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'A Time to Build' - William W. Cook and His Architects: Edward York and Philip Sawyer

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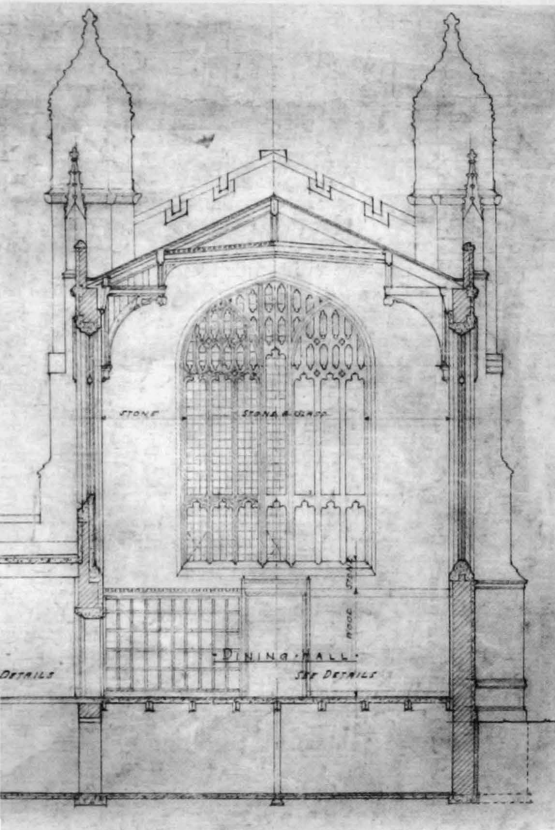


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Original York and Sawyer pencil drawing, west facade.

'a time to build'

WILLIAM W. COOK AND HIS ARCHITECTS: EDWARD YORK AND PHILIP SAWYER

The following narrative outlines the role of donor William W. Cook and the architects who built the Law Quadrangle 70 years ago. The report is excerpted and adapted from 94 Law Library Journal 395-425 (2002-26). The author is director of the University of Michigan Law School's Law Library.

By Margaret A. Leary

William W. Cook first worked with the architectural firm of Edward York and Philip Sawyer in 1911, when he contracted with them to build his New York town house at 14 East Seventy-first Street. He then used them for his first gift to Michigan, the Martha Cook Building (named in honor of his mother), and continued to work with them on subsequent Michigan projects. Cook also used the same interior finishing specialists, the Hayden Company, also based in New York City.

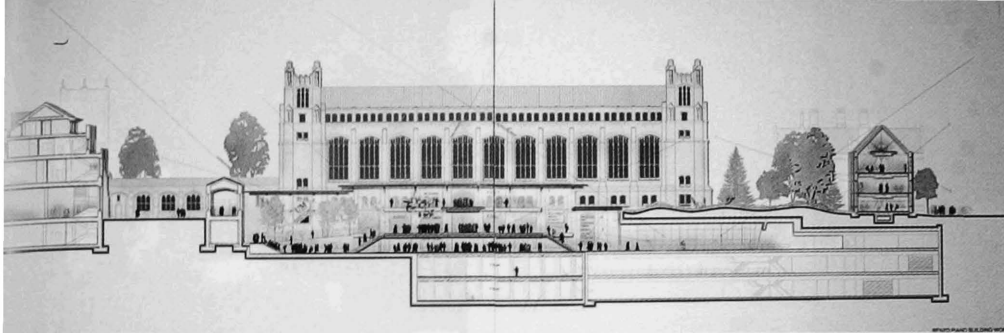
Ilene H. Forsythe's book, *The Uses of Art: Medieval Metaphor in the Michigan Law Quadrangle* (1993), includes many examples of the dialectical process that created the Law Quadrangle — determining the site, siting the individual buildings, selecting the type of stone — and quotes Cook's description to York of this process as “Going over the designs together, you furnishing the art and I the philosophy.”

York and Sawyer met as associates at the preeminent New York City firm of McKim, Mead, and White, where they worked together from 1891-1898. They left to form their own firm when they

won a competition for Rockefeller Hall at Vassar College, where they eventually did six more buildings. They were influenced by the partners in their former firm, and so was William Cook. Stanford White designed, for Cook's employer Clarence MacKay, a very grand mansion called Harbour Hill on Long Island, between 1899-1901. Cook's aesthetic education was undoubtedly affected by that building, which David Garrard Lowe described in *Stanford White's New York* (rev. ed. 1999) as “fashioned of the finest pale gray Indiana limestone. . . [with] rooms crammed with priceless paintings, rare tapestries, and fantastic furniture.”

York and Sawyer, following their departure from McKim, Mead, and White, won 11 of the 14 competitions they entered in the next few years, when the usual rate was one in four. After five years they had \$5 million worth of work, more than their former firm. Even so, Sawyer would recall later (in *Edward Palmer York: Personal Reminiscences by His Friend and Partner Philip Sawyer and a Biographical Sketch by Royal Cortissoz* 9 [1951]) that York carried little cash and had to borrow a quarter from Sawyer to pay for lunch.

The same book describes the working relationship between the two men. York was the “thoughtfully directed energy behind” the partnership who nurtured clients and developed the overall strategy for the firm's future. He was “innately philosophical and serene,” a “rationalizing, constructive architect.” According to Sawyer, York did his work almost invisibly, “got his stuff drawn by others, let the contracts, built it satisfactorily without



noise, working so intangibly that no one ever caught him at it.” And, Sawyer continued, his “scope was unlimited. He never lost patience with any client, no matter how foolish his suggestions, and when I once complained bitterly of a Building Committee who would not allow me to do the thing which seemed so obviously the best to me, he said, ‘But Sawyer, think of all the fool things that our clients have prevented you from doing.’”

Sawyer, in his own words, “was a draftsman. I would have confined myself to drawing, sketching, and painting, if I could have afforded it. I had compromised on architecture as the next best thing, and my interest was in rounding out the building on paper to the last detail. What happened to the drawing afterward didn’t much matter to me.”

The firm developed specializations in college buildings, banks, and hospitals. York and Sawyer designed about 50 banks, including the Franklin Savings Bank at 8th Avenue and 42nd Street, and the Bowery Savings and Federal Reserve banks in New York City. Among their hospitals was Tripler Army Hospital in Honolulu. They did a score of private residences, including a 26-room apartment for Mrs. W.K. Vanderbilt in 1927. They also did office buildings in Montreal and Toronto, and the U.S. Steel Sphere at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York.

One measure of the extent and quality of York and Sawyer’s work is their 67 entries, as of May 7, 2002, in the Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals. A measure of the historical influence of the firm is that entries begin in 1905, and extend to the March 2002 issue of *Architectural Digest*, which details the restoration of “one of the great, grand apartments in Manhattan, a seldom-seen, beautifully preserved time capsule,” the very maisonette originally built for Mrs.

Vanderbilt. An article in the June 2000 issue of *Interiors* describes the restoration of the 1923 Bowery Savings Bank.

York was the lead architect on the Michigan project until he died in December 1928. Thus, he personally created the style of the Lawyers Club buildings and worked extensively on the concepts for the Legal Research Building.

Cook announced, in early 1929, his intent to give that building to the Law School. York’s role in the design and detail of the buildings was critical to a dialectical process in making the Law Quadrangle. For example, he educated Cook about the comparative qualities of various stones and the rationale for using Gothic-style architecture.

After York’s death, Sawyer became equally influential, and Cook accepted his suggestions about the higher foundation and towers for the Legal Research Building. The two men seem to have developed a close relationship; Sawyer was one of three witnesses to sign the final version of Cook’s will on August 8, 1929.

Cook’s death in June 1930 touched off a two-year contest over his will, and the University did not receive proceeds from the estate until the fall of 1932. Hutchins Hall was completed in 1934 and is less detailed and ornate than any of the earlier buildings, probably because of the Depression, the somewhat smaller estate after the will contest, the drop in the value of stocks, and Cook’s absence from the last stages of planning.

A new piazza/entryway, above in cross section and below as part of a three-dimensional model, is to give the Law School its first “front door,” an entry from Monroe Street, as well as provide a breathtaking view of the Reading Room from that entryway. It also will provide below-ground connection with the Law Library and the new building at the southeastern corner of the Law Quadrangle. The current “backpack” of aluminum and the library stacks will be removed.

