THE BUILDING:
Dr. Steven Bedford

"I think we are going to build an architectural building."
- Palmer C. Ricketts, June 24, 1929

(i) The design and development of the Greene Building is inextricably linked to the foundation of the School of Architecture. Although the Hooker/Schermerhorn Institute master plan called for a building on this site, its use was not defined. In 1929, Rensselaer, however, was about to admit at least 500 more students and the construction of a new building was needed to meet the influx of students.

The design process for the building was one that had potential for disaster. Institute President Palmer C. Ricketts had just hired a recent Harvard graduate, Ralph Gulley, to head the new architecture department, while the architecture firm that RPI had used previously, Lawlor & Haase, was in some turmoil since Haase had just died. Prior to contacting Lawlor, Ricketts had been in correspondence with Gulley, sending him some sketches, the site plan in April 1929 and a letter noting that the building would require quarters for two janitors, that it was to be of Harvard brick with Indiana Limestone trim and, "I do not know what to do about the design of this building."(ii) Gulley responded by presuming that he could be the building's architect and promising sketches by June 1929, but he was also to be in Europe on a Harvard-sponsored traveling fellowship (the Sheldon).(iii) Ricketts seemed to want Gulley as architect, but perhaps due to reservations concerning Gulley's absence and lack of experience, did want to maintain a relationship with Lawlor, even though he questioned Lawlor's design skills: "Lawlor is a good man to look after contractors, he has not the taste that Haase had, Haase was one of Stanford White's men . . . I did not like to throw over Lawlor as soon as Haase died."(iv) Since Gulley would be using the lion's portion of the building for his new department, Ricketts proposed that Gulley and Lawlor collaborate on the design for the new building, which was initially called the Fine Arts Building. Ricketts reassured Lawlor that their almost 30-year relationship would continue:

I do not propose to leave you out of this business merely because Haase had passed on, but I knew that for the Architectural Building the Head of the Department of Architecture would have something to say, and I think this is the best way to do business, that is, for you and him to work together. He is a very fine fellow of a very high type and I think you will work well together.(v)
Gulley visited Ricketts and the site prior to his departure for Europe and obtained some information on the site. A building plan of approximately 150 feet by 50 feet was decided on and Ricketts immediately began to offer detailed advice. The site presented some problems. It naturally sloped steeply to the east, potentially exposing an additional story on the eastern quarter of the northern, or main façade. Ricketts suggested that they use a solution already employed on the Sage Building; placing a retaining wall parallel to the north façade and partially backfilling against it. The area between the wall and the facade could be covered and used for storage.\(^{(vi)}\)

Gulley and Lawlor met in New York on July 2, 1929, reviewing the proposed program and sketch plans for the building. We learn from Lawlor’s meeting summary that the basement and first floor were to be used by the Institute as classroom and laboratory space and the upper floors were to be solely occupied by the School of Architecture and to be planned by Gulley. One puzzle was the apparent confusion over the size of the structure. Gulley was working with 150 feet x 50 feet outside dimensions while Lawlor was working with 160 feet x 60 feet.\(^{(vii)}\)

Ricketts’s primary concern was the northern façade. He was afraid that Lawlor was not up to creating an appropriate face for this new structure. As Gulley traveled through Europe, he was unable to respond quickly, but Ricketts continued to bombard him with letters and give him more information. By August 29, 1929, Gully and Lawlor had supplied separate plans and elevations. Ricketts diplomatically disapproved of Lawlor’s plan and elevation and wrote to both men that he wanted the facade to be plain, like that of the Amos Eaton Building, not like the Pittsburgh Building.\(^{(viii)}\)

Showing a preference for Gulley’s general design, Ricketts told Gulley: I think all the elevations of this building ought to be plain.\(^{(ix)}\) You have not developed your plans entirely, but I like the looks of your building. Very frankly—and I do not wish you to say this to Mr. Lawlor at all in any way—I do not like the front elevation of the building as shown on the blueprints he has sent me ... You two will have to settle this matter in some way between yourselves.\(^{(v)}\) Ricketts then asked Gulley to further develop his front elevation.

The key façade element that Ricketts disliked was Lawlor’s use of highly plastic elements on the façade, in particular the partially engaged columns. Ricketts wrote that he had never heard of a person being only three quarters engaged, but I suppose this might happen to a column. You two can fight it out as to whether you want round or flat things on the building.\(^{(x)}\)

Both architects were constantly bombarded by Ricketts’ suggestions. Some were substantial, such as using the attic space and illuminating it with skylights, or reducing hallway width (to 8 feet) to maximize the size of classrooms, using wooden window sash instead of steel, and setting the interior finishes (concrete hallway floor topped by terrazzo, maple classroom floors, tile walls in the hallways,
use of dark oak millwork with no veneers), while other letters obsessively criticized
the location of toilets (but not urinals) above the basement level. We also learn that
the basement plan was not to be laid out for some time and that the first floor was
to be classrooms and offices, while a large lecture hall with projection equipment
and stepped seating was meant to occupy the western end of the building. The
metal fire escape on the south side of the building was to be placed there because it
faced St. Joseph's Seminary where no one would see it. Ricketts also suggested that
the names of famous architects be used decorative elements on the building.\[xii\]

The Ricketts/Gulley correspondence is quite revealing. First, it was Gulley
who planned the entry sequence and developed the use of the fourth floor (attic),
but he also proposed using metal spandrels between the second and third floors.\[xiii\]
Gulley responded to all Ricketts' concerns in a lengthy letter. Noting that Ricketts'
criticisms and suggestions - full of clear and explicit details were very helpful, Gul-
ley tactfully noted that Lawlor's façade designs were too ornate and with too many
elements unnecessarily complicated. Gulley explained that he planned to make his
own north elevation much simpler. Gulley's primary interest was in maximizing the
availability of natural light on the upper floors. He assented to most of Ricketts'
suggestions, such as eliminating the steel sash and most toilets, but he did insist on
sinks in the drafting rooms, suggested a cream color for the wall tile and held out
for concrete floor as more hygienic. He agreed to a frieze incorporating the names
of famous architects of all ages and proposed February 1, 1930, as the date for
completion of working drawings.\[xiv\]

Ricketts continued his compulsive refinement of plans with Lawlor and
Gulley. He continued his objection to toilets: *I do not think a man would want to
use a water closet so often that he could not go downstairs to the basement where
I think all water closets ought to be. While they may not smell badly, they certainly
are no magnolias.*\[xv\] The faculty demanded wood floors in the classrooms and the
north façade continued to be an issue. The troika - Ricketts, Lawlor and Gulley - de-
bated between pilasters and engaged columns and between having and not having a
parapet.\[xvi\]

The architects clashed over the names of architects to be inscribed on
the building. Ricketts ended the argument by writing to Joseph Hudnut, dean of
Harvard's School of Architecture for advice. Hudnut sent a list of names (now lost)
and Ricketts insisted they all be American: *it would be a good advertisement for
the school and it would be the first time that it has been done in America.*\[xvii\] The
names as finally agreed - Bulfinch, Burnham, Goodhue, Hooker, Hunt, Jefferson,
Latrobe, McComb, and McIntyre.

Over the following two months the building plans began to take shape
always under the watchful eye of Ricketts and always responding to his idiosyncra-
sies. But Lawlor and Gulley continued to disagree until Ricketts lost patience, writing
Lawlor that the architectural building plans have got to be settled ... I want that
building to look like the other buildings; I do not want it to look like the devil or like a freak set in the middle of the other buildings.\footnote{con}

Although Gulley was responsible for much of the design, his name was not included because he was not licensed in New York, a new requirement in 1930. Working drawings were completed in late February 1930 and the bids submitted in March 1930. The winning general contractor, the Amsterdam Building Company of Albany, bid $431,000. Building permits were filed on April 15, 1930, It opened in time for the fall semester of 1931.

\footnote{i}{Steven Bedford.}
\footnote{ii}{Ricketts to Gulley, April 22, 1929, RP Box 4, folder 100.}
\footnote{iii}{Gulley to Ricketts, May 2, 1929, RP Box 4, folder 100.}
\footnote{iv}{Ricketts to Gulley, May 3, 1929, RP Box 4, folder 100.}
\footnote{v}{Ricketts to Lawlor, June 24, 1929, Box 4, folder 105b. Ricketts papers.}
\footnote{vi}{Ricketts to Gulley, June 27, 1929, RP Box 4, folder 100.}
\footnote{vii}{Lawlor to Ricketts, July 9, 1929, RP Box 4, folder 105b.}
\footnote{viii}{Ricketts to Lawlor, August 29, 1929, RP Box 4, folder 105b.}
\footnote{ix}{Ricketts to Gulley, August 29, 1929 RP Box 4, folder 105b.}
\footnote{x}{Ricketts to Gulley, August 29, 1929, RP Box 4, folder 100.}
\footnote{xi}{Rto 1, September 10, 1929, 105b.}
\footnote{xii}{See Ricketts papers, Box 4, folders 105b and 100.}
\footnote{xiii}{Ricketts to Gulley, September 3, 1929, folder 105b.}
\footnote{xiv}{ibid.}
\footnote{xv}{R to G, October 7, 1929 -- 105b.}
\footnote{xvi}{R to G -- 105b.}
\footnote{xvii}{R to G, November 13, 1929, Box 4 f 105b.}
\footnote{xviii}{R to L, January 4, 1930 -- 105b.}

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After graduating from RPI, Steven Bedford Ph.D. worked briefly in the energy conservation field in New York before entering the doctoral program in Art History at Columbia University. While pursuing his doctorate he was, and still is, active in the historic preservation field. He is well-known in the field of early 20th century American architecture and architectural education. He now teaches in the BCT program at RPI and is a senior manager in an environmental planning firm in Connecticut.