

# “Unconventional Convention”

THE ANN ARBOR CONFERENCES, 1940-1954

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In his letter to Wells Bennett, dean of the College of Architecture and Design at the University of Michigan, dated April 16, 1940, Walter Gropius confirmed that he had “arranged to supervise the work of your three graduates...on the Booth Competition.”<sup>1</sup> The letter, printed on Harvard University letterhead, appropriate given that Gropius was the chairman of the Department of Architecture at the time, was in response to an earlier note sent that same month from Bennett in which we can assume the advising role had been suggested.<sup>2</sup>

While it is not wholly surprising that the chairman of the Department of Architecture at Harvard University would be writing to the dean of the College of Architecture and Design at the University of Michigan (UM), the timing of the letter is notable for several reasons. First, both Bennett and Gropius were new to their roles, each having started in their respective leadership positions in 1938. Secondly, the exchange of written letters falls during a period when American schools of design were absorbing an influx of foreign practitioners and teachers due to the near certainty of war in Europe. Gropius, a recent German émigré to the United States and the founder of the Bauhaus, was a key

and illustrious example of this trend. Finally, the communications come a mere two months after the first “Ann Arbor Conference” convened at the University of Michigan on February 2 and 3, 1940. This final point ties together the first two—the arrival of European architects and the changing leadership of architectural education in the United States—and reveals that these two academics, Bennett and Gropius, conversed at a design education conference in Ann Arbor.

The Ann Arbor Conferences are largely absent from mid-century design literature. So, it is quite astonishing in initial research forays to find that the first Conference in 1940 was attended by such luminaries as Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy, Mies van der Rohe, and Antonin Raymond.<sup>3</sup> Additional attendees included Eliel and Eero Saarinen, James Marston Fitch, Joseph Hudnut, Albert Kahn, Alden B. Dow, and “other representatives from the Museum of Modern Art, *Architectural Forum*, and significant schools of architecture of both modernist and Beaux Arts proclivities.”<sup>4</sup> What were these conferences? Who attended and what was deliberated? And, what do these midwestern, mid-century meetings reveal about architectural education at UM during this period?



**WELLS IRA BENNETT**

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The Ann Arbor Conferences, a series of almost a dozen academic and professional gatherings, were the creations of Wells Ira Bennett (1888-1966). Born in Red Creek, New York, Bennett earned degrees in architecture from Syracuse University and UM before joining the UM architecture faculty in 1912 and serving as dean from 1938 to 1957.<sup>5</sup> A designer with a keen interest in low-cost housing design and urban planning, Bennett’s tenure at UM was marked by many developments including the creation of a city planning program in 1946, the promotion of an experimental laboratory, the hiring of innovative instructors, and the nurturing of landscape and urban design curricula. As a pedagogue, he rejected any limiting definition of architecture and, instead, embraced an expansive understanding of design. The eleven Ann Arbor Conferences that were held during



**WALTER GROPIUS**

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his nineteen-year deanship are evidence of the breadth and depth of UM’s educational approach guided by his stewardship.

The first Ann Arbor Conference, “Coordination in Design with Regard to Education in Architecture and Allied Design,” was organized by Bennett and his colleagues Joseph Hudnut, dean of Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, and Walter Baermann, Director of the California Graduate School of Design at Caltech. It was no accident that the Conference was held “in the middle” in Michigan since the goal was to find common ground in design education. While, regrettably, no proceedings were published, archived personal correspondences, such as the Gropius-to-Bennett letter quoted earlier, news articles, and published reviews offer some inkling of the matters discussed and connections forged.

### The Ann Arbor Conferences (1940-1954)

- 1940 Coordination in Design with Regard to Education in Architecture and Allied Design
- 1943 The Ann Arbor Conference (post-war role and responsibility of the architect)
- 1944 Architectural Design and Practice
- 1945 Architectural Design and Practice, 2nd
- 1947 Hospital Planning
- 1948 Esthetic Evaluation of Beauty in Architecture – or Beauty in Architecture and Allied Arts
- 1949 Midcentury Report on Design Progress
- 1950 The Theatre
- 1951 Changing Community Pattern as a result of Industrial Relocation
- 1952 Design of Industrial Plant
- 1954 Design & the American Consumer

Walter Gropius presented a paper on “Training the Architect for Contemporary Architecture,” which he delivered again later that year at the Department of Art Education Seminar on Modern Architecture held by the *National Education Association of the United States*. The full text of the address was subsequently published in the *Department of Art Education Bulletin* in 1941. In his comments, Gropius laments that the “discrepancy between occupation and vocation is seriously increasing” and that the “courage to venture into other fields of human experience has vanished in our specialized system of production.”<sup>6</sup> Gropius’s call for the “simultaneous training of handicraft and design” at the Ann Arbor Conference was a reiteration of his Bauhausian thesis.

Kenneth C. Black, then President of the *Michigan Society of Architects* (MSA), wrote a review of the Conference for the MSA’s *Weekly Bulletin*. Black observed that it was a “distinct pleasure” to witness the “leaders of modern education

in design” present their platforms with “evangelical zeal.” Black continued, “The conference, which began as a serious attempt to explore the possibility of establishing a fundamental educational background for architectural and industrial designers, wandered off into a labyrinth of semi-related subjects and ended by becoming a sounding board for the individual theories of its leading conferees”<sup>7</sup> (Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, and Saarinen). In response to these disparate positions, Frederick Kiesler, an American-Hungarian architect and multi-media designer, declared “Architectural education’s primary purpose is to teach students to think for themselves.”<sup>8</sup> Though initially shocking to those present, Kiesler’s proposition was ultimately accepted by the assembly and, in many ways, shaped the ethos of future Conferences. Kiesler’s position—which eschewed a Beaux Arts approach and rejected the limits of “technics (à la Maholy-Nagy) or of materials (à la Gropius),” embraced the aim of training designers “in a broad scientific



**KENNETH C. BLACK**  
*Michigan Modern*

approach.”<sup>9</sup> This strategy was one he nurtured through his *Laboratory of Design Correlation* at Columbia University, an experimental approach that, no doubt, energized parallel research initiatives at UM. Black ended his review with this wish: “I would like to express the hope that as modern educational programs in design develop, they will not pay too much attention to the mechanics of technology (which are always in a state of flux) but will lean, with Saarinen [and Kiesler], toward the development of freedom of thought and a fundamental appreciation of beauty and design in all the arts.”<sup>10</sup>

The first Conference officially concluded with a call from Harvard’s Joseph Hudnut to meet again in a spirit of exploration. With this freedom in mind, those present agreed to not formalize the event, but rather, to maintain the focus on dialogue and community.



**JOSEPH HUDNUT**  
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**“No officers to be elected? No committees to report? No by-laws to be amended? No resolutions to be voted?... Nothing but ideas and opinions; nothing but good talk and good listening; new friends and new understandings. Nothing but plans for work to be done and faith that great things can yet be accomplished.... It certainly is an unconventional convention.”**<sup>11</sup>

—Joseph Hudnut

While the 1940 Conference had the most robust representation from the Modern pantheon, subsequent gatherings are notable for the topics addressed and the attendees. Responding to Kiesler’s challenge, each Conference sought “to bring to the architect, and also to the practitioners of our sister arts, a better mutual understanding of their problems in such fields as the theater and industrial design.”<sup>12</sup> The second conference, held in 1943,



**FREDERICK KIESLER**  
The Frederick Kiesler Foundation

addressed the most pressing issue of the time, that of the post-war role of the architect.

**“[The architect] must not wait until the war is over, then it will be too late. The Architect is peculiarly trained and fitted and he must make these more effective than ever through the mediums of: Research, Publication, Exhibitions, Education-public, Participation in post-war community planning, Public relations between industry and the public.”**<sup>13</sup>

—MSA Weekly Bulletin  
November 23, 1943

Practicing architects from San Francisco, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and across the state of Michigan converged on Ann Arbor

for the conference where they were joined by academics from UM, Harvard University, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Texas.

The 1945 Conference on “Architectural Design and Practice” was the first with published proceedings. The topics covered were of such relevance to the profession that many of the papers were reprinted in the *Weekly Bulletin of the Michigan Society of Architects*. The sessions on the first day of the Conference included “Architecture Today” (Joseph Hudnut, Dean, School of Design, Harvard University), “Design in Practice” (William Wilson Wurster, Dean, School of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology), and “The Relation of the Architect

to Government” (George Howe, Deputy Commissioner, Public Buildings Administration). The second day, February 4th, saw an array of presentations ranging from John W. Root of Holabird and Root (Chicago) on “Procedure of the Large Office” to the UM’s George B. Brigham on “Prefabrication.”<sup>14</sup>

By the late 1940s, the Ann Arbor Conferences were an established part of the professional and academic milieu in the Midwest and beyond with practitioners and educators alike participating in the lively conversations. The 1948 Conference on “Esthetic Evaluation” featured a number of influential sessions.<sup>15</sup> Christopher Tunnard (Yale University), author of seminal city planning texts including *Gardens in the Modern Landscape* (1948), spoke on “Landscape Design in Relation to Architecture and City Planning” and philosopher Dr. Irwin S. Erdman (Columbia University), author of *Arts and the Man: A Short Introduction to Aesthetics* (1960), among other volumes, contributed “Architecture and other Forms of Esthetic Experience.” This opening session was moderated by G. Holmes Perkins who was serving as the chair of Regional Planning at Harvard University at the time. Interestingly, in 1950 Perkins moved to head the School of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania where he shifted the curricular structure away from its Beaux Arts roots and transformed the program into a collaborative and interdisciplinary one. A critic of a static approach to design education and practice, Perkins commented on the Ann Arbor Conferences, “Certainly Dean Bennett is to be congratulated on the wonderful job he has done and on preventing the

Conference from getting ‘hardening of the arteries’ as so many tend to do over a long period of time.”<sup>16</sup>

The remaining sessions of “Esthetic Evaluation”—sculpture, music, painting, and, finally, architecture—were similarly enriching. In the “Painting” session, György Kepes spoke on “Visual Forms—Structural Forms.” Kepes, who had studied with László Moholy-Nagy in Berlin, came to the United States and taught at the New Bauhaus in Chicago. Later, after moving his teaching to MIT, Kepes would launch an art-science research institute called *Center for Advanced Visual Studies* (CAVS) in 1967. As a review of UM College of Architecture and Design faculty meeting minutes during this decade reveals, the foregrounding of applied and exploratory research at the Ann Arbor Conference is very much in concert with UM initiatives promoted by Bennett and his faculty.<sup>17</sup>

The “Architecture” session on the second day of the “Esthetic Evaluation” Conference was moderated by Alden B. Dow and included a presentation, “What Buildings are Beautiful?” by Joseph Hudnut and a panel on Esthetic Qualities in Architecture. This panel featured Charles Eames, Douglas Haskell (editor at *Architectural Forum*), and Philip Will (president of the Chicago American Institute of Architects [AIA] chapter from 1946 to 1950 and the national AIA president from 1960 to 1962). Eames, who as a student and instructor in industrial design at Cranbrook Art Academy had collaborated extensively with Eero Saarinen,<sup>18</sup> was invested in humanistic modern design. At the time of his participation in the 1948 Ann Arbor Conference, Eames was





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**CHARLES EAMES**  
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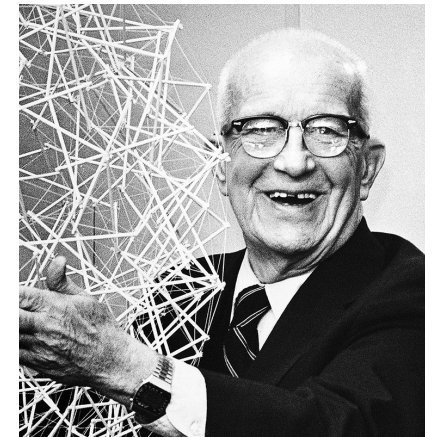
deeply enmeshed in John Entenza’s (the influential publisher of *Arts & Architecture* magazine) *Case Study House Program in California*. Working initially with Saarinen on a 1945 design for a “house for modern living,” Charles and Ray Eames would ultimately build Case Study House #8 in 1949 in Pacific Palisades.

Following just a year later, the 1949 Ann Arbor Conference was equally extraordinary. Officially the 7<sup>th</sup> Ann Arbor Conference, entitled “Midcentury Report on Design Progress,” the ambitious theme was meant to encapsulate the “end of an exciting half-century, and [take stock] since certain dynamic aspects

promise continued change in the fifty years ahead.”<sup>19</sup> In the section on “Buildings,” Buckminster Fuller, designer and author, presented his prefabrication research and discussed the potential applications of the geodesic form. In the same session, Carl Koch, an architectural consultant for the Lustron Corporation (Ohio) presented “The Industrialized House” and Nathaniel A. Owings of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (Chicago), spoke on “Trends in Design of Large Buildings and Groups of Buildings.” The section on “Equipment” featured presentations by Richard Pratt, architecture editor of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and Douglas Haskell, the architecture



**EERO SAARINEN**  
“Getty Images”—Universal History Archive



**BUCKMINSTER FULLER**  
The Buckminster Fuller Institute

editor of the *Architectural Forum*.<sup>20</sup> Once again, a packed agenda with challenging content.

The design conference was not a new phenomenon when Bennett launched the Ann Arbor series in 1940. In fact, it was a “much used device” of the time.<sup>21</sup> Professional events held by the AIA and National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) and other official organizations were well established. And, of course, the Modern movement had its own meetings, notably the Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) which held eleven sessions between 1928 and 1959. Bennett himself, in an article he wrote for the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* in 1952, emphasizes that unlike the conferences just mentioned, the Ann Arbor Conferences were not outcome driven nor was “there the temptation to come to a formula.” Rather, the objective was the discussion of ideas and, to achieve this without bias and restriction, “the channels of communication, speech and personal presence [were] freely open.”<sup>22</sup>

**“The essential thread of continuity in the Conference has been a recognition of the essential interrelation of all phases of visual design. As usually understood the sense of a common cause for the several aspects of design is very tenuous. Paradoxically, however, it is probably the very weakness of this thread of continuity that has bound together the nine meetings that have measured the life of the Conference. From such strands as architecture, philosophy of esthetics and design, community planning, the drama, and industrial design, there has been spun the tie that binds.”**<sup>23</sup>

—Wells I. Bennett

A second important characteristic of the Ann Arbor Conferences was the participant profile. Aside from a core group, the individuals attending and presenting their ideas changed conference to conference with subject matter experts brought in to share their knowledge and skills. In this way, the Ann Arbor Conferences

avoided the “echo chamber” of a restrictive, overly formal system. To prevent narrowing the scope of the conversations, the Conferences switched between general and specific topics that could meaningfully bridge academia and professional practice. For example, while the 1945 Conference, discussed above, addressed the broader concerns of “Architectural Design and Practice,” the 1947 session was dedicated to “Hospital Planning” and the 1950 meeting was titled “The Theater.” As an example of the range of participants, the Conference on “Hospital Planning” included physicians and hospital administrators in addition to the design professionals.<sup>24</sup> At the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference, in 1952, on the “Design of the Industrial Plant,” both Minoru Yamasaki and Eero Saarinen presented alongside renowned social psychologist Rensis Likert.<sup>25</sup> As Bennett noted, “whether the particular conference is speculative or pragmatic in approach, information is exchanged and one can feel the scene enlivened by the interplay of emotional and intellectual ideas.”<sup>26</sup>

The Ann Arbor Conferences did not continue as originally imagined beyond the deanship of Wells Bennett. During his tenure, however, they were a magnetic force that placed the design programs at the UM in the thick of mid-century thinking. The quality of the presentations and the openness of the dialogue drew individuals from the academic elite and a wide range of creative practices. Ideas were explored, experimentation was encouraged, and research emphasized. Architect Walter A. Taylor, the founder of

the AIA’s Department of Education and Research (launched in 1946) noted that with conferences, “the unforeseen, unscheduled by-products are worth more than the formal program. At Ann Arbor we get more of the treasured by-products, the aroma, the distilled essence of much thinking, while the prepared remarks, of as high quality as any, are the framework or vehicle for the intangibles, the effervescence, the overtones.”<sup>27</sup> ■

#### NOTES

1. Gropius, W. (1940). April 16 Letter to Wells Ira Bennett. Wells Ira Bennett Papers Box 1: Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
2. The “Booth Competition” to which the letter refers is the George G. Booth Traveling Fellowship which was first awarded in 1924 and today, in 2021, offers a travel stipend of up to \$10,000 to a recent graduate of the Master of Architecture degree at the University of Michigan. The award was funded by and named for George Gough Booth, the founder of the Cranbrook Educational Community and the patron of Eliel Saarinen. <https://taubmancollege.umich.edu/resources/george-g-booth-traveling-fellowship>
3. Bennett, W. I. (1952). The Ann Arbor Conferences. *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (March 1952).
4. Bartlett, N. (1995). *More than a Handsome Box: Education in Architecture at the University of Michigan 1875-1986*. University of Michigan College of Architecture and Urban Planning. George Brigham Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Box 2, “Correspondence” file.
5. *Wells Ira Bennett Papers: 1916-1965* The Bentley Historical Library University of Michigan Retrieved 6/10/2021 from <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhlead/umich-bhl-85577?rgn=main;view=text>
6. Gropius, W. (1941). Training the Architect for Contemporary Architecture. *Department of Art Education Bulletin*, VII.
7. Black, K. C. (1940). The Ann Arbor Conference. *Pencil Points* (March 1940).

8. Phillips, S. (2010). Toward a Research Practice: Frederick Kiesler’s Design-Correlation Laboratory. *Grey Room* (38), 90-120.
9. Black, K. C. (1940). The Ann Arbor Conference. *Pencil Points* (March 1940).
10. Ibid.
11. Hudnut, J. (1952). The Ann Arbor Conferences: from the sidelines. *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (March 1952).
12. Perkins, G. H. Ibid.
13. The Ann Arbor Conference. (1943). *Weekly Bulletin of the Michigan Society of Architects*, 17 (No. 46).
14. George B. Brigham, J. (1945). Prefabrication: a talk before the Ann Arbor Conference. Ibid., 19 (No. 39). Brigham’s work in prefabrication and his other notable contributions to architectural education and residential design in Michigan are discussed in Jeffrey Welch’s article in this issue (AIA Huron Valley Awards 2022, no. 05, pp. 06-25).
15. The Ann Arbor Conference. (1948). Ibid., XXII (No. 13).
16. Perkins, G. H. (1952). The Ann Arbor Conferences: from the sidelines. *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (March 1952).
17. A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning (University of Michigan) records.

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(1876-2011). Box 1 and 2, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

18. Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen entered and won the 1941 Museum of Modern Art “Organic Design in Home Furnishings” competition.
19. Bennett, W. I. (1948). November 29 Letter to Buckminster Fuller. Wells Ira Bennett Papers Box 1: Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.
20. *Papers Presented at the Seventh Ann Arbor Conference*. (1949). Mid-Century Report on Design Progress Review-Preview, University of Michigan.
21. Bennett, W. I. (1952). The Ann Arbor Conferences. *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (March 1952).
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. The Ann Arbor Conference. (1945). *Weekly Bulletin of the Michigan Society of Architects*, 19 (No. 19).
25. Tenth Ann Arbor Conference: the Design of Industrial Plants. (1952). *Weekly Bulletin of the Michigan Society of Architects*, 26 (No. 11).
26. Bennett, W. I. (1952). The Ann Arbor Conferences. *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (March 1952).
27. Taylor, W. A. Ibid. The Ann Arbor Conferences: from the sidelines.

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