

Trost Symposium Presentation, May 8, 2014

I begin my narrative in the Autumn of 1950. It was then that I enrolled in the graduate library school at Columbia University in New York (a library school, by the way, that no longer exists). One of my fellow students was Baxter Polk, who was on leave from Texas Western College. He was head of the library here from 1936 to 1973, and when the College, then enrolling about 2,600 students, ran into some accreditation problems, it was decided that it needed a library headed by someone with a graduate library degree. So Baxter enrolled at Columbia. For a period of several months we shared an apartment with two other students.

In 1952 I made my first visit to El Paso. Baxter had resumed his duties at TWC, and I visited the campus to see his library. I also saw him act in "The Play's the Thing," by Ferenc Molnar, presented in Magoffin Auditorium on the campus. Of course I marveled at the Bhutanese architecture, but on that visit to El Paso no one mentioned Henry Trost to me. I even stayed in the Hotel McCoy, which I later learned had been designed by Trost; it had been opened in 1912.

A few years later, when we were both living in Northampton, Massachusetts, I met my future wife, June-Marie Fink, who was working there as an art historian. When she said she had grown up in El Paso, I shared with her the short list of people I knew who lived in El Paso, and it turned out that she also knew Baxter Polk. After we were married we spent some time with him during several of our trips to El Paso, where June had many relatives.

During a visit to El Paso in the early 1960s June and I and her mother, Julia Fink, were walking with our older daughter, who was riding in a stroller, near the Trost family residence on Yandell Drive. I took one look at the building, and, greatly astounded, asked my mother-in-law, "What's *that*?" She replied calmly, "Oh, that's where my friend Blanche Foster lives."

Blanche Groesbeeck Foster had, with her late husband, John N. Groesbeeck, bought the house from the Trost family. (It is now owned by the McGregor family.) Blanche Foster very graciously showed us through her house and also showed us the remarkable set of freehand pencil drawings on paper, made by Henry Trost, that she and her husband had inherited with the house. At our suggestion, in 1975 she very generously donated these drawings to the Library of the University of Texas at Austin.

In the late 1960s I returned to graduate school, this time at the University of Chicago, where one of my professors was Paul E. Sprague, the leading expert on the drawings of the famed architect Louis Sullivan. Sullivan, a master of ornamental architectural design, is a unique figure in architecture for several reasons. For want of a better term he was a drawingaholic; that is, if a pencil and a piece of paper were at hand, he would grab the pencil and begin to draw. Sometimes the drawings were focussed on a specific ornamental designs that went into production, and sometimes the drawings were merely elegant doodles. The only other architect who resembled Sullivan in this respect was Trost. When shown some of Trost's Sullivanesque

drawings included in the Blanche Foster gift to UTEP, Sprague told June-Marie and me that if he had seen them out of context he would have attributed them to Sullivan.

While living in Chicago from 1888 to 1896, Trost had acquired a considerable reputation as an ornamental-metal designer. He did have documented contacts with Sullivan. At least once he attended a lecture by Sullivan. Also, in 1889 he entered, anonymously, as required, a competition for a wrought-iron gate. This competition was set up by the Chicago Architectural Sketch Club, of which Trost was a member. Sullivan was one of the judges and Trost's design was premiated and later published under his actual name. Beyond that there was no documented contact, but perhaps an architectural ornamental company in which Trost was a partner was a subcontractor for Sullivan's firm, Adler & Sullivan. Or perhaps Trost helped to execute metal ornament for one or more of Sullivan's buildings while working for Winslow Brothers. Trost worked in a fluid era in which ornamental-metal firms in Chicago were exchanging partners and designers with great frequency. In 1896 a leading Chicago architectural magazine summed his role in this environment:

The new president of . . . [the Chicago Ornamental Iron Company], Mr. H. C. Trost has been recognized for many years as a superior designer in metal-work, and to him is due the credit of much of the advance made in this country in the art of designing and shaping of metals into ornamental forms.

Also, architectural firms like Adler & Sullivan frequently added architects who worked for them for short amounts of time when the firm was very busy, and thus the firm might very well have engaged Trost directly. This remains a possibility because documentation was not a priority for a busy firm trying to meet client deadlines. Moreover, Trost lived in Chicago during precisely the time when Adler & Sullivan was at its busiest. So several converging oral traditions that placed Trost directly in the office of Adler & Sullivan perhaps deserve some credence.

Anyway, what June-Marie and I began to realize is that Henry Trost, who moved to El Paso in 1903, was an important figure in American architecture who had not received the recognition due him because he worked on the fringes of America in cities and towns with relatively small populations. El Paso itself had less than 40,000 population in 1910. Nevertheless Trost was of major significance to art history for several reasons.

1. As noted, some of the freehand drawings of Henry Trost must be considered images of great importance to art history because they were spontaneously made cousins to some of Sullivan's finest ornamental sketches. Concerning the latter Sprague wrote, in 1979: "Had Sullivan regarded his sketches as we regard them today, that is, as independent works of art, and his working drawings as important historical documents, he would certainly have taken a much greater interest in preserving them." In that last phrase Sprague was referring to the fact that, as he put it ". . . of the literally thousands of pencil sketches prepared by Louis Sullivan for his buildings and ornament, fewer than two hundred survive today."

A similar situation prevails for Trost. Only a small portion of what must have been hundreds, if not thousands, of his ornamental sketches dating from his Chicago years and later have survived. These are divided between the Blanche Foster gift of 73 drawings to the Library of the University of Texas at Austin, and the current holdings of the Trost family, consisting of 59 drawings.

2. One of the chief reasons June and I were attracted to Henry Trost is that he is unique in architectural history because of the range of his work and because his creative mind simultaneously produced superb designs in a variety of historic-revival styles as well as designs that were part of the latest trends in architecture. We liked to think of ourselves as unconventional art historians who could deal with data that other art historians shunned because they could not fit the data into a neat narrative.

But this does not mean that June and I were not interested in developing a narrative. And one thing that bothered us about dealing with the range of Trost's work was that his patrons seemed to like whatever he designed for them. With few exceptions, the interplay between the architect's designs and any adverse reaction to them cannot be documented. The only architect who developed a long-range relationship with Trost & Trost who was not a member of the Trost family was Everet Bradt, who was with the firm from 1906 to 1930. Julia Fink and I interviewed him once, and I sought to get a sense of client dissatisfaction with some of Trost's more forward-looking designs. He said that he could recall nothing of that kind.

With that in mind, I now point to the only documented controversy connected with a commission for Trost & Trost: the first four buildings of 1917 for the School of Mines. And this also gives me an opportunity to recognize the UTEP centennial on my remarks this evening.

In our 1981 book, *Henry C. Trost: Architect of the Southwest*, June and I wrote:

For most of Trost's work it has proven impossible to learn much about architect-client relationships; in the case of the School of Mines, rich sources of information have been preserved, recording details of a complex fabric of architect-client relationships. These relationships, viewed in the context of concurrent academic, political and military developments, constitute the raw material for a fascinating dramatic narrative. The full story would exceed the scope of this book; only a brief account can be included here.

Well, June-Marie and I had a lot going on in our life together, and we never got around to writing more about this controversy. And I have been distracted by other things since she died in 2009, so the narrative never got written. If anyone here is interested, it is worth noting that Ruth Augur, the registrar at the time and a feisty partisan in the controversy, was also the well-rounded person who broadened the outlook of future miners and their professors by introducing drama into the fledgling school. In 1919 she wrote and directed the first theatrical performance staged by the school, so why not a play about the controversy to honor her memory? Or even a play that

might be turned into a grand opera? After all, El Paso was a frequent venue for touring opera companies during the School of Mines era.

Surely everyone here knows that the first four buildings for the School of Mines on Mundy Heights were the first Bhutanese-style buildings built outside Asia, and that it was Kathleen Worrell an artist, architect and writer who was the wife of the Dean of the School of Mines, Steven Worrell, who suggested the Bhutanese style for the new campus after reading an article about Bhutan in the April, 1914, issue of the *National Geographic Magazine*. Since the School of Mines had been placed under the supervision of the University of Texas Board of Regents, a fascinating array of people were involved in the drama, both in Austin and in El Paso, many of whom could surely fit the description that comes down to us of Kathleen Worrell as “a very strong personality.”

When it had been decided to move from a Trost-designed campus near Fort Bliss that it had inherited from the defunct El Paso Military Institute, the fledgling School of Mines needed not just an architectural style but also a new site. Dean Steven Worrell and University of Texas President Robert Vinson asked El Paso architect Charles Gibson of the firm of Gibson & Robertson to make “sketches not plans” for what Bhutanese style buildings would look like on Mundy Heights; the result was published in an El Paso newspaper and is the only drawing than can now be located made by Gibson or the firm of Gibson & Robertson.

I must digress here. Various kinds of drawings were made by architects and draughtsmen and women working under their supervision in the pre-computer age. Sometimes there were presentation drawings to help the client choose an architect or to make comments about possible changes. Sometimes there were informal sketches showing ornament or other details. But always there were ink-on-linen drawings from which blueprints were made to enable contractors to bid and to guide the actual builders during construction.

Trost & Trost must be ranked among the American firms for which the richest troves of drawings are available. This is chiefly due to the El Paso construction firm of Ponsford Brothers. After Trost & Trost was no longer active Ponsford Brothers took ownership of the former firm’s drawings, including some informal ones on tissue paper but most importantly hundreds of ink-on-linen drawings used to make blueprints. June-Marie, an alumna of El Paso High School (where she is being honored with a memorial plaque on Saturday), was a fellow student there with Frank James Ponsford, the son of Walter T. Ponsford, who arranged for us to look over the drawings and make copies of some of them. Walter’s brother Henry, also known as Harry, donated all of the Trost & Trost drawings to the El Paso Public Library in 1979.

I should also point out that Trost & Trost were very meticulous in making their ink-on-linen drawings and in at least one case were pressed into service as preservation drawings at a key meeting about the new campus. One of these was their ink-on-linen drawings of Main Building and why their use of both red and black ink, irrelevant to the making of blue prints, might have made a difference.

Back to my narrative. By the mid 1950s, in spite of the fact that Trost-designed buildings were in wide use in El Paso, and some were among the city's most prominent, the Trost name was mostly forgotten. But feature stories in newspapers began to appear in the mid 1950s and slowly the one time fame of Trost & Trost was restored. Francis Fugate in his *Frontier College* of 1964 included the Trost & Trost rendering of early 1917 now hanging in Heritage Hall, redacted the name of Trost & Trost and did not mention Trost anywhere in his book. And once when we were discussing our Trost research with him, Baxter Polk told me and June-Marie that some people at TWC doubted that Trost & Trost had anything to do with designs for the campus.

In an article I published in 1969, at Sprague's urging, based on a term paper I had written for one of his courses, I mentioned Trost as the designer of the first four buildings at UTEP only because I used the Bhutanese as an example of the range of his work, and there was no illustration. The breakthrough came in 1971 with Dale Walker's masterful "The Lamaseries on the Hill: the Bhutanese Architecture of UT El Paso." This was published in *NOVA*, of which Walker was editor at the time. The illustrations are a fascinating blend of of Asian Bhutanese buildings and related buildings on the UTEP campus. Curiously he ties the UTEP buildings to Trost & Trost only through an undated letter by Ruth Augur, most of which he quotes. Augur had been Kathleen Worrell's staunchest ally to retain the idea of a Bhutanese campus for El Paso at a time when Henry Trost and key figures in Austin and El Paso, even including Worrell's husband, were wavering. In the end the Bhutanese style prevailed but after doing considerable work on the project, Gibson & Robertson, strongly favored by Kathleen Worrell and Ruth Augur, was passed over and the commission went to Trost. By the time a fifth building was needed in 1921, Gibson & Robertson were no longer in business and Trost & Trost designed what was originally known as Kelly Hall. The article June-Marie and I wrote in 1980 about the UTEP campus for *NOVA* was called "The Trost Touch," to point to what she and I considered to be the contribution of Henry Trost to the successful completion of the project.

3. In our 1981 biography June-Marie and I had space for discussion of relatively few buildings. We knew more was needed and we received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities for a complete catalogue of the work of Henry C. Trost and the work of Trost & Trost, to be placed in the El Paso Public Library. We worked full time on the project for the first six months of 1988. It was like a second honeymoon as we visited numerous small and large cities and towns in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico, staying in motels. Our field headquarters were in Julia Fink's apartment in the Trost-designed Carusso Apartments in El Paso. In the following years we did still more field research and finalized our entries in our home in Cincinnati. This catalogue is now also available in the marvelous web site set up by Margaret Smith, grand niece of Henry C. Trost.

During the field work for this catalogue, June-Marie, a gifted and skilled photographer, made numerous color photographs that, like the freehand drawings of Henry Trost, stand as works of art. They also serve as a demonstration of one reason Henry Trost is unique in architectural history. As noted above, it is impossible to find another example of an architect who worked simultaneously on emerging trends as well as range of revival styles.

4. June-Marie and I worked on the last of our writings about Henry Trost in our 2009 article for the *Grove Encyclopedia of American Biography*. Sad to recall, June was on her death bed at the time. We did not have much space for the article, and we wanted say something we had not put into print until then. So we pointed out that more buildings by Trost had been published on postcards than those of any other architect. I should add that we had a large number of examples in our personal collection.

5. I wanted to point to a few of the people in addition to addition to Julia Fink and Margaret Smith who were important to Trost research. These include Mary Sarber, former Southwestern Librarian at the E.P.P.L. Without her June and I would not have written our biography and found a home for our catalogue. She also negotiated the Ponsford gift of Trost & Trost drawings.

And I would like to point to Claudia Rivers of the UTEP Library, who years ago negotiated with June-Marie to have her Library become home to our research materials. Claudia Rivers is now working hard to integrate these materials into her Library, and she has curated the marvelous Trost exhibition which we will see beginning tomorrow.

And one last word. I had known about the recent and totally senseless demolition of Trost's Muir Building. It was one thing to read about it in E-mail messages from Margaret Smith and look at the disturbing images in E-mail attachments, and quite another thing to visit the site of the now-vanished building, as I did a few hours ago. It was a major shock to stand at the southeast corner of Pioneer Square and see how the texture of a major stand of Trost-designed buildings has been shred forever.