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“A Parley of Historians”; or, A Learned Society in Public

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In 1960 the Society of Architectural Historians, then in its second decade of existence, appeared in the *New York Times* on two occasions: in an article about the annual meeting and in an advertisement about the benefits of membership. Though unrelated, these mentions provide a good starting point for exploring perceptions of the learned society from within and without, raising issues about the nature and character of SAH as a dynamic organization whose aims and aspirations have evolved over seventy-five years.

In October 1960, when SAH had 1,500 members, the society placed an advertisement in the *New York Times Book Review* inviting “the participation and support of all professionals and laymen who share its interest in our architectural past.”¹ SAH was hoping to swell its ranks through direct appeal to the paper’s 1.3 million Sunday readers, inducing them to attend its meetings, join its tours, and read its journal. Complete with a mail-in coupon, the ad revealed SAH as a learned society coming to terms with the age of mass media and mass consumption, as far as these were manifest in the demographics of the readership of the *Times Book Review*. Here, in effect, was a public declaration that enthusiasm for the subject, along with an ability to pay \$7.50 in dues, was as valid a qualification for SAH membership as an academic affiliation or any other conventionally recognized credential. You needn’t be learned about architecture, the ad implied; you need only be keen on buildings. Though the society’s *Newsletter* noted that the ad brought a “good

response,” it is not clear how many *Book Review* readers, if any, accepted SAH’s invitation.²

This big-tent self-image was a departure from the conventional public persona of a learned society in the middle of the twentieth century, which is exactly how the *Times* portrayed SAH earlier that year, in a brief notice about the 1960 conference held in New York. When SAH took over the auditorium of the Guggenheim Museum in late January for a session on modern architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright’s controversial building had only been open for a few months, but it had been generating headlines since Wright unveiled his first model of the museum in 1945. Fifteen years later, with the building finally finished, the *Times* had good reason, along with a bit of poetic license, to describe the group of architectural experts gathering in this work of hotly debated architecture as a “Guggenheim Parley.” This wasn’t the first time the newspaper referred to an SAH gathering in terms that had such obvious oppositional connotations. In 1952 the *Times* described the annual meeting as “a parley of historians,” which sounds oddly like a collective noun.³ A pride of lions, a flock of seagulls—a *parley of historians* must be what you call it when scholars of this type congregate.

At the same time, parley has vaguely militaristic overtones. Though it originally meant a debate or a public disputation, usually in a university, in modern usage parley came to refer to opposing sides, generally declared enemies, conferring during a truce in order to come to terms. There would be no truce at the Guggenheim, because SAH refused to join the fray, at least in public: “The controversy over the design of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum on upper Fifth Avenue was sidestepped yesterday by architectural historians who met in the museum to discuss modern architecture.”⁴ Whether motivated by respect for the dead

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(Wright had died a short time earlier) or mindful of scholarly propriety, the Guggenheim event revealed SAH as the very model of a decorous learned society.

These contrasting images of SAH as simultaneously welcoming and insular came into public view just as the role of learned societies in the United States, especially those dealing with the humanities, was being reconsidered. The American Council of Learned Societies, which elected SAH to membership in 1958, had just released a report on the subject and would shortly organize the national commission that led to the creation of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1965. That initial ACLS report, *One Great Society*, described opposing cultural positions that mirrored those SAH seemed to be occupying concurrently. At one extreme were mainstream learned societies, which confined their activities to “meetings of bookish experts”; at the other was a vanguard actively pursuing a “public program” to promote “humane learning” through the interpretation of the most “enduring expressions” of human experience⁵—of which SAH’s broadly defined object of study was a large-scale, highly visible, and nearly unavoidable example.

There was more at stake in the implied tension between internal focus and outward engagement than a desire to chip at the foundations of ivory tower isolationism. Sounding an alarm that remains all too familiar today, ACLS’s *One Great Society* report argued that the humanities in the United States were in a perilous state and, as a result, so was U.S. society as a whole. Too few people understood what scholarly research in the humanities was, and even fewer grasped “what good it does in a busy world.” The reason for this was obvious to anyone reading the ACLS report: too many learned societies had retreated from the issues of the day and resigned themselves to a status of “antiquarian curiosity.”⁶ Indeed, many were following precepts that weren’t all that different from those Benjamin Franklin established in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Franklin’s “proposal for promoting useful knowledge” in the American colonies, circulated by broadside in 1743, outlined the mission and bylaws of the first learned society in what would become the United States. He called for “virtuosi or ingenious men” to share their ideas through written correspondence, to meet in person on a regular basis, and to pay annual dues. Franklin’s agenda was twofold: to improve the “common stock of knowledge” and to provide the opportunity for learned folk to “see and converse or be acquainted with each other.”⁷ Two centuries later, when a group of virtuosi, including several ingenious women, gathered in Cambridge to organize the American Society of Architectural Historians they were motivated by similar enthusiasms. They, too, hoped their society would serve an important networking function, “providing a useful forum”

and “facilitating enjoyable contacts” for persons dedicated to the history of architecture. To keep such people “in closer contact through the academic year,” the society also determined to launch “an unpretentious journal” whose goal was to report on member activities and to “disseminate the results of research.”⁸

The journal’s first issue included in its twenty-six typewritten pages a brief essay on the Roman brick industry that Herbert Bloch wrote to summarize the presentation he made to the incipient society at the Harvard Faculty Club on 31 July 1940. For the most part, however, issue no. 1 served more to announce the existence of the society than to publish actual scholarship. To this end, Turpin Bannister, SAH’s first president, saw to it that the journal was sent not only to the society’s twenty-five members but also to 175 interested parties, giving it a distribution that was somewhat less than Benjamin Franklin’s colonial broadside. With this fairly limited circulation, knowledge of SAH occurred principally by word of mouth. Even into the late 1950s, SAH was entreating its members to pass their copy of the newsletter to an “architecturally-minded friend” rather than tossing it in the trash.⁹ Despite shades of intellectual tribalism, in an era of expanding voluntary associations this came close to a take-all-comers policy, a relatively nonhierarchical approach to participation in a learned society.

By the middle of 1941, SAH had gained its hundredth member, a milestone that convinced the young society to pursue its stated goals, “despite troubled times.” Even “in a time of crisis,” President Bannister wrote a few months before the United States entered World War II, “we must make certain that worthwhile values and movements shall not be scuttled.”¹⁰ Performing its “own peculiar duty” during those war years, SAH worked “to conserve the finest aspects of our national life,” most visibly by continuing its recently inaugurated study trips and walking tours, which cultivated awareness of buildings and places through firsthand, in-the-field inspections of significant structures, both old and new.¹¹ Whether it was the companionship or the shared knowledge and expertise, the first organized trips—in the summer of 1940 to colonial and federal buildings in Salem and Marblehead and to modern buildings in Lincoln—were reportedly successes, with members pronouncing them “more stimulating and enjoyable” than solo ventures.¹² Here it is worth noting that in the middle of the century such tours were frequently regarded as the exclusive province of specialists or members of the elite, latter-day versions of Ben Franklin’s virtuosi. As late as 1956, when the *New York Times* reported on a walking tour sponsored jointly by SAH and the Municipal Art Society of New York, the paper identified the participants as “a hearty band of esthetes.”¹³ But from the beginning, SAH had a broader outlook, directing its tours to those inside and outside the academy, to historians, architects, and

preservationists, to students and professionals, and to interested laypeople. In fact, “any kindred spirit” was welcome to join a tour or, more important, to join the society.¹⁴

This openness was not wartime expedience; it was very nearly a populist agenda, one that seems to have reflected an awareness among the early SAH leadership of the distinctive status of architecture in relationship to the culture at large. Though SAH’s subject matter was principally historical, its purview was absolutely contemporary. In this context, *contemporary* does not imply the newest or most up-to-date but, more literally, living, existing, and occurring in the present—the world around SAH at each moment in its history. During its earliest moments, what the society saw was troubling. Though SAH was not founded explicitly for stewardship of cultural heritage, almost from the beginning the society understood that buildings themselves comprised the most critical material resources of its scholarly enterprise. Buildings were the lifeblood of the society, and in its first years SAH saw them being destroyed at an alarming rate. At home, they were victims of modernization; abroad, they were casualties of war. Throughout the early 1940s, a regular feature in the journal detailed the destruction, as submitted by members and gleaned from news sources. Though every installment of “In Memoriam Monumentorum” was poignant as a death roll of buildings, they had a sense of urgency as well, serving as a rallying cry for members to draw attention to current losses and to encourage future preservation.¹⁵

Within a year of SAH’s founding in 1940, Turpin Bannister was already hinting that such advocacy was a “proper” and “fitting” task for this “infant society” and that it was not unreasonable to think that SAH was positioned not only to contribute to a “philosophy of preservation” but also to develop and implement a “program of action.”¹⁶ In short order, this program made its way into the reformulated public-oriented aims of the society, which now dedicated itself to promoting preservation and to fostering architectural appreciation and understanding.¹⁷ SAH carried this momentum into the following decade when the *New York Times* characterized its public proselytizing on behalf of monuments as diverse as the White House, the Rookery, and the Robie House, as something akin to “an architectural revival meeting.”¹⁸ The American Institute of Architects concurred, awarding SAH a 1956 citation of honor for performing “an indispensable service” in reminding designers not inclined “to look at the past” that “civilization’s heritage of architecture and the allied arts is our priceless possession, and that now as always ‘The Past is Prologue.’”¹⁹ The AIA citation is both generous and politic, only hinting, politely, at tensions simmering beneath the otherwise placid surface of SAH at midcentury: tensions between modernism and historic monuments, between

architects and historians, and even between the past and the present. To comprehend their importance, let’s return to the 1960 conference in New York.

Not to the Guggenheim parley but to a session that took place the following morning, dealing with preservation and urban renewal and focused on the Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. In 1960 the district surrounding Independence Hall was still very much contested territory, with developers, planners, and preservationists debating the demolition of the dense fabric of buildings that surrounded the major monuments associated with the nation’s founding. The papers presented offered the diverse perspectives of policy makers and administrators, of “citizens and antiquarians,” and they “aroused a lively discussion,” according to a report in the *SAH Newsletter*. With members of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority and the City Planning Commission—including the legendary Ed Bacon—squaring off against folks from the National Park Service and the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, here, finally, was a meeting that might well be described as a parley.²⁰ That SAH devoted one of the five sessions that comprised its thirteenth annual conference to a topic as timely and disputatious as urban renewal—a full year before the publication of Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*—reflects an engagement with the contemporary built environment that, as we have seen, had been present in the society’s activities since its earliest years. But engaging the contemporary landscape was not the same as embracing contemporary architecture. Hence, SAH’s sidestepping, earlier at the conference, of the controversy surrounding the Guggenheim’s design.

In the November 1959 issue of the *SAH Newsletter*, Agnes Addison Gilchrist, its editor and past SAH president, characterized the upcoming session at the Guggenheim as “a great event.” Undoubtedly hoping to spur attendance, she also observed that Wright’s museum “caused strong and diverse emotions” and hinted that the “Carracullan” character of the building, more than the session on modern architecture to take place there, would be the real draw.²¹ The afternoon included a range of scholarly papers on American and European topics (Bill Jordy on the PSFS Building; George Collins on Spanish Modernismo), but the highlight for the nearly 200 registrants must have been Guggenheim director James Johnson Sweeney’s address about the museum itself. Though the *Times* reported that his talk was well received, James Marston Fitch, who chaired the session, seemed to disagree. “No one is silent; no one is neutral,” he told a reporter, but “no one is willing to speak here about the museum building.”²² This refusal to go on record about Wright’s building is not insignificant, as it reflected a fundamental issue for SAH at midcentury: the chronological frame appropriate to its scholarly concerns, translating into the

reticence of some midcentury historians to discuss contemporary work.

Though Richard Hubbard Howland wrote cheerfully in the journal in 1942 that listening to Walter Gropius discuss the early years of the Bauhaus and visiting Philip Johnson's house on Ash Street in Cambridge demonstrated to those participating in a meeting of the newly organized Boston chapter of SAH "how closely contemporary architecture and architectural history can be linked," this didn't necessarily translate into scholarship.²³ Around the same time, and just when SAH was getting its bearings as a learned society, Nikolaus Pevsner cautioned his colleagues against commenting on "things which belong to our own day and not to history yet." In the conclusion to *An Outline of European Architecture* of 1943, Pevsner warned that the historian's "job is done when he has applied the principles of historical analysis as far into the problems of the present day as they can safely be applied."²⁴ In the following decade Henry-Russell Hitchcock likewise noted the difficulty of defining "the present" with respect to the historian's task—though he did venture far enough in *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* to declare the Guggenheim "remarkable" while the building was still under construction in the mid-1950s.²⁵ In that book, which won an award at the 1960 meeting, Hitchcock argued that while there was an increasing body of scholarship dealing with the so-called "first and second generations of modern architecture," there was no "objective historical process" that applied to the architecture of the 1950s.²⁶ For Hitchcock, this meant it was necessary to view "the postwar present" entirely through the legitimating lens of the prewar past: only there, he believed, could one find an explanation for contemporary architectural developments.²⁷ This may explain why, in the entirety of that three-day meeting in New York in 1960, only one paper dealt with postwar architecture: a "philosophical and personal interpretation" of the new capital at Brasilia delivered by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy.²⁸

If this hands-off approach to working on recent architecture seems like an abstruse concern of historical methodology, that's precisely what it was. SAH was expansive toward membership and stewardship of the built environment, but SAH was also a society of scholars engaged in scholarly debates about scholarly methods and scholarly discourse. It was an "enjoyable forum" open to all at the same time it was a "parley of historians" dedicated to the history of architecture. Of course, the decades since 1960 have seen the parameters of what constitutes *history* stretched as far as those defining something called *architecture*. And while it's too tidy and categorical to say that as the scholarly discipline changed, so did the scholarly society, one was bound to rub off on the other—though it will remain for a historian of the society's sesquicentennial to parse the long-term effects. Still, it may well be that in the discipline's embrace of temporal,

typological, and methodological diversity during the past half century, SAH's early inclusivity with respect to membership and mission finally had a correlate in its intellectual outlook. The society hasn't evolved since its founding; it has self-actualized.

Notes

1. The SAH advertisement appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, 23 Oct. 1960, 188. A *Book Review* advertisement of this size would cost \$15,000 today. On circulation in the 1960s, see "4.4 Million a Day Get Papers Here," *New York Times*, 30 Mar. 1965, 36.
2. "SAH Notices," *SAH Newsletter*, Nov. 1960, 1. The decision to place the ad seems to have been motivated, in part, by declining membership. In 1959, for the first time since 1940, SAH membership was down. See "SAH Membership Note," *SAH Newsletter*, Nov. 1959, 1.
3. "U.S. Speeds Work on Old Aquarium," *New York Times*, 27 Jan. 1952, 49.
4. "Guggenheim Parley Demurs on Dispute," *New York Times*, 30 Jan. 1960, 18.
5. Quoted in Howard Mumford Jones, *An Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1979), 247, 250. The ACLS report was published as Howard Mumford Jones, *One Great Society: Humane Learning in the United States* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).
6. Jones, *An Autobiography*, 255.
7. Benjamin Franklin, *A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America* (Philadelphia, 1743). For the full text see <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0092#BNFN-01-02-02-0092-fn-0001>.
8. "Introducing A.S.A.H.," *Journal of the American Society of Architectural Historians* 1 (Jan. 1941), 1. (Hereafter, *JASAH*.)
9. "SAH Membership Note," *SAH Newsletter*, Nov. 1959, 1.
10. Turpin C. Bannister, "Next Steps III," *JASAH* 1 (July/Oct. 1941), 46.
11. *Ibid.*
12. "A.S.A.H. Beginnings: A Report," *JASAH* 1 (Jan. 1941), 21. See also "Next Steps: Summer Meeting," *JASAH* 1 (Jan. 1941), 23.
13. John Sibley, "Neither Snow, Slush Nor Curious Keep Art Unit Hikers from Appointed Rounds," *New York Times*, 9 Apr. 1956, 18.
14. "Next Steps, II," *JASAH* 1 (Apr. 1941), 42.
15. The first installment was in the journal's first issue. "In Memoriam Monumentorum," *JASAH* 1 (Jan. 1941), 22. The longest installment was in 1944, with detailed reports from London and across Italy. "In Memoriam Monumentorum," *JASAH* 4 (Apr. 1944), 42–43, 52. Between 1941 and 1945, the journal also reported on war damage under other titles, usually in the "News Items" section.
16. Turpin C. Bannister, "Introducing the Journal's Special Issue on: The Preservation of Historic Architectural Monuments," *JASAH* 1 (July/October 1941), 3–4; Bannister, "Next Steps III."
17. See "Aims," *JASAH* 2 (Jan. 1942), 2.
18. "Chicago Takes Look at Itself in the Mirror of Architecture," *New York Times*, 10 Nov. 1957, sec. 8, 1.
19. "The AIA Citation," *JASAH* 15 (Oct. 1956), 32.
20. "SAH Notices: 13th Annual Meeting," *SAH Newsletter*, Feb. 1960, 1. See also College Art Association and Society of Architectural Historians, *Annual Meeting Program*, Jan. 1960, n.p.
21. "A Great Event," *SAH Newsletter*, Nov. 1959, 2.
22. "Guggenheim Parley Demurs on Dispute," 18.
23. Richard Hubbard Howland, "News Items: Cambridge-Boston Local Group Organized," *JASAH* 2 (July 1942), 32.
24. Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (1943; repr., London: John Murray, 1948), 215.

25. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), 332.

26. The *SAH Newsletter* indicates that Hitchcock's *Architecture* won "the CAA book award" in 1960. "SAH Notices: At the Annual Business Meeting," *SAH Newsletter*, Feb. 1960, 1. CAA's online listing of award winners indicates the book won the Charles Rufus Morey Award in 1962. See <http://www.collegeart.org/awards/moreypast>. Hitchcock's latest tome would have

been of particular interest to the SAH membership since he was not only a prominent scholar but also was past president of the society (elected 1952) and was still serving on the SAH board of directors at the time of the New York conference. On Hitchcock's election to the SAH presidency see "Tokyo Architect Delighted by City," *New York Times*, 28 Jan. 1952, 2.

27. Hitchcock, *Architecture*, 411.

28. "SAH Notices: 13th Annual Meeting," 1.