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# WELL, NOW THAT YOU ASKED---

By PAUL L. WOOD, B. ARCH, '23

## ANOTHER GRADUATE SPEAKS

PERRY BORCHER'S request for a few words of pearly wisdom to spread upon these pages to edify the young and fair haired architects about to spring forth upon their chosen and beloved profession, all starry eyed and everything, puts one on a Hot Spot, indeed. This imitation of the Voice of Experience solemnly handing down pronouncements and prognostications from Mount Olympus is risky, for the moth-eaten wig may slip and the grease paint melt under the Klieg lights at any moment, thus ruining the disguise and exposing the Voice as just another Home Town Boy in the Big City talking big in his spare moments. So brace yourself—here goes!

The hopes and fears shared in their undergraduate days by those of the class of 1923 (dusty old Gray Beards, virtually pioneers to you, I suppose) are no doubt identical with those being nursed along on the campus in 1939. We pulled up our academic gowns and scurried away from Commencement into a somewhat different set of economic conditions than you face today, and the practice of architecture, in many ways, has changed with the times, too. But it appears that, fundamentally, the problem, or task, of growing from

student to architect remains much as it was sixteen years ago. So, perhaps the steps which seem, in retrospect, to have been important may interest you.

Current conditions in our profession reflect the uncertainties of our time. A decade of extravagant building contributed to a great depression. Vast governmental financing during the past 5 years artificially stimulated public works and low-cost housing in an effort to revive business, but other conditions are still preventing the financing of construction by "private funds" in any considerable volume, except in the speculative residential field. As a consequence, architects are not experiencing the steady "flow" of commissions normal ten years ago. A job in hand, but few or no prospects is the usual present situation. Under these conditions employment can be offered only on a temporary basis for the "duration of the job". This means that men are faced with finding new jobs every few weeks or months, that there is little security or permanence, that there is a large turn-over, and that competition for work keeps the scale of wages low while similar competition among architects depresses the fees collected. A major European war would seriously affect business adversely here,

and it is not at all aside from the realm of possibility that the taxation required to meet the huge funded obligations of local, State and Federal government may continue to so restrict the volume of profits and savings that capital may remain aloof from such long-term, high-risk investments as large scale building requires. Should this unwanted, gloomy condition long prevail, opportunities in architecture may fail to knock on your door for yahrs and yahrs.

But, on the other side of the ledger is entered the undoubted fact that during the past eight or nine years of upheaval, few draftsmen have been developed from the ranks of recent graduates by continuous good experience, with the potential likelihood of a very real shortage of competent men being acutely felt thruout the profession should there be experienced a sustained and accelerating volume of work for a year or so. Thus, you may count on continued improvement of general business conditions to bring you the opportunities for interesting, valuable, and continuing employment such as used to normally beckon each class of graduates. While there is Life, let there be Hope, also. She is pleasant company.

First off, it must be appreciated that the "success" you fully expect to attain is surely relative as well as exasperatingly elusive. What one may accomplish another will not, for each has his own abilities, and few experience such identical conditions of life that any one pattern of performance may be labelled "Success—This Is It" and hung up to dry as the Standard. People are far and away more important than Architecture, and your life as an individual—the growth and development of your character, your accomplishments as a man or woman, your influence on others, your leadership in your community, and your attainment of real happiness in this life, is of greater import to you than simple success as an architect, for the latter can be but a part of the whole picture which the rest of the world sees as you. It is important, of course, that you rise to the highest level possible to you, and I want to make clear the fact that in the practice of architecture there are required men of many different, but equally valuable and necessary abilities, and that success in that particular field to which you may later find your capacities are best suited will be as good as longed-for success in some other field which you may now believe to be the only Green Pasture.

In school, design is rightly stressed as all important. But design is more than facade and rendering. I heard Ralph Walker earnestly tell an assemblage of the haughty prima donnas of his once huge organization that he wanted them to thoroughly grasp the idea that the benighted draftsman over in the corner drawing lines representing the plumbing pipes was contributing just as definitely to the design as was the star drawing the sacred elevations, and lest they didn't understand what he meant, he said consider the appropriateness of

a six inch sewer about chin height across the main lobby, or something. Between the original flower of design and the three-dimensional result is the work of many men, each a master of his field, and each essential.

Many of the most able designers in the profession today can and do make thorough working and detail drawings as well as design sketches, and many of the most valuable men in both large and small offices, tho not able to do designing in the restricted sense that the student knows in his school projects, are those who ably and quickly prepare the intricate documents of all kinds required by contemporary work, and they, each with his own contribution, are partaking in the determination and development of design in the broadest sense. It is important that each student strive to become the finest draftsman, in the widest sense of the word, that his particular abilities permit. I write these words to encourage those whose formal design ability may not appear to be tops in the school judgments to seek their success in the other equally valuable fields of working drawings, specifications, engineering, or supervision.

You've no idea with what appreciation are held those comforting souls who seem to know all the practical answers, who can tell you how big is a joist, and who compose so expertly those dull tomes to supplement the drawings and confound the contractors "as may be required to the satisfaction of the architect".

But, irrespective of your ultimate place in the profession, the beginning is still the beginning, and, strangely, it is the beginning that is often of far-reaching importance to the ultimate accomplishment. The esquire has been known to have a bearing on the rendu.

Based purely upon personal experience, I might suggest that the best beginning is to get a job with Howard Dwight Smith, who always has had something important to do, and has a most engaging way of doing it by thrusting just a little more upon his men than they think they are prepared for, and then making it possible for them to come thru successfully so that they grow in ability and responsibility. But, in case the current supply of junior draftsmen exceeds his demand, the aim and hope should be to land in an office where the procedures are equally sound, businesslike, and efficiently productive. While Architecture still proudly wears its label as a Fine Art, and can occasionally be practiced in the Grand and Gentlemanly manner, it is no la-de-da performance of 6B pencils and Windsor & Newton colors with matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays. You had best learn forthwith that good business practice and efficient production of the documents of service are absolutely essential to being an architect for long, and so pick your first office with as much perspicacity as your hunger permits.

There are architects and architects, and sad experience proves that an alarming percentage are poor employers, bad teachers, jealous of the rising generation, and generally inept in the performance of their duties as archi-

texts. If you could inspect the drawings submitted for examination by city building departments and public boards, such as the School Buildings and Grounds division of the New York State Education Department, you would be moved to wide-eyed astonishment that the great and numerous schools of architecture could have operated these 40 years with such imperceptible results.

The first five years of your experience should provide the opportunity to have passed thru practically every step in office procedures, and to rise to the ability to assume considerable responsibility. Ohio State does a good job of training insofar as any school can go. The rest is up to the individual. Training can never stop because each day brings new problems to the architect requiring new solutions. Only by experience will you learn how offices, big or small, manage to bring out of the imagination the documents necessary to enable others to build the things the clients think they want and still make money for the architect and end up on speaking terms with the client. You'll be surprised some day to discover how easy it is to fumble those last two items!

It remains my impression that the better office to start in is a relatively small one doing miscellaneous work in collaboration with competent structural, mechanical, and electrical engineers and landscape architects. No one man can do everything, and to early see how the work of specialists is coordinated by an able architect is good ground training. In the smaller offices the junior draftsman usually has the chance at more varied tasks and ordinarily will advance to senior drafting rank and the important post of job captain more quickly than in large offices.

The procedures in an office of two or three people should fundamentally be no different than in a great organization of 300. Size usually involves an increase in paper work and record keeping, but an able architect will organize even a handful of employees in a simple manner to define duties and authority clearly. To move ahead in any size office the beginner must first be eternally all eyes and ears, willing to assume all the responsibility his experience allows, and second, he must make

friends, and make friends in every walk of life. The three most important things in architecture have been said to be: 1. Get the job; 2. Get the job, and 3. Get the job, and as sure as death and taxes you will never be the architect for anything, short of a miracle, unless you are favorably known by the person, or group of people, who are going to spend money to build something.

The great cities like New York and Chicago seem to glisten thru the mists of distance, but the old proverb about the absence of value in all that glitters is indeed applicable. In the first place, many youngsters flock to the metropolis unprepared for the bitter competition of experience, and under present conditions find that there is a large group of unemployed already there before them. In the second place, the percentage of good work being done at present is probably no higher than in many of the smaller cities, particularly since the greatest current of activity is in commercial alterations, apartment house work, and the like. It may be wise for some to seek the larger opportunities that should be inherent in vast accumulations of people, but it seems to me that present day conditions, at least around New York, make it inadvisable for one to go there until he has advanced in experience at least to the status of being able to command a small crew of men and ably direct a job thru the office. While true that a few years of experience in a good New York office is excellent stock-in-trade to carry back to the home town or other city, many find that, once established in the metropolitan area, it becomes very difficult to pull up stakes and go elsewhere at the right time.

There are often very real opportunities to be found in the smaller cities which have varied types of industries employing skilled labor, where there is likely to be reasonable prosperity. And many should certainly carefully weigh the advantages of returning to their home communities where acquaintances with people and conditions may be easily resumed and extended in a familiar and friendly environment. The choice of a city to live and work in is important. If a town lacks industries there can be little sustained demand for buildings, unless it is a trading or commuting center. If, like some New England cities, it depends upon some one industry which may die because of new developments or the shifting of the industry to a new locality, the demand for new buildings will be limited. While our frontiers have largely vanished, cities where the development of natural resources or active industries are attracting new population are still to be found, and there the architect will find his greatest opportunities.

So there it is in a nut shell. All you have to do is work for the right architects, meet the right people, marry the right girl, move to the right town, and you may do right well by yourself. So here's to your success—may you have lots of it—but don't go snoopin' around to get a peek at my income tax return!

# Jim's

On the Way to College

17th & High

Food as you like it