

MY DEBT TO THE ARK

BY DAVID LITTLEJOHN

In Spring of 2009, the College of Environmental Design in conjunction with William Stout Publishing will release the new book, "Design on the Edge: A Century of Teaching Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley." The editors, Waverly Lowell, Elizabeth Byrne, and Betsy Frederick-Rothwell gratefully thank author David Littlejohn, Emeritus Professor of Journalism for his permission to reprint selected highlights from his reminiscence.

I learned four important lessons from my years in the Department of Architecture at UC Berkeley. First, I learned that, like medical residents or marine commandos in training, I was able to work totally inhuman hours. I could accomplish worthwhile things by doing without sleep, to which I have given fairly low priority ever since.

Second, I learned the immeasurable value of working with sympathetic and like-minded fellows. If we were suffering, at least we were suffering together. The camaraderie, high spirits and mutual support made life in T10 and the Ark not only bearable but fun. Our best teachers, while offering their own frequently harsh criticism and grudging moral support, encouraged such collaboration. As a teacher myself for 35 years, I tried to foster similar learning environments—although nothing can take the place of an all-night charette.

Third, I learned the value of spending one's working hours in a handsome, well designed space, by which I mean the Ark not T10 or Wurster Hall.

What mattered most to me, though—since I never did become an architect—was the profound and lasting importance of people like Ken Cardwell and Jim Ackerman, who opened my eyes to the ever-nourishing inspiration of good buildings of the past. Once you get



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hooked on architecture as an index of human history—a proposition nowhere better argued than in Spiro Kostof's *A History of Architecture* of 1985—and on the compulsion to stand in and move through fine buildings (not just drive past them, or look at them in pictures)—you have access to a lifelong source of joy beyond the imagining of your blindered fellow-humans, to whom all buildings, streets and spaces look alike.

During my third year in the undergraduate architecture program at Cal (1956–1957), I was forced to face up to three large, important facts:

1. I was a better writer than I was a designer;
2. By and large, I preferred old buildings to new ones;
3. I really, really hated engineering.

Troubled by this confrontation with reality, I took off a semester to wander around Europe, where I tried to find as many as I could of the great buildings James Ackerman and Stephen Jacobs had introduced me to in Arch 121 and 122. (The quest is still going on). I decided to change my major from architecture, which was beginning to seem too much like engineering, to English, where I was getting better grades. In 1963, I got a PhD at Harvard but no part of my education mattered as much to me as the three

years I spent—in fact, virtually lived—in T10 and the Ark.

This had, I believe, much to do with the sheer number of hours I spent there each week, working elbow-to-elbow with like-minded fellow students on the same projects. We put in hundreds more hours building models, solving overnight sketch problems, and drawing geometric forms and intricate perspectives for Arch 6N and 7N, which then had to be shaded with hand-ground sumi ink washes.

For two years I spent almost every weekday afternoon and evening, as well as most Saturdays at T10. I kept cutting one class to study for another, or abandoned them all to get back to the board. First 12-hour design sessions, then all-nighters became common—once a month, then every week: three in five days in May 1955. I pulled my first two-nighter (62 straight hours) in November, my second in December. In April 1956 I wrote, “Hellish, killing crit from McCue. Finally wound up shading, coloring and lettering about 4:30 AM, inhumanly and agonizingly beat, crushed, sick, sore and suffering. Drove home—stopping to give some oaf a push—and crawled into bed. For three hours.”

I've never worked so hard in my life, before or since. But I've also never been able to work with such an agree-

able team of mates—watercoloring somebody else's sky in streaks of canary yellow, or zippatoning his shadows, while he drew me a background of cubistic trees or let me copy his door-frame section details. A third buddy ran out to get us hamburgers and coffee.

Is there another professional field in which the educational process involves so much helping (and learning from) one's coevals, instead of competing with them? Of course, we were competing secretly—for scores, for grades, for X's and KX's, for the attention and approval of our teachers and juries. The camaraderie and good feeling—essentially all-male in those days—extended to afternoons at Harmon Pool—also all-male—adventures in San Francisco, and drives around the Bay Area in search of Maybecks and Wrights, the latest Callisters and Wursters and Eshericks. Each Spring, the costumed revelry of the Beaux-Arts Ball let us pretend that one night of mock-debauchery in a dark, noisy, decorated Ark made up for nine months of slave labor.

What has it all taught me? That I can work fantastically hard and long whenever I need to. In 1963, I wrote a 450-page PhD dissertation in four months. Since then, I've written many other things, often on deadline. But nothing I've done has been as labor intensive as my usually unappreciated design projects of



1954–1957. If you can design, draw and render an acceptable overnight esquisse on “Your Grandest Dream or Inspiration” (a genuine assignment of May 1955), my unconscious mind must have decided, you can do anything.

Thanks to my classmates I also learned that higher education only makes sense when it’s congenial rather than competitive. This depends primarily on classmates, but also on a few fundamentally benevolent instructors to set the tone. Midway in my sophomore year I began venturing both south of North Gate and west of Berkeley. By junior year, the combination of literature, art, theatre and music—both on campus and in San Francisco—seduced me away from the straight and narrow of the T-square.

So I quit architecture, but architecture never quit me. I still believe, thanks to what I learned during those years, that the most profound and exciting aesthetic experience life offers is to feel yourself standing in or moving through a perfectly designed and constructed space. Almost any house designed by Wright or Barragan will do it for me, as well as the best works of Renzo Piano—the Beaubourg, the new Loyds, the Beyeler Museum. An architect-friend in Paris always takes me to the latest Bofill, Nouvel or Portzamparc when I visit. Just three years ago, an architect

from Herzog and De Meuron showed me around their own top hits in Basel. This deep-rooted need for “the architectural experience” first took root during my three years in and near John Galen Howard’s modest, redwood-shingled Ark. When, in 1982, Don Lyndon agreed to design a high, sunwashed study-addition to our modest white 1941 house in Kensington (recycling one of its old windows into the new wing), I felt that the physical setting for my life had reached a peak it would never again achieve.

Three of my books—*Architect: The Life and Work of Charles Moore* (1984), *The Fate of the English Country House* (1997), and *The Real Las Vegas* (1999)—provide even more evidence of my debt to the Ark. The first would never have happened had not Dick Peters, then a professor of architecture and a fellow Arts Club member, agreed to introduce me to its subject—whose work I had admired since I first discovered the Sea Ranch Condominium in the 1960s—and got me invited to one of Charles’s legendary Sea Ranch house parties in December 1981. For the country house book, I read through carloads of books from Wurster Hall—including 100 years of *Country Life* magazine—nothing I had been taught of architecture or planning in the 1950s quite prepared me for Las Vegas at the century’s end.

It might seem that those thousands of hours I spent at the drafting table were hours wasted—and not just because no one drafts by hand (or grinds sumi, or stretches paper) anymore. Given the direction my professional life has taken, I might better have spent those hours reading Shakespeare or learning Russian or mastering the cello. Or even sleeping.

But I wouldn’t have given up my hours in T10, CRP and the Ark for all the Great Books of the Western world. On very few parts of my single life can I look back with such total satisfaction as I can the three years I spent with George, Jay, Dick, Ted, Bob, Jack and all the others scribbling through the night on rolls of yellow trace, then fudging the dimensions of my T-square-and-triangle lines on pristine white 20 by 30 inch illustration boards—inevitably spoiled by my overhasty water coloring just before deadline. ^{FW}

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“Design on the Edge: A Century of Teaching Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley” is comprised of essays, reminiscences, photographs, and a full-color centerfold of student drawings. The book will be available for sale through the Environmental Design Archives.