THE HISTORY:
75 Years of Architecture at Rensselaer
Dean Alan Balfour

This newsletter is devoted to the 75th anniversary
of the opening of the Greene Building and coincidentally the initiation of a profes-
sional degree in architecture at Rensselaer. Although 1930 is the date above the
entrance to Greene, the building did not in fact open until the fall of 1931, so there
is justification for having a celebration in 2006. As listed on the inner cover four
events will mark this significant year:

Alumni Lecture Series: will bring established practitioners together
with recent graduates to discuss education and the profession.

The 75th Anniversary Ball: May 12th in the Greene Building, in black
tie, bringing the alumni from all decades back to the campus-
saluting the great teachers of the school.

Architecture and the Senses: An International Symposium planned
for fall '06

World Practice: A lecture series also planned for fall '06

In this little keepsake I offer a brief history of the school and its chang-
ing character then historian Steven Bedford (Rensselaer class of '75) documents
the waltzing between the client - President Palmer Ricketts and two architects,
sometimes in conflict. The illustrations are old and new. The old have been dug
out of a meager archive recording the Greene Building and the life of the school.
(The archive needs to be enhanced, so if anyone has photographs from their years
here, please send them to me). The new, presents Rensselaer student entries to the
most recent international professional competition that final-year students have
competed in for the last decade - with great success. (The final project work from
this anniversary year has all been brought together to form the lively book called
Futures, which will be published in the spring semester. This will hence forth be an
annual production). To my knowledge, this is the first attempt to record the history
of the School of Architecture, and it offers only the briefest introduction. For many
favorite teachers will not be named and some of the exceptional achievements of
our graduates will go unnoticed, but view what follows as only a first step toward a
definite history, which the school deserves.

To the history: The building was named for Franklin Greene who led Rensselaer
from 1846 to 1858 and is best remembered for developing a model engineering
curriculum. Clearly he was a man of broad vision for in 1856 he proposed creating
a school of architecture. Had this been accomplished at that time Rensselaer would
have had the oldest school of architecture in the country. Though architecture was not taught at Rensselaer until the 1930s, its graduates were responsible for three uniquely 19th-century American monuments, which are as much architecture as they are engineering structure.

Washington Roebling, Class of 1857, shared with his father, John Roebling, the painful and lengthy task of building the Brooklyn Bridge; and shared also the family view that the bridge was not only the structure that will forever testify to the energy, enterprise, and wealth of the community but also that it was a great work of art.

A son of Brigham Young (second president of the Mormon Church), Don Carlos Young, who graduated from Rensselaer in 1879, supervised the construction of the first Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City, a building that would give physical form to the spirit of Mormonism.

At the same time as Carlos was laboring in Utah, the so-called Rensselaer Gang was working furiously to create that most potent symbol of the Chicago World’s Fair, the Ferris Wheel; the antithesis of the paste classicism of the ‘White City.’ Led by George Ferris (Rensselaer class of 1881), the gang conceived and promoted this great ‘observation wheel’, which became the effective rival to the Eiffel Tower in presaging the future in the fin de siecle imagination. Brilliantly engineered, the Ferris Wheel was inspired by the water wheel at the Burden Iron Works in Troy that had the largest diameter in the nation before Ferris came to Chicago. (I have a theory that Vladimir Tatlin fused the Ferris Wheel with the Eiffel tower in his imagination to form his Monument to the Third International – proposed in Moscow in 1920, but never built).
The Greene Building opened its doors to the study of architecture in 1931 and the first bachelor’s degree was awarded in 1933. It was at first called the Fine Arts Building though only architecture, occupying the upper floors, seemed to merit that title. The ground floor and basement were dedicated to general purpose classrooms and laboratory space, (I think the building is the most distinguished work of architecture on the campus). In the essay following, Steven Bedford presents Rensselaer president Palmer Ricketts as a highly demanding, yet knowing client. I leave it to Steven to tell the story but one small tale is appropriate here. Ricketts wanted to surround the building with names of great architects whose example would inspire the students. He sought advice from the dean of Harvard’s School of Architecture, and was given too many European names for his taste, so made his own list – all Americans. The names as finally agreed – Bulfinch, Burnham, Goodhue, Hooker, Hunt, Jefferson, Latrobe, McComb (as architect of New York City Hall), and McIntyre (the genius of Salem). Most are somewhat parochial choices, while the recently deceased Goodhue was the only contemporary architect listed, but it is a good list even today. Surprisingly though, the one great 19th-century architect A.J. Davis, whose early Gothic revival church sits on the northwest corner of the campus, was omitted – probably too romantic for Ricketts’ taste. In 1940, Rensselaer faculty member Turpin Bannister was part of a group of Harvard graduates who founded the Society of Architectural Historians. He was its first president and first editor of the society’s journal. (He also helped edit the WPA guide to New York State).
The 50s: The period when the school began to develop a distinct character, a character much influenced by those returning from war or those whose architectural practice was in some way war-related. The dean of this period was Harold Hauf who led the School from 1952 to 1960. He was a superb specification writer who, true to form, established a strong block of technology faculty, who tended to overshadow the innocent designers with their fondness for Frank Lloyd Wright. However, the balance between art and science was held in these years by the presence of such gifted artists as Edward Millman (still celebrated as a muralist), George Rickey (a sculptor of international significance) and, above all, in the teachings of the beloved Don Mochon, whose sketches and cartoons are treasured to this day. Rickey’s majestic rocking sculpture, which he named Two Rectangles Vertical Gyratory up V was christened “Chrintoid” by the students (a mysterious name, possibly a reference to the slab in 2001 A Space Odyssey). The sculpture dominated the old campus for many years, and there was sense of loss when Rensselaer decided not to keep it (a loss only repaired recently when the Campus was able to obtain an equally dynamic Rickey work Six Random Lines Excentric shortly before he died at a great age).

Many graduates from the 1950s went on to distinguished careers such as Lee Pomeroy ’54 of Lee Harris Pomeroy Associates; the brothers Samuel ’57 and Martin Ginsburg ’58, of Ginsburg Development; and Peter Bohlin ’58 of Bohlin Cywinski Jackson.

The 60s: George Dudley served as dean from 1961 to 1964. He is remembered fondly though much of his time was taken up with the affairs of the Nelson Rockefeller administration. He was a key agent for Rockefeller in a number of projects, most significantly the creation of the United Nations building.

Don Mochon replaced Dudley in an acting capacity until Keith MacFeeders was named dean in 1966. MacFeeders served until 1969. Yet, in this brief period
he succeeded in establishing a focus of work that was to mark the school for the next two decades; a focus on research which led to the formation of the Center for Architectural Research. The Center was directed in its inception by the gifted Alan Green, who was succeeded in 1972 by David Haviland - of whom more later.

The character of the school in these years was defined by the teachings of Robert Winne, Michael Mostoller (an RPI grad and still a successful architect in Princeton, NJ), and Richard Plunz '66 (now director of Urban Design and the Earth Institute at Columbia). Their teachings were stimulated by the visions of Team 10, Italian Rationalism and the rise of an overtly rational corporate reality. Graham Williams joined the faculty in 1964 and by the end of the decade there were more significant additions, most notably Kenneth Warriner and Walter Kroner. Warriner quickly emerged as the radical intellect, while Kroner developed and expanded the research project. Theirs was the culture that laid the basis for the success of many graduates from the 1960s - among them Richard Rittelmann '60 of Burt Hill Kosar; James Bradburn '66, a founding partner of Fentress Bradburn Architects; Peter Gorman '67 of Brennan Beer Gorman Architects; Hugh M. Hochberg '68 of The Coxe Group Inc.; and Steven Ehrlich '68 of Steven Ehrlich Architects.

The 70s: Bernd Foster served as acting dean for a brief period (1969-1971) after MacFeeders and before the arrival of a new dean, Patrick Quinn, who joined the school from U. C. Berkeley. Quinn ran the school throughout the 1970s; years remembered for fierce debate and ambition. For many, Quinn’s most memorable creation was the annual Hudson River Festival climaxing in the spectacular crossing of the Hudson on homemade boats. There were also lectures by Louis Kahn and Bucky Fuller, and there was a brief exchange program with Polytechnic of Central London. Historian Dora Crouch, the first woman on the faculty, came to the school in 1974 and Peter Parsons joined the faculty in 1977. Prominent graduates
from the 1970s include John Jackson and Frank Grauman (now partners with Peter Bohlin), Alan Greenberger of MGA, clothing designer Steven Fabrikant, Howard J. Wolf of Wimberly Allison Tong and Goo; James Henry Collins of Payette Associates Architects and Scott Wyatt, of NBBJ, and many more are emerging.

The 80s: David Haviland, after acting in the position for a year, was named dean in 1980 and headed the school throughout the decade. He came to office at a time when serious questions were being raised as to whether Rensselaer should continue to have a school of architecture. Such anxious thoughts did not deter Haviland from building the faculty and it was in 1980 that David Bell and Sid Fleisher joined the community.

Rensselaer in these years was shaped by the NASA-disciplined vision of George Low, who headed the Institute as a leader who had placed a man on the moon. Not only did architecture survive, it grew in many significant ways. For the first time, the school attracted women to the design faculty, notably Nicole Pertuiset and Frances Bronet. The semester-long Rome program was established (shepherded by Patrick Quinn). The curriculum was toughened and more focused, and, most significantly for the future, the school was chosen as the site for the New York State initiated Lighting Research Center (LRC) wholly due to efforts of professors Walter Kroner and Russ Leslie and the leadership of the dean. Shortly after its formation, the U.S. lighting industry chose to make the LRC its lab of choice to set standards for the industry and encourage innovation. The LRC is now a preeminent national and international center for lighting research and innovation; it has the strongest ties to industry of any such center in Rensselaer and is alone in supporting advanced degree programs. It also was a powerful demonstration of an advanced research and

Walter Kroner and friends outside Greene
scholarship appropriate to architecture.

The 90s: Don Watson followed Haviland as dean in 1990, and Alan Balfour assumed the position in 1995. Watson kept the school on an even keel. Balfour has had the time to grow, develop and enhance the school in ways appropriate to Rensselaer. He has been assisted by a succession of associate deans, including Frances Bronet, Mark Mistur, and Ted Kreuger. He has been assisted by David Riebe in directing the professional programs, and by a caring group who look after all the finances and student affairs including Christine Dickson and Lecia Odell, and Audrey Larkin Zurlo, current assistant to the Dean, all under the dedicated leadership of Dale Masten.

Major initiatives in the last decade include:

New Faculty: In the last decade, more than 16 individuals have joined the rank of the tenure and tenure-track faculty. The faculty of the school is larger and more diverse than at any time in its history, with 23 tenure and tenure-track faculty of whom four are women. The two most recently tenured faculty are Anna Dyson and William Massie. Professor Dyson is leading a team of engineers and scientists to develop energy-producing smart facades for buildings. Massie's data formed and fabricated design projects are now part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art.
The school also continues to attract the most gifted young practitioners in clinical appointments. This faculty increase is in relation to considerable growth in students entering the school. This year 2005/2006 has seen the largest student body in the school's history – approximately 300 undergraduates and 70 graduates. This success is seen as a direct reflection of the quality of education.

*International Programs:* The Rome Studies Program continues to be popular (next year will be its 25th year). The program in Ahmadabad India was suspended several years ago after religious riots but plans are in place to reestablish the connection in the next academic year. The recently established programs at Tongji University in Shanghai are attracting almost as many students as those in the Europe Studies Program. The students in China are fully involved in a university environment and share a studio with Chinese students. This has allowed them to become deeply involved in the social forces driving change in the city.

*Restoring Greene:* The restoration of Greene has been ongoing for the last few years and much of the work will be completed in time for the anniversary. The building is now fully compliant with requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. A bridge at the south end links to the raised walkway of the Jonsson Engineering Center. In 2000, an elevator was installed serving all floors of the school. All but one of the studios have been reequipped and are all fully networked. These renovations began with the unveiling of a reconstructed entrance and the reinstallation of a front door. (There is a photograph later in the newsletter).

*Graduate Programs in Architectural Sciences:* With the success of the degree programs in Lighting, master's degree programs have been established in Architectural Acoustics, Building Conservation and most recently in Built Ecologies. This set of master's degrees form a cluster of programs that all lead to the new
Ph.D. in Architectural Sciences at Rensselaer. It is the first such doctoral program in the nation. The building up of the graduate program has brought some extraordinary scholars and scientists into the architectural faculty, and is gradually changing the culture and the ambition of the school.

The future: The school now stands as a preeminent setting for advanced work in key areas of architectural technology, all with potential for attracting the research funding necessary for the support of graduate students as well as gifted scholars and researchers from engineering and the sciences into the School of Architecture. The presence of this graduate culture in architectural sciences is expected not only to enhance the undergraduate experience but complement an already powerful undergraduate design culture.

The future graduate from Rensselaer will not only be the equal to any in design, but superior in effectively anticipating and applying new technologies, both material and virtual, that, with increasing speed, is transforming the practice of architecture.

Alan Balfour is professor and dean of the School of Architecture. He holds a Diploma in Architecture from the Edinburgh College of Art, and a Master of Fine Arts in Architecture from Princeton. Before joining Rensselaer, Balfour was chairman of the Architectural Association in London. He is the former Smith Professor and dean of architecture at Rice University, and the former director of architecture programs at Georgia Institute of Technology.

His most recent book Creating a Scottish Parliament was published summer of 2005. Major writings include books on Shanghai in 2002 and New York in 2001; they offer critical histories as well as a rich examination of city character and form as defined by the architecture. His book, Berlin published in 1995, documents the transformation of Berlin before and after the collapse of the Wall. This and the earlier book Berlin: The Politics of Order: 1737-1989, received the American Institute of Architects International Book Award.

In 2000, Alan Balfour was the Topaz Laureate, the highest recognition given in North America to an academic in architecture. This gold medal is presented jointly by the AIA and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture.