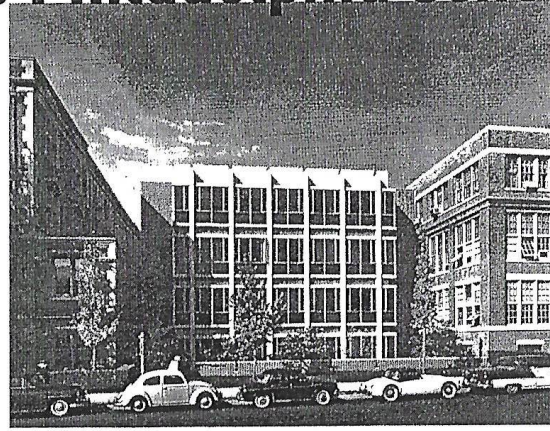
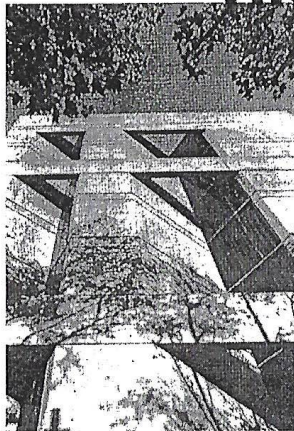
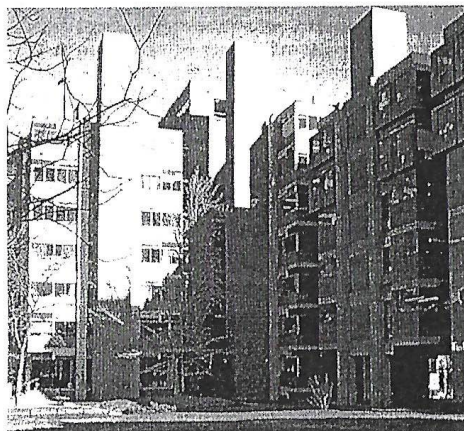


## The Philadelphia School of Architecture



September 2003

The Philadelphia Architect September 2003

### Robert Geddes, FAIA: "Harold Pender Laboratory (1958–2003)"

*Harold Pender Laboratory, Moore School of Electrical Engineering, University of Pennsylvania*

*Architects: Robert Geddes, Melvin Brecher, Warren Cunningham (later Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham Architects)*

*Gold Medal 1958: AIA Philadelphia Chapter  
Silver Medal 1958: Pennsylvania Society of Architects  
First Honor Award 1960: American Institute of Architects*

**I**f there was a Philadelphia School, then the Pender Laboratory was one of its earliest buildings—and the first on the Penn campus.

Urbanistically, it was an infill along 33rd Street. It sat between the Moore School, a converted industrial building, and the Towne School, a fine Penn collegiate building.

Functionally, the Pender Laboratory was a new wing for the Moore School of Electrical Engineering, providing open loft floors for electronic research labs, offices and classrooms.

It was a utopian venture—structurally and compositionally.

**Structurally**, it was an ideal concrete frame. Each floor was a clear-span, two-way grid network accommodating mechanical and electrical services within the structure. Internally, to achieve the hollow grid network, removable cardboard boxes were used as formwork. Externally, pre-cast concrete formwork was used to achieve the structural frame; for

example, the horizontal channels were authentically the restraining edge of the grid network. Formwork was the key to the structure. (Good word, "formwork.")

**Compositionally**, it fit. It was calibrated to fit with its neighbors, not by stylistic imitation or eclectic pastiche, but by matching their scale and rhythm. It was intentionally constructivist as a structure and classicist as a composition. It sought clarity and coherence.



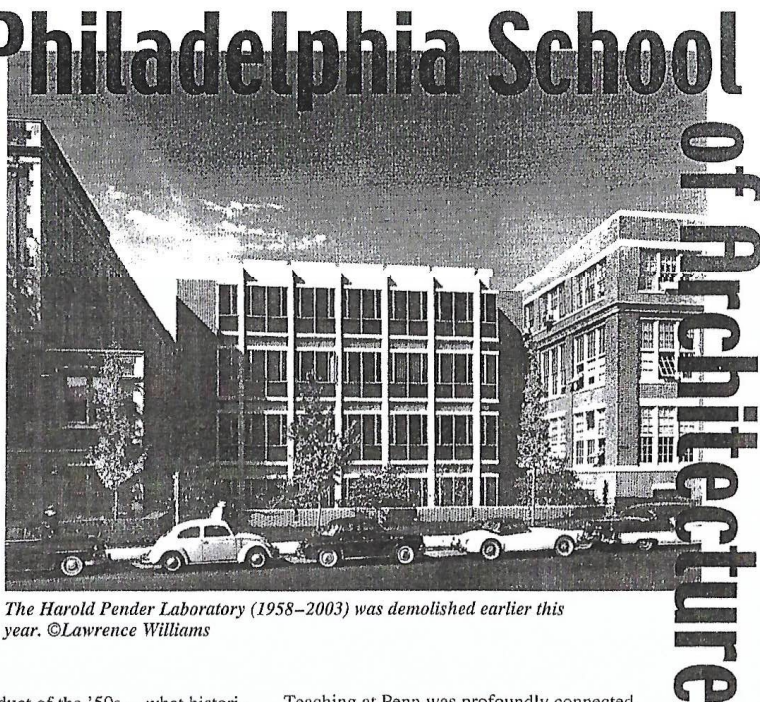
*Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham Architects (currently GBQC) Partners Robert L. Geddes, Melvin Brecher, George W. Qualls and Warren W. Cunningham.  
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It was a product of the '50s—what historians might call the "long decade" in Philadelphia architecture and urbanism. The decade started in 1947 at a civic exhibition in Gimbels Department Store in Center City. Design and planning, housing and neighborhoods, politics and professions—*together*. It was an authentic "new urbanism" in the context of a "new politics."

At that time, while studying architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, I would often visit Lou Kahn in his office and report back to the other students. Subsequently, a group including Ian McHarg and me did a collaborative thesis—a downtown plan for Providence—stimulated by what was happening in Philadelphia. I came to Philadelphia in 1951, in the first squad of Holmes Perkins' new faculty at Penn.

Teaching at Penn was profoundly connected with practice. For example, the structural focus of our second-year design studio was a forecast of the Pender Laboratory; and the collaborative method of our graduate studios used Philadelphia as a laboratory. We often worked together, for example, on a "new house study" for the Redevelopment Authority. We were engaged by the Planning Commission as design consultants for neighborhoods and districts. The "Citizens Council on City Planning" was our forum of ideas. Two historic documents, the Comprehensive Plan (1960) and the Center City Plan (1963), were created during the "long decade." And many of us started our architectural firms.

The Pender Laboratory was our first building. When it was being demolished this year, Barney Cunningham wrote me that he "reveled in the fact that they are having a hard time tearing it down ... it was a strong building."



*The Harold Pender Laboratory (1958–2003) was demolished earlier this year. ©Lawrence Williams*