The Architecture of Jens Fredrick Larson

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All to the Highest Endeavor

By

Rod Miller

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To Amanda
Sen bir neşe çeşmesisin.

Ah, to build, to build!
That is the noblest art of all the arts.
Painting and sculpture are but images,
Are merely shadows cast by outward things
On stone or canvas, having in themselves
No separate existence. Architecture,
Existing in itself, and not in seeming
A something it is not, surpasses them
As substance shadow.

Michelangelo, Longfellow
(A Larson favorite)

A further value of the development plan, though less tangible, is of an importance really inestimable. As the embodiment of an ideal aesthetically and logically satisfying, it stimulates all to the highest endeavor–the building committee, in demanding a worthy architecture, the architect, in satisfying that demand, the friends of the college, in supplying moral and financial support.

Architectural Planning of the American College
Jens Fredrick Larson and Archie MacInnes Palmer

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FOREWORD

Jens Fredrick Larson was a fearless warrior, and a self-confident and hugely successful architect, as well as the foremost creator of the American college campus in the Georgian style. Until the publication of *All to the Highest Endeavor*, Rod Miller's definitive study of the dashing and influential collegiate designer, Larson was one of the most important architects that America forgot.

As a decorated fighter pilot in the Royal Flying Corps in World War I, Larson went up against German ace Baron von Richthofen's Flying Circus. Yet the Red Baron proved less threatening to the young American in the flimsy canvas and wooden biplane than did the introduction of the International Style. Bauhaus directors Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, along with other émigré architects, brought "German worker housing"–flat roofs, factory sash, slender pillars–to American universities. The onslaught of Modernism buried the careers and the reputations of traditional architects such as Ralph Adams Cram, James Gamble Rogers, Charles Platt, and Larson.

The destructive and willfully ignorant triumph of the Modern fashion is demonstrated at two Larson campuses. Larson's grand Jeffersonian plan of the University of Louisville was sabotaged due to the influence of Walter Creese, a Harvard-trained architectural historian who championed flat-roofed, aluminum-trimmed glass blocks with all the glamor of warehouses. Another Larson design, Wake Forest University, stayed true to its creator's vision, but the new Georgian campus was vilified in the national architectural press. The new design school at North Carolina State University, with its cadre of immigrant professors, led the charge with high-minded, moralistic attacks on Larson's Wake Forest.

Was Larson wounded or even mildly disturbed by these character defamations? The suave and accomplished architect might have even been amused at the unfriendly press he and Wake Forest received. Afterall, Larson–and not the Modernists–had the commission for an entire university campus, designed from the ground up, and with unlimited financial support. Perhaps, too, the practical book he co-authored with Archie Palmer, *Architectural Planning of the American College,* was as quietly influential as Le Corbusier's theoretical treatise, *Vers une Architecture*, published a decade earlier.

At the time of Wake Forest and the surrounding architectural contretemps, Larson was at the height of his career, and could look back on a life's work of beautiful houses and churches, plus stunningly handsome academic ensembles. Regardless of which side one falls on in the traditional versus modern debate, Jens Larson's legacy is remarkable. It is hard to imagine a more iconic American campus than Dartmouth College. Baker Library, the centerpiece of the campus, was the progenitor of several semi-patriotic renditions of Independence Hall, that touchstone of the Enlightenment. The symbolic tower is a tribute to the architecture of Christopher Wren and to the radical ideas of the Founding Fathers. The theme was further refined by Larson at Colby College, and also at the Institute for Advanced Study, as well as Bucknell University. Rather than merely a replication of a brilliant design motif, Larson fashioned Georgian into an individual style that blessed his clients with a dignified and respectful face to the world. It is impossible to imagine Dartmouth without Larson, so inseparably linked are his buildings and the college's identity.

Like the best traditional designers–and the great architects down through the ages–Larson was able to create in a variety of styles with aplomb. He provided a no-nonsense academic mantle for Canadian universities with far fewer resources than Dartmouth or Wake Forest. Larson's Gothic churches and chapels show a deft hand in the medieval idiom, while his Trinity Lutheran church in Worcester is an imposing exploration of Larson's own Scandinavian heritage. Larson's wide-ranging historical knowledge informed his suave and utterly Francophone International House for the City University of Paris (which begs comparison with Le Corbusier's white-box-on-pilotis dormitory built there the same year). The Chicago Tribune Tower competition design does, alas, illustrate the size limits of brick Georgian, although it has a certain cozy American appeal which is lacking in Gropius's de Stijl-like composition.

That no one has championed this major figure, until now, has always perplexed me. Larson buildings were always a backdrop to my life. My father's office was at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, while I attended Dartmouth and lived in a Larson-designed dormitory. I taught at the University of Louisville for a quarter of a century, where the incomplete Larson Plan formed the heart of that campus. Given knowledge of the wide-ranging oeuvre of Larson, it is doubly surprising that the elegant Georgian designer wasn't given the ink and appreciation that he so richly deserves. Now, thanks to the enthusiastic research and writing of Rod Miller, the history of art has access to the story of this prolific, accomplished, and no longer forgotten architect.

William Morgan

PREFACE

Jens Fredrick Larson: No one knows his name. When researching for any and all Larson information, I have been quite surprised to see the variety of ways in which his name has been spelled. The most common misnomer, and one I'd run across for years, was to spell his middle name Frederick. His correct name does not include the e. Not terribly unusual is the spelling of his last name as Larsen. Rather charmingly, the French referred to him as Jean-Frédéric Larson. I have found him mis-named as John Larson, Jervis Frederick Larson and, after a maddening search through mid-century North Carolina newspapers, knowing that Larson's name must appear somewhere, I found him, in two different newspaper stories, as J. Frederick Lawson. It struck me that not only have editorial standards declined since the Nineteenth Century but also that this was a suitable metaphor for Larson's entire career. No one knows his name. This is a man who was a war hero, an American volunteering to fight for another country, a flying ace, a focused young man who pulled himself up from a rough life and won a scholarship to Harvard, an Architect-in-Residence for Dartmouth at age twenty-eight, a professional who was permitted to design, from scratch, two entire college campuses, entered a design in the now legendary Chicago Tribune Tower competition, developed a friendship with and received funding from John D. Rockefeller, was awarded the *Legion d'Honneur* for his work in Paris, a thoroughly thoughtful architect who wrote an expansive book on campus planning, won the competition against more well-known firms to build Fuld Hall (wherein Einstein had an office from the opening), had a French President attend the ceremonies for the opening of one of his buildings, President Franklin Roosevelt serve on a Board for another, and President Truman speak at the groundbreaking of another… and no one knows his name.

At first blush, one may suspect that Larson was not brilliant at self-promotion; that appears to have been very much the case. On the other hand, he was spectacular at work. Larson designed many buildings for a variety of clients in more than just the Georgian style. He was adaptable and thoughtful and actually actively listened when clients, or potential clients, had concerns or suggestions. His thoroughness and consideration, and work ethic, garnered him many prestigious contracts. So, what happened? It is too simplistic a claim that it was merely a stylistic preference, that Georgian

was out and Modernism was in, to explain the lack of fame and the attacks Larson suffered. The change was an intellectual, indeed, a moral one. Larson lived, and worked, during a massive shift in the West. The Georgian style, echoing history, tradition, and Greek rationalism, began to be seen as something merely staid, dead, and oppressive. This paralleled the rejections of any notions of rationalism, tradition, or theology, as being a guide to insight, wisdom, and meaning. Architectural style was reduced to mere preference; lifestyles were similarly degraded. After the ravages of the postmodern battles, wherein much was fought, but not much gained beyond mere subjectivity, it is time to again look to history, to tradition, and to the themes and concepts of Classical rationalism as manifest in the aged proportions and harmonies of Georgian brick and stone.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1948, in the small North Carolina city of Winston-Salem, Jens Fredrick Larson began work on the new Wake Forest College campus. Larson had been the former architectural advisor to the Association of American Colleges, author of *Architectural Planning of the American College*, and he was known for his work at Dartmouth College, Colby College, and the Institute for Advanced Study. At the peak of his career, Larson wanted to create something special for the new campus. Over the next decade, Larson worked on hundreds of drawings for dozens of buildings all in his traditional Georgian style. Wake Forest would boast a huge, encompassing central lawn capped with a massive chapel, buildings all with warm orange-hued brick walls and chimneys, carved wood or stone doorways, carved wood pilasters and enrichments, all rationally organized echoing both Beaux-Arts planning and English estates. **(Fig. 0.1)**

Fig 0.1 Wait Chapel, Wake Forest University
Winston Salem, North Carolina

Around the same time, Walter Gropius, Bauhaus founder, Modernist pioneer, and darling of the *avant-garde*, began work at Harvard University on the Harvard Graduate Center. This was to be Harvard's first Modern work as well as Gropius' first large commission in America.[1] Previously only the tried-and-true Georgian style was utilized at Harvard. With Gropius at the helm as architect and faculty member, however, the deviation was deemed appropriate.[2] Harvard would boast her first flat roofs, factory sash windows, unornamented walls, and stainless-steel trim, all with a nod towards German industrial complexes. (**Fig. 0.2**)

Fig 0.2 Harvard Graduate Center, Walter Gropius and TAC
Cambridge, Massachusetts

While Gropius' work was mostly well received by the architectural community throughout the United States, Larson's was not. Larson was also lambasted in the local press. In spite of Larson's success and renown, the community was in an uproar over his designs. At a public meeting in Winston-Salem, Larson was verbally attacked by architects and residents for wanting to use traditional styles to create a campus that would reflect something more than "The Times".[3] In the end, however, both Wake Forest and Larson got what they sought and built the campus according to

traditional designs and layout.

The two events capture something of the contemporary zeitgeist of mid-twentieth-century America. Gropius wrote, "Architecture is said to be a true mirror of the life and social behavior of a period. If that is true, we should be able to read from its present features the driving force of our times".[4] Presumably the Modern spirit was driving Harvard to depart from tradition and to build with flat roofs and asymmetry. Was it the notion that, as historian William Curtis wrote, "The past, once the source of all wisdom, came to be regarded with suspicion".[5] The spirit of the times was indeed one of change. But what then was behind the support, and the style, of Larson's work?

Seventy years have passed since Gropius and Larson created their notions of good architecture. For many years Modern architecture ruled the day, often with an iron fist, and established itself as the only choice for significant building. As of late, however, Modernism and its concurrent concepts have fallen into question. With hindsight it has become easier to see Modernism's motivations, its idealism, and its failings.[6] But what might hindsight show us about the more traditional works of architects like Larson? Indeed, how might Larson's work answer Postmodern architectural trends?[7]

The majority of Larson's work was done for colleges and universities. Whereas many other architectural structures might be seen as unimportant in their intellectual associations (or in not having any substantial associations), it is reasonable to assume that colleges and universities are more aware of building meaningful architecture. Larson's Georgian collegiate work suggests ideas of tradition and learning, as well as those normally associated with Classicism: harmony, symmetry, proportion, strength, and delight. Classicism may be a thoughtful choice for architecture, and life. Exploring Larson's *oeuvre* offers opportunity not merely to argue for his inclusion into some sort of canon of great architects, but to discern his place among his contemporaries, why he was a good architect, and why it might be worth contemplating his work and its meaning.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY LIFE: HARVARD, ENGLAND, AND THE RED BARON

Jens Fredrick Larson was born on August 10, 1891 in Boston to Leonard Ludwig[8] and Andresigne (Anderson) Larson. His mother was Danish, his father Swedish. Larson's grandfather was Jonas Larson, an architect and engineer who designed and constructed the canal between Stockholm and Södertälje.[9]

Young Jens Larson's upbringing was rather strict but not burdensome, being raised by an uncle who worked for the Waltham Watch Company. The arrangement may have been due to his father's alcoholism.[10] His early education was limited by the family situation and yet a significant moment occurred for the twelve-year old Larson when his sixth-grade teacher, Miss Western, after seeing his paintings, asked if knew what architecture was. Larson credits that moment as firing his imagination and desire to become an architect. Miss Western appears to have done more when, just a few years later, in 1907, the sixteen-year old Larson began work as an office boy for her cousin, the architect Charles Whittemore.[11] Evenings were spent at the Boston Architectural Club, an organization for those interested in the profession.[12] In addition to Whittemore, he learned from Boston architects such as the senior Clarence H. Blackall, Chief Designer James Clapp, and perhaps G. H. Burr.[13] (In 1915 those teachers would form the firm, Blackall, Clapp and Whittemore, designing a number of theaters in the Boston area, including the Bowdoin Square Theater as well as the Tremont Temple, a Baptist church). Larson continued his education by reading architecture books at the Boston Public Library and visiting area museums. From early on he also developed a love of oil painting which remained with him for life. He stated, "My avocation has always been oil painting".[14]

With encouragement from Clapp, Larson applied for and won a scholarship to the prestigious Harvard Architectural School. Larson's scholarship covered his two-year education from 1910-12. In 1911 he received "First Mention" in a student architectural competition sponsored by the Boston Society of Architects, for designing a loggia and balcony for

a state capital.[15] Among others, Larson's teachers included Herbert Langford Warren, Ralph Adams Cram, Frank Miles Day, Cass Gilbert, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.[16] It should be noted that Harvard had numerous buildings constructed during the late 19th century in the Colonial style. Closer to Larson's time was the Georgian Robinson Hall, home to the architecture school (Charles McKim, 1901). In 1909, Harvard inaugurated Abbott Lawrence Lowell as President. Lowell, responsible for a great deal of architectural expansion, worked to make Harvard more inclusive by building more dormitory space; the firm of Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge worked to produce dormitories that were large in scale but fit with Harvard's Colonial/Georgian tradition. New types of practical buildings were constructed using a traditional style. Certainly, young Larson was paying attention.

After Harvard, Larson joined, as a designer, the Montreal architectural firm Brown & Vallance where he worked mainly with university and memorial building designs.[17] Drafting was not his first choice, however, and after a year doing such in Montreal, he sought out a means of becoming an architect. Because he did not have the usual college training, he could not compete for the Beaux-Arts Scholarships–so he arranged his own program of apprenticeship.

Larson selected Sir John James Burnet of Glasgow as his first choice, ignoring the advice of his Canadian friends who let him know selection by Scottish firms was fiercely competitive. Larson went right to Burnet himself and no doubt impressed Sir John as at the end of the meeting Larson was given a small job, at £3 a week.[18] Burnet was a very well-known Scottish architect who could manage himself in a variety of styles including Georgian. Indeed, unlike Mackintosh (whose reputation surpassed Burnet's only after Burnet had died), Burnet had "a large and varied [practice] which was the Mecca of every aspiring Glasgow apprentice".[19] He received training both at his father's office (John Burnet, Senior) and at the *École des Beaux-Arts.* In 1897, Burnet served as the President of the Glasgow Institute of Architects. He was knighted in 1914 and was awarded the Royal Gold Medal in 1923. Burnet worked on many projects including the Fine Arts Institute in Glasgow, the King Edward VII Galleries, a British Museum addition, the Gardner Memorial Church, Brechin, and a number of private estates. Of Burnet, Larson wrote, "He very carefully discussed all the jobs we worked on to make me realize the scope of the work and the knowledge necessary to be an architect".[20]

What is of especial note here is that Burnet also worked on a number of university and library designs. Burnet was responsible for numerous buildings at Glasgow University, including the Union, the Chapel, and

Zoology, and other structures such as the Elder Library, the Wallace Scott Tailoring Institute, the Royal Institute of Chemistry, London, and the North Library at the British Museum (now destroyed). Burnet even traveled to the United States in 1896 to better study laboratory design for the University of Glasgow.[21] It is difficult to say exactly what Larson drew from his apprenticeship with Burnet, but at the least he would have been influenced by Burnet's perfectionism. At the Burnet atelier, apprentices worked with tracing paper as designs were conceptualized and drawn–one was not permitted to erase.[22] Larson stayed in Glasgow for six months.

After working with Burnet, Larson moved in 1913 to London and spent about six months in the office of Thomas Edward Colcutt, of the firm Colcutt & Hamp. Like Burnet, Colcutt was well connected with the architectural establishment. Often placed in that stylistic category of late-nineteenth-century English architects referred to as "eclectic", Colcutt worked as an assistant to G. E. Street,[23] set up an independent practice in 1873, and later shared a partnership with Stanley Hamp. Colcutt won the Royal Gold Medal in 1902 and was the President of the Royal Institute of British Architects 1906-1908. Colcutt designed the Town Hall, Wakefield, Yorkshire (1877-80), the Palace Theater, Cambridge Circus, London (1890), and the Savoy Hotel, London (1889). Also, like Burnet, Colcutt had a hand in school-related work designing four of the houses at Eton, the Imperial Institute, Kensington (1893), and extensions at the Mill Hill School, Middlesex (1907). Larson maintained a life-long respect for Colcutt.[24]

In 1914, the Montreal firm Brown & Vallance, for whom Larson had formerly worked, asked him to return. He did so and worked as a draftsman until the outbreak of World War I at which time Larson joined the First Canadian Division of Artillery in August 1914 and was sent to Europe.

During the War, Larson served in France. An artilleryman for two years, he was a gunner and was later commissioned in the field. With good reason, he found the trenches intolerable.[25] He was admitted to the Royal Flying Corps in 1916 and attended "Preliminary School" in Oxford.[26] By November 1917 he was flying patrols and earned his first victory.[27] He established a reputation as an exceptional pilot, earning nine confirmed victories, making him an Ace, and even once engaged the infamous Baron von Richthofen–the Red Baron–in an aerial duel which ended in a draw. At the war's end, Larson had earned the rank of Captain as well as the Star, Victory, and British War medals; he was offered promotion to Major and a position with the Headquarters Staff of the newly formed Royal Air Force.[28] He declined the promotion in order to pursue a career in architecture. The British shipped him back to Canada with the first return of troops in January 1919. (**Figs 1.1, 1.2, 1.3**)

Fig 1.1 Jens Fredrick Larson, WWI Royal Flying Corps

Fig 1.2 Larson with his RFC aircraft