

Architecture at Princeton

Reflecting on 17 years at Princeton

Architecture is ultimately about form, Robert Geddes believes, but not form for its own sake.

A reminder of that important, if occasionally ignored, principle sits in the corner of his spacious office on Alexander Street, at the architectural firm of Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham. It is a chair designed by the Dutch architect Rietveld, in effect a piece of abstract sculpture in colorful hardwood panels.

"I keep it there as a polemical statement," says Princeton's dean of architecture with a wry smile. The chair was a gift from his faculty, and in Geddes' view it illustrates some of the pitfalls to which modern architecture is heir.

"There's a danger of architecture becoming autonomous, and it's critically important when designing a building to understand the people and groups of people who'll be using it," he says. "At Princeton, we've worked hard to strengthen the connection of architecture to history and the social sciences—to keep architecture from becoming totally self-reflective and narcissistic."

Later this year the 58-year-old Geddes will relinquish his administrative chores as dean to resume full-time his commitments to teaching and design. He is Princeton's first dean of architecture and has held the position for 17 years, making him the "dean" of American architectural deans. In September, Robert Maxwell of the Bartlett School of Architecture in London becomes the new dean.

In a recent interview Geddes took a retrospective look at the school and trends in contemporary architecture.

"When I came here in 1965 from the University of Pennsylvania, the school had just moved from McCormick Hall and its affiliation with art and archaeology. We had a new building, and in many ways it was a new school," he recalled.

"A real effort was made by me to establish links with other parts of the University—to restore our historic ties with the Department of Art and Archaeology and to build stronger connections with the schools of public affairs and engineering." Internally, Geddes added, he redesigned the school's curriculum to "unite the teaching of design with courses in technology, history and the social sciences. That was done by asking every member of the faculty who taught a design studio to teach a seminar or course in architectural analysis and theory as well."

The school is distinguished today, Geddes feels, by the strength of its small but high-powered faculty—"pound for pound by far the best faculty in the country"—the unity of its programs (academic and professional,

undergraduate and graduate), the strength of its interdisciplinary ties, and its humanistic approach to professional education.

"It's very good for students of architecture to be exposed to different kinds of tension, for example, between the views of social scientists and historians," Geddes says. "On the one hand, when designing a building, you have to keep your eyes open to the present—what's happening to households, the changing role of women and demographic changes in the population all reflect on living space and the nature of cities. On the other hand, it's important to understand historically the social and cultural conditions that produced the cities and architecture of the past."

The blend of approaches and disciplines is reflected in undergraduate course offerings in such areas as the history of architectural theory, building science and technology, urban design and analysis, and politics and cultural expression in architecture. Faculty associated with the school include members of the departments of civil engineering, sociology, and art and archaeology.

Princeton's diverse yet unified approach—a single faculty teaches both undergraduates and graduate students—coupled with its relatively small size and range of programs, makes it unique among architectural schools, according to Geddes. Undergraduates can choose between programs in design (leading to a professional career) and architectural history and theory. The graduate curriculum offers professionally oriented programs in architecture and urban design, as well as a Ph.D. program with an emphasis on scholarship.

Design work is critically important at the school, and Geddes emphasizes that many faculty members are practicing architects. Geddes himself heads a 90-person architectural firm that won the highest honor of the American Institute of Architects in 1979. The award said that "the firm's work in housing, educational facilities, public buildings, and urban planning projects has shown a consistent regard for design quality, respect for the environment, and social concern. Its members' continuing commitment to architectural education has helped insure that their own high standards will be perpetuated by future generations of design professionals."

Geddes has designed the dining hall commons and courtyard of the Institute for Advanced Study, Stockton State College, the downtown renewal plan for Corning, N.Y., Philadelphia Police Headquarters, and the master plans for Penn's Landing in Philadelphia

and for Liberty State Park in New York Harbor. He has also executed major commissions at the University of Pennsylvania, while in his capacity as dean at Princeton he has been instrumental in the selection of new architects for the campus here.

The list of architects who have designed Princeton buildings in the last 10 years is "as good a group as you'll find at any university," he says, and includes I.M. Pei (Spelman Halls), Robert Venturi '47 (the new Butler College), and the firms of Davis Brody (Biochemical Sciences Building), Mitchell/Giurgola (Geology Library), and Gwathmey and Siegel (Whig Hall renovation).

Geddes, who regards himself as "very much of a classicist" in his architectural tastes, has several favorite areas on campus. He particularly likes the yard fronting on Nassau Hall, including the Joseph Henry and Maclean houses, as well as the Graduate School and the Collegiate gothic dormitories on the west side of campus. "The walk up from the railroad station through Blair Arch is beautiful. Ralph Adams Cram was consulting architect during much of that period (1895-1930), and it's one of the best groups of buildings you'll find anywhere."

He thinks that Princeton's eclectic mix of building styles works reasonably well, although the architecture "breaks down in the New New and Wilson quads—they're nowhere near the quality of the earlier dormitories." Other unsuccessful designs, in Geddes' view, are the Woodrow Wilson School ("the worst building on campus—closely followed by the Engineering Quad"), Fine Hall ("a first-rate mistake—it's too isolated in its campus setting and too isolating in terms of human behavior") and the Mudd Library ("undistinguished").

"One problem has been that Princeton since World War II has built too many freestanding buildings, without enough attention given to the continuity of architectural spaces," he said. "Even the Biochemical Sciences Building, while a good design as a single building, suffers in that respect."



Dean Robert L. Geddes

I'm concerned about that entire end of the campus along William Street, which may be going up incrementally without coherence."

On a national scale, Geddes is encouraged by some but not all of the architectural trends he's seen since coming to Princeton.

"When I graduated from architecture school [at Harvard] in 1950, a small group of architects, working in the international style, were establishing themselves with buildings like Lever House, the United Nations, the glass banks on Fifth Avenue. Since 1965 the adequacy of that position has been questioned on several levels—does it deal adequately with human needs, and is it too abstract and reductionist?" said Geddes.

"On the plus side, since 1965 there's been a greater concern for symbolic content and a much greater visual range in buildings. Architects today enjoy a more inclusive working vocabulary than they used to. One area where there hasn't been any real advance, curiously, is in the technology of making buildings, particularly in the use of industrialized systems. It may come from Japan or Sweden, but sooner or later a major breakthrough is going to occur."

Geddes will have plenty of work to keep him busy after his "retirement" as dean. His current design projects include an addition to the art museum in Louisville, Ky., as well as major office buildings in Trenton and Kansas City, two Mobil research laboratories near Pennington, and the modernization of the University of Pennsylvania Hospital.

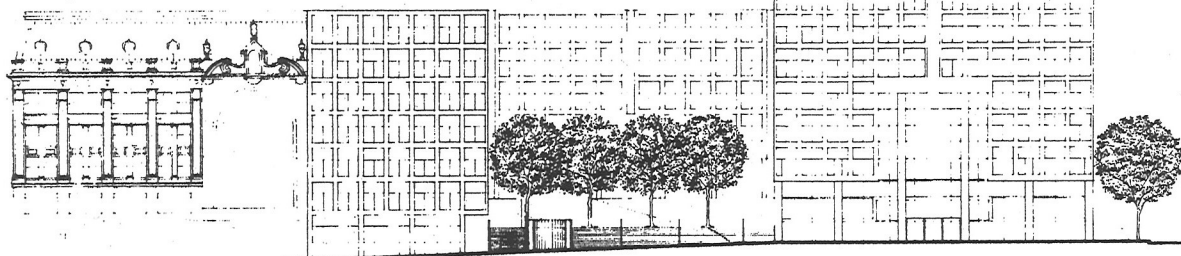
He will also finish a book and prepare an exhibition on the Academy Gallery in London. Later he will take on an additional course while continuing to teach Architecture 101.

Geddes created Architecture 101 not long after arriving here. Titled "Introduction to the Built Environment," it enrolls more than 100 students a year, more than two-thirds of whom do not plan to major in architecture.

"The course is a particular challenge and responsibility," remarks Geddes, "because most of the students may never come in touch with architecture in a formal sense again."

A retrospective exhibition, "Robert Geddes: The Forest Edge," is on display at the American Institute of Architects Gallery, 117 S. 17th St., Philadelphia, until April 16.

—J.I. Merritt '66



Kansas City Office Building designed by Dean Geddes. He heads a firm of 90 persons: Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham.