

# Professional Education in the Beaux-Arts Atelier

MADLEN SIMON  
Kansas State University

## DESIGN EDUCATION AS AN INSTITUTION FOR PROFESSIONAL UNIFICATION

The development of a system of architectural education during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a key feature in the professionalization of architecture in the United States. Education served the cause of professional solidification in several ways.<sup>1</sup> Education conferred a set of credentials that aided the public in differentiating architects as a set of practitioners distinct from other providers of similar services who practiced their craft without benefit of a professional education. When the profession adopted licensing requirements, architectural education offered the knowledge and skill necessary to meet professional standards. Education also provided a mechanism for acculturation. In educational settings, students were initiated into the history, values, customs, practices, and language of architecture.

The major formative influence on American architectural education was the institution of the atelier that grew up in and around the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1819 onwards.<sup>2</sup> The atelier and the Beaux-Arts educational method were imported from France in the mid-nineteenth century by American architects returning from studies at the Ecole. The influence of the Ecole alumni on the early development of architectural schools in the United States has been well documented.<sup>3</sup> The present study views the studio education that developed in the nascent schools of architecture as one branch of a system of ateliers that spread across America in the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. These ateliers grew up in universities, art schools, technical schools, and high schools, in architectural clubs, and as stand-alone institutions. Early in the twentieth century, preparation for a professional career could take place in any of these settings as well as through office training, sometimes supplemented by correspondence courses. During this period, drafting, which might have become a para profession in its own right, became incorporated into the architectural profession. The atelier system served to unify a geographically, economically, and socially diverse population of students and draftsmen into one cohesive

profession sharing the knowledge, skills, values, customs, and language of architecture.

## THE FRENCH MODEL FOR DESIGN EDUCATION

The first American atelier was founded by Richard Morris Hunt, the first American to study at the Ecole, in 1857.<sup>4</sup> Hunt modeled his atelier on the design component of his French architectural education, where studies took place in two distinct settings: lectures at the Ecole and design work at one of the several ateliers connected with the Ecole. The atelier was a studio run by a practicing architect known as the *patron*, in premises separate from his architectural office. Students of all levels worked together on design competitions, the novices learning by assisting the experienced students, who received criticism from the *patron* himself. As students progressed, they learned to pass their knowledge on to the novices, institutionalizing a tradition of mentorship in the Parisian ateliers. Atelier work was characterized by competitive team spirit and lively camaraderie. Ernest Flagg, American architect and alumnus of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, set forth the details of the French atelier as follows:

"The patron pays the rent and visits the atelier at stated intervals, and there his functions cease. All other affairs, both financial and administrative, are conducted by the students themselves. The latter are divided into two classes, *les anciens* (seniors) and *les nouveaux* (novices). The former govern and the latter obey. The officers of the atelier, elected by the *anciens* from among their number, are a *massier*, or treasurer, who is the chief officer; he is generally a popular man and of ornamental appearance, as befitting one holding a post of such high distinction. It is he who does the honors of the institution upon state occasions; it is he who receives the patrons' cane and hat when he enters; it is he who sits at his right at the annual dinner and proposes the health of our beloved master. Being called to fulfill so many high functions, the ordinary affairs of the office are beneath his dignity; therefore, he has an

assistant, called a *sous massier*, who does the dunning of delinquent members, and attends to the purchase of coal, oil, towels, soap, and the thousand and one other necessary supplies. . . .”

## THE TRANSFER OF THE ATELIER MODEL TO AMERICA

The atelier experience was a powerful force in the lives of the Ecole alumni. Following Hunt, many more alumni sought to recapture elements of their Parisian experiences back in the United States. Some of the returning students, like Hunt, recreated their educational experience by opening ateliers in America. H.H. Richardson, another returning Ecole student, ran an office at his home in Brookline, Massachusetts in the 1870s and 1880s that combined the functions of office and atelier.<sup>6</sup> The first American atelier to truly emulate the French prototype in separating the places of work and study was the Atelier Masqueray-Chambers, opened in New York in 1893 by two Ecole alumni, E.L. Masqueray and Walter B. Chambers.<sup>7</sup> Others took part in establishing schools of architecture in the United States modeled upon the French system, incorporating the atelier into the formal education. By 1895, eight out of the ten schools of architecture in the United States included Ecole-educated faculty.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the century, American alumni of the Ecole had created their own professional organization. The group, incorporated in 1894 in New York as the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects (SBAA), grew out of a student meeting in Paris in 1889. Their mission was “to cultivate and perpetuate the associations and principles of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, of Paris, and to found an Academy of Architecture, for the purpose of architectural exhibitions and training, and to establish and maintain a library of architecture, and also a clubhouse.”<sup>9</sup> The SBAA offered members the opportunity to continue the pleasant camaraderie that had formed such a memorable part of their student years in Paris. It also provided a means for this professional elite to fulfill the responsibility, inculcated in the Parisian ateliers, to mentor the younger generation. The privileged alumni of the Ecole were inspired to extend educational opportunities to aspiring architects who lacked the means to study abroad. Self-interest also motivated the Ecole-educated elite, who considered themselves capable of a higher order of architectural design than other American architects of their day. In order to produce high quality work, these architects needed the assistance of draftsmen capable of understanding and executing their visions.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to their training in the hierarchical atelier in which the more experienced students supervised the novitiates, young architects returning from Paris were well prepared to take on their teaching mission.

The newly formed SBAA began to issue competitive student programs on a quarterly system. The programs were modeled upon the competitions that the members had undertaken in ateliers in Paris.<sup>11</sup> Members took turns writing projects and serving on juries to evaluate student submissions. Many opened ateliers and served as patrons for the students participating in the competitive projects. American ateliers followed Flagg’s description. Austin Lord, architect and Ecole alumnus, described the American atelier as follows in 1914,

“. . . in a certain thriving town are a number of progressive young men who have received their education in the city schools, with perhaps some special training in certain branches. These young men are employed in architects’ offices and have been encouraged to study architecture independently of their office practice. They have neither the time nor the means to attend a school of architecture in this country, much less abroad. At this juncture some one of the practicing architects in the city offers his services, generally free of charge, as Patron of the proposed atelier. The atelier is formed with a *massier* and *sous massier* as the authorized officers, who look after the details of administration, etc., and maintain the general organization. These ateliers are organized on the most economical basis possible. Owing to the fact that young men engaging in this work are generally of limited means and cannot afford any unnecessary expense, a cheap loft in the commercial part of the city can be secured at a low rental. Elevator and janitor service is generally not available. Heat and light often add a maintenance charge, but with a reasonable number of students say twenty to thirty, the entire individual expense per month ought not to exceed \$8 to \$10. This expense is quite within the means of the average draftsman, and when this expenditure is compared with the expenditure of a college course, it will be seen that the student working under the atelier system is placed in a very advantageous position.”<sup>12</sup>

Ateliers continued to form, just as Lord described, spreading across the United States. Some of the ateliers existed independently. Others formed in schools of architecture, in offices, or in the many architectural clubs springing up across the country. The earliest clubs held design competitions of their own. It was a natural development for them to formalize their educational activities into Beaux-Arts ateliers following the programs of the SBAA. New clubs arose in response to the opportunities offered by the SBAA. The combination of club and atelier offered a beneficial synergy. Clubs provided a loyal membership, including young and old, providing both students and patrons for the ateliers. The clubs offered physical premises including libraries, lounges, and studio spaces, and provided administrative support for collecting dues and keeping records. The clubs had sufficient infrastructure to provide activities in support of the educational mission, such as lectures, various courses, field trips, exhibitions, and publications. Clubs were equipped to offer the social activities such as smokers, dinners, and dances that fostered the camaraderie typical of the Paris ateliers. A key



Fig. 1. Atelier at the San Francisco Architectural Club.



Fig. 2. Atelier Arthur Brown, Jr. at the San Francisco Architectural Club 1910.

feature of the club experience was the opportunity for students to study and socialize with the leading architects of their city. Ateliers affiliated with clubs tended to be longer-lasting and more influential than the stand-alone ateliers which tended to come and go according to the interests of the individual students and patrons.

### THE IDEAL OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOL

The early vision of the SBAA was the "ultimate formation of an American school of architecture, modeled after the Ecole des Beaux-Arts."<sup>13</sup> After its first decade of educational operations, the SBAA was struggling to redefine its vision of the American school of architecture. It was evident that the SBAA would not succeed in reproducing the French situation of a centralized school in its premier city bringing students together from around the country for instruction in architecture. The SBAA's educational program was taking a different form, in response to

particularly American circumstances. First of all, the federal government did not administer education in the United States, as it did in France. American universities were either state or private institutions. Rather than one central school arising in the capitol city, Washington, or in the cultural capitol, New York City, multiple schools of architecture were developing around the United States. The SBAA was not involved in the administration of any one of these schools, but it was becoming the dominant influence in the teaching of design, as the schools increasingly adopted its programs and sent student work to be evaluated by its juries. In 1905, Lloyd Warren, corresponding secretary of the SBAA, wrote to patrons of Ecole ateliers, "It is our desire to unite all these schools in one movement by establishing a central administration in New York, the different universities to retain their individuality—very much as the ateliers of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts do at present, but the great principle is that they shall all follow the same path of instruction; namely the one laid down for us by you, our Masters, at the Ecole."<sup>14</sup>

### THE REALITY OF THE NETWORK OF ATELIERS

By 1916, the SBAA had institutionalized its educational mission in the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design (BAID), incorporated as an educational institution in New York State. The new institution stated its first principle as "The Atelier System, by which the Institute recognizes as one of its component parts every group or atelier of students . . . which desires to take part in the exercises the Institute provides. . . ."<sup>15</sup> The BAID began to publish an annual circular of information describing its educational program. In the 1923-1924 circular of information, the rules were established that "Any group of five (5) or more students may form an Atelier (Studio Club) organized for the purpose of studying the BAID Competitions under the guidance of a Patron. The officers of an Atelier should be elected, consisting of the "Massier" (President and Treasurer) and "Sous



Fig. 3. Members of the SBAA working in an atelier on competition entries for the new Beaux-Arts Institute of Design.

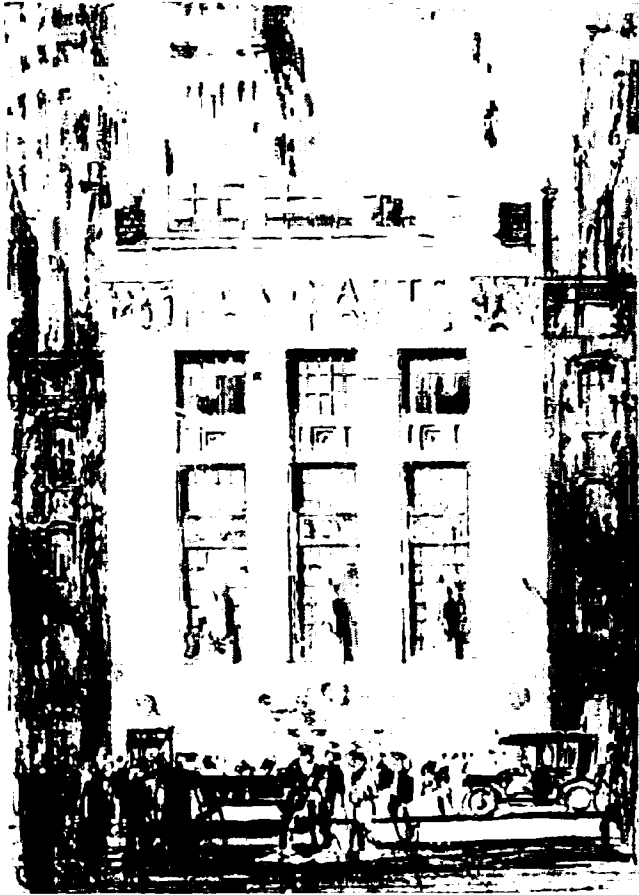


Fig. 4. Architect and patron Frederic Hirons' winning competition entry for the new Beaux-Arts Institute of Design.

Massier" (Vice-President and Secretary).<sup>16</sup> The BAID also published an annual listing of ateliers and local correspondents. By 1930, there were schools, ateliers, and supervisors registered in 123 cities in forty of the United States plus Bermuda, five Canadian cities, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. The various ateliers constituted a network, connected to its hub, the New York office of the BAID, by the United States postal service. The corresponding secretary managed the educational program by mail, writing letters, sending information and programs to ateliers, receiving drawings from ateliers, organizing juries, reporting results of judgments, and arranging for publication of awards. Competition results were published in national journals, *The American Architect* and *Architectural Review* as well as a regional journal, the *Pacific Coast Architect*. The student projects were clearly a matter of interest to the profession at large. In 1924, the BAID began publishing its own journal, the *Bulletin of the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design*, modeled upon the *Concours d'Architecture*,<sup>17</sup> setting forth the programs, the composition of the juries, competition results, and reproductions of premiated student drawings. Generally, the award-winning projects were left to speak for themselves. Occasionally, a member of the jury was selected to write a critique of the projects, a practice that became more prevalent in later years. In

general, the Beaux-Arts education was accompanied by little rhetoric. Students were expected to learn by example, from a study of historic precedent and from the work of their peers. The journals were a feature of school and club libraries, disseminating the Beaux-Arts student work to a national audience, providing a unified vision of design achievement to atelier students in a variety of settings.

#### DESIGN EDUCATION IN THE ATELIER

Where ateliers formed inside schools, coursework complemented design studies. Architectural clubs often provided lectures and courses for their members. Where ateliers existed independently of supporting institutions, however, American students lacked access to a spectrum of knowledge that their *patrons* had gained at the Ecole. The BAID offered only one half of the architectural education provided by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the design component.

Students advanced through a series of levels in the Beaux-Arts design education. The first step was the *analytique*, in which a student designed a simple project, studying the individual parts in a unified two-dimensional composition incorporating plans, sections and elevations at a variety of scales. Through completing *analytiques*, a student gained an understanding of the orders, a sense of scale and proportion, an ability to unite architectural elements into a simple design, and a command of drawing, composition, and rendering. Class B projects offered more complex programs, requiring students to design and present small buildings. Class A projects offered yet larger and more complex programs. Along the way, students had opportunities to focus on historic precedent through measured drawings and archaeology projects. They learned to conceptualize and present quickly in sketch problems known as *Esquisse-Esquisses*. The ultimate project was the Paris Prize, a two-stage competition for the design of a monumental project, modeled upon the French *Prix de Rome*. The winner of the Paris Prize earned a year of study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, an opportunity to both advance one's education and to rise into the social elite of the Ecole alumni.

Projects were undertaken by students around the country as a series of competitions. Before the project deadline, the *massier* of each atelier would collect the drawings and mail them to the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design in New York for judgment by a jury composed of prominent members of the profession including atelier *patrons*. The jury would award honors and mentions to outstanding student work and declare *hors de concours* (out of the running) any projects that failed to follow the rules of the competition. Results of each competition, along with photographs of some of the winning entries, were published in the architectural journals, occasionally accompanied by a report of the jury's comments. Exhibits of student

The atelier model provided a solution to a problem that continues to plague the profession in America: the perceived gap between education and practice. In Paris, American students experienced the bifurcated educational system of the Ecole that enabled practitioners to teach design in their own ateliers while lectures were delivered by faculty inside the academy. The atelier *patrons* in Paris, leading French architects, were inspiring figures to the American students at the Ecole. The Ecole alumni were loyal to their patrons, recommending their ateliers to younger students, thereby forging professional relationships that spanned multiple generations

THE ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS AS EDUCATORS

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Fig. 5. Students began their design studies with the analogue.

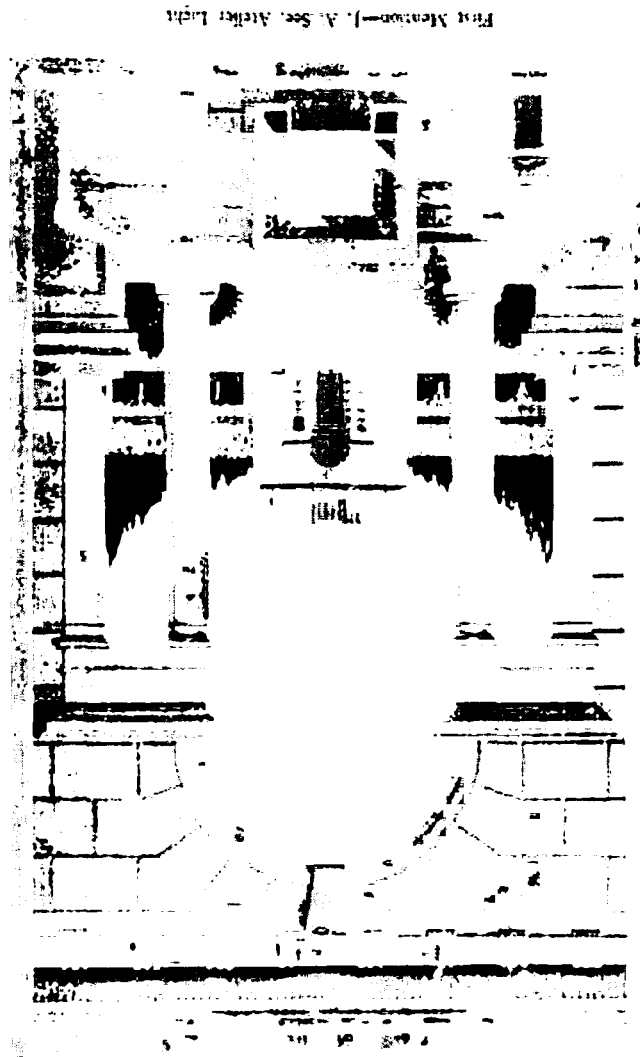
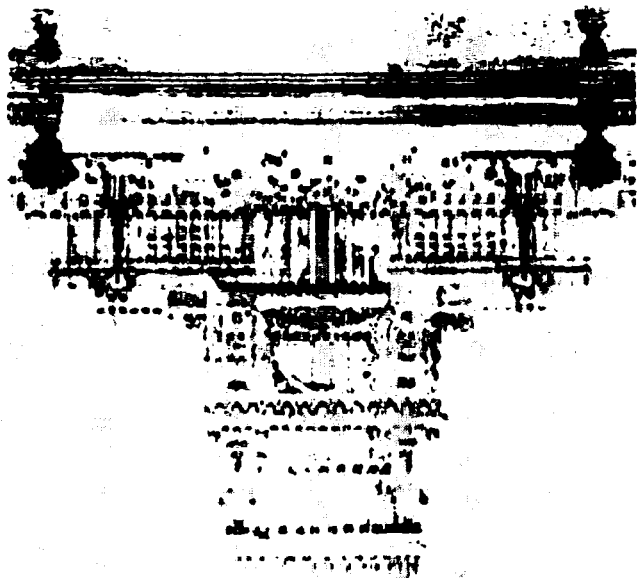


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and crossed the ocean. For example, American architect/educator Bernard Maybeck and French architect/educator Victor Laloux studied in M. Andre's atelier in Paris. Maybeck and Laloux influenced a generation of Bay Area architects including Julia Morgan and Arthur Brown, Jr. who in their turn educated new generations of architects and educators. Morgan mentored the draftsmen in her office and Brown served as *patron* in his atelier at the San Francisco Architectural Club.<sup>18</sup> The hierarchical structure of the French atelier instilled in its students a sense of teaching as a mentoring process. As students progressed in their design studies, they learned to pass their knowledge along to the less experienced students who assisted them in rendering their projects. The architects of the SBAA were trained to teach as they pursued their own design studies in the ateliers of the Ecole. The concept of the practicing architect as design teacher was a key tenet of the educational program of the BAAD. It gave young draftsmen the opportunity to study under the important architects of their cities. In the United States, the BAAD adopted the features of the French system that enabled practitioners to teach. The creation of competition programs and evaluation of student work were taken care of by the BAAD in New York. Administrative matters were handled by the student officers of the atelier. The *patron* could concentrate on teaching and practice.

Fig. 6. San Francisco Architectural Club atelier student (and later, atelier patron) Edward Frick's winning competition entry for the 1919 Paris Prize, "The Capitol Building of the League of Nations."



## SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

A key tenet of the BAID plan was that the design education could take place in school or atelier alike. An important difference between the situations in France and the United States was the economics of education. The European system provided a free education for students who qualified. In the United States, a class difference existed between those who could afford to study, either abroad or in one of the American schools of architecture, and those who were obliged to go directly from high school into an office to earn a living. The educational program of the BAID developed in a way that benefited aspiring architects in both social classes. The atelier education provided many draftsmen the basic education they needed for professional success as registered architects. It gave a talented group of draftsmen a chance for upward mobility into the highly educated elite.<sup>19</sup> The atelier also offered a locus for continuing design education to graduates competing for traveling awards and scholarships such as the prestigious Paris Prize.

Educating new generations of draftsmen was an economic imperative for the Paris-educated members of the SBAA.<sup>20</sup> Research on design studies at the San Francisco Architectural Club confirms the importance of the atelier to practitioners. Design education at the club was, for many years, dominated by the Ecole-educated Arthur Brown Jr. and members of his firm. While Brown was designing his San Francisco City Hall in 1914, several of the draftsmen working on the project by day were learning Beaux-Arts principles and sharpening their design and drafting skills in the evenings at the club.<sup>21</sup> A comparison of the City Hall (Figures 7 and 8) with Brown's students' projects of the same era (Figure 6) yields obvious similarities in design and drawing, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between office and atelier.

## THE ATELIER IS DEAD—LONG LIVE THE STUDIO

The activity of club and independent ateliers reached its peak in the academic year 1928-1929. Students in forty-nine of these ateliers achieved awards or mentions in the competitive programs of the BAID. The stock market crashed in 1929. The ensuing depression took its toll on architectural practices, decimating the ranks of draftsmen and patrons. Letters such as the following, from architect and atelier *patron* Fitch Haskell to the BAID, offer evidence of the devastating effects of depression on the ateliers. "Of late," wrote Haskell, "the atelier in Pasadena had practically ceased—only one registered and irregular work. A few years ago in Los Angeles we had twenty or more most of the time. Much as I regret it, I can not promise any further contributions. I fear that the work will have to be cut to next to nothing till times improve."<sup>22</sup> The number of schools sending work to the BAID remained fairly constant during the depression years, but the number of other ateliers dwindled. The depression was the beginning of the end of atelier education outside the schools.

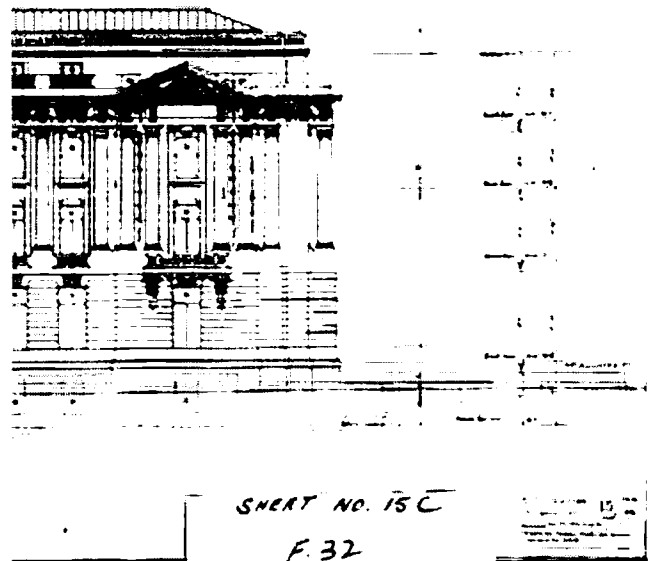


Fig. 7. A sheet of Bakewell and Brown's construction documents for the San Francisco City Hall drawn by Tantau, Frick, and Von Ahuden, all Arthur Brown Jr.'s students in the atelier of the San Francisco Architectural Club.



Fig. 8. Bakewell and Brown's San Francisco City Hall, centerpiece of the Civic Center Complex.

The entry of the United States into World War II brought atelier activity to a virtual halt. Students left schools and young draftsmen left offices to enter the armed forces. There was a brief resurgence of the club and independent ateliers after war's end, as they proved a useful institution for returning GI's in need of review for the licensing exam. These ateliers were soon rendered unnecessary by the GI Bill, which enabled all of the men returning from military duty to obtain a college education. This was a major factor in breaking down the division between the educated class and the working class in the architectural profession. Only a few isolated ateliers continued their educational work outside the schools. The San Francisco Architectural Club continued to teach design in its atelier into the early 1960's. The Boston Architectural Club transformed itself into the Boston Architectural Center (BAC) and offers an accredited professional education. The atelier survives as the student social organization at the BAC.<sup>23</sup> These two clubs were unusual exceptions to the rule. After World War II, architectural education became firmly institutionalized in professional programs within universities, art schools, and technical institutes. As a result of this unification of architectural education, the earlier professional distinction between draftsman and architect faded away as office training lost acceptance.

As the clubs and independent ateliers disappeared, the term atelier vanished from the schools. Internal ateliers continued to flourish, though, under the new nomenclature, studio. Present-day studio culture retains much of the flavor of the ateliers. Students still learn in small, cohesive groups, receiving instruction from a design critic who functions as a *patron*. Students continue to learn design by responding to written programs and often engage in design competitions. At some schools, students still compose presentations and render drawings. Studio jargon retains a smattering of French terms such as *parti*, *charette*, and *entourage*. Although the independent institution of the atelier disappeared, American architectural education coalesced around the studio. The legacy of the ateliers is the studio experience, the crucible in which American architects are formed.<sup>24</sup>

This research was supported by a grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) for a discussion of the professionalization process. See David Brain, "Discipline and Style: The Ecole des beaux-Arts and the Social Production of an American Architecture," in *Theory and Society* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989) 807-868, for a discussion of the

broader argument that the Beaux-Arts style itself was instrumental in the institutionalization of the professional status of the architect and the organization of a market for architectural services.

<sup>2</sup> For readings on the Beaux-Arts education in Paris, see essays by Arthur Drexler, Richard Chafee, David Van Zanten, and Neil Levine in Arthur Drexler, ed., *The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), Donald Drew Egbert, *The Beaux-Arts Tradition in French Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), and Robin Middleton, ed., *The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth Century French Architecture* (Thames and Hudson, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> For readings on the Beaux-Arts influence on American architectural education, see James Philip Noffsinger, *The Influence of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts on the Architects of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1955), Harold Bush-Brown, *Beaux-Arts to Bauhaus and Beyond* (New York: Watson Gupitil Publications, 1976), and essays by Joan Draper, Joseph Esherick, and Bernard Michael Boyle in Spiro Kostof, ed., *The Architect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Paul R. Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1980)

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Flagg, April-June 1894, Vol.III, No.4, 422. Translations of French terms are the author's.

<sup>6</sup> James F. O'Gorman, *H. H. Richardson, Architectural Forms for an American Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 22

<sup>7</sup> Noffsinger, op. cit. and Mardges Bacon, *Ernest Flagg, Beaux-Arts Architect and Urban Reformer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986) 51-52

<sup>8</sup> Noffsinger, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> *American Architect and Building News*, 3 February 1894, vol.XLIII, no.945,49.

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd Warren, *Annual report of the Committee on Education of the SBAA*, 1909, in the files of the SBAA at the Van Alen Institute

<sup>11</sup> For Ecole projects, see *Les Esquisses d'Admission a l'Ecole National et Speciale des Beaux-Arts* (Paris: Ecole des Beaux-Arts, 1914) and *Concours d'Architecture* (Paris: Ecole des Beaux-Arts, 1918-1938). For description of SBAA projects, see *SBAA Announcement*.

<sup>12</sup> Austin W. Lord, "The Atelier System of Architectural Education in America," *The Brickbuilder* (Boston: The Brickbuilder, July 1914, Vol. XXIII #7)

<sup>13</sup> Ernest Flagg, first meeting of Ecole alumni in New York, April 3, 1893, in Bacon, op.cit., 50

<sup>14</sup> Lloyd Warren, letters soliciting support from patrons of Parisian ateliers, M. Pascal, M. Bernier, and M. Daumet, 1905, in the files of the SBAA at the Van Alen Institute

<sup>15</sup> *Articles of Incorporation of the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design*

<sup>16</sup> *Circular of Information* of the BAID

<sup>17</sup> *Concours d'Architecture*, op.cit.

<sup>18</sup> For insight into atelier membership and mentoring relationships, see Michael R. Corbett, *Splendid Survivors* (San Francisco: Living Books, 1979), Richard Longstreth, *Julia Morgan - Architect* (Berkeley: Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association, 1977), and Noffsinger, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Max Abramowitz interview with the author, October 2000

<sup>20</sup> Lloyd Warren, *Annual report of the Committee on Education of the SBAA*, 1909, in the files of the SBAA at the Van Alen Institute

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Brown Jr. Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California - Berkeley

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Fitch Haskell to Frederick Frost, treasurer of the SBAA, December 1933, files of the SBAA/BAID at the Van Alen Institute

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the BAC, see Margaret Floyd Henderson, *Architectural Education and Boston* (Boston: Boston Architectural Center, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> The influence of the Beaux-Arts education extends well beyond the United States. See *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians 2000*.