
A CERTAIN BRAND OF HUMANISM: LEWIS MUMFORD, MATTHEW NOWICKI, AND THE ARCHITECTURAL PEDAGOGY OF NORTH CAROLINA STATE COLLEGE, 1948–1952

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PROLOGUE: MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND OPPORTUNITIES

On February 11, 1948, a symposium of architects was held at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) to raise the question: "What is Happening to Modern Architecture?" The session was prompted by an article written by Lewis Mumford, published a few months earlier in his Skyline column for the *New Yorker* magazine, where he sharply criticized hard-line modernists who "placed the mechanical functions of a building above its human functions" neglecting "the feelings, the sentiments, and the interests of the person who was to occupy it."¹ Counter to such approaches, Mumford championed what he called "the Bay Region Style" of coastal California as a "native and humane form of Modernism," giving particular praise to the work of architects Bernard Maybeck, William Wurster, and John Galen Howard. For Mumford, their work reconciled universal principle with the particulars and idiosyncrasies of local involvements, resulting in "free yet unobtrusive expression of the terrain, the climate, and the way of life on the coast."²

But now, in the MoMA's auditorium, Mumford stood before many of those whom he had implicitly, if not directly, criticized—Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and others—and they were eager to respond. These figures scoffed at Mumford's criticisms of Modern Architecture, offering a variety of defenses against his assertions. Alfred H. Barr and Hitchcock went so far as to denigrate Mumford's favored architecture as nothing more than work in a sentimental, "Cottage Style." Before long, the discussion drifted towards a critique of "isms" in general, and Mumford's criticism was largely disregarded by those at whom it was aimed. This situation, however, was largely a product of their misunderstanding of Mumford's position.

Mumford's opponents understood his affinity for the Bay Region Style in largely superficial terms, as a visual aspect of its architectural form. Hitchcock reduced it to a question of 'expression', suggesting that "the cottage style is concerned apparently with giving a more domestic, a looser and an easier expression" to architecture, as if that were its primary appeal.³ Breuer understood it much the same, associating the 'human' aspects of the Bay Region Style with "imperfection... imprecision..." and "with camouflaging architecture with planting, with nature, with romantic subsidies."⁴ However, it was not these formal qualities of the Bay Region Style in and of themselves

that appealed to Mumford, but rather the underlying values of which the work's appearance was a necessary outcome. While the architects concerned themselves with the human response to the form of the architectural object itself, Mumford was more concerned with the human response to the *surrounding world and others* as mediated by the architectural object. This fundamental distinction between seeing architecture as object versus understanding it in terms of its psychological, social, cultural, and environmental involvements can also be found in critical passages of Mumford's writings.

In the preface to the 1955 second edition of his book, *Sticks and Stones*, Mumford suggested that the text's greatest contribution was the assertion that a given building cannot be understood "as a self sufficient entity, an aesthetic abstraction," but rather must be seen as "an element in a complex civic or landscape design... as part of a greater whole... felt only through dynamic participation in that whole."⁵ In the closing chapter of the same text, though this from the first edition of 1924, Mumford stated that to design architecture as such, one must "begin at the other end from that where our sumptuously illustrated magazines on home building and architecture begin—not with the building itself, but with the whole complex out of which architect, builder, and patron spring, and into which the finished building, whether it be a cottage or a skyscraper, is set."⁶ It was this sort of emergence—from the terrain, climate, and way of life on the coast—that Mumford saw as the formative process responsible for the Bay Region Style. At the MoMA symposium, however, Mumford's words and the essence of this argument seemed to have fallen upon deaf ears.

Shortly after the symposium, Mumford received a letter that contained an unexpected proposal. The message was from Henry L. Kamphoefner, a professor of architecture at the University of Oklahoma. Kamphoefner wrote to tell Mumford "of the newly formed School of Architecture and Landscape Design at North Carolina State College at Raleigh" where Kamphoefner had recently been hired as Dean.⁷ He hoped to gauge Mumford's interest in taking part in the new school and advising on plans for the curriculum and faculty. Further, Kamphoefner expressed his vision for the school as an academic environment dedicated to "the development of an organic and indigenous architecture," a phrase he undoubtedly knew would appeal to Mumford's sensibilities.⁸ In this, Mumford was being offered an opportunity to bring his teachings into the realm

of architectural education, not only through lectures or courses, but also by helping shape the program's pedagogical orientation. Mumford eagerly accepted.

I. SEEDS OF CHANGE: KAMPHOEFNER RECRUITS NOWICKI



Figure 1. Mumford at the MoMA symposium, 1948.

From the mid-1930's onward, many architecture programs in the United States began transforming their curricula, seeking closer alignment with 'modernist' principles. Such was Henry L. Kamphoefner's charge at North Carolina State College (NCSC).⁹ Kamphoefner had, in fact, already accomplished much the same task at the University of Oklahoma, where in 1937 he had been hired as an assistant professor of architecture, rose to Acting Director by 1942, and effectively became dean by 1945.

When he accepted the deanship at NCSC in late 1947, Kamphoefner was charged with the program's complete redesign. The new dean's vision for the school was ambitious and he believed that by gathering new faculty of "national, and even international, prominence with wide reputations in their professional fields" he could

elevate the School of Design to a position of national renown.¹⁰ It was this search for individuals of high acclaim that brought him Lewis Mumford, and through Mumford he found Matthew Nowicki.

Matthew Nowicki was a Polish architect, urban planner, and educator who had immigrated to America after WWII as Attaché to the Polish consulate in Chicago, charged with the task of enlisting American interest in rebuilding Warsaw. This led to his appointment as Polish representative on the architectural committee for the United Nations building, a role that brought him to New York, where in August of 1947 he first met Lewis Mumford.



Figure 2. Nowicki and Kamphoefner, c. 1949.

Following their initial meeting, Nowicki wrote Mumford to thank him and confess that "the thrill of meeting [his] favorite author" was still with him, a sentiment revealing much about Nowicki's interests and values.¹¹ At this time, Mumford's principle and most architecturally relevant texts included *Sticks and Stones* (1924), *Technics and Civilization* (1934), *The Culture of Cities* (1938), and *The Condition of Man* (1944). As a corpus, these works advanced a particular worldview, placing the human being at the center of its philosophy, human needs' satisfaction as the most important task of building, and idealizing harmony between "culture and technics" with both "predominantly in the service of life."¹² These notions resonate with Mumford's thoughts on the Bay Region Style, affirming that architecture must, above all else, serve the needs

of humankind—physical, psychological, social, and cultural—and should grow from the context and ways of life for which it exists. These values, which could be labeled a brand of mid-century humanism, were undoubtedly shared by Matthew Nowicki. The two were kindred spirits, and quickly became close friends.

In August of 1948 and on Mumford's recommendation, Kamphoefner appointed Matthew Nowicki as Acting Head of the Department of Architecture at the NCSC. At that time, Nowicki confessed that his "greatest ambition" was to create "a school of Lewis Mumford," designing an architectural program around the core tenets of their shared values.¹³ This would seem in step with Henry Kamphoefner's vision for a school focused on "the development of an organic and indigenous architecture," but it would soon become clear that assembling a faculty around such a singular ideal would be no easy task.

II. THE PROGRAM AT NORTH CAROLINA TAKES SHAPE

In his first weeks at NCSC, Kamphoefner decided only to retain two of the existing eleven members of the architecture faculty. Several vacancies were filled by Kamphoefner's colleagues from the University of Oklahoma. Lewis Mumford was hired as a visiting lecturer and adviser on curricular decisions. Matthew Nowicki was to teach a fifth year design studio and "would be active in the development of the new curriculum."¹⁴ And a few others were hired for various teaching assignments.

Previously, NCSC had offered a five year Bachelor in Architectural Engineering, but it would now be replaced with a five year Bachelor of Architecture degree based upon significant curricular changes. Students already beyond their sophomore year would continue working toward the former degree, while first and second year students would be shifted into the new program. As such, the redesigned curriculum would be fully implemented by the spring of 1952. A special curricular committee was formed with Kamphoefner, Nowicki, and Mumford as its key figures, and they began by stating the new program's chief aims. Primarily, the course of study was to give each student "a full understanding of the nature and character of the period and civilization he is a part of (its past, its present stage, and possible future trends)" and provide him "with technical means of expressing this period in his professional work."¹⁵ This was to be accomplished by complementing the requisite professional training with extensive "study of human civilization and its forms" and the mandate that "the course of design should be organized with the man (his nature and his needs) as a clearly defined object of all studies."¹⁶

As an organizational device, the curriculum was divided into four complementary course sequences, referred to as the chair of structures and technical subjects, the chair of descriptive drawing, the chair of design, and the chair of humanities, history, and regional studies. While the former sequences (structures/technique and drawing) were fairly normative, the latter (design and humanities/history) were the program's more innovative components.

The chair of humanities and history consisted of courses distributed throughout the program's five years, and was to help students develop an understanding of and sensitivity toward architecture's human involvements. Freshmen were required to take two courses called "Contemporary Civilization" and "Contemporary Science and Society." The first course, taught at the Department of Social Studies by its own faculty, used Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* as its textbook and was intended as an introduction to "the humanities and social sciences."¹⁷ The second course, "Contemporary Science and Society," investigated "the ways in which new scientific concepts, particularly in physics, chemistry, astronomy, and biology, have affected the form and intent of the arts and of some social institutions."¹⁸ These two courses laid the foundation for an understanding of civilization and society, the complex of relationships within which the architect practices, and would be built upon by each course in the humanities and history sequence.

From the second year onward, students were to be required to take three consecutive years of history courses. This is notable, as by the late 1940's Harvard's GSD and other schools had been in the process of reducing the role of historical study in architectural education.¹⁹ At NCSC, the first of these required courses was on the "History of Landscape Architecture," exploring "the fundamental principles involved in adapting the land for human use... studied in relation to climate [and] economic and political systems."²⁰ By first focusing not on buildings themselves, but rather on human adaptation of landscapes speaks to expanded thinking about architecture in general, conceived as an outgrowth of its context rather than an isolated and self-sufficient object. This same emphasis was maintained in subsequent history courses, which involved the "critical study [of] social, religious, and political life of [historic peoples] as reflections and causes [of] architectural and structural form."²¹ These courses focused on the notion of "historic building cultures" rather than historical styles.²²

The fourth year involved perhaps the most innovative aspect of the new curriculum—architecture students were *required* to take two courses in the social sciences: "Human Behavior" and "Urban Sociology," both taught in the Department of Sociology. This was prescient, anticipating the growing focus placed on social sciences in architectural discourses and curricula throughout the 1960's. The course in Human Behavior focused on the psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of social dynamics and interaction, while Urban Sociology was centered on questions of urban history, population growth, "social ecology of the city" and a host of other urban concerns.²³ In 1948, when the new curriculum was formulated, the program at NCSC was the first in the United States to propose coursework in the social sciences as a requirement in architectural education. As a whole, the chair of History and Humanities formed, in Nowicki's words, "the backbone of the philosophy of the school," and its humanistic values were to be imbedded within the studio sequence as well.²⁴

An assignment that vividly expresses these aims was a second year design project for "a primitive shelter for man and wife." The year-

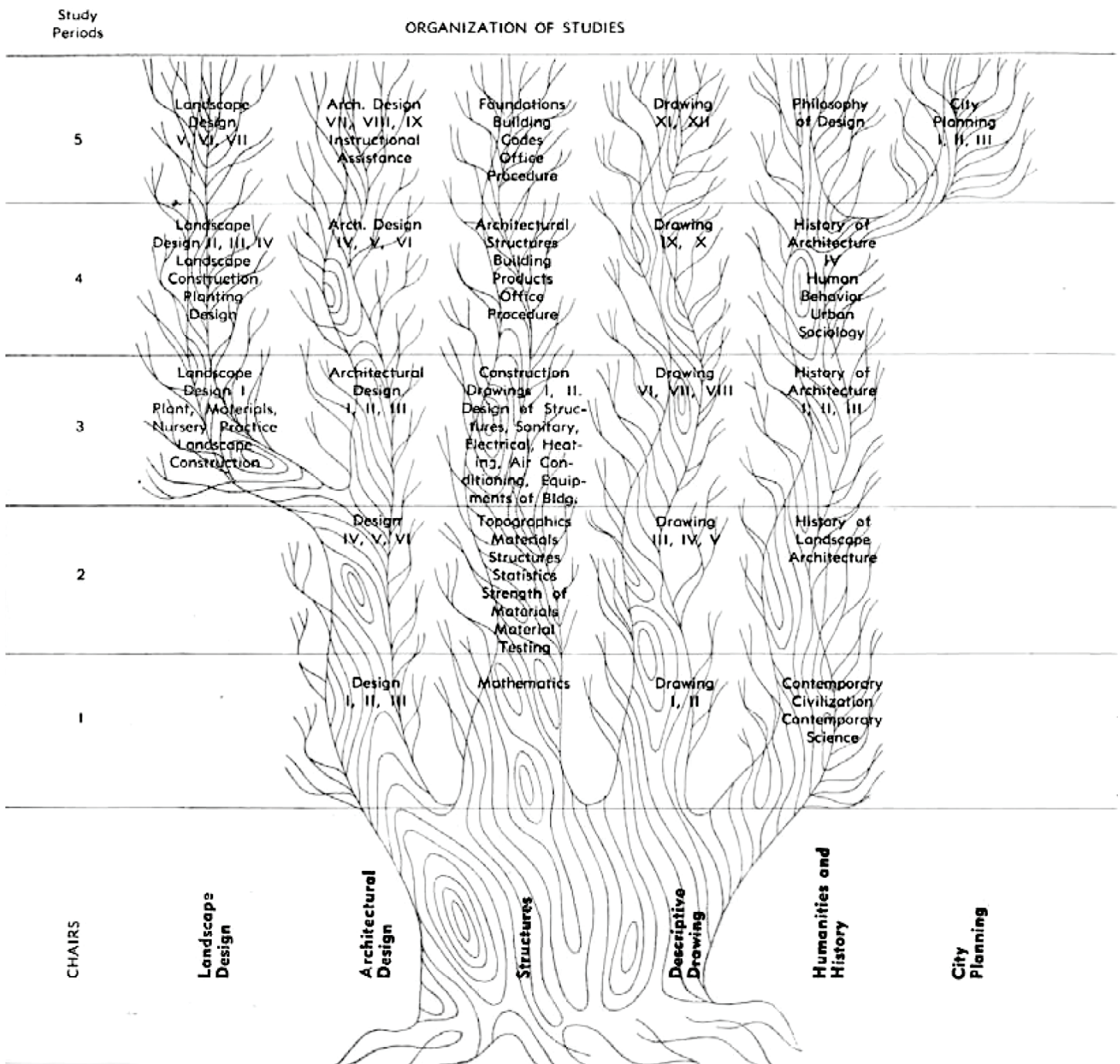


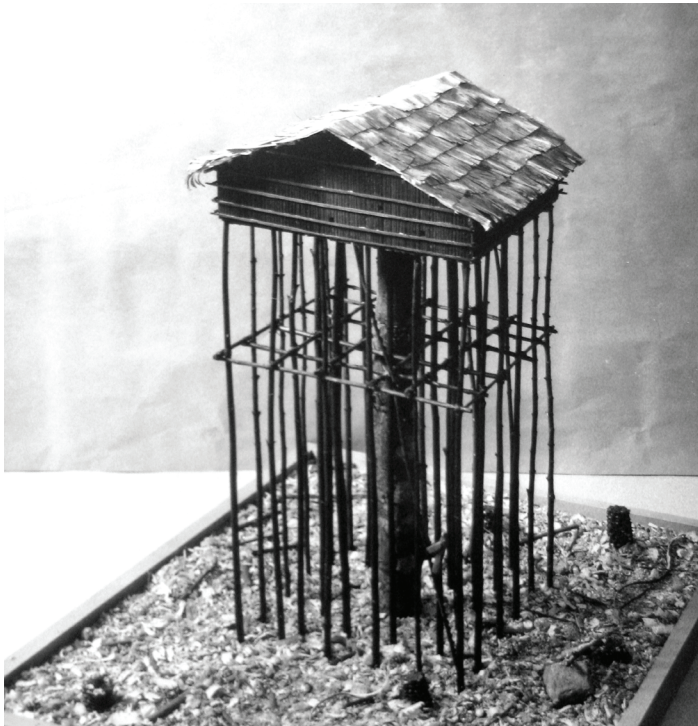
Figure 3. Diagram of organization of studies into 'Chairs', published in Matthew Nowicki, *Bulletin for The NCSC School of Design*, Raleigh: NCSC, 1949.

long project involved three phases: two research and one design. The first third of the academic year was spent on an exhaustive study of a specific landscape—tropical jungle, arid desert, temperate steppes, sub-tropical river valley, or high mountain forest—analyzing a particular site in terms of its “climatic influences, physical characteristics, and the resources or economy of the region.”²⁵ These things would suggest appropriate materials, techniques,

forms, and strategies for building. The product of this investigation was one 20” x 30” illustration board communicating the collected data via “color, diagrams, charts, sketches, etc.”²⁶ Next, students analyzed the occupants themselves—man and wife—first studying them physically in terms of “height, weight, strength, reach, eye-level, comfortable sleeping, sitting or squatting positions and heights,” and it was stressed that anything designed must be

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“geared to this **scale**.”²⁷ Living habits—daily patterns of life and social interactions—were also studied, attempting to identify and explore all “necessities of life” in terms of material and spatial requirements and potential relationships between ways of dwelling and the environment. The third phase of the project was to design a dwelling to “adequately provide for all the needs of man and wife, and thus, reflect their living pattern in its conception.”²⁸ In its climatic specificity, use of native materials and techniques, and adaptation to a specific way of life, “the shelter [would] also be an expression of the geographical region in which it is to be built.”²⁹ Thus, the assignment prescribed a mode of architectural concep-



Figures 4 and 5. Student projects for a primitive dwelling for man and wife, c. 1950.

tion by which the work emerges from the conditions of its physical and human context, what Mumford and Nowicki might have considered an organic and indigenous architecture.

Another project, developed by Nowicki, involved an analysis the North Carolina vernacular, requiring students to identify a local structure that typified the regional character, document it exhaustively, and produce measured drawings of the structure. This was accompanied by a written description of various functional, material, economic, and social influences on the building's form, to illuminate the relationship between these things and the ways of life the structure supported.³⁰ This sort of thinking also factored into Nowicki's fifth-year design studios. In Kamphoefner's description of Nowicki's pedagogical process, collaborations would be made with faculty from the department of sociology to analyze social groups and “evolve the human program” for design projects, helping students develop spatial organizations around their particular ways of life.³¹

While all of these ‘humanistic’ initiatives woven into the curriculum seemed clear in theory, their implementation in practice often proved difficult. The program's effectiveness in instilling humanist values in students depended on individual instructors, and many of the others were resistant to Mumford's and Nowicki's ideas, choosing to teach in the ways they were used to and from the position of their own views on architecture and design. Soon, an ideological schism developed among the faculty, a condition exacerbated by lack of consistent vision for the program among its administrators. While Nowicki and Mumford sought primarily to instill students with humanistic values, Kamphoefner's chief goal seemed to be elevating the School of Design's level of prestige as “the architectural center of the south.”³² To accomplish this, Kamphoefner persistently brought in visiting faculty of wide renown, and while some were sympathetic to Mumford's and Nowicki's values, many others were not. Such figures included the likes of Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and especially Buckminster Fuller, whose presence at NCSC would prove particularly divisive.

Fuller was a visiting professor at the School of Design from 1949-54, and while he was popular with students, his influence at NCSC was of issue to Mumford and Nowicki. Fuller, like Mumford and Nowicki, was also concerned with “human needs”, but where the latter pair valued cultural differentiation, human experience, and social exchange, Fuller's human interests tended toward issues of universality and standardization. Further, while the curriculum was based on a doctrine of contextual specificity, Fuller's teaching focused on mass-production and architecture's deployment across the globe with little regard to regional or cultural differences.³³ Thus, Fuller's presence undermined the pedagogical objectives of Mumford and Nowicki, and that he was repeatedly brought to teach at the School of Design by Dean Kamphoefner demonstrates conflicting objectives among the program's leading figures.

While Mumford and Nowicki sought to base the program on a singular, humanistic ideology, Kamphoefner wanted otherwise. Despite the fact that teaching towards “an organic and indigenous

architecture” was his own initial mandate, Kamphoefner’s vision for the program was now, if not initially, to create an atmosphere of intellectual diversity by bringing a group of “divergent opinions and ideas together” and letting the student “come to his own conclusions.”³⁴ Frictions among the faculty accumulated, and by early 1950 a “current of opposition” against the humanistic curricular model had formed, and, in Mumford’s words, it operated on a “radically different set of interests and purposes.”³⁵

Nowicki spent the summer of 1950 in India, serving as a principle designer for the Capital Complex in Chandigarh.³⁶ On August 31, 1950 he caught a connecting flight from Cairo to New York, returning home for the start of the fall semester. A half hour after takeoff, the Trans World Airlines flight Matthew Nowicki had boarded crashed in the Egyptian desert. Of the 55 passengers, none survived.

EPILOGUE: AN UNFINISHED PROJECT

After Matthew’s passing, a number of curricular changes were soon implemented. The fourth year requirement of “Human Behavior” and “Urban Sociology” was eliminated and, as the curriculum was only in its third year, its removal preceded its implementation. The history requirements were also reduced from three years of study to two, compressing the two architectural history courses into one, and reducing the explicit emphasis on social and cultural factors.³⁷ Mumford, discontent with the program’s direction and citing his ideological differences with “a dominant minority of the faculty,” gradually reduced his role at NCSC, ceasing his involvement completely by 1952.³⁸

From that point onward, the program of humanistic architectural education undertaken at NCSC would be carried forward by Dean Kamphoefner, albeit on his own terms and less strictly than under Mumford and Nowicki. At least in its general description, the school remained “dedicated to the development of a native architecture” and stated its belief that architecture’s greatest responsibility was “the art of humanizing the environment” (a phrase borrowed verbatim from Mumford).³⁹ Whether this mandate always played out in practice is questionable, but nevertheless the School of Design continued to accumulate a very impressive list of visiting faculty, stressing interdisciplinarity and diversity of viewpoints. This was not what Mumford and Nowicki had envisioned, but over the course his twenty-five year tenure at North Carolina State College (1948-1973), Dean Kamphoefner surely built the school into a significant program within the realm American architectural education.

Though some of its aspects would be taken up elsewhere over subsequent decades, Mumford’s and Nowicki’s larger aim—developing a course of architectural education around Mumford’s ‘humanistic’ values—would remain an unfinished project.⁴⁰ And yet, in its conception and attempted implementation, it raises important questions about architectural education today. Can a curriculum be effectively centered on a singular ideology, and does attempting to do so risk unfairly limiting the student’s experience? Or if a curriculum should allow for the coexistence of diverse or even contrary ide-

ologies, at what point does it prove problematic for lack of unified vision and coherence? Does a ‘humanistic’ program of study such as that of Mumford and Nowicki constitute a restrictive ideology, or might it provide a foundation for any approach to architectural production? As architectural education becomes responsible for the satisfaction of ever greater technical requirements, how does one instill the student with a sensitivity to culture, social dynamics, human needs, and the architect’s responsibility to these things? Such questions are as important now as ever, for we, as educators, should remind students that an architect must do more than design objects of aesthetic appreciation and that one builds, above all else, to provide human beings with places to dwell.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lewis Mumford, “Skyline,” in *The New Yorker*, 11 October 1947, pp.106-109.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, “What is Happening to Modern Architecture?” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, Vol. 15, No.3, Spring 1948, p.9.
- 4 Marcel Breuer, “What is Happening to Modern Architecture?” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, Vol. 15, No.3, Spring 1948, p.15.
- 5 Lewis Mumford, *Sticks and Stones*, New York: Dover Publications, 1955, pp.8-9.
- 6 Ibid., p.199.
- 7 Letter from Henry Kamphoefner to Lewis Mumford, dated February 12, 1948, University of Pennsylvania Archive.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 After 1959 it would be changed to North Carolina State University.
- 10 NCSC Course Catalog 1948-49, Raleigh: North Carolina State College, 1949, p.98.
- 11 Letter from Matthew Nowicki to Lewis Mumford dated August 17, 1947, University of Pennsylvania Archive.
- 12 Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010 [1934], p.150.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Letter from Henry Kamphoefner to Lewis Mumford, dated July 29, 1948, University of Pennsylvania Archive.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 NCSC Course Catalog 1949-50, Raleigh: North Carolina State College, 1950, p.333.
- 18 Matthew Nowicki, *Bulletin for The NCSC School of Design*, Raleigh: NCSC, 1949, p.15.
- 19 By 1939 the history requirement at the GSD was reduced to a single course and by 1946, history became an elective field of study. See Jill Pearlman, *Inventing American Modernism*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007, p.120-21.
- 20 Matthew Nowicki, *Bulletin*, op cit., p.15.
- 21 Ibid., p.18-19.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid., p.18.
- 24 Ibid., p.11.
- 25 Arch 202 assignment, *A Primitive Shelter for Man and Wife*, Winter Quarter 1948-49, NC State University Archive.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Summer Regional Research Project, assignment handout, June 1950, NC State University Archive.
- 31 Ibid.

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- 32 Letter from Lewis Mumford to Henry Kamphoefner, dated April 26, 1951, NC State University Archive.
- 33 This aspect of Fuller's practice is typified by his Dymaxion Houses.
- 34 Letter from Henry Kamphoefner to Lewis Mumford, dated August 31, 1951, NC State University Archive.
- 35 Lewis Mumford, "The Life, the Teaching, and the Architecture of Matthew Nowicki" in *Architectural Record*, July 1954, p.134.
- 36 Upon Nowicki's death, Le Corbusier was famously brought in as the designer of the complex's principle structures.
- 37 NCSC Course Catalog 1945-46, Raleigh: North Carolina State College, 1956, pp.198-99.
- 38 Letter from Lewis Mumford to Henry Kamphoefner, dated April 26, 1951, NC State University Archive.
- 39 Henry Kamphoefner, "Introduction to the School of Design," NCSC Catalog 1956-57, Raleigh: North Carolina State College, 1956, pp.72-73.
- 40 Under the leadership of William Wurster, the College of Environmental Design at University of California, Berkley dealt with similar themes in terms of "humanization of the environment." The late 1950's and 1960's would also witness a growing role for the human sciences in architectural education, but in most institutions this would eventually fade.