

FACE OF THE AIA

AIA150

1967—1976: New HQ and a New Age Take Center Stage

by Tony P. Wrenn, Hon. AIA

Times were relatively good and administrative space tight for the AIA national component, so leaders were planning a new national headquarters building to “satisfy both physical and spiritual functions—a building of special architectural significance, establishing a symbol of the creative genius of our time yet complementing, protecting and preserving a cherished symbol of another time, the historic Octagon House.”

The initial design competition selection, by Mitchell/Giurgola—a five-story red brick building that featured a semi-circular mostly glass wall that embraced The Octagon House and garden provided insufficient space and, after acquisition of an adjacent 19th century building on New York Avenue, the AIA asked for a new

design. The AIA approved the resulting 130,000-square-foot proposal at its 1967 convention, but the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts thought it did not complement The Octagon and rejected it and the follow-up revision. Mitchell/Giurgola withdrew.

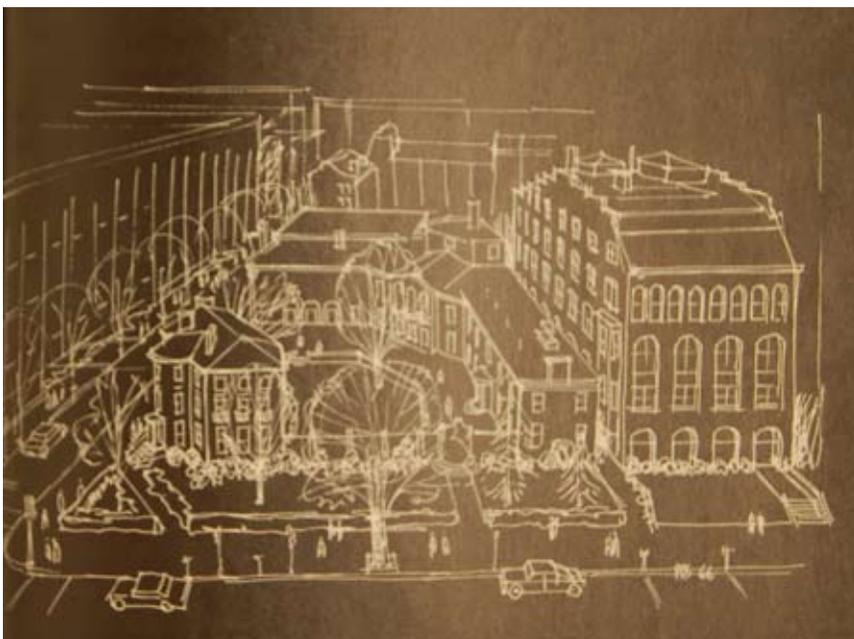
A new AIA selection committee, with Max Urbahn as chair and the first, second, and third place winners of the initial competition among its members—Romaldo Giurgola, I. M. Pei, and Phillip Will Jr., respectively—began interviewing for a new architect. They announced their selection May 14, 1969: The Architects Collaborative (TAC), Walter Gropius’ firm in Cambridge, Mass., with architects Norman Fletcher and Howard Elkus in charge of design and construction. Their design was ready for presentation to the Commission of Fine Arts on May 15, 1970, and the commission approved.

For the two-year construction phase, from January 1971 to March 1973, national AIA administration was housed at 1785 Massachusetts Ave., NW, a 1910 building by Jean de Sibour and now headquarters of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

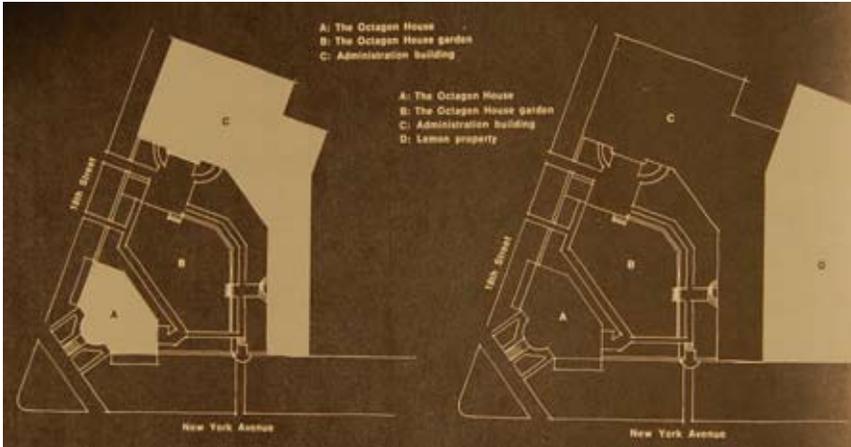
Even as the Lemon Building, the Octagon Stable, and the 1940s Administration Building were cleared away, restoration of The Octagon went forward under the direction of restoration architect J. Everett Fauber Jr. On March 12, 1973, the AIA began moving into the new headquarters building at 18th St. and New York Ave., NW, behind The Octagon. In a press release, the Institute noted “The new seven-story headquarters building—which will be known as ‘The Octagon’ [the official name of the historic Tayloe mansion]—will house the Institute’s 100-person staff on the first three floors. The remaining four floors will be available for leasing.” Formal dedication took place in June, to which that month’s issue of *AIA Journal* was devoted. The press-release proclamation aside, the new building was rarely referred to as The Octagon Building, generally becoming known simply as the AIA Headquarters Building.

The times they were a-changin’

The decade had begun with a convention in New York in 1967 when AIA President elect Robert L. Durham noted “We have finished our ‘first 100 years.’” Though the computer age had arrived and was being touted as a great time saver and asset, Durham suggested that the architect should be wary and control technology, for



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“when we lose our interest in quality and cannot give our first emphasis to design, we will no longer be worth of the name AIA.”

Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York addressed the convention telling conventioners “I know of no more important group in our country today than those assembled here in this gathering. Your contribution as artists, as builders, as planners, as creators in a country which will rebuild everything that has been built since the days of George Washington in the next four years or duplicate what has been built in the next 40 years is probably the most important responsibility of any group of men and women in this nation ... You are determining our future.”

Wallace Harrison won the AIA Gold Medal that year, and Rockefeller was present for that ceremony as well. He and Harrison, whose relationship as architect, client, and friends went way back more than a quarter century obviously formed an obvious mutual admiration society. Rockefeller had noted that Harrison was “sensitive to new ideas and new concepts and yet he is not swept along by every passing fad and fancy in architecture.” He continued “I can’t help but recall an incident in 1934, I think it was, or ’35, when Wally and his associates in the

Rockefeller Center group had finished designing the central building from a functional point of view, and then there was a discussion as to whether this building should be draped in some architectural style, and my father leaned strongly in this direction, and Wally contained himself as long as he could and finally exploded, ‘Damn it, Mr. Rockefeller, you just can’t do that!’ And he didn’t.”

Harrison was eloquent in his acceptance of the Gold. “In spite of our poets and prophets, we Americans have weaknesses and like all humans have permitted the extension of slums, the over-building of cities, the misuse of the skyscraper, and the automobile making traffic impossible.

“By now throwing out the bad parts of science and Victorian materialism and mechanization, we also have permitted the dividing of races, the division of the poor classes in the cities and

the richer whites in the suburbs. We have even stood by with small protests while our sciences have developed the bombs.

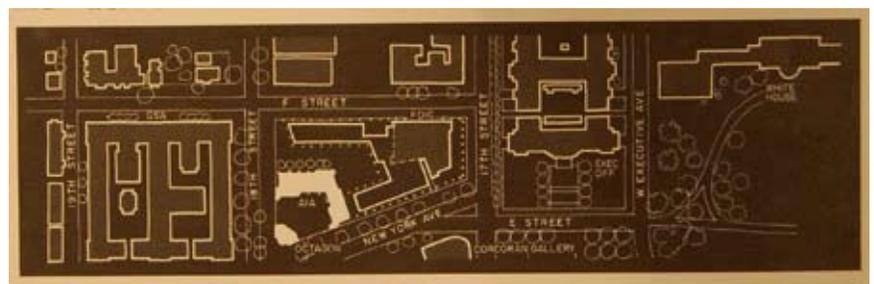
“But, born hopeful, we architects offer a better future—new towns; new communities—where in the American way, rich and poor, black and white, can live together with a new transportation and a better environment ... Governor Rockefeller has shown how the government can use architectural imagination.”

Rockefeller had been associated with Harrison for 35 years and called it “one of the happiest and most rewarding association of my life.”

“Few issues are outside the breadth of Wally Harrison’s knowledge,” Rockefeller said. “Few subjects are beyond the reach of his curiosity. Wally Harrison’s interests are as wide as the world. And they range well beyond the necessities of his professional discipline.

“And yet, it a wonderfully rewarding way, it is this very largeness of mind, this wider vision, that elevates his architecture to greatness ... I am reminded of the time Winston Churchill said: ‘We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us.’ If this is true, as I suspect it is, then Wally Harrison has helped to shape our lives to the dimensions of greatness.”

The AIA of the '60s



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preserved ...

A previous decision of the Institute to oppose the extension of the West Front of the U.S. Capitol was being restudied, since some maintained the AIA should not be involved. A task force appointed by the Board studied the matter and disagreed, reporting that “architects collectively, i.e., arts commissions, service action groups, AIA chapters, or the Institute itself, have an obligation to society to comment constructively on public issues. Changes to the Capitol are in this category.” The opposition was renewed “... since the decision to stop adding to the Capitol must be made at some point, it should be made now while the last remaining exterior portion of the original Capitol can be saved as vis-

ible evidence of our heritage.” Ultimately—after more than a decade of statements, congressional and committee appearances, and a demonstration before the Capitol West Front and a march up Constitution Ave.—the AIA prevailed. One still looks from the Mall at a West Front that displays the genius of architects Thornton, Latrobe, Bulfinch, and Walter and of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.

... And persevered

Few AIA convention speeches are more memorable, would be longer remembered, or bring about more study and introspection than that of Whitney M. Young Jr., at the 1968 Convention in Portland, Ore. In starting a lengthy tutorial on civil rights, Young said, “if I seem to repeat things you have heard before, I do not apologize, any more than I think a physician would apologize for giving inoculations. Sometimes we have to give repeated vaccinations, and we continue to do so until we observe that it has taken effect ... you are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the

cause of civil rights, and I am sure this has not come to you as any shock. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance.”

In the discussion period that followed the speech, Young continue his offensive:

“But the fact happens to remain that out of the 11 hundred AIA members in New York, only seven are Negro; out of the 8 hundred in Chicago, only eight are Negro. I don’t know what the other 165 [chapters] look like, but you know. This is not enough ... You are leaders in your communities, and you are not giving the quality and the extent to the issue that can be given ... We want you to be architects of a new morality, of a new national commitment, and you’ve got to catch up because your forefathers in this field didn’t do too well, so you have to run faster.”

Recognizing the going was deserved, AIA commissions, task forces, and studies on integrating blacks, women, and other minorities into the practice of architecture, and into the Institute,



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followed.

AIA President George Kassabaum reported in 1969 "The AIA's national activities this year have tried to awaken a collective social conscience in the profession ... we have urged every chapter to destroy any racial barriers they may have inherited from past generations ... But though we have tried to show the way by our national policies and committee actions, your community will not judge you or your profession by what the national organization does ... Your community will reach its decision by what you and your chapter do."

A longer view elsewhere, too

In 1969, the AIA presented its first Twenty-five Year Award, established "to recognize a distinguished design after a period of time has elapsed in which the function, esthetic statement, and execution can be reassessed." The first award went to New York City's Rockefeller Center, "a project so vital to the city and alive with its people that it remains as viable today as when it was built." The then-17-acre cluster of 18 buildings on 4 city blocks, little changed, retains that vitality still.

Among other awards that year was the AIA Allied Professions Medal to John Skilling, principal-president of Skilling, Helle, Christiansen, Robertson, structural engineers for the World Trade Center.

Continuing its long-established stewardship of monumental Washington, the AIA broadened its opposition to District of Columbia planning in 1969 to include transportation. "Testimony opposing construction of an improperly planned and developed freeway system for the District and environs was delivered before the District of Columbia City Council and the Na-



tional Capital Planning Commission." Though the opposition was vocal and widely shared, the automobile proved a powerful opponent. An open cut, which would have carried Interstate 66 across the Mall in front of the Lincoln Memorial was successfully fought, but highways were still built that separate Kennedy Center from its neighborhood, slash across the city in front of the Capitol and cut, in open wounds, through every quadrant of L'Enfant's planned city. The AIA had been able to protect the Mall, but even that protection would prove temporary, and the next 30 years would bring changes that McMillan Commission members could not have imagined.

In 1970, AIA President Rex Allen told the Institute "... it was not until we saw the Earth's portrait from the moon on TV that it was brought home to one and all that our space ship is a mighty small self-contained planet with limited resources and limited area for waste disposal ... We had better become aware of what we're doing, as a nation, because we are the worst offenders and as architects—don't we have a peculiar and particular responsibility. Aren't we fond of claiming that we are the designers of the man-made

environment ... the future," he suggested, "is not pre-ordained, it is what we will choose to make of it."

By 1971, the Institute had also undertaken computerization of Institute records. "The system and an IBM 360 computer were installed in October," the Board reported. "As the system is developed, its capacity for storage of data and facts about the profession and the professionals will enable the Institute to better serve each member and the interests of architecture." While the system proved successful in preserving and providing business and professional records created from that time forward, it has yet to develop a backward reach that will insure retention of the Institute's historical records about the AIA and about architects.

Save the land; sprawl no more

In 1972 AIA President Max Urbahn reported a National Policy Task Force Report, "call to action for the acquisition, conservation, and design of our most precious natural asset—land. It is land which is needed now for our future generations ... I am not suggesting that architects alone are equipped to deal with our national environmental crisis. But I submit to you that we are better equipped than any other single profession to guide the public debate on the critical questions which will relate directly to the future quality of the built environment."

A year earlier AIA President Robert F. Hastings had told AIA members: "Over the years, the rhetoric on this subject has become a kind of prideful ideology. By talking about it, you tended to demonstrate that you were a deep thinker, well versed in the new philosophies, one of the new breed of futurists. Yet, while you talked about change, you privately felt unaffected by it. No longer ... The fact is that we

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can no longer afford a system that discards cities and towns and the people who live in them. We can no longer afford a system that encourages waste, sprawl, neglect, and destruction. We can no longer afford a system that consumes our resources faster than we can replenish them ... The architect today, and the Institute he [sic] directs, must now, I believe, plunge actively into political life, enlist allies, swing votes, mobilize community action, and take positions on issues that were once thought to be outside our rightful area of concern." It is almost as if Hastings were suggesting a return to the AIA of 1900.

A lasting pledge to free-trade principles

In turn, 1972 also brought a challenge from the Justice Department. Prior to 1970, the Ethical Standards of the AIA stated "An architect shall not enter into competitive bidding against another architect on the basis of compensation." The Department of Justice had contacted the AIA in 1968 noting that in its opinion the standard was in restraint of trade and a violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act. Because of the demonstrated concern of the Institute's own attorneys, no judicial action had been taken against any member for violation of the standard since 1963.

Yet, on December 7, 1971, the Department of Justice advised the AIA that they planned to file suit against the Institute for violation of the Sherman Act, but offered to avoid litigation through negotiation of a consent decree that the Institute would "not have any ethical standard, rule, by-law, resolution, policy statement, plan, program or course of action which prohibits members from at any time submitting price quotations for architectural services."

After long discussion, the decree was approved by AIA members assembled in convention. Settled for the moment, the question would come back later whether the Institute had abided by

architects seemed to hold steady at 1.2 percent of the total. "This may be the lowest percent of any occupation short of steel workers or coal miners." She discussed other findings: "Unre-



the decree.

A dearth of women in the profession

One resolution of the 1972 convention addressed to the "Status of Women in the Architectural Profession," requiring the Institute to act positively to improve that status and report to the convention on actions. Judith Edelman, who reported, noted that the "intent of this sub-committee is not to try to change the minds of those who believe that women should not be architects, who would not want their wives or daughters to be architects. That is clearly beyond the scope of the committee's effort. But there is a crucial difference between the right to such personal beliefs and the right to discriminate against those women who make the decision to be architects." Edelman reported that the percentage of women registered

finned as they may be at this time, they are certainly enough to clearly demonstrate that the alleged grievances are not all in the heads of some paranoid chicks."

Four years later, in 1976, the Institute could announce a broad affirmative action program aimed at ending professional discrimination against women, making such discrimination a violation of professional ethics. In announcing the program, AIA President Louis de Moll called it "a commitment that all of us must consciously make not merely as a matter of conscience, nor of compliance with governmental or other directives. If we fail to respond, we will be shortchanging not only a great many talented and dedicated architects and future architects. We will be shortchanging our whole profession." Sixteen years after that

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initial resolution, the Institute would celebrate—with exhibitions, publications, and very public events—the centennial of the election of the first woman to the AIA, Louise Blanchard Bethune, in 1888. Although a great deal of progress has been made, women still are under-represented among registered architects.

The AIA at 109: poised for change

The American Bicentennial in 1976 seems not to have been an AIA thing, though AIA President Louis de Moll declared that the AIA had learned from it and, disturbed by what it learned, had “taken that all-important first step—becoming concerned.” That concern evidenced itself in many ways, including vocal AIA support for passage of an Energy Conservation and Production Act, participation in a National Forum on Growth Policy, and sponsorship of AIA Regional Urban Design Assistance Teams (R/UDATs [www.aia.org/aiaarchitect/thisweek06/0818/0818bp_rudat.cfm]).

“The problems we face,” de Moll said, “don’t need to overwhelm us. They define challenges which a vigorous, concerned people and a new national leadership should welcome.”

Whether the nation, at the age of 200, was learning was a question that could be answered in many ways, but the AIA, at the age of 109, certainly seemed to be.

Images:

1. Site elevation, looking north, of the 1940 Administration Building, Library (former stables), Lemon Building, and Octagon. Drawing by Paul Spreiregen, FAIA.
2. Site plan identifying the position of each building before demolition of all but the Octagon.
3. Plan showing the footprint of the proposed new building in relation to the Octagon.
4. The models of The Architects Collaborative proposals incorporating changes called for by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (chronologically, top to bottom).
5. The AIA headquarters building under construction. (Photo courtesy of the AIA Archives.)
6. Whitney Young Jr. addressing the AIA convention in Portland, Ore. (Photo courtesy of the AIA Archives.)
7. Nelson Rockefeller addressing the 1967 AIA convention. (Photo courtesy of the AIA Archives.)