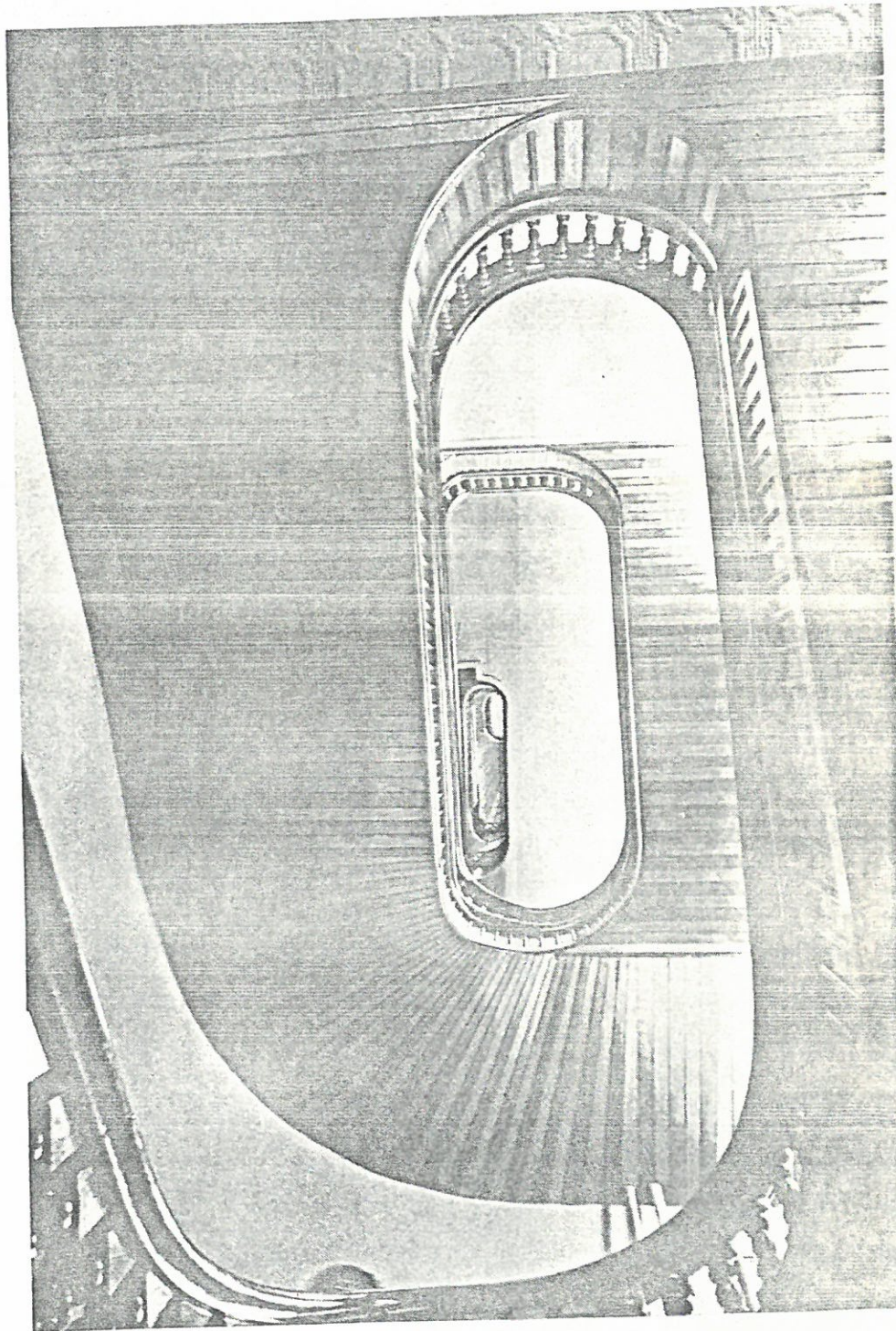


The Question of Tradition a challenge to the university



Kansas Engineer, November, 1963

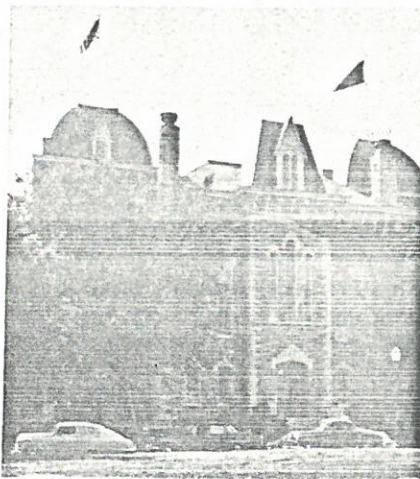
Gerald Bernstein

Last year a student of mine, who was serving as Art Editor of the *Jayhawker Yearbook*, asked me to write the commentary for a pictorial article on campus architecture. The old campus buildings were of particular interest to me and in my article I concentrated on the remarkable conglomeration of picturesque architecture which grows along the east ridge of Mount Oread. Within the short span of a year, one of the buildings I discussed has been smashed into oblivion, one is marked for imminent doom and one quakes in its alleged unsteady foundations.

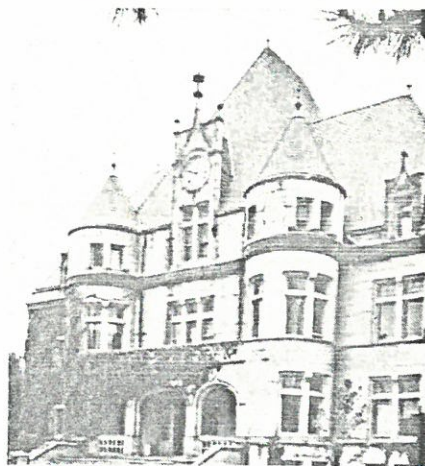
Although I admit a strong personal affection for the historic campus, I am fully aware of the pressing needs of our University. The explosive expansion demands that sentiment submit to necessity. But is necessity an excuse for mediocrity?

The factor which produced the architecture of the east campus was the nineteenth century phenomenon of Eclecticism. It grew out of the American desire for an architecture of "historical heritage." The architects of this movement borrowed directly from past styles, often coating iron framed buildings with Gothic frosting. Their primary aim was to create a ready-made tradition for a growing nation. The tradition they tried so hard to instill in the form of Gothic towers and Romanesque arches seems terribly naive in this age of steel and reinforced concrete. Nevertheless, the romantic qualities of the old campus, with

the nostalgic elegance of its forms, have managed to evoke a sense of tradition far greater than the borrowed motifs of the past.



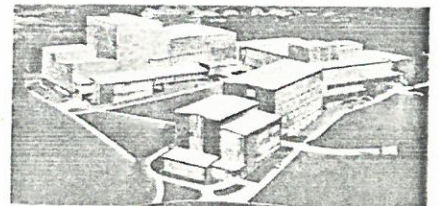
The twin towers of Fraser, which have symbolized the University to countless alumni, are the product of the active imagination of a former Chancellor. When it was built, 87 years ago, its design was based on the observation of over 80 university buildings, and something of each one seems to be in the final version. Completed in 1876, it was the largest university building in the United States and boasted such features as "panopticon-curved" lecture halls. The architecture is at best a conglomerate style, with Gothic flavored windows and a French seventeenth century Mansard roof. It unfortunately was built without benefit of a proper foundation and will in the next few years, fall victim to the wrecker's iron ball.



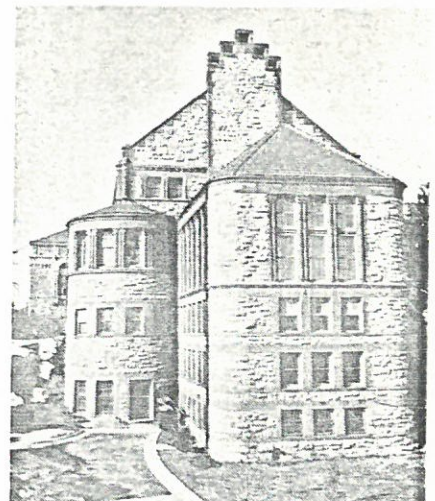
It's hard to imagine the campus without Fraser, but I, for one couldn't imagine the view of Mt. Oread devoid of Blake Hall's

majestic red roof. But today a large, gaping hole has replaced that once proud example of American eclecticism.

The passing of Old Blake is a tragic loss to both sentimental alumni and students of the nineteenth century architecture. It had the fortress-like appearance of a French Medieval château. The dramatic sweep of its steeply pointed roof, as well as its turrets and tracery recalled the châteaux of the Loire Valley. Blake's majestic setting on the crest of the hill presented its designers with the challenge of a unique site—a challenge, I might add, which has not been met by our more recent campus architecture. Murphy Hall's

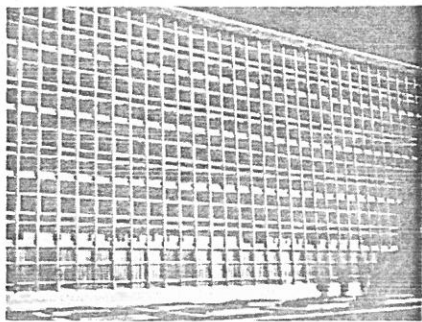


series of unrelated and disorganized shapes are poorly disposed on its sloping site. In contrast, the buildings of the old campus were well integrated to their hillside location. For example, the organic mass of Spooner Hall achieves a sense of monumentality when viewed from below.



Built originally as the library of the University, and now the Museum of Art, Spooner Hall was designed by a leading nineteenth century architect, Henry Van Brunt. Its architectural detail is freely derived from eleventh century Romanesque style. The architect attempted to adapt the basilica-

can plan of a long nave, side aisles and multiple apses to the library needs of a reading room and book stacks. Its roughly hewn stones and heavily arched entrance-way are familiar elements of the Romanesque revival style, yet its strong masses and ingenious interrelation of parts make it an outstanding structure in any style. It was obviously designed for its site and is securely attached to the hill by its unity of form and good proportions.

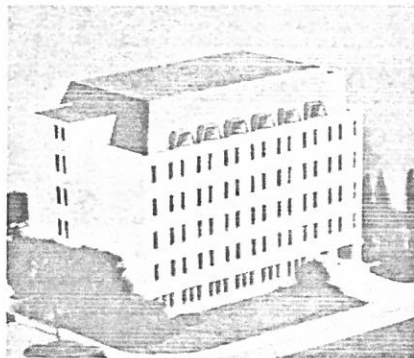


Compare this concept with Summerfield Hall, a building that makes no statement of function or location. Summerfield Hall would be more fitting in an urban setting than on the gentle slopes of a campus. It is a poor reinterpretation of the slab office buildings found in countless numbers in large cities. The curtain wall on the south facade is derived from the United Nations Secretariat in New York. Unfortunately, the architect of Summerfield Hall not only borrowed the U.N. building's elevation but also its poor site orientation. Both structures become "solar furnaces" in the glare of the afternoon sun. Summerfield Hall's "wall of glass" is a cliché rather than a series design solution. It fails to meet the challenge of its environment or the standards of its nineteenth century predecessors.

With the projected ten-year expansion program for the University, many problems face the planners. Not the least of these is the danger of destroying the magnificent open vistas which now exist on the hill. The areas between buildings hopefully will not be blocked by new structures. Other universities which have tried to effect architectural unity in terms of style and material, unfortunately negate these efforts by leaving no

vantage point from which to appreciate the view. This basic error may be avoided by constructing new buildings perpendicular rather than parallel to the slope.

Another related problem which faces the planners is how stylistically to replace the historic buildings which are making way for the new in this era of expansion. Blake Hall, which had been in disuse for a number of years, could no longer serve the needs of the University. With the ever-increasing demand for adequate classroom facilities it was decided to replace it with a modern structure.



The designers of the projected new addition have attempted to capture the flavor of Old Blake by recalling the color and shape of its roof line. I am sympathetic with the architect's aims, but I feel he has missed the point. The slanted red roof, pierced with hooded dormers, seems to be the only connection between the old and the new. If the designer wanted to express the architectural character of Blake, rather than its eclectic motifs, he could have recalled the former building's brilliant relationship to its site, or the interplay of planed and curved surfaces on its eastern facade. The model for the new structure shows no such adaptation of building to hillside. Its rectangular form stands flat upon its site, totally oblivious to its unique location.

Old Blake was a product of the American desire for historical tradition. It was built at a time when new advances in technology and materials had not yet been universally accepted. Contemporary architecture need not copy historical motifs in an effort to achieve tradition. Clearly, tradition is not preserved by retaining a visual

image of part of the preceding structure and applying it to a new edifice totally unqualified to receive it.

The exciting potentials of structure, such as reinforced concrete and steel space frames, have introduced a new vocabulary of design. This is not to say that all new structural techniques must be unquestionably accepted, for as Mies Van der Rohe said, "It is better to be good than original." But if the campus architecture of the future is to meet the standards of its nineteenth century predecessors it must do so not by borrowing old motifs, but by creating new tradition.

We are living in an era of expanding horizons. The next decade will see great changes in the campus of the University. The expansion program calls for an extensive building program that will provide facilities for over 20,000 students. If we are to meet the challenge of expansion both in scale and quality we must set our sights high.

The University is striving towards excellence in every area. There is no reason for accepting provincial substitutes in architectural design. Sound architecture costs no more than that of mediocre design.

Although there are many factors which are involved in determining the architecture of our campus we must expect that competent architects will be chosen. Historically, this country has used architectural competitions to achieve the best possible solutions. From the White House, designed in 1792 by Hoban, to Federal Office buildings under construction today, open competitions have stimulated interest and quality in design.

In order to achieve first rate architecture we must develop an appreciation for excellence. This can be accomplished only through a greater awareness on the part of the administration, faculty, students and community. We must recognize that the architecture of our campus represents the University as a whole, and we will get superior architecture only if we demand it.