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Instructive design

Designing a building to hold an architecture school is no simple challenge. It may be used as a measure of the school itself, provide students a teaching model and catch the world's attention. OSU's Knowlton School of Architecture has unveiled the plans.

BY JANE
WARE

How does a school of architecture do a new building for itself? Lately Ohio State University's Knowlton School of Architecture has been finding out, and it's a weighted task. For the fact is, a new building will seem like a measure of the school itself.

But Robert Livesey, director of the Knowlton School, is confident that the design in hand, by Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects of Atlanta, will enhance his school's reputation. "It will put us on the map in a way we haven't been," he says. And in a way the school deserves. He recalls that this past winter, for instance, at the moment Swiss architect Jacques Herzog learned he had won the Pritzker Prize, architecture's Nobel, he was a visiting professor at Ohio State. Says Livesey, "That's the kind of school we are."

Not only should this new building, the Austin E. Knowlton School of Architecture, catch the world's attention, but it also should serve as a teaching model for the students within, who represent three programs: architecture, landscape architecture and city and regional planning. And architect Mack Scogin hopes not only students will learn. "One goal," he says, "is to use the building as a means of teaching everyone, even the public, about the possibilities of architecture."

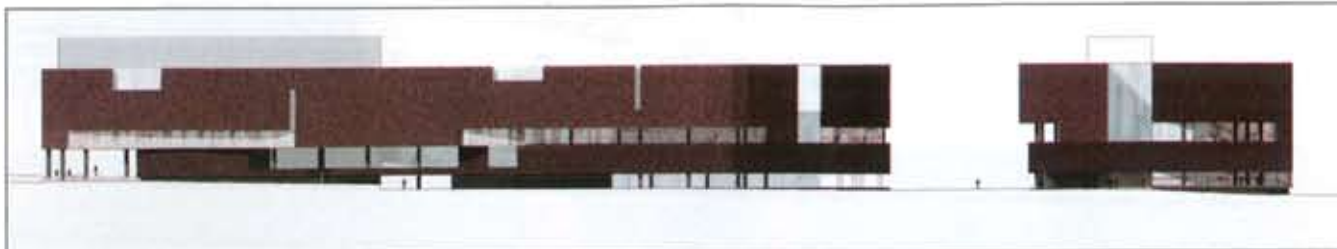
It will be another two years before anyone can really start learning from this

Atlanta architects Merrill Elam and Mack Scogin, at the far end of the table, meet in Columbus with architect Robert Wandel of Wandel & Schnell Architects (left, in white shirt), Knowlton School director Robert Livesey, far right, and others to go over drawings for the multifunctional building.

building. Drawings were to go out for bid in June and construction doesn't begin until this fall. The first step will be the demolition of Ives Hall, a two-story brick building on the site at Neil Avenue Mall and West Woodruff Avenue.

Ives occupies only two-thirds of the site, points out Robert Wandel of Wandel & Schnell Architects, the local firm working with Scogin and Elam, while the Knowlton School will cover almost all of it and will follow its shape. That gives the new building curving north and west sides and a squared-off front, on Neil Mall, which it will face with an open, 50-foot-high porch. In outline, the building's shape is vaguely like a fish swimming west, with deep rectangular cutouts for the porch, for a garden on the south side and for a terrace (the fish's mouth) on the west.

For sure, Knowlton will not be a typical classroom building. That's partly because inside at every level, ramplike corridors run the length of the building; formally called inclined planes, they have a barely



In the drawing at right (west side) is a center blue section illustrating a cut made entirely of translucent glass that will glow at night. The school's library can be seen in the left drawing (north side) in the raised section on the top of the building, also visible on the top in the west drawing.

perceptible 5 percent grade. The sloping access permits rooms alongside at different elevations. For instance, from the front door one gradually ascends four feet to jury spaces in the middle of the building, and then another six feet to the auditorium toward the back. Ceiling heights also "bounce around," as Livesey puts it. Offices are around nine feet high; classrooms, 14; studios, 14 to 28.

All this variety, Scogin says, is deliberate, "to exhibit the possibilities of space making. It's an exhibit of fundamental architectural possibilities."

"I think of it as the world's slowest building," he says. "It takes a while to traverse. By the time you make it to the top you understand everything that's going on in the building." But aren't students in too much of a hurry for a slow building? "Students," says Scogin, "think they're always on the run. In fact they have more time than anyone on the face of the earth. They do have the time to look at things. They must observe and experience architecture to design architecture. That's part of their education."

The building does have elevators and stairs, too. Says Livesey, "We have all manner of stairs. Fire stairs. Stairs for vertical circulation. If a student wonders what a fire stair is, they can go see one. If they wonder what a cantilevered stair is, they can go see one. And so on."

By now it shouldn't be surprising that, as Wandel points out, every level also has a different shape. In general, activities that draw in outsiders will be mostly on the first level. Included there are classrooms that may bring nonarchitecture students to the building; a gallery; jury spaces, where students, faculty and outside practitioners review individual projects, and, toward the end of the hall, a cafe and the auditorium. The auditorium, which has 200 seats for lectures, can expand to 350 with benches along the wall and bleachers.

The next highest level, a mezzanine, is almost all faculty offices. Above that the third level is for large, high-ceilinged studios,

or design classrooms. Then another mezzanine level holds a computer lab and study rooms for the graduate students in planning.

Finally, the two-story library is at the front end at the fifth and sixth levels. It will be a classic book-lined room, with its 30,000 volumes not in stacks, but in shelves on the walls, accessible from walkways at two levels. The library, Livesey says, will be visible from the first-floor corridor. "From the front door," he adds, a person can look up and "have a sense of all the things going on. There's no hiding in the building. It's all about discourse, about integrating the school's three disciplines."

Also in the teaching mode, the building's landscaping will demonstrate four garden types. The library overlooks one of these, an adjacent roof garden where ivy grows on walls. Another will be a south-facing garden in the 40-foot-deep cutout along the south wall; third will be a grove

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of trees to the north, and finally a small cluster of trees, a bosk, will front the building. Landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh of Boston will do the designs. In the early 1990s Van Valkenburgh and Scogin were both department chairs in their respective fields at Harvard. Both are still professors there.

Farther out on the building's perimeter, the site has a neighborhood where Scogin finds "an incredible mix of styles and building types." Across an alley to the south are the closest structures, two parking ramps, and Ohio Stadium looms at the back beyond Tuttle Park Place. The other side of Neil Mall has engineering buildings, while

the new, multibuilding Fisher College of Business is on the far side of Woodruff.

With 150,000 square feet altogether, Knowlton will be 400 feet long, 150 feet wide and 60 feet high. Some of its windows will be set deliberately to show what's going on inside. The room where students work on models, at the back under the auditorium, will be visible from Tuttle Park Place, while administrative offices and studios will be seen from the front porch. The front wall in the porch will be white marble, but other walls in the three large rectangular cutouts will be glass, to bring light into the building. Most of the outside walls will be covered by gray tiles. Whether they're terra cotta or a more expensive half-inch-thick granite will depend on bids.

Of the total \$28.5 million tab, \$2.5 million is still to be raised, \$10 million is coming from the state and \$16 million from benefactor Austin E. Knowlton.

Knowlton, for whom the school has been named and the building will be, is the man who made all this possible. A 1931 graduate in architecture—he will be 92 in July—Knowlton did well in the construction business in Columbus; his company put up many campus buildings, including the Fawcett Center. Part of his gift is five marble columns, each illustrating an order of architecture: Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Composite and Tuscan. Presently on display at Tuttle Park Place, the 23-foot columns will be moved into the structure's west cutout, where they'll be lined up outside a window next to an inclined walkway.

In 1902 Ohio State's trustees approved Joseph N. Bradford's plans for Brown Hall, which was completed in 1903, and architecture moved in. It has never left. As for Bradford, he was a professor of architecture and, from 1911-'29, also university architect. Thus he was in charge of campus building design and did many himself, including Brown and the widely admired Pomerene Hall.

So why didn't the school of architecture turn to its own faculty this time? After all, in 1992 Livesey himself was design architect for NBBJ's Harold Nestor Hall at Columbus State—that campus's keynote building. Why not a faculty architect here?

For starters, Livesey says, the university doesn't permit faculty to work for the uni-

versity. Moreover, it would be impossible for all of them to work on plans together—"You can't design by committee," Livesey says. And for just one to have the job would be unfair to the others. Besides, the faculty was the client, and, Livesey says, a good client is essential to design.

With such a client, planning the Knowlton School was not necessarily business as usual for university staffers routinely involved with new buildings. Usually, says university architect Jill Morelli, academics are very concerned with program, or with what a new building will be used for, and don't particularly care what it will look like. That was certainly not the case for architecture, where the users were, she says, "intellectually engaged in the process of design."

As Knowlton School project captain for the office of facilities planning and development, architect Barbara Koelbl went to all the planning meetings—way more than average, including some held for students—and acknowledges that this was a client "well versed in design theories." She expects that in the construction phase, her office will take the lead.

Koelbl observes that Scogin and Elam always were well prepared. Once, they came on the plane from Atlanta with an all-white building model in parts. Though



Just beyond the main entrance will be an exhibition space, at right, with concrete steps behind serving as seats for a presentation area. Above are studio levels, connected by a series of inclined planes to all other floors in the building.

it took two hours to set up on a 5-by-8-foot table, it was, Koelbl says, effective in revealing the complex structure in a way that two-dimensional drawings never could. The two architects are a husband-and-wife team who attended Georgia Tech together starting in 1961. This was

their first architecture school, although, as Scogin points out, both are teachers: "It's not a new subject." Their firm's other current projects include a furniture factory, a house in upstate New York and a music library at the University of California at Berkeley.

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For the Knowlton School, the new building will mean that at last, all 550 students and the library can be under one roof. They have been scattered between Brown and Ives, a one-time engineering building that was slated for demolition before being adapted for architecture in the late 1980s. As for the library, that's been in the basement of the Science and Engineering Library where, at least to the architects, it seems like an afterthought.

Livesey has been focusing on the new building ever since he was named director four years ago. First, he and his cohorts came up with a relatively huge list of 80 nationally known architects. That was cut down to 18 or 20 and finally to the five interviewed in August 1998. Besides Scogin and Elam, the five included Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who has since won the Pritzker Prize, and Bernard Tschumi of New York. Once Scogin and Elam were chosen, they helped choose the local architect, Wandel & Schnell.

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The five finalists were chosen, Livesey says, for being innovative and for willingness to deal with a limited budget and a client with strong opinions. They made an impressive list. Scogin thinks they were attracted by the school's caliber and Livesey's "vision to move it forward." The Wexner Center for the Arts, in recent years the campus's premier architectural showcase, may have helped also. "It makes a strong statement about the university's commitment to the arts and the creative process," Scogin says.

He adds that the broader architectural community is watching for the Knowlton School's new building.

Which is, of course, the point. ■

Jane Ware is a freelance writer in Columbus.