

# Revival Meeting or Call to Action? . . . . a look at the re

Last October the editor of the country's most prestigious AIA Society publication invited me to write a modest contribution for its pages. He suggested that *New Mexico Architecture* could use a short but pithy piece about the four-day AIA Western Mountain Regional Conference held in Albuquerque, October 18 through 21, 1972. The theme, as I recall, was: "Education of the Architect." The editor's invitation came rather informally, whispered through the dulcet strains of a well-rounded mariachi ensemble during one of the spirited hospitality events. Since I was a guest panelist, I had assumed that this offer, if I heard it correctly, should be accepted as a flattering tidbit to be consumed along with pickled onions and gin-soaked olives provided for bobbing purposes by our gracious hosts.

Thus it came as a pleasant surprise some six weeks later to be reminded that my recollections were confirmed. Somehow, I had imagined that your editor would be up to his ears in recorded tape made during the four-day session at the Four Seasons. However, I did not know that he was unable to keep his recorder plugged in. It seems that during the conference the motel was still under construction, and the electricians had installed only two receptacles (actually one, two-hole convenience outlet). As a chivalrous gesture and unobserved by the audience, the *NMA* editor shared his plug-in rights with the two charming lady journalists from Denver. Because of his generosity, apparently he was left short of material. Readers should be warned that I already delivered an oral summary of the conference proceedings at the final banquet session. Apologies are hereby extended to any *NMA* subscribers who have already heard this recapitulation of the serious side. However, the editor has reassured me that some repetition is permissible since many left early, and those who stayed would have been too drowsy to remember.

Our era will go down in history as the great epoch of the panel-conference; it is modern society's partial remedy for an overdose of passive spectator sports; it gives the illusion of participatory democracy, especially when the feedback response (or hot line) is an essential part of the program. Conferences in our day, including those on architecture and education, seem to have descended directly from old-time revival meetings that were held annually back in the days of the horse-and-buggy. Sinners within driving range would come together once a year for two or three days of singing, praying, preaching, picnicing and holding hands. It was a time of general spiritual release pregnant with temporary therapeutic values. After careful preparation by the local congregation and their deacons, out-of-town evangelists would take over the proceedings, exorcise evil spirits, convert transgressors and reassure the faithful. Usually, the most notorious reprobate in

the community could be inspired to rise up, shout testimonials and, amidst a chorus of amens and hal-lalujahs from the audience, would accept the path of righteousness. Back in those early days people called it a moving event; today, under controlled hotel-motel circumstances, we refer to it as a meaningful dialogue or, if confrontations appear, a happening.

The greatest similarity between the old-time revival meeting and the AIA-Educational conference lies in the generating of a temporary exhilaration followed by a predictable backsliding effect to status quo. Six weeks used to be the maximum duration, under the most favorable circumstances, for visible signs of salvation to remain. Today everything seems to be speeded up. For too many architects who do not attend, the time period of a state of grace is zero, especially if they also do not read. For the architect who participates, the euphoria of good intentions may last until he is bumped by the old practice of job-stealing, fee-cutting and miscellaneous chiselling that is accepted as part of the game. For the educator who attends the conference, realities of budget, administration, faculty deadwood and unmotivated students soon forces him to give up any thoughts of redesign, and to feel virtuous enough just to tinker away at the old curriculum: two-two-two, two-by-four or, as at Harvard, 2 plus 2 equals 6. Another means of obtaining instant applause from students is to change the course from table d'hôte to smorgasbord with no limit on dessert and with icebox or pantry privileges for those who can't make the schedule of classes.

The accepted standard of ethics in professional practice gets conveniently set aside in the outwardly polite, dog-eat-dog competition. The same code that ambiguously defines the transgression implicitly prevents the policing of any but the most flagrant violations by small fry. All architects seem to live in glass houses. Fear of retaliation protects especially the big-boys who usually have their spokesmen installed as officers at the national as well as regional and local level. In some cities smaller firms know that they exist almost by courtesy of the larger ones. In this regard individual chapters and regions will vary but the problem seems to be general. Under these circumstances, with images of the "successful" architect conspicuously before them, the schools are forced by conscience and by students to look elsewhere for their models.

There should be no quandry about which comes first, the chicken or the egg, in relating cause and result to the practice of architecture and education of the architect. Today's profession has to be the chicken, positively or negatively responsible for tomorrow's architect. The school is the incubator providing an artificial, temporary environment with necessary heat and light until graduation, but with

# IA Regional Conference held in Albuquerque... by Buford Pickens, FAIA

no control thereafter. The most talented, idealistic and responsible graduate from the best school gets lost in attempting to cope with the reality of professional practice—which is not the printed code of AIA. He soon learns the possible options: either 1. adjust to the operative norm; 2. keep a low profile as employee; or 3. run a very small office; or else 4. get out.

## The AIA needs a two-party system.

Having known and observed five or six generations of students and their later progress in the profession, it is sad to witness the metamorphosis. Unfortunately, the national AIA organizational structure seems to reward and encourage "operator" types; the prescription of rewards and promotion through the committee structure seems designed to weed out the idealist, the creative thinker, and the designer. A few make it through the Chapter level and the Region to the National Board where they are outnumbered and their best efforts frustrated. The present system has reached a dead end. If, as I believe, the improvement of schools depends upon the inspiration of major reform in the profession itself, and if the profession depends upon its tightly organized Chapter-Region-Octagon web, then one must conclude that the AIA needs a two-party system. Major reform is impossible without a loyal opposition to force the upgrading of performance by the establishment. Perhaps then the students would prefer to be trained as architects and not cop out into the various hyphenated hybrid fields.

The 1972 WMR Conference, thanks to the courage and skill of its program committee, succeeded in exposing most of the basic issues before representatives of all who are primarily concerned viz., students, faculty, school administrators and practitioners of various ages. That in itself was a major accomplishment not possible in many regions I know. Furthermore, the conference was long enough to permit after-thoughts to surface. Everyone was given a chance to be heard and reheard with a conscientious effort made to answer questions by individuals. The incident about who should or should not sit on the platform was a nice theatrical bit well played impromptu by all the cast. Too bad that architects as space planners don't experiment more with the effect of seating arrangement on group dynamics. They continue to neglect the lessons of history of architecture from the functional design of a kiva to the British House of Commons. A depressed cockpit, as demonstrated so appropriately by the performance at The Barn Theatre, would have served better as a conference setting. Dean Colbert could have been quietly elevated into the haymow and the students could have dramatized their entrance and exit from all four corners. Best of all, the par-

ticipating power-to-the-people audience could have enjoyed refreshments at their tables, elevated properly, well above the speakers who could spin around on revolving chairs. When will architects learn the lessons of history?

The opening discussion of the College Curriculum focused attention on the nature and usefulness of a "core" which is the same question Adam must have asked Eve. The core of a curriculum in the past has been that essential minimum of required studies all architectural graduates had in common. Today, when some architectural students want to be social workers in housing, researchers in industrial prefabs, city planners, or work for a consortium in the field of environics, there can be little overlapping, at least for some schools. However, if the profession of architecture was led by creative thinkers and designers who could hire and fire their salesmen and accountants instead of the other way round, perhaps the schools could devise a core of studies that would relate to better ways to design buildings for people.

### DISTINGUISHED CONFERENCE PANELISTS:

- Daniel Boone: Practicing architect in Abilene, Texas. Past President of the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards.*
- Charles Colbert: Practicing architect in New Orleans, Louisiana. Former Dean of Columbia University School of Architecture.*
- Buford L. Pickens: Educator-Historian. Former Dean of the Department of Architecture at Tulane University and Washington University at St. Louis.*
- Ambrose M. Richardson: Chairman of the Department of Architecture at Notre Dame University. Past President of the National Architectural Accrediting Board.*
- Forrest Wilson: Director of Ohio University School of Architecture. Former editor of Progressive Architecture magazine.*
- Richard C. Peters: Chairman of the Department of Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley.*
- Conference Moderator: John B. Reed, practicing architect in Albuquerque and conference program chairman.*

About this time in the conference, Daniel Boone, FAIA, from Abilene, Texas described the newly devised, wide-mesh, no-graphics exam for National Council of Architectural Registration Board applicants. After considerable discussion about passing the buck back to the schools, one sympathetic, old-time gentleman from Utah asked how in tarnation we could expect the schools to prepare the poor be-

wildered students of 1973 when the professionals themselves do not understand the residual connotation, nor even the digital, non-responsive functional analysis? The answer from the panel, according to my notes, was that today's neophyte, while he is still in school, must be provided with a total mechanism for his own sequential, decision-postponement patterns that will be needed by 1984, only twelve years hence.

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## Can the practice of architecture be taught in universities???

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Forrest Wilson then raised the fundamental question: "Can the practice of architecture be taught in universities?" Obviously, the question was intentionally loaded. Also, it was a frankly disarming, hair-down confession of confusing the Forrest with the trees because Wilson had just become director of Ohio University's School of Architecture. Such an admission by him invited a straight answer; obviously he was not intending to be rhetorical, even though implying in plaintive tone that he might as well ask how can the blind lead the blind.

Ambrose Richardson, FAIA, newly appointed chairman of the Notre Dame architecture department, and former president of the National Architectural Accrediting Board recalled that during the 40's, the 50's and even into the 60's we still had relatively clear, if limited objectives: first to gain acceptance of a new and non-eclectic architectural form language appropriate to the technology of our era; and second, to win the freedom to use these new four-letter words like f-l-a-t r-o-o-f, p-i-p-e r-a-i-l, g-l-a-s b-l-o-c-k. But instead of progressing with clarity and order toward meaningful statements, we seem to have laid the haphazard foundations for an international Tower of Babel. After this statement, it was apparent that apprehensive apparitions crept into the discussion.

Don Schlegel was cheered on by a block of U of N.M. students, who with firecrackers had recently been forcibly ejected from beneath the platform by "Hot-Foot" Charles Colbert, former dean of Columbia University. Schlegel claimed he had convincing evidence in the form of model studies to show that symbolic use of tinker-toy type of clip-on and plug-in schools will not work in the desert environment. He was vigorously supported from the floor by Jess Holmes and Bob Campbell who reminded the guest panelists that they were in a heap of trouble if they came to the mountain region thinking that certain elements here were the creative response to the interface orbital strategy. Indeed, they were obviously not capable of organic regeneration under the New Mexico systems and subsystems put forward by Bainbridge Bunting in his latest book on the buildings of Back-Bay Boston.

At this point Hal Stroud pointed out that as far as Tempe was concerned "A City is Not a Tree" and furthermore, a building is not jumping cholla

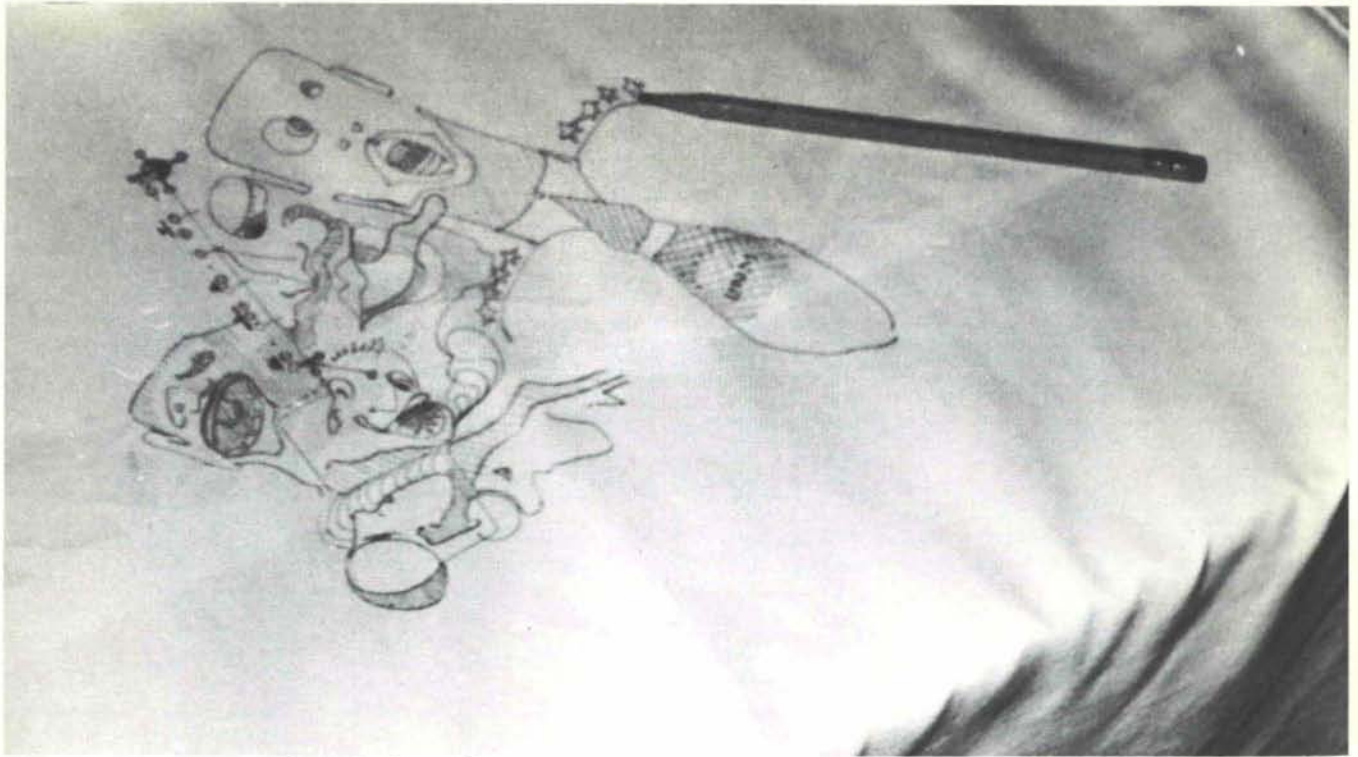
in spite of what M. Whiffen has written to the contrary. Jim Elmore added that as far as he was concerned a building is not a tumble weed either. A young lady student from A. S. U. explained that at Tempe, following the sensitivity experiments at the AIA convention at Boston in 1970, the School of Architecture at A. S. U. has given up freehand drawing for freehand feeling. Jorgé de la Torre signed up for a post-graduate course.

Don Stevens cast a critical eye on the notion that cellular agglomerates lack the power either of synchronicity or etiolated stimuli. He explained to the students that he was opposed to such a proposal as being wholly inconsistent with the Spanish Colonial traditions surviving even today in modern form at Rancho Encantado. He believes that contemporary architects could learn a lot from listening to the guitar recitals of Ruben Romero.

At this point Maximillian Flatow objected that the conference was entirely too negative and that the loud speakers were too loud. He said that the imported panel was merely minimizing the maxis and maximizing the minis. This line of totalistic planning did not jibe with his views on hierarchial organization and played directly into the hands of the prevailing elitists from the U. of N.M. graduate school who had taken over his office pueblo. Furthermore, to use his own words: "It is a far cry from the poetic language that Adler and Sullivan perfected and from the organic principles that Wright and Schindler bequeathed to the western mountain folk." Cheers and applause arose from all corners of the hall.

Conference Chairman John (Don Juan) Reed (Rédarigo), a descendant of Ponce de Leon, who came from Mississippi to Albuquerque in search of the Fountain of Youth, called upon Brad Kidder who has produced plans for a back-to-back, tetrahedral megastructure designed to straddle Sandia Mt. Rosemary Merzback, editor of the *Denver Daily Journal*, immediately requested publication rights. At this point the conference recessed while the two sturdy Trunks from *Symposia*, the super-regional magazine, asked if *NMA* Editor Conron would be willing to help them untangle the mumblistic and twiddlistic articulation that was cluttering up so much of the tape recording. With the recorders turned off, even the students were unwilling to talk so the session broke for lunch and/or the rest rooms.

After lunch on the second day (or it was it the third?) Jason Moore spoke briefly about his research on the new project called Fun-el-Town or Instant City. The feature of this unique conception staggers the living quarters in a cluster of giant funnel superstructures. He was invited by Dick Peters, head of the architecture department at the University of California, Berkeley, to speak to his homogeneous student body. Incidentally, Peter's own distinguished and bearded head was separated from his body by a high, white plastic collar which he said was fine therapy for three slipped discs, but it was embar-



*The doodle art of Panelist Charles Colbert.*

rassing to wear because he was really a blue-collar person at heart. His school is combining architecture with social work until the California architects can introduce more humanism and less pollution in the built environment. His students have called this the new Peters Principle.

Requesting the mike, the old-timer from Utah said he could now see as well as hear the Tower of Babel. He began to realize how the new language of architecture provided too many hifalutin words—a babel that kept architects even from understanding each other. The vocabulary of technical means has outrun our ability to express fundamental architectural ideas that people can grasp—ideas that relate buildings to the environment. Have architects and students spent too much time thumbing noses at each other and at regional and vernacular traditions? He proposed that “the conference could save itself from the recidivistic [sic] fate of a revival meeting if representatives of each chapter and school would go home and together discuss the subjects presented at the conference; there must be better systems to organize, practice, build, teach and learn.” He recommended to them the following questions which the panel raised but did not answer:

1. Is the issue the training of architects or the education of people?
2. Is teaching a profession or a part-time hobby?
3. Can neophytes teach neophytes?
4. Why are schools so fearful of research in, and evaluation of, educational method, especially in design?

5. Why are both architectural schools and offices almost wholly immune to regular, constructive criticism by each other?
6. Why do architects look the other way when members of their profession either (a) build badly; (b) pollute the visual environment in serving financial interests of the client instead of the public; (c) recommend needless destruction of historic architecture they do not even try to evaluate?
7. Why are architects, as individuals, afraid to take a stand on public or civic issues that are not patently self-serving?
8. Why is there so little about architecture in the mass media?

The venerable gentleman from Utah concluded with this admonition: “If you don’t like my questions or the way I have worded them, compose your own polysyllogistic [sic,] substitutes.”



It would be interesting to find out if the WMR-AIA Chapters or schools accepted the challenge to make the conference a call to action instead of just another revival meeting. Anybody know?

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