A HERITAGE OF DREAMS
Some Aspects of the History of the Architecture and Planning of the University of Pittsburgh, 1787-1969

JAMES D. VAN TRUMP

The architectural history of any human institution is no inconsiderable part of that organization, whether it is a church or library, bank or governmental agency; its building or buildings are its flesh by which in all phases of its development its essential image is presented to the world. Nowadays, as site and area planning come increasingly to the fore, the relation of groups of buildings to the land is receiving more attention from historians. Institutions of higher learning with their campuses and their interaction with larger social, architectural, and planning patterns are especially amenable to this type of study.¹

An exhibition of the history of the architecture and planning of the University of Pittsburgh from 1787 to 1969 was held recently in

¹ Such studies are not exactly new as evidenced by the series of articles on American college campuses published in the Architectural Record from 1909-1912 by the well known architectural critic and journalist, Montgomery Schuyler (1843-1914). However, our “planning” horizons have through necessity broadened since Schuyler’s day.
the galleries of the University's Frick Fine Arts Building from 19 January to 14 February. Sponsored jointly by the University and the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, the show presented pictorially the most important facets of the physical lineaments of Pittsburgh's oldest and largest local institution of higher learning from its primitive beginning to Deeter Ritchey Sippel's master plan for the University of the future. The story of that institution's long building history from logs to steel and concrete, from the primal forest to the modern technologically controlled environment, is also the chronicle of America itself, not only of its achievements, but also its aspirations and its dreams.

Titled "A Heritage of Dreams," the exhibition was a record of the visions, realized and unrealized, of those dedicated men who have always been concerned about the University's progress. A university is a house of the human mind and spirit, but it is also buildings and a place; consequently, its physical "plant" has always been a not unimportant part of the process of learning. The exhibition was a chronicle of visions past and present; on the historical side, what was not constructed was given equal time with what was, and both aspects are important in considering the appearance of the University of Pittsburgh today. No one can say with certainty how much of the present master plan will be realized, but it is always necessary to plan, it is salutary to dream, and what is actually accomplished will be added to the record in due course.

It must be remembered also that the University of Pittsburgh, although it has changed its location a number of times, has always been, except for one suburban interlude around the turn of the century, part of the city of Pittsburgh and closely connected with it. It has grown and developed as the city has grown, and its problems of expansion today are those of any great contemporary urban institution of learning.

But the ever expanding complex of buildings that now occupies so large a part of the Oakland district of Pittsburgh was remote from the early vision of the University's incorporators in February 1787, when it was founded as the Pittsburgh Academy largely through the efforts of Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748-1816), one of the leading citizens of the young city. This, the first institution of higher learning west of the Allegheny Mountains and north of the Ohio River, had its first headquarters in a small log house located near Third Street and Cherry Alley on the "Academy lot" which had been given to the
new institution by the Penn family in March 1787. For many years this plot of ground was to be the only campus of the school as well as its only "real estate" asset.

Judge Brackenridge had tried to get the Pennsylvania legislature to endow the new Academy with grants of land beyond the confines of the young city at the Point, but his efforts came to nothing. The log Academy — Plato's olive grove of Academe cut up into lengths of timber? — did duty as a classroom until sometime in the 1790's when another building known as the brick Academy was erected and paid for partly by public subscription and partly by the interest on five thousand dollars granted by the Pennsylvania legislature in 1798. With the advent of this structure which had one room on the first floor and two on the second, the older log house became the home of the Academy's principal. Brick was a rather more sophisticated building material than logs, and the institution which became the Western University of Pennsylvania in 1819 was well on its way.

The next step in the building history of the University came in 1830 when a handsome building of stone in the Classical manner surmounted by a cupola was constructed on the same lot. This monumental structure in the Greek Revival style was, until the completion of the second Allegheny County Court House in 1841, possibly the finest public building in the city. It is possible also that the University was designed by Pittsburgh's foremost architect of the time, John Chislett (1800-1869), who was responsible for the Court House and several banks, but the University records that might have informed us were destroyed along with the building in the great fire of April 1845. The 1833 painting of the building by Russell Smith (1812-1896) that now hangs in the Pennsylvania Room of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh was visually one of the most handsome items

2 No known contemporary visual record of the log Academy now exists, but Charles M. Stotz "reconstructed" it from existing evidence which was embodied in Ward Hunter's drawing of 1937. This sketch was also used as the frontispiece for Agnes Lynch Starrett's Through One Hundred and Fifty Years, The University of Pittsburgh (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1937), a book absolutely indispensable to anyone dealing with any facet of the University's history. In a sense, the book served as a guide for the exhibition. The Stotz-Hunter drawing was used in the exhibition by way of a negative in the photographic collection of the University.

3 The University charter of 1819 granted to the trustees forty acres from the common lands of Allegheny City on which to build, but the citizens of Allegheny claimed the land as their pasturage. A lawsuit resulted and the University's title was declared defective by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

4 Illustrated in the exhibition by the photograph of an unidentified early engraving from the University's photographic files.
in the exhibition to which it was loaned. Also on display was a reproduction (appearing on this page) of an engraving of the structure taken from Sherman Day's *Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania* of 1843 (page 68).

A description of the University still survives in Harris' *Business Directory* — "The University stands on Third street eastward a little of Smithfield street. The building is of free-stone, and has in front an imposing and stately appearance; within, there are four rooms on the first floor, for the recitation of the classes. On the second floor is the room appropriated to the philosophical apparatus; the Trustees' room, containing the College Library; and the Chapel, for public declamations, and the delivery of orations at the commencement. In

Western University of Pennsylvania

the third story is the room for the society of the students, elegantly furnished, and containing a library of 600 volumes; a large school room, for giving a complete English education; and an adjoining apartment for particular recitations . . . . The number of students in actual attendance is forty-three, and daily increasing." 5

After the destruction of this building, the University sold the site (the last remaining portion of the former Academy lot, parts of which had been disposed of earlier) and bought a lot on Duquesne Way near the present location of Joseph Horne's department store where it built a new structure, which seems not to have been in any

5 Quoted in Starrett, 102.
way memorable architecturally because no known illustration of it has survived. It, too, was destroyed by fire in July 1849, and for six years University classes were suspended.

The University, however, still survived and in 1854, the trustees purchased a lot at the corner of Diamond (now Forbes) and Ross Streets where it erected a building opened in 1856. This was a rather dull structure in the Italianate style so common in mid-century America, but it served the University until 1882 when it was taken over by Allegheny County as a temporary place of meeting for the law courts when the Court House was destroyed by fire in that year. So passed the last downtown headquarters of the University. This building was shown in the exhibition by means of a nineteenth century photograph.

Fire was not the only enemy of public buildings in the sometimes hastily built American city cores of the nineteenth century — lack of space was another. Overcrowding was a perennial problem in the comparatively cramped "Golden Triangle" of Pittsburgh. After the Civil War, residents of the Triangle began to leave it in increasing numbers for more salubrious quarters of the city and the suburbs. After 1880 the churches began to leave as well, and schools sought locations where they could better serve the moving population. Already it was apparent that downtown Pittsburgh would be left largely to commerce, the law, and governmental offices.

But it was imperative that the University find new quarters in 1882. A bill was introduced into the state legislature asking that the University be granted the site of the Western Penitentiary (which had moved to Woods Run) on the Allegheny Commons, but it failed to pass. For the next few years, the University rented rooms in the United Presbyterian and the Reformed Presbyterian theological seminaries in Allegheny.

This arrangement was, however, only temporary. In March 1865, the Allegheny Observatory with the land around it had been conveyed to the University. This suburban tract on Perrysville Avenue north of the metropolitan center was a likely prospect for the new "campus" since the downtown area was no longer feasible as a location. The trustees in this interim period decided to erect two new buildings on the observatory property; plans were completed in 1889 and work was begun. In January 1890 the University took possession

6 Starrett, 168.
of the completed structures, and its suburban interlude began.\footnote{7 Other American universities were in similar case. The University of Pennsylvania had removed to suburban West Philadelphia in the eighteen-seventies.}

The new buildings, designed by the local architect, James T. Steen,\footnote{8 \textit{The Inland Architect} 13:8 (July 1889), 106. Synopsis of building news — Pittsburgh. The cost of the buildings was given as "approximately $70,000."} were in the then fashionable Richardsonian Romanesque style which had been so notably exemplified in Pittsburgh by the Allegheny County Court House and Jail (they had been finished in 1888). The University Romanesque unlike that of the Court House is pedestrian, but at least Pitt's two new structures signified for the wandering institution not only a settled home but also a return to monumental architectural form which it had known only once before in the domed building of 1830-1845.\footnote{9 The University photographic negatives yielded an excellent photograph of the Perrysville Avenue campus for the exhibition.}

The old observatory was also part of this suburban group of buildings, but in the last decade of the nineteenth century, it was decided to erect a new and larger observatory building in Riverview Park. An architectural competition was held in 1896 which was won by Thorsten E. Billquist (d. 1922) for a design in the Classical style. In 1900, the cornerstone was laid and in 1912 the building was dedicated.

By 1900 the institution on Perrysville Avenue had become a large university and again it was apparent that it must find larger quarters. Its suburban situation was too remote from the other cultural activities of the city and more room was needed for the expansion of the physical plant. Fortunately the development of the Oakland district of Pittsburgh as a center of local culture made the choice of a new site a relatively simple matter. The Schenley Farms property had been sold in 1905 to Franklin F. Nicola (1859-1938),\footnote{10 The career of F. F. Nicola, as an idealistic promoter and planner in the Pittsburgh of his day, deserves more thorough study than it has hitherto been accorded. The present writer hopes one day to complete an article on his work in Oakland.} the astute real estate entrepreneur of the Civic Center, and it was he as moving spirit of the Schenley Farms Company who caused the land to be divided into monumental, educational, social, and residential zones. A hillside tract bounded by O'Hara, Parkman, Allequippa, and Bouquet Streets was purchased by the University in December 1907. By this move at the beginning of the twentieth century, the University entered on a new era.

Although architectural competitions are now a rarity, they were
in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries almost a commonplace. Sixty-one architects competed for the design of the University's new "plant." The design of the firm of Palmer and Hornbostel (who had also won the competition in 1903 for the nearby Carnegie Technical Schools) was chosen by the awards committee. Although the original perspective drawings from this competition seem to have disappeared, they were published and reproductions were made for the exhibition.  

From the standpoint of convenience and accessibility, a hillside site poses problems for the architect, but the Palmer and Hornbostel scheme planned a moving stairway (never constructed) to give access to their upper ranges of buildings. The scheme was crowned by a large porticoed temple structure on the hilltop. Had it ever been executed, this educational "Acropolis" would undoubtedly have been a splendid and dramatic addition to the architectural monuments of Pittsburgh, but only four buildings of the complex were ever erected.

The year 1908 marked the Sesquicentennial of the city of Pittsburgh; in that year also the Western University of Pennsylvania became the University of Pittsburgh, and the cornerstone of the first of its new buildings, the School of Mines, later State Hall, was laid at an important ceremony. State and Thaw Halls — the "anchor" buildings at the bottom of the proposed Palmer and Hornbostel complex — were finished in 1909 and 1910 respectively; Pennsylvania Hall, up the hill, which for a time became the School of Medicine, was also completed in 1910. By 1920-21 when Alumni Hall was

11 In *American Competitions (1908)*, vol. II, plates 40-44. The drawings of other competitors were also illustrated in this work. Henry Hornbostel (1867-1961), an architect of considerable talent whose later career was much identified with Pittsburgh, had come to Pittsburgh in 1904 as supervising architect of the Carnegie Technical Schools. The dramatic monumentality of the 1908 University scheme undoubtedly owed much of its effectiveness to his design ability. As a member of the firm of Howell, Stokes, and Hornbostel, he had won second prize in the 1898 competition for the University of California campus at Berkeley. Some of the Pitt drawings were also reproduced as an addendum to a pamphlet now in the Hillman Library of the University — *Instructions and/or regulations of a competition for the selection of an architect and the procuring of a general architectural plan for the Western University of Pennsylvania in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*. This was, in effect, the program issued for the guidance of the competitors.

12 Both these buildings have been much changed on the exterior, notably in the removal of their monumental staircases. State Hall is slated for demolition to make way for a new high-rise science building. For the exhibition we were able to find excellent photographs of both these buildings in the University archives.
built after the designs of the Pittsburgh firm of Janssen and Cocken, the Palmer and Hornbostel scheme had been definitely abandoned, because the new structure cut directly across the axis of their site plan. Thus although the effulgent dream of an educational Acropolis faded rapidly within a decade, the University was about to change its sights once more and an even more spectacular vision, combining the glories of the medieval past and the latest advances in twentieth century building technology, was about to burst upon the eyes of bedazzled Pittsburghers.

The Perrysville Avenue property, which was sold to the Protestant Orphan Asylum in 1908, was in effect the University's first campus. With the Palmer and Hornbostel scheme, the University had come into the era of the planned campus which after the turn of the century was becoming a necessity — institutions of higher learning were becoming too large to be subject to the haphazard accretion of buildings common to the nineteenth century college layout — not that the planned university was unknown in that period, as witness Thomas Jefferson's scheme of 1819-1826 for the University of Virginia which possibly had been influenced by an even earlier project for Union College, Schenectady, New York, designed by Joseph-Jacques Ramée in 1812.

What Henry Hornbostel could do in designing a college campus is evidenced by the scheme for the Carnegie Technical Schools later Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie-Mellon University) of 1904-1916 — here his executed design is his monument. It is also in the Classical manner — both in style and layout as was the Pitt scheme; both were very French in exemplifying the practice of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, particularly in its emphasis on logical planning. Stylistically the varied architecture of the University, after its log house beginnings had eschewed any of the medieval revivals — except for the Richardsonian Romanesque interlude on Perrysville Avenue. Otherwise it had been consistently Classical — in one variation or another of that manner — but Alumni Hall was the last Classical structure erected by the University for many years. The Gothic

13 Benno Janssen (1874-1964) was another extremely talented architect of the eclectic period in Pittsburgh. He had a deft hand with the Classical style, which is something in evidence in the design for Alumni Hall, although it is not his best performance in the genre. Again the University archive provided a good photograph of the exterior for the exhibition, but some of Janssen's drawings for it are now in the possession of the Pittsburgh architect, E. J. Hergenroeder.
The log Pittsburgh Academy
The brick Academy
The projected 1908 Oakland campus
State Hall in 1909
The Commons Room
Dream was about to emerge in all its glory among the clouded hills of Oakland.

After the First World War the University enrollment increased even further and with the abandonment of the Palmer and Hornbostel scheme it became imperative again to consider means of expanding the "plant." Chancellor Samuel Black McCormick who had managed with great skill the transition from Perrysville Avenue to Oakland resigned in 1920, and Dr. John Gabbert Bowman arrived to fill his place. It was to the idealism and vision of the latter, as well as the "drive" and the practicality that enabled him to implement them, that we owe the final success of the great Cathedral of Learning scheme.

As the building history of the University becomes after 1920 more complex, it must be said that we do not have space within the scope of this brief article to consider all developments. We will concentrate here upon that great structure which has become one of the landmarks of Pittsburgh as well as the chief symbol of the University, the Cathedral of Learning and the buildings constructed in its shadow. In removing the chief focus on the University from the hillside and in coming down into the very center of Oakland, the University created more expansion problems for itself, but these were not as yet visible in the early 1920's.

The early history of the land bounded by Forbes, Fifth, and Bellefield Avenues and Bigelow Boulevard, known locally after 1900 as Frick Acres because it was at that time in possession of Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919), the great Pittsburgh industrialist, does not concern us here. In 1921 the University purchased the plot with

15 Prior to 1946 when smoke control laws went into effect in Pittsburgh, these hills were indeed beclouded by much smoke, particularly in a period of financial prosperity like the 1920's. The reference here is to the preface of William Blake's poem Milton in which the lines "And did the Countenance Divine/ Shine forth upon our clouded hills?" occur in the second stanza. Undoubtedly the Cathedral tower by its great height was intended to rise superior to the smoke, but in fact it has never totally escaped the local grime and it has already been cleaned once.

16 One exception was the inclusion in the exhibition of a rendering in ink and water-color of a projected apartment house scheme for H. C. Frick dated January 1916, designed by the architectural firm of Janssen and Abbott. The present writer discovered it in the collection of the late Benno Janssen when he visited him in Charlottesville in 1962. Although the drawing is not signed, Mr. Janssen told the writer that it was executed by the well-known architectural water-colorist Birch Burdette Long, who as an artist has been unjustly forgotten. The drawing is now on loan to the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation and was exhibited through the courtesy of E. Patten Janssen of Charlottesville.
funds provided by Andrew W. and Richard B. Mellon. The chronicle of the architectural developments on the Cathedral plot is the most complete we possess — it occupied almost a whole gallery at the exhibition and this pleasing state of affairs was due to the fact that most of the visual documents — plans, drawings, models, and photographs — concerned with this phase have been conserved for the most part in the archives of the University’s Department of Architecture and Engineering.\(^\text{17}\)

The first scheme of 1922 for new buildings on the Cathedral plot was designed by Edward Purcell Mellon (1875?-1953) with Robert Tappan (d. 1961) as associate architect, and it made use of a high-rise structure of moderate height surrounded by subsidiary buildings including a chapel. It was also fully apparent that the style to be employed was Collegiate Gothic, mostly based on English medieval precedent. Although the original drawings could not be found, they had been photographed and these photographs were shown in the exhibition.

This scheme supposedly was not spectacular enough to suit the temper of the times or the aspiring spirit of the University, so it was laid aside and Charles Z. Klauder (1872-1938)\(^\text{18}\) of Philadelphia was called in to make the daring design of a fifty-two-story Cathedral of Learning which was accepted as the official scheme. This great tower, the product of the marriage of the new technology of an industrial and scientific age and the communal aspiration of the Gothic era, seemed to be the perfect solution to the University’s expansion problems; here the modern skyscraper and the medieval Cathedral met. The old nineteenth century cry of “onward and upward with the arts and sciences” resounded here even more sonorously.

A great publicity campaign was launched to secure the necessary funds to build the magical tower, and corporations and schoolchildren contributed to the building fund — within three months ten million dollars were pledged during the campaign of 1925.\(^\text{19}\)

In September 1926 ground was broken for the new structure, but

---

\(^{17}\) The Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation and the writer wish to acknowledge with gratitude the assistance of Mr. Theodore Bowman, the Curator of the University, and his staff at the Department of Architecture and Engineering in preparing the exhibition. Without their constant and active cooperation the show would not have been possible.

\(^{18}\) Klauder (1872-1938) was a specialist in academic architecture. With Herbert C. Wise he co-authored *College Architecture in America* (New York, 1929). On page 292 is a full-page rendering of the Cathedral of Learning.

\(^{19}\) Starrett, 258-259.
although it was substantially complete ten years later, parts of it were not finished until after the Second World War. The Depression of the 1930's undoubtedly lengthened its period of construction, as questions of architectural function probably abridged its height which became eventually forty stories. Even so, grand as the Cathedral is visually, it became apparent before too many years had passed that the out-size high-rise was not the answer to the problem of University expansion.

Klauder had from the first considered the Cathedral as the clou, the center piece of a complex of buildings; many studies for this group were made from 1924 to 1944 and a large number of them were shown in the exhibition, both original drawings and reproductions. The studies were continued by Trautwein and Howard, Klauder's successors, by Eggers and Higgins, and by the University's Department of Planning. All that were built were the Foster Memorial (1935-37) and the Heinz Memorial Chapel (1934-38) — both designed by Klauder, while across Fifth Avenue and constructed after the Second War, George Hubbard Clapp Hall reflects the paling glamor of the Gothic Dream.

A special section of the exhibition — drawings, plans, and documents — was devoted to the Nationality Classrooms that surround the great Commons Room on the first floor of the Cathedral of Learning. These are representative of the various nationalities and cultures that have in the last two hundred years made up the population of Pittsburgh.

Whatever functional deficiencies may inhere in the Cathedral of Learning, as a symbol and a visual landmark it is superb. We shall not see its like again. The last great monument of the Gothic Revival in America, it is both in its faults and its virtues a summation of its

---

20 Perhaps the most handsome work of art in the exhibition was a large watercolor rendering of the Cathedral (in the University's possession) showing Klauder's final accepted design but before the top of the tower had been changed — this last change was made during construction. It was like the Frick Acres apartment scheme, described above, executed by Birch Burdette Long (1878-1927), a free-lance architectural "renderer" who made a specialty of these ceremonial perspective drawings. As a local landmark, the Cathedral has also served as a model for a number of artists. The present writer hopes to compile a list of such works of art.

21 This program of designing and furnishing the classrooms had its inception in 1927 when the first local nationality committees were formed. From the beginning Mrs. Ruth Crawford Mitchell of the University was advisor to the various groups who were responsible for raising funds to complete the rooms.

22 In this regard, the writer has discussed the building previously in his "The Gothic Revival in Pittsburgh," Charette, xxxvii: 8 (August 1957), 14-18.
period, the city, and the University, but it also points the way to things to come. For the University that has come so far already, the latest expansion project of the Pittsburgh firm of Deeter Ritchey Sippel, which occupied the final gallery at the exhibition, displays new latitudes of architectural expression, new horizons of planning.  

23 Although the exhibition included examples of the work of all architectural firms that have contributed buildings to the University campus, including the work of Harrison and Abramovitz for Chancellor Litchfield, the writer feels that the work executed since 1955 is too recent and does not properly fit into an historical magazine. The Deeter Ritchey Sippel master plan belongs essentially to the present and the future; in due course it can be evaluated historically.