architecture and life; that he learn how to analyze his work and himself; and that he acquire the ability to apply himself creatively.

Robert M. Hutchins put it this way: "Education is not to teach men facts, theories, or laws. It is not to inform them or amuse them, or to make them expert technicians. Rather it is to unsettle their minds, widen their horizons, inflame their intellects, teach them to think straight — if possible — but to think, nevertheless."

In conclusion, let me say that our architectural education must remain fluid and dynamic, geared to the individual man, to our society, and to the technology of our times. We hope to give the student a broad philosophy that will aid in his search for a lasting and truthful architecture. If we can give him not only a thorough foundation in the

social and technological sciences but also open his mind to orderly and creative thinking, teach him how to evaluate and apply knowledge, and to retain always an alert mind — then we shall turn out well-rounded human beings who will one day take their places as mature architects with understanding of the aspirations of humanity.

There is a short prescription found in Buddhism that succinctly sums this up: "Develop an infallible technique and then place yourself at the mercy of inspiration."

**Gropius  
at Harvard**

*Charles Burchard*

It was at Harvard as a graduate student in 1938 (this was the second year both Gropius and Marcel Breuer were at Harvard) that, for the first time in the experience of most of us, architecture was taught as a function of a contemporary situation from which appropriate methods of designing were developed. The design problems given were set within realistic limits and were related to real sites. Research, programming and study were made a significant part of the design sequence and we were brought in touch with other disciplines: engineers, economists, city planners, public administrators, businessmen who could help us to understand and relate some aspect of our problem to the total solution. We also began to work in groups toward the solution of one common problem. This was done not as a speedy and efficient way of pooling individual resources but as a method of education; for Gropius felt that group working was a valuable educational vehicle and a technique needed to be learned for the role the architect had to play in contemporary mechanized society.

During that year, we began to understand also that Gropius was not talking to us primarily about buildings as a new kind of style but was attempting to interpret the vast changes of our age to us in terms of architecture and in terms of design as a process of doing. Underlying all our work was the constant exploration of the potentials of our time and how to assimilate them to our ever-changing needs. This, more than likely, sounds a bit old hat to most of you. But 20 years ago it was an enormous change from the rather remote academic philosophy of the schools in America that most of us in that graduate class had come from.

I am not an historian. But from the turn of the century, American architecture and architectural education fell more and more under the influence of what I would call a

watered-down version of the Beaux-Arts and the schools of architecture not only lost the esthetic discipline of the Beaux-Arts but became progressively more and more out of touch with the 20th century realities.

Scientific knowledge was by then creating a world of enormous horizons but it had dislodged familiar habits and patterns and called for new solutions. The framework of reference of the static educational methodology of the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design then current in the United States, with its many isolated courses, its aesthetics more closely related to 19th century needs than to the present, lead us to relate our design to a world of unconnected facts.

The work of the architects of the "Chicago School" in the 1880's with the forthright expression of the steel frame and of Frank Lloyd Wright a generation later was the beginning in America of a new architectural expression and a new attitude of mind.

The counterpart in modern architecture in Europe is well known and was expressed most prominently in education in the work of the Bauhaus under the directorship of Walter Gropius. These new forces and events, however, had little influence in American schools, other than for the discontent of individual teachers and students until the 1930's. Then an influx of modern architects and teachers from Europe and architects here in America whose point of view and design expression was more in step with the society of our time began to control developments in some of our schools of architecture.

The effect of Gropius at Harvard in the latter '30's was impressive. But it was after World War II that the curriculum throughout the four years of the Department of Architecture underwent major revisions and the philosophical basis of the Harvard school was underlined by both what was done and by what was planned. But as frequently happens, it did not attain anything like its ultimate penetration by the time of the retirement of Gropius, Hudnut and other faculty members who helped influence the course of events there.

### *Basic Design*

One of the cornerstones of the Bauhaus of the 20's was its Basic Design course aimed at coordinating the elements of handwork and design where the student is introduced first to three-dimensional experiments of composition on space with all sorts of materials. Maybe this should be re-examined now but in the words of Gropius, "Working with materials, the students begin simultaneously to understand surface, volume, space and color as a comprehensive view of the vast field of possibilities for expression lying before him. In addition to technical skill, he evolves his own form language in order to be able to give tangible three-dimensional expression to his ideas." Gropius felt that "the three-dimensional conception is the basic architectural discipline. Methods of stimulating interest in visual

expression in all fields of plastic arts must train the student first to see, to perceive distance, and to grasp the human scale. Such disciplines are indispensable for acquiring the instructive sureness to organize three-dimensional space and to conceive it *simultaneously* in terms of structural efficiency, economy of means and harmony of appearances."

Such a Basic Design course was instituted at Harvard for the student at the beginning of his training. The course curiously enough never reached the stature at Harvard hoped for by Gropius prior to his retirement and as it apparently now exists at Harvard, a very significant part of the curriculum.

In addition, a Basic Design course, as an integrated and comprehensive way of thinking and doing, fosters an relation-minded attitude which we felt was basic to comprehend contemporary events. Extending this way of thinking to the wider level of social problems led to the establishment of another fundamental course at Harvard, intended in the first year to occupy half of the students' time, while Basic Design occupied the other half. These two courses were intended to introduce the beginner immediately to the comprehensive scope of his profession. The course to be taken by all students of the three departments (architecture, city planning, landscape architecture) was designed as an all-embracing year-long study project with the students working in teams involved in a project such as the total design of a neighborhood unit.

In this fundamental course we discarded written programs. We wanted the student to discover the world about him and its needs, to find answers to both his practical and aesthetic problems within the needs he set for himself to solve, and formed by the materials he today has to work with. There was no separation between architect, landscape architect, or planner. Each and all took the Basic Design course, and the Fundamental Planning course where they worked together on common problems.

The first year this program was instituted, our studies were based on the city of Cambridge and the four significant phases of neighborhood life: recreation, education, housing and the service or shopping needs of the community were investigated. These investigations were made by the students going out and actually seeing for themselves, by investigating records and by personal searching. What did Cambridge provide for its citizens in the various phases of modern life? The conditions found were put down on paper by the various teams, each responsible for some part of the whole. It was assembled, analyzed and discussed. The conditions were measured against standards which the students established as an essential minimum in the fabric of modern urban life, and on the high level architects and planners could and should offer today.

Means of instituting programs for improvement were investigated; financial, economic and legal implements were

calculated; and finally, programs were developed by the students themselves which would provide a social fabric on the level we thought we could offer with full consideration taken of the practical means of accomplishing it.

In this way, the student became familiar with the dynamics of contemporary need far beyond the scope of any isolated problem. But more than that, a critical background of his own was developed familiarizing him with the forces moulding design on the community scale and which we thought should be the driving force forming any part of the whole.

Through objective analysis, he set the standards and he wrote the program. There was no so-called design critic. An architect, a planner, a landscape architect, engineering instructors and the instructors in the Basic Design course were constantly at the disposal of all students and teams, rotating through the drafting room. Each phase of the program was carried through to the stage of completely designed solutions. The student analyzed the function as he himself found it necessary to fulfill and sought to find the significant architecture form within the very problem itself and through the use of tools he was exploring in related and integrated simultaneous activities.

By means of the comprehensive curriculum in the first year we hoped that design would be seen in a new way, not as an isolated problem in which the client (or teacher) produces a program and which imposes no obligation to think or go beyond it, but as a tangible expression of a new way of working, as an architecture conceived in terms of human activity in which expressed the forms could grow out of these activities.

In the later two years, a vertical system was used in which each design critic combined his theoretical approach to design with its direct application at the student's drafting table and in a way peculiar to each teacher's own personality.

In addition, the two fundamental disciplines of the first year were followed up in succeeding years by both short problems in Basic Design and by giving at least once a year one long collaborative problem to be undertaken by teams of students from each of the three departments of the school: architecture, city planning, and landscape architecture.

We have heard a great deal already about the many specialties that feed architecture. This is a necessary symptom of contemporary Western civilization. It cannot be eliminated and it is part of our scientific age. But these skills will have to be applied in reference to each other and focused as a unity on the solution of contemporary problems. The course at Harvard was one answer in that it attempted to unlock the creative power of the student in the frame of reference of this new attitude of mind. I think the strength of the post-World War II Harvard curriculum lay in its attempt to do just that. The curriculum of

the school of architecture today probably must go even beyond. The isolated architect, the isolated engineer, the isolated sociologist, each highly skilled within his own orbit but without means of communication or of pooling skills, surely no longer suffices for the bulk of things that have to be done.

I was interested in reading Wurster's comments made as a panel member on the subject of Education at last year's A.I.A. convention. He said, "Today the problems confronting us are only researchable in terms of other disciplines, as well as our own, involving engineering, pure science, sociology, and other behavioral sciences, economics and finance, public administration among others. Any effective research program involves collaboration, in some form, with other departments and graduate students in other fields. Even on the strictly aesthetic aspects of form, space and their emotional impact, outsiders are needed: physiologists, psychologists, historians and cultural anthropologists."

He concluded by saying that architects have an existing role in shaping the human environment. But they can fulfill this role only by working in partnership with others and by trying to act with others as peers. This attitude of mind, however, cannot be turned on at a moment's notice. It is a matter of training and is a function of the schools. The orbit of today's school of architecture must reach out far more than was done at Harvard a decade ago.

**Background to  
Architectural  
Education**

*Thomas Howarth*

During the year I spent in the U.S.A. recently making a special study of schools of architecture I soon discovered that very little was known of European schools and of the British professional and educational systems. Since others will be discussing the European schools it seemed to me that I could most usefully outline for you the background to architectural education in Britain.

On the 20th October 1791 four architects met at the Thatched House Tavern in London and agreed to form a club, its name, they decided, should be the *Architects' Club*; they were James Wyatt, Henry Holland, George Dance and Samuel Pepys Cockerell. These men elected as members eleven other architects and four honorary members of distinction. Every member had to be an Academician, or an Associate of the Royal Academy in London, or a member of the Academies of Rome, Bologna, Parma,