



Lorch Hall Drawings

Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan



Emil Lorch

Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan



Lorch Hall
Photo by Janet Kreger

PURE DESIGN

Emil Lorch, Architectural Education, and Michigan

by Jeffrey Welch

American Visionary

Sometime in the spring of 1923, Emil Lorch persuaded the modernist Finnish architect, Eliel Saarinen, to teach a short course in architectural design at the University of Michigan. Though Eliel Saarinen was wooed by other schools, Emil Lorch had the better hand because his program at the university, more so than those at other schools, attended to issues of modernity in architectural thinking and practice. It was an attitude neatly embodied in the dapper figure of Emil Lorch, whose formative experiences in Chicago in 1899-1901 set him on a path to leadership in architectural education. For thirty years, 1906-1936, he led the architecture program at the University of Michigan.

On the Way to Chicago

In 1899 Emil Lorch arrived in Chicago to be an assistant to William M. R. French, director of the Art Institute of Chicago.¹ For this role he was overqualified and underpaid, but it was a job in line with his interests and acquired on the rebound. Born in Detroit in 1870 in a German family, Emil Lorch was fluent in German and he worked assiduously to acquire perfect French. After high school he attended the Detroit Museum of Art's art school before enrolling in a special program at MIT, the oldest architectural school in the country. He studied for two years in Cambridge and while there he also worked in the office of Peabody & Stearns, a venerable, conservative Boston firm. At that time, Robert S. Peabody was one of five Eastern architects involved in planning the Chicago World's Fair. His firm was engaged on the Machinery Building, to be clothed in Italian Renaissance ornamentation. Emil Lorch worked on this project. Returning to Detroit, Emil Lorch became a teacher at the Detroit Museum of Art school in 1895, where he quickly rose to second in command. An inveterate organizer and attentive to administrative and educational issues, he took charge of night classes and he started up the Detroit Architectural Sketch Club in 1896 to support the young draftsmen in city architectural firms. In 1897, sponsored by H. J. Maxwell Grylls, he was invited to become an honorary member of the Detroit Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. A successful and respected teacher and administrator, he was slated to take over direction of the art school for school year 1898-1899.

At this time Emil Lorch already projected an indomitable will, an enterprising resourcefulness, and a deft sensitivity to trends. To prepare for his new role, he went to Europe for the summer, traveling in Germany and Austria before settling in Paris. He was planning to attend an international conference on public art in Brussels with the idea of sending back five "letters" to be published in the *Detroit Evening News* and other newspapers. In Paris, however, he received notice that the museum school would be closed, permanently. It was a bewildering turn of events, and there had been no inkling of it beforehand. Rather than return to Detroit, he spent the year in Paris, attending lectures and studying at the Collège de France, the École des Beaux-Arts, and the École du Louvre. He witnessed (and was impressed by) the national competitions held to design buildings for the Paris Exposition of 1900, and he became thoroughly familiar with École des Beaux-Arts practices. While in Paris he met N. H. Carpenter, secretary to the Board of Trustees at the Chicago Institute of Art. Returning to Detroit in September 1899, Emil Lorch confronted Detroit Museum of Art Director A. H. Griffith, receiving from him the additional \$600. he insisted he was owed (but which all along the museum had refused to pay).² Going in, the appointment in Chicago seemed to be merely an echo of his museum school job in Detroit.

Fiery Architects in Chicago

Here the story enters an uncanny dimension. By 1899 the Chicago Architectural Club had been taken over by a new generation of architects, young lions energized by the outspoken visionary architect Louis Sullivan. These men, Dwight Perkins, George Dean, Robert Spencer, Jr., George Maher, Max Dunning, Myron Hunt, Irving and Allen Pond, F. W. Fitzpatrick and others, led the movement to found the Architectural League of America in the spring of 1899. The Architectural League of America focused on organizing a working relationship among architectural clubs in Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, Boston and Toronto. They wished to coordinate traveling exhibitions to be shared among them, and in particular they took up the subject of architectural education. They thought that Beaux-Arts methods of education did not apply in American urban environments nor in the design of tall buildings. Furthermore, the interests of the Western architects were not being served by the American Institute of Architects, based in New York, where the succession of presidents (all Beaux-Arts men), saw the

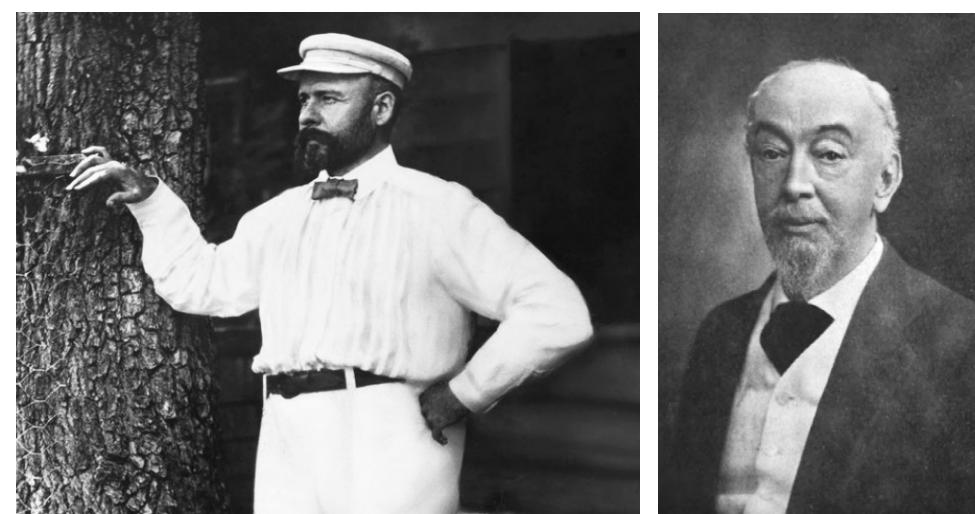


Emil Lorch, Bentley Historical Library,
University of Michigan

conservative architects of the Chicago World's Fair simply pass the post one to the next: Richard Morris Hunt (1888-1891), Daniel Burnham (1894-1895), George Post (1896-1898), Henry Van Brunt (1899-1900), Robert Peabody (1900-1901), Charles McKim (1902-1903). At the end of the second convention of the Architectural League of America in Chicago in the spring of 1900, Emil Lorch was appointed Corresponding Secretary of the Executive Committee, a post giving him a wide range of responsibility and opportunities for communication both national and international. European travel, language skills, a ready pen and his presidency of the Detroit Architectural Sketch Club fitted him for this role, and through it he became familiar and often friends with the leading architects and architectural educators in these member cities.

An Articulate Advocate for Pure Design

In May 1901, at the third convention of the Architectural League of America in Philadelphia, Emil Lorch made a presentation on a new departure in the study of architectural design. His address was published in the June issue of the Chicago-based *Inland Architect and News Record* as "Some Considerations Upon the Study of Architectural Design," and it was accompanied by Robert Spencer, Jr.'s, kindred address, "Should the Study of Architectural Design and the Historic Styles Follow and Be Based Upon a Knowledge of Pure Design?" (The answer was Yes).³ This June issue was dedicated to the question of architectural education, which had been the focus of the Philadelphia convention where Emil Lorch had taken center stage. Just when or where he encountered this new approach to art education, whether while studying in Cambridge, MA (1891-1893) or teaching in Detroit (1895-1898)—he was by 1901 in command of these new ideas.



Louis H. Sullivan

William LeBaron Jenney, Bentley
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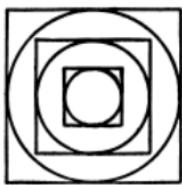


Fig. 206

The repetition of outlines-within-outlines may be concentric or eccentric. The repetition is concentric in Fig. 204. It is eccentric in the example which follows.

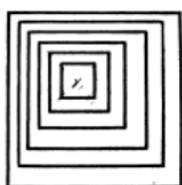
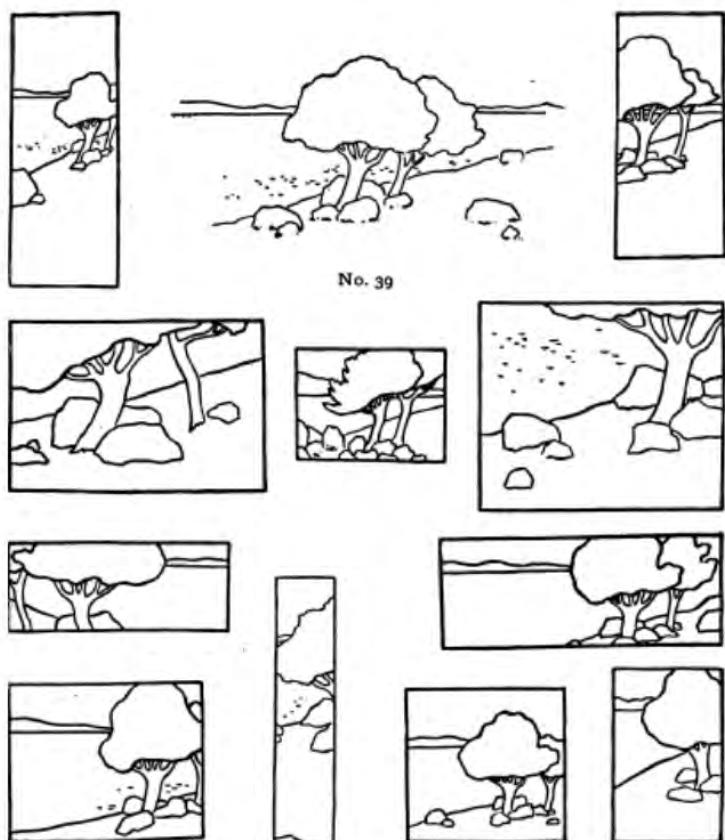


Fig. 207



(top) Exercise from *A Theory of Pure Design*
(bottom) Exercise from *Composition*

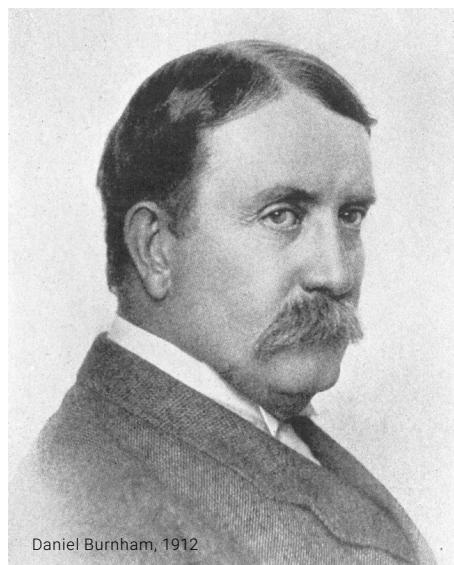
At the turn of the century, the concepts of "pure design" were still taking form. Emil Lorch and his Chicago colleagues had the benefit of Arthur Wesley Dow's book, *Composition: A Series of Exercises Selected from a New System of Art Education* (1899) to strengthen their ideological position. *Composition* claimed to be "the first publication of any consecutive series based upon the scheme of art education whose elements are here presented."⁴ It invited students to develop sensitivity to line, composition and color through a series of exercises of ever-widening complexity. Through the comparison of their own work performed in each exercise, students learned to recognize the importance of structural details and, with ongoing experience, become aware of the presence of quality, perfection, even beauty⁵ in their work. At its heart, *Composition* enabled the student to identify the formal elements in a work of art, to analyze the artist's means of expression, and to find inspiration for his own creative ends. The other major American proponent of pure design, Denman Ross, published his book, *A Theory of Pure Design: Harmony, Balance, Rhythm with Illustrations and Diagrams*, in 1907, giving the phrase "pure design" a wider and fixed association. Both these books share a basic approach to design education. What made Emil Lorch's new ideas radically different (at least in the eyes of teachers of architecture and traditionalist architects) was lifting the design terms of pure design out of a fine arts context and applying them to teaching architectural design. The more general concept is easy to grasp, since these days the approach taken by advocates of pure design have become a commonplace in art education programs. Rather than teach architectural design by rote copying of historical models, students would be asked to solve problems using simple design elements—dots, lines, geometrical shapes. Such exercises developed analytical skills, inculcated sensitivity to shapes, structures and whole schemes, and led to greater self-confidence in discerning what was good. Giving the student stronger powers of observation and independent judgment also contributed to creating an autonomous citizen. For these American architects, this outcome fostered a habit of thinking that was essential in the evolution of a democratic society.

Pure Design: An American Innovation

However, even before he made his case at the convention in Philadelphia, Emil Lorch had been "discontinued"⁶ from his job at the art school on May 11th, reportedly at Daniel Burnham's instigation.⁷ Most probably the cause was his effort to introduce pure design into his architectural drawing classes. While the younger students liked his classes, the older ones complained. Yet there were other aspects in the overall picture that may have put him at odds with his immediate employer. An impatient Emil Lorch may have overstepped his role of assistant director when he spoke out in public about a city proposal to build a permanent Arch of Triumph to honor Admiral Dewey.⁸ The *Chicago Tribune* published his drawing for the viewing stand for Dewey's visit. In another instance, since Director French was absent, Emil Lorch found himself standing beside museum President Charles Hutchinson to explain why so many art

school students (20 out of 27) had failed the examination for teaching posts in Chicago schools. Here he was defending a program he had only recently joined. Emil Lorch had also written an article for the *Chicago Tribune* assessing the exhibition of American Art (which also included work by students in the Art Museum School) at the Paris Exposition of 1900. This article displayed his expertise as an educator, and it revealed his notably sovereign knowledge of art educational practices in Chicago city schools. Such demonstrations as these—of his competence, ambition, social prowess and wide knowledge—may well have alarmed his supervisor.

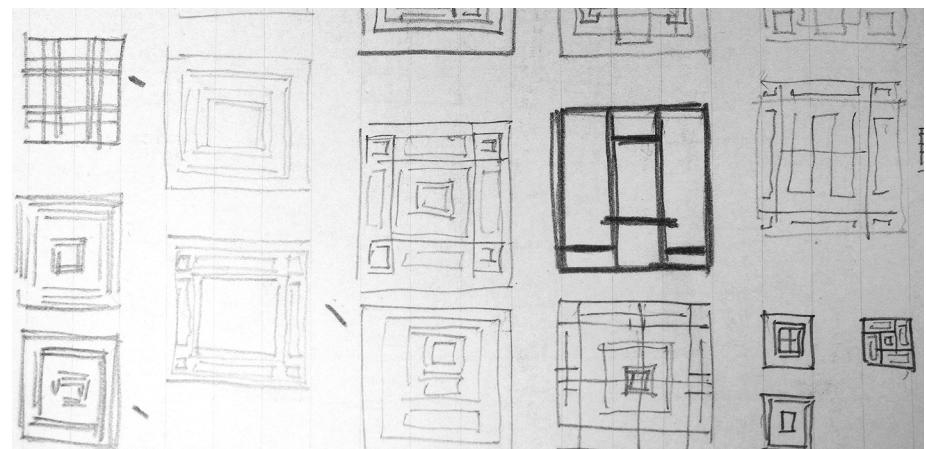
A second very probable cause of his being fired from the museum school, of course, involved recent developments in Washington, D. C., as Daniel Burnham had just been tapped in March 1901 to lead the Senate Park Commission in its mission to give the city a new look.⁹ This commission, in league with the American Institute of Architects, maneuvered to take command of the Federal building program for an imperial Mall; at the same time, the American Institute of Architects was in the process of moving its headquarters to Washington, D. C. The wider strategy of the Eastern architects included the erasure of the Architectural League of America, which was agitating for an American architecture derived from New World landscapes, flora and fauna, building forms and democratic spirit. The Eastern architects did not like being described as "French" architects and mere copyists enslaved to anti-democratic European architectural styles and educational training. Pure design was being touted as an answer, a way of releasing the creative imagination of young people searching for more modern forms of architectural expression, and it was Emil Lorch who seemed to have the firmest grip on these ideas that so inspired his Chicago colleagues in the spring of 1901 in Philadelphia.



Daniel Burnham, 1912

Pure Design: A Subversive "Cult"

Emil Lorch's departure from Chicago took some steam out of the Architectural League of America's position on education. The idea of pure design impelled ready assent because it pointed out a simple truth: developing sensitivity to shapes, rhythms, repetitions, oppositions, color and natural forms sharpened skills of observation and trained the eye to appreciate beauty. Members of the Chicago Architectural Club and more generally the many organizations that joined to create the Architectural League of America understood this. They saw pure

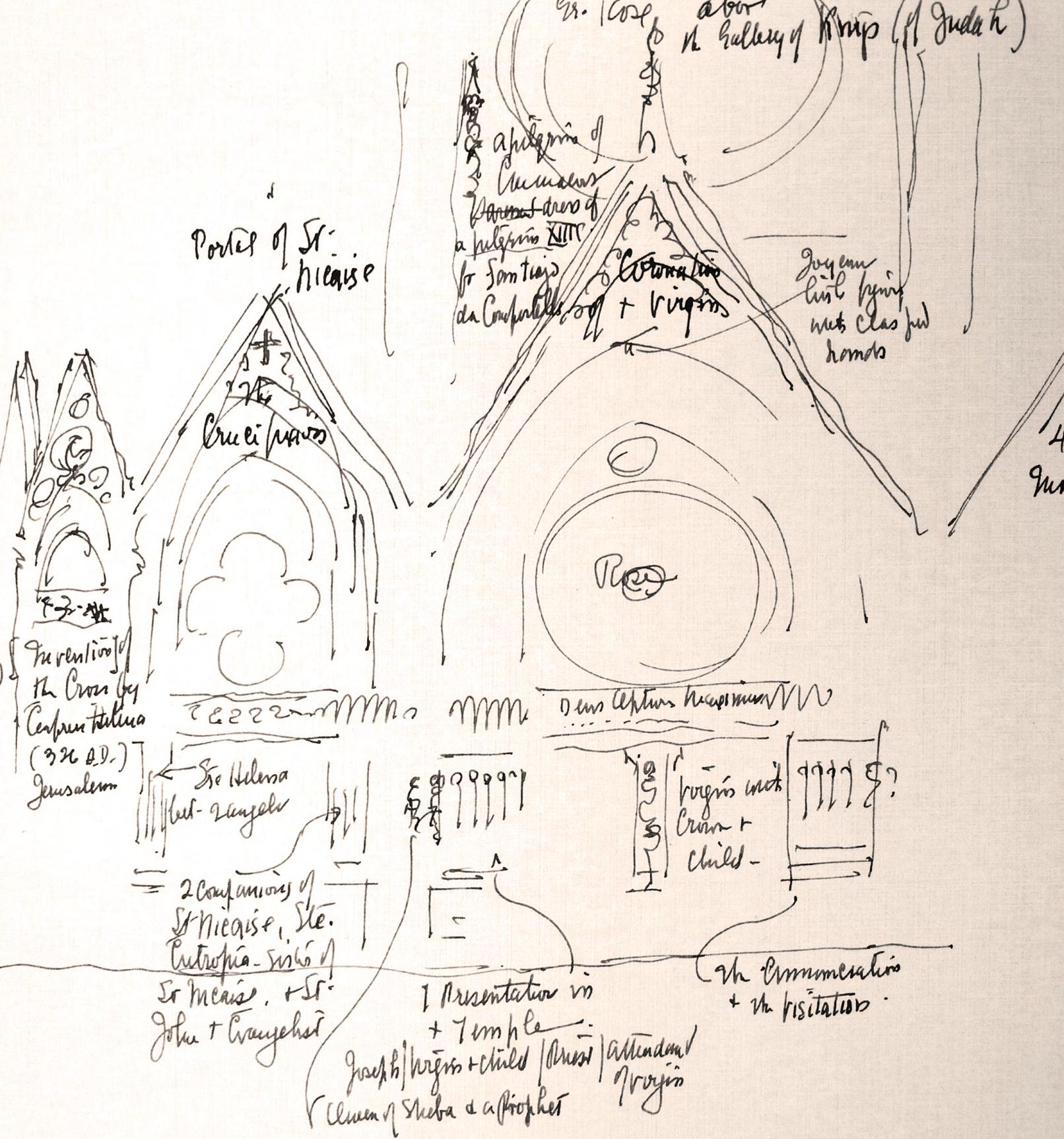


Emil Lorch Teaching Notes, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

design as a method of freeing students from the monotony of copying historical styles by having them work with simpler and more abstract concepts during their early preparation, thus freeing up imaginative play. Also, they would be better prepared for the later study of architectural forms. Unfortunately, Emil Lorch was the only practicing educator among these busy architects; intuitively, they understood what he was trying to do but they could not do it themselves nor could they readily explain the concepts. Thus, when he was let go from the Art Institute in May 1901, this expertise went with him, and the Architectural League of America slowly lost its forward motion against the pushback from the East. In July 1900, for example, a sharp riposte in support of orthodox training methods had come from Alexander Trowbridge, head of architecture at Cornell and a long-time friend of Emil Lorch from Detroit days when Alexander Trowbridge mentored a young Albert Kahn. Again, in the November 1901 issue of *Inland Architect and News Record*, American Institute of Architects President Robert Peabody had this to say about training young architects by copying historical precedents:

An education in an office plainly does not cultivate such powers. Nor, do I believe with those who bow to that vague deity, pure design, that they are to be gained by the contemplation of Nature and the study of natural products. The art of architecture is necessarily conventional, and it is bound up with the history and the life of mankind, and the egotist who tries to play his hand alone makes a mistake.

In addressing directly the subject of the Architectural League of America, he intoned: "At times it has assumed a position of opposition to us, but I fancy that attitude, together with an endorsement of any passing cult, is but temporary, for fads and special cults [like Pure Design] pass away and only basic principles remain."¹⁰ These comments, expressed at the American Institute of Architects Convention, captured the attitude of the Eastern men as a whole.



Emil Lorch Persists

On his side, Emil Lorch was convinced that the application of this new method for teaching design in fine arts classes could also be applied to teaching architectural design. His mentors were Arthur Dow at Pratt Institute and Denman Ross at Harvard. He had struck up a relationship with these men, inviting them both to speak about their work at the Architectural League of America Convention in Philadelphia. Although both men declined to make the trip, Denman Ross responded with an invitation to attend his summer class, open to selected individuals, mostly teachers seeking advancement and new methods of thinking. Emil Lorch did attend the summer class, and this, in turn, led to his taking a teaching assistantship in the architecture department at Harvard under its head H. Langford Warren. For the next two years Emil Lorch taught classes to pay the rent, completed the requirements for an M. A. in Architecture, and did independent research in pure design with Denman Ross. Architecture degree in hand at last, Emil Lorch found a position at Drexel Institute in Philadelphia, a small school that gave him latitude to experiment with teaching his version of pure design in the classroom. After three years at the Drexel Institute, where he befriended Paul Cret at the University of Pennsylvania, Emil Lorch took up the task of building an architectural program from scratch at the University of Michigan.

(left) Emil Lorch Teaching Notes,
Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

On the Way to the University of Michigan

In the two years at Harvard and three years at Drexel Institute, Emil Lorch stayed true to a deep conviction that pure design offered a better method for teaching architectural design. It is important to note here that in Chicago he had met and befriended Jemima Elmslie, sister of George Grant Elmslie; in June 1901, the couple became engaged.¹¹ As the years unspooled, Emil Lorch sought a permanent position that would enable him to marry, while at the same time he worked steadily on his research in pure design. As it became a fact that he needed a degree to land a better job, he could justify taking two years to get a Master's Degree from Harvard, but once in place at Drexel he pursued leads in all directions, and the drama of his job search is, happily, recorded in letters (copies are in the Bentley Historical Library) sent to "Myrna" Elmslie on almost a daily basis.

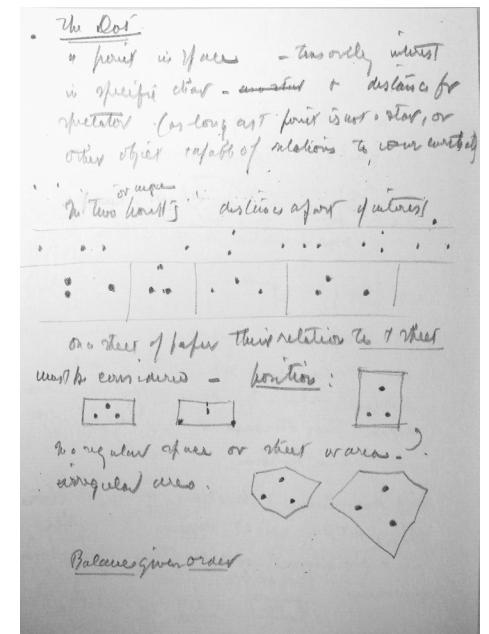
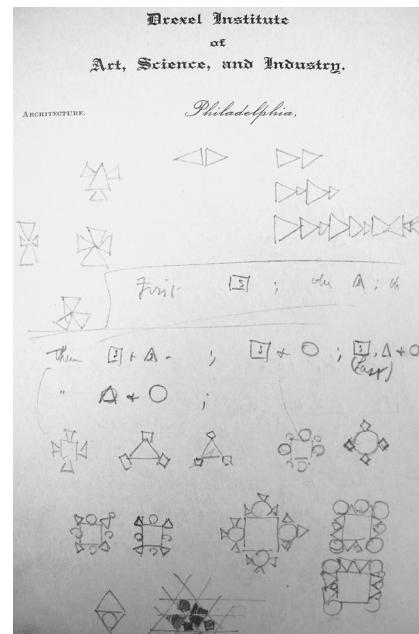
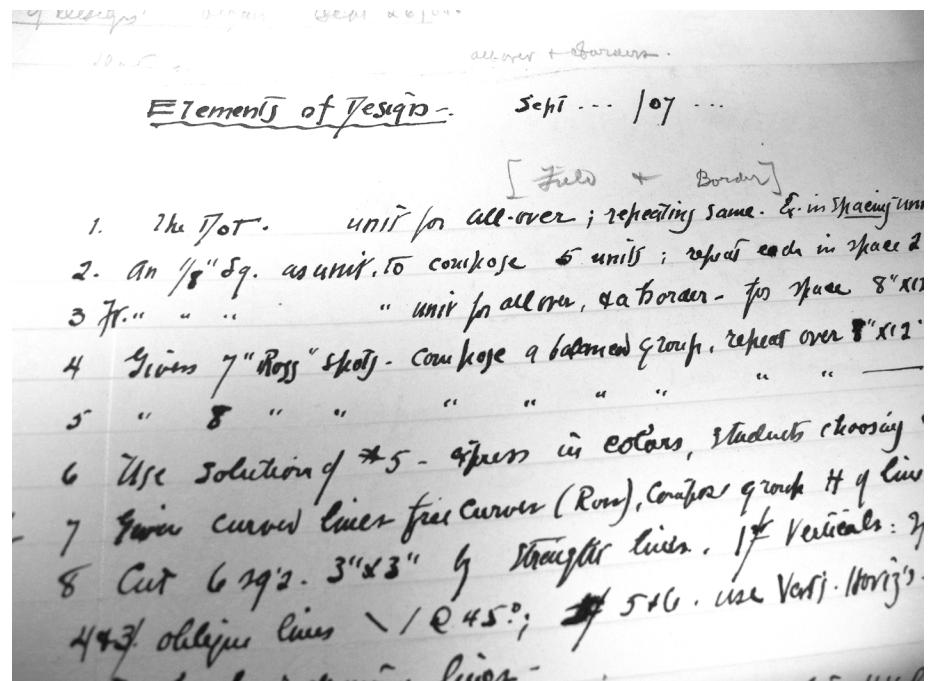
Offers That Were Hard to Refuse

In two key instances, Emil Lorch's negotiations with possible employers indicate the importance to him of having freedom to pursue ongoing research in pure design. Almost as soon as he was hired at Drexel, his Harvard mentor, H. Langford Warren, apprised him of an opening at the University of Liverpool, England, where there was an interest in getting "an American who is familiar with the organization of our American schools." Professor Warren leaned hard on his protege for admittedly selfish reasons: it would be a rare accomplishment for an American school to place a graduate in an English program, something for Professor Warren to brag about wherever he went. Regarding the curriculum at Liverpool, Professor Warren's upbeat remarks dimmed any appeal for Emil Lorch:

I do not believe that you would find that the curriculum is regarded as fixed. From what was told to me I think you would have pretty free swing though, of course, it would be undesirable to make sudden changes from the existing curriculum and at the beginning at least you would have to take things as you found them and the work would have to be fitted into the other work at the university.¹²

What was a plum for the professor was a pickle for the protege. A steady barrage of questions and time running short allowed Emil Lorch to finesse the situation and keep his friendship. Later, Professor Warren provided a key recommendation for Emil Lorch's candidacy at the University of Michigan.

A second equally besetting opportunity arrived in mid-1904, an assistant professorship at the University of Pennsylvania (next door to Drexel Institute) then under the guidance of Professor Warren P. Laird. Professor Laird's note of June 14 started a protracted negotiation, the heart of which was the question of Emil Lorch's freedom to continue experimenting with pure design. These two



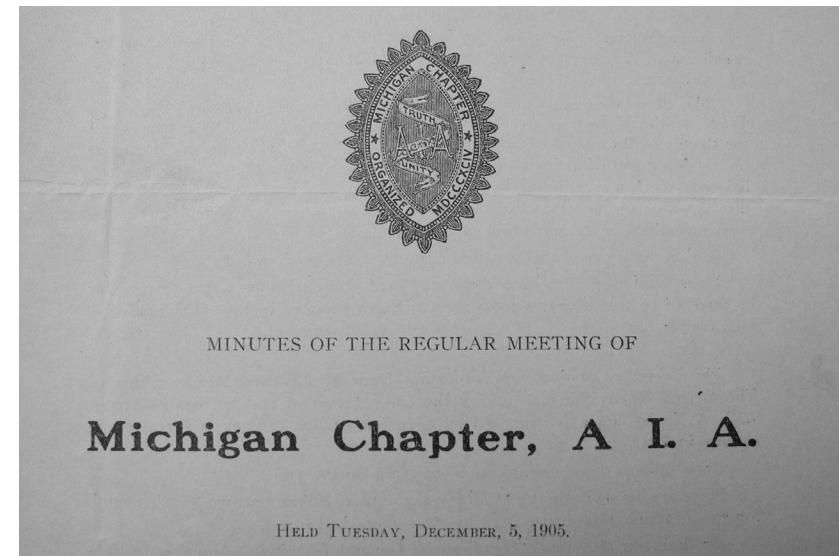
Emil Lorch Teaching Notes,
Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

men were well known to each other, and Emil Lorch had been invited to act as a judge of student work at the university. The Penn offer was tempting. The university was large and powerful, and he was respected and appreciated, and his situation at Drexel Institute had become problematic—his colleagues were lazy, the pay was low, the aging president showed signs of senility, and there was little opportunity for advancement. The enduring attraction, however, was curricular freedom. The position, as presented to him by Professor Laird on June 30, imposed a quite rigid set of teaching expectations for courses in

architectural drawing, ‘graphics’ (projections, intersections and developments and otherwise elementary descriptive geometry), shades and shadows, perspective, rendering and order problems, and elementary design (courses numbered in the catalogue 1-5-7-9-13), in all of which the instructor is perfectly free [in the letter two bold lines have been struck through the word perfectly] as to methods; and draughting room work in the orders (course 3), which is done in close conjunction with the lectures in the subject given by myself. In all this work the methods are subject to my approval, and I desire to be in close touch with processes and results, for which latter course the instructor is responsible in proportion to the extent of the very large measure of freedom he is allowed.

This longish description opens several possibilities of interpretation. Chiefly, however, Professor Laird assumes that a close and fruitful working relationship can flourish through mutual understanding and shared standards of performance. There is an exceedingly positive recognition of the younger man’s knowledge, skills and work ethic. At the same time the reality of close supervision implied the antithesis of curricular freedom, and the workload left little, if any, room for personal endeavors, particularly when Professor Laird set down a final expectation: he expected his assistant to give “a quiz a week to each of the two classes” lectured by him.

Myma Elmslie now in her third year of waiting received this comment from Emil Lorch, posted on June 30: “Today came Prof. Laird’s letter at last telling me more definitely what the job is, etc. It’s an instructorship in his own department at the U. of Penn. The character of the work is in fact different from what I am now doing & hence I am very doubtful about wanting it. It would involve none of the lecture work I am now able to do & desirous of continuing.”¹³ Once again, he finessed a situation in which he had to disappoint a close friend pressing hard for his cooperation. And once again, he later turned to Professor Laird to provide the second key recommendation to the University of Michigan.



Michigan AIA Minutes, Emil Lorch Endorsed
Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

An Opening at the University of Michigan

On November 4, 1905, Emil Lorch wrote to Myma Elmslie: “This morning I found in the ‘American Architect’ an article telling that an Architecture Department is proposed at Ann Arbor. I am trying to get it..of course, and am about to send off letters. If you were here you could, if you insisted, write laudatory and commendatory letters to all those concerned for me. I must now learn who those persons are.”¹⁴ He sent the first letter on November 4, to James E. Scripps, publisher of the *Detroit Evening News*. They had been long-time friends. James Scripps wrote immediately to President James B. Angell strongly recommending Emil Lorch for the position. On the 5th, Emil Lorch wrote to five key men: Detroit architect H. J. Maxwell Grylls of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls of Detroit; John Donaldson, venerable Detroit architect active in the American Institute of Architects and, as well, the architectural consultant to the university and chairman of the search committee; George Ropes, Detroit architect and a close friend from MIT days; H. Langford Warren, head of architecture at Harvard; and F. W. Chandler, head of architecture at MIT, also a close friend. Presumably, he visited Professor Laird in person to ask for a recommendation. Emil Lorch did not know John Donaldson well, and John Donaldson did not seem to know him, but John Donaldson was on the board at the Detroit Museum of Art and a high-profile member of the American Institute of Architects representing the city of Detroit. His was the voice to be won.



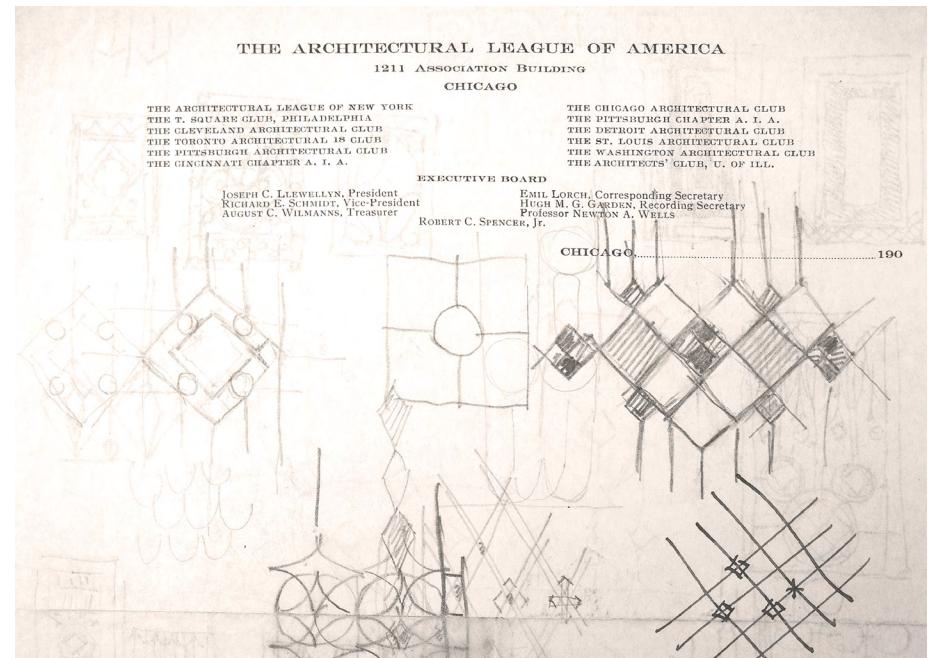
Emil Lorch, Drawings from a train window
Courtesy of Molly Osler

Looking at Emil Lorch's campaign for the job at Michigan, the conquest appears both tidy and super-efficient in spite of all the predictable contingencies and anxieties crowding the one-day-at-a-time process. Everyone he queried responded immediately to his requests for advice, information and support. Laudatory and commendatory recommendations came in to John Donaldson from Professors Warren and Laird, H. J. Maxwell Grylls, F. W. Chandler and many others, including Louis Sullivan and Robert Spencer, Jr. On December 5, the Detroit Chapter of the American Institute of Architects endorsed Emil Lorch's candidacy at a meeting including John Donaldson, who also joined his fellow architects to make it a full-throated endorsement, which he promised to take to the Board of Regents.¹⁵ Within one month and one day (November 4 to December 5) Emil Lorch had sewn up the whole matter.

Two Impediments to Closure: Frenemies and Money

However, as to be expected two snags threatened the movement to closure. An element of the bizarre infests the first one. All along, Emil Lorch's persistent championing of pure design concepts for teaching architectural design had troubled his conservative mentors and friends. One of the reasons he was rejected in a bid for a job at Princeton in mid-1905, for example, was his lack of "classical" training," a euphemism for his skeptical attitude toward the accepted Beaux-Arts methods employed in architecture programs across the country. Not surprisingly, it was Woodrow Wilson, then President of Princeton, who met with Emil Lorch and decided he would not do for Princeton. In a letter to Professor Warren, Emil Lorch wrote: President Wilson "objected at once to my technical training and experience and 'lack of classical training'." In the larger picture, however, there were no exercises in technical training then being offered at Princeton, and furthermore, he wrote to Myra Elmslie that the professors he met there were

mere archaeologists, who would teach the history of painting—with no reference to color in a concrete sense and seemed to draw back from in our discussions. [sic] The President objected at once to my lack of classical training and to my training and experience of a technical rather than merely a cultural study nature. I only hope that they did nothing, by inquiry, that might endanger the unwholesome place at Drexel.



Emil Lorch Teaching Notes,
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Emil Lorch would have been unhappy in such a small and unscientific environment. He much admired the cultured men he had met at Princeton but the curriculum held little appeal: "They would be splendid men as associates although with all respect to their academic training and great learning they know—little about teaching their subjects. They ought to go to a normal school for method work." And his take on the small college town—an expensive place with no theaters or musical concerts—was unflattering: living there would be "thus conducive to the fostering of intense loyalty, self-satisfaction and the other sins of provincialism. You see I am a little doubtful—and yet there is that cringing cur at Drexel Institute."¹⁶ It was most fortunate under these circumstances that the Michigan announcement came just a few months after this mutual rejection for an Ivy League position, which, on the surface, seemed most desirable.

And yet a competitive energy had been triggered by the youthful upstart at Michigan. It posed a direct challenge to the venerable architectural programs at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania. Professors Warren and Laird had sent in their letters of recommendation to John Donaldson by mid-November 1905, a fact that he duly reported to Emil Lorch on November 21. However, in this otherwise informational letter, John Donaldson also proposed an idea so completely counterintuitive and off base that it had to have produced great consternation. In a tone evocative of an imperial directive, John Donaldson wrote the following:

I am inclined to think that it would be but for the present at least to attempt at the U. of M. a good preparatory Architectural School leaving the establishing of an advanced School for the future.

It would seem wise to me to concentrate the energies & resources upon a few high class advanced Schools, rather than upon the multiplication of a large number of weaker schools.

I shall be glad to hear from you on this matter.¹⁷

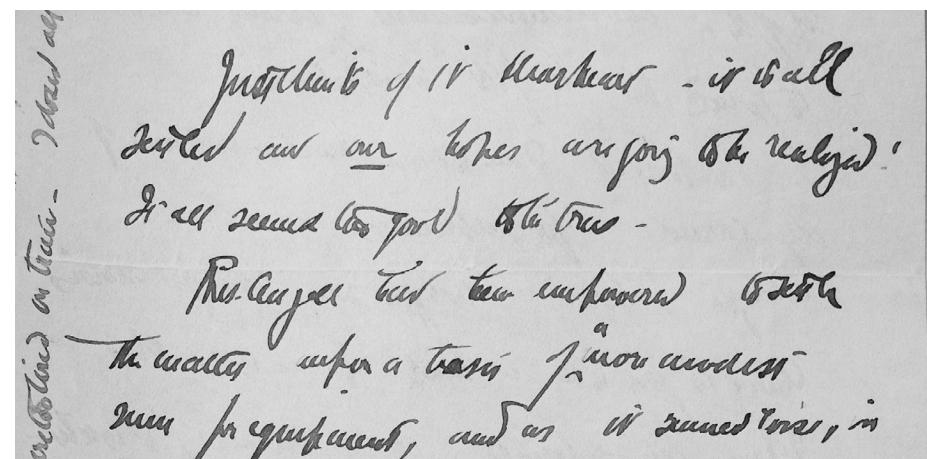
Much later, Emil Lorch discovered that Professor Warren (in league with Professor Laird) had included this suggestion in his letter of recommendation to John Donaldson. At first, it appeared that the idea had originated with John Donaldson. However, learning of the true source in late December from Professor Warren himself, Emil Lorch met with Professor Warren to clear the air. It was just as well, because the word out of Chicago in January 1906 from George Grant Elmslie, had Louis Sullivan getting ready to come out of his corner to enter the fray:

Minnie [Myra] spoke the other day of the good professors of Architecture desiring the establishment of a Preparatory School at Ann Arbor. Good Heavens that is awful. I can't imagine anything more disastrous to your

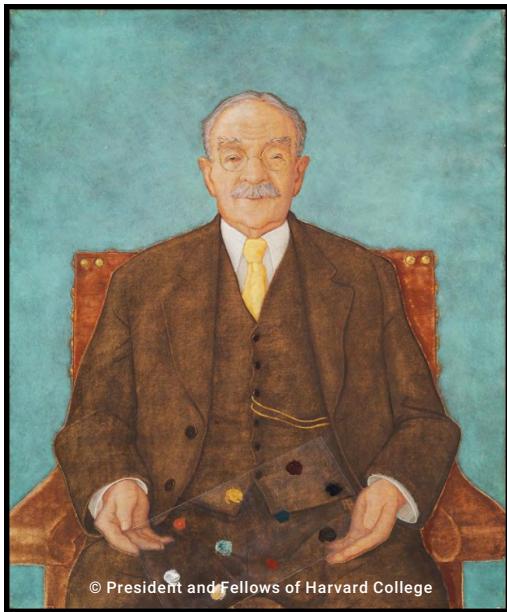
welfare there, than such a scheme, if carried out. Do you want anything done from here in the matter. Mr. S. will write every Prominent Architect in the West, if need be, and have them protest against such an undertaking. Do you want the thing taken up, say, as a mere rumor. It is to me an exceedingly serious condition of affairs, because Laird & Warren can do a whole lot of harm, a whole damn lot of harm and more than that!!¹⁸

The good professors revealed a desire to blunt this new competition from a large, powerful and growing institution. They revealed themselves, also, as veteran administrators yearning to raise their own programs to graduate status. Emil Lorch absorbed it all and set aside any sign of disappointment in what they had done.

The second snag involved an unnecessary hitch in communications regarding the costs of starting up a brand-new program within the domain of the Department of Engineering. Emil Lorch had asked for \$5,000. for the first year for books, supplies and teaching materials such as lantern slides but as the day of reckoning came on the university balked at the sum. The amount had been suggested to him previously, so it was a surprise to him to learn that the Board of Regents could not commit to \$15 or \$20,000. over the first four or five years. In his negotiations with President Angell, Emil Lorch took a compromising tack, asking what the university thought to be reasonable; the sum turned out to be \$2,000., a workable number under the circumstances. Emil Lorch met with President Angell at the Murray Hill Hotel in New York City on Saturday, January 26, 1906. He wrote Myra Elmslie on Sunday: "Just think of it Dearheart—it is all settled and our hopes are going to be realized! It all seems too good to be true."



Letter to Myra Elmslie from Emil Lorch,
Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan



A THEORY OF PURE DESIGN

Harmony, Balance, Rhythm

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS AND DIAGRAMS

BY DENMAN W. ROSS, PH. D.
LECTURER ON THE THEORY OF DESIGN IN HARVARD
UNIVERSITY, FELLOW OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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Denman Ross published his own book on the subject, *A Theory of Pure Design*, in 1907. It would be wrong to claim that Emil Lorch's researches in the company of Denman Ross from the summer of 1901 to the fall of 1903, and the continuing relationship with him after leaving Harvard and moving to Ann Arbor contributed to shaping the magnum opus. The fact remains, however, that Emil Lorch's commitment to this new method of teaching architectural design helped him stay true to something deeply felt and deeply right. It is not surprising that he would say, "It all seems too good to be true," but it is also wholly appropriate to acknowledge a just reward for keeping to a high ideal.



Informal portrait of Emil Lorch by Alexis Lapteff, 1928
Courtesy of Molly Osler

The Enduring Influence of Denman Ross

With good humor and his dry irony, Emil Lorch in this same letter of January 27th, commented to Myra Elmslie as to thanking those who had helped him:

There is going to be a heap for me to do this Spring especially during the next few weeks. I dread the amount of correspondence involved. Now I must write letters to so many people to tell of the result and then will come the congratulations, and the letters in reply to all these.—it involves more writing than getting married!!¹⁹

His draft of his letter to Denman Ross on March 8 deserves to be quoted at length:

The inspiration received from you during the last four years has been so large a factor in the success of my work as a teacher of design that this moment when the opportunity of my life lies before me, seems peculiarly fitting to express to you my deep gratitude.

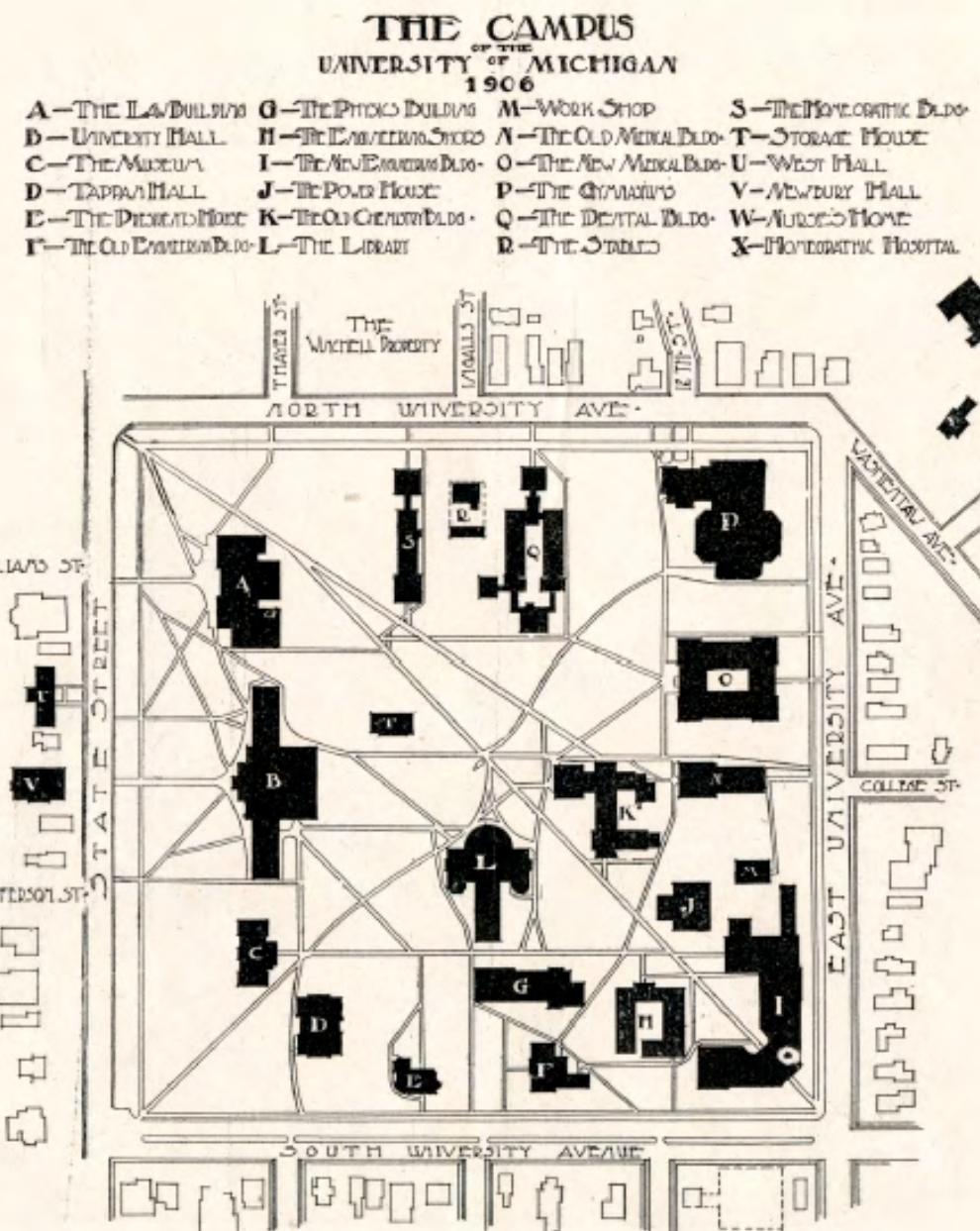
It was largely perhaps entirely due to your initiative that I received my first opportunity at Harvard enabled me to carry on the work for studies and along with the friendly associations and characters that have been of real help to me and I will always feel indebted to you for this and much more. [sic]²⁰

Aftermath

Emil Lorch brought to Michigan a completely balanced appreciation for the benefits of Beaux-Arts training and for the merits of teaching architectural design using the principles of pure design. His experiences in the East and the Midwest and in Europe provided a perspective on the politics and the prejudices facing young architects emerging from college programs. He had the unexpectedly thrilling exposure in Chicago to an outspoken advocacy for an "American" architecture. His sojourn there brought him into direct contact with Louis Sullivan, the rising star Frank Lloyd Wright, George Grant Elmslie and so many other proud, restless and progressive architects. During his years at the University of Michigan, Emil Lorch asked three times that an honorary degree be given to Louis Sullivan, who was a frequent visitor to Ann Arbor.

One interesting sign of Emil Lorch's deep preoccupation with Chicago architecture came to light in 1932. An ongoing controversy in architectural history, related to the origin of the steel cage system for constructing skyscrapers, appeared to be resolved after the careful examination of the Home Insurance Building (1883-1885) then being demolished in 1931. Steel cage construction enabled a tall building to rise entirely free from masonry support. Though a patent had been given to Minneapolis architect Leroy S. Buffington in 1888, it had just been shown (and reported to the *Michigan Daily* by Professor Lorch in 1932),²¹ that actually it was William Le Baron Jenney who first used it successfully in his Home Insurance Building. As fate would have it, W. L. B. Jenney had been invited to Ann Arbor in 1876 to start up an architecture program. He gladly came to Ann Arbor to teach, but the state appropriation supported the plan for only one year.

The College of Architecture went "Modern" after the Second World War. But already in its DNA was a turn to a progressive Western outlook. Both incarnations of its architecture program were led by accomplished and creative men, one of them, W. L. B. Jenney, the founder of the Chicago School, and the other, Emil Lorch, the exceptional teacher, administrator and architect. His great project in the late 1920s was the design for the Architecture building that now bears his name. Its tower harmonized with the other two modernist towers at the Michigan Union and the Michigan League, visible above the central campus trees, and designed by Chicago architect Irving Pond. So it was that out at the University of Michigan in the Midwest, Emil Lorch, a modernist keen to anticipate the coming trends, brought extraordinary figures like Louis Sullivan and Eliel Saarinen to Michigan, for the benefit of his students, his university and his state.



During his December 1905 interviews, Emil Lorch could see the need for a campus plan

University of Michigan Campus Plan, 1906,
Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

End Notes

1 Materials used for this essay are from the Emil Lorch Papers, Box 1, at the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. Biographical details and letters are supplemented by draft copies of letters written by Emil Lorch to his fiancée, Jemima "Myma" Elmslie, between 1901-1906.

2 Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, September 6, 1899, Box 1-6.

3 *Inland Architect and Building News*, 37, 5 (June 1901), p. 34, pp. 34-35.

4 Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition: A Series of Exercises Selected from a New System of Art Education*, (New York: The Baker and Taylor Company, 1899), p. 5.

5 Actually, the two proponents of pure design, Arthur Wesley Dow and Denman Ross, differed on this point. For Arthur Dow, learning to compose and create a wholeness—his term for it was “composition”—awakened the individual to know and to feel beauty and possibly be able to produce it. Denman Ross stayed resolutely scientific in his course of training students. He liked to say, “We aim at order and hope for beauty.”

6 The use of the word “discontinue” by W. M. R. French sought to soften the rejection implicit in the firing of Emil Lorch. “In spite of personal liking and appreciation of your attainments and your work, I find I was mistaken in thinking I wanted an assistant Director, although I want a good private secretary very much. I am unable to invent any service suitable to you and within our means.” Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Box 1-9.

7 Two key sources view Emil Lorch and the subject of pure design differently. Wilbert R. Hasbrouck, in *The Chicago Architectural Club: Prelude to the Modern*, (New York: Monacelli Press, 2005), p. 287, notices Emil Lorch’s presence in Chicago in a caption accompanying a portrait of him. “Lorch and Sullivan shared an interest in ‘modernizing’ architectural education. In the spring of 1901, the school’s [Art School of the Art Institute of Chicago] advisory group of architects [Daniel] Burnham, [Howard Van Doren] Shaw, [James Gamble] Rogers, [Charles] Frost, and [Charles] Coolidge led a campaign to replace Lorch and some time later he left Chicago.”

H. Allen Brooks in his *The Prairie School: Frank Lloyd Wright and His Midwestern Contemporaries*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), pp. 39-41, took note of Emil Lorch’s influence at the Philadelphia convention, but he quoted from the Chicago-based periodical *Inland Architect and News Record* 37, 5 (June 1901), p. 33, to convey the impression made by him at the time:

Under the influence, and it does not seem improper to say under the leadership of Emil Lorch, for the past two years, the League has devoted much attention to the discussion of the necessity for the study of pure design in architectural education in place of the time-honored practice of training the student along classical and historical lines. The clubs of the League have endorsed the movement for which the Chicago Club gave initiative, and it has already grown so strong and developed such practical and feasible characteristics as to compel the attention of architectural educators everywhere.

But then H. Allen Brooks drops the subject of pure design: “The concept of pure design, like so many theories for architectural design in the nineteenth century, might well have come to naught but for one listener at the League convention. Upon [Frank Lloyd] Wright they made a deep impression and through his subsequent work the essence of pure design was transmitted to the world.”

8 *Chicago Tribune* articles: “Naval Architecture in Marble,” 26 August 1900, p. 2; “Reviewing Stand for the Coming Dewey Celebration in Chicago Planned by Architect Emil Lorch,” 3 April 1900, p. 2; “Failure to Pass Art Test: Institute Graduates Do Not Qualify for Teachers,” 9 January 1901, p. 8; “Editorials by the Laity,” 12 August 1900, p. 39.

9 Daniel H. Burnham: *Architect Planner of Cities*, by Charles Moore (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), Volume 1, p. 139.

10 “Architectural Education,” by Alexander Trowbridge, *Inland Architect and News Record* 35, 6 (July 1900), p. 48. “Thirty-Fifth Annual Convention American Institute of Architects,” “Annual Address of the President of the American Institute of Architects,” by Robert S. Peabody, *Inland Architect and News Record* 37, 5 (June 1901), pp. 29-31. See pp. 29-30.

11 George Grant Elmslie, brought into the Chicago firm Adler and Sullivan on Frank Lloyd Wright’s recommendation in the early 1890s, stayed and worked together with Louis Sullivan until 1909.

12 Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, November 17, 1903, Box 1-29.

13 Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, letters from Professor Warren P. Laird to Emil Lorch, June 14 and June 30, 1904, and letter from Emil Lorch to Myma Elmslie, June 30, 1904, Box 1-32.

14 Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, November 4, 1905, Box 1-41.

15 Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, December 20 letter from H. J. Maxwell Grylls, including the Detroit Chapter of the American Institute of Architects Program of the December 5, 1905, meeting, Box 1-42.

16 Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, August 7, 1905, Box 1-39.

17 Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, November 21, 1905, Box 1-42. See also H. L. Warren’s letter to Emil Lorch, December 23, 1905, Box 1-42.

18 Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, January 1906, Box 1-44.

19 Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, January 27, 1906, but misfiled in Box 1-43 in the file titled “Undated 1905.”

20 Emil Lorch Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, March 8, 1906, Box 1-44.

21 *The Michigan Daily*, Volume 13, Issue 45 (18 August 1932), p. 4. Later research tends to confirm that Leroy S. Buffington’s patent did express the first steel cage design for a tall building. See Gerald R. Larson, “The Iron Skeleton Frame: Interactions Between Europe and the United States,” in *Chicago Architecture 1872-1922: Birth of a Metropolis*, edited by John Zukowsky, (Prestel-Verlag, Munich, in association with The Art Institute of Chicago, 1987), pp. 39-55.

By Jeffrey Welch

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September 17, 2019

Acknowledgments: Many thanks to the Bentley Historical Library staff, and in particular Malgosia Myc, Diana Bachman and Karen Wight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Jeffrey Welch



Photo credit: Kevin Adkisson

Recently retired to Ann Arbor, Jeffrey Welch was a teacher at Cranbrook Kingswood School in Bloomfield Hills, MI, for almost forty years. The incomparable architectural atmosphere at Cranbrook and living in and working in buildings designed by Eliel Saarinen have led to a book on the founding and history of Cranbrook. A graduate of Harvard College in 1971, he received a Ph. D. in English from the University of Michigan in 1978. His ongoing research now includes the career of Emil Lorch, the first head of the University of Michigan school of architecture, and topics related to Midcentury Modern architects and architecture in Michigan.