

HUMANITIES



Fig. 1. Humanities, February 1997. [Del Brown Photo, AP-65]

Humanities was built in 1966, and opened in 1969, as the home of History, Music, Art and Art Appreciation. The architect was Mr. Harry Weese of Chicago, working in the so-called Brutalist style.

Between the end of WWII and 1959 the University had spent tens of millions of dollars on construction, mostly on housing, and on the sciences. This was first, the result of the influx of students into Madison, and second the influx of federal money into science education. At Wisconsin, the second effect was amplified by the presence of the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF), which also assisted in the construction of scientific facilities. The upshot of these



Fig. 2. A photograph of the model of Humanities, used at the regents August 1964 meeting to discuss the concept. [series 9/2, Humanities, ns-1747]

trends was that by the late 1950s some of the traditional core subjects of the University found themselves in the position of the poor stepchild. These departments were mainly in the humanities area of the college of L & S. They included history, music and art.

History was housed in Bascom Hall, with 16 offices for 23 professors and 34 T. A's. The requirement that all students take American History had boosted their teaching loads enormously. Music had two main buildings, the eighty year old Assembly Hall (now old music Hall), and the music annex, a converted commercial building on Park Street. Art and art history had offices and classrooms in the old engineering building (now old education) on Bascom Hill. The old journalism building (now demolished) on Observatory Drive, was the main location for art studios. This studio building was regarded as a fire hazard, a judgement that was proven sound when it burned in 1965, reducing the already inadequate space for art.¹

In 1962, building committees were appointed from these three departments, history, music and art, to prepare plans. At that time the 1959 "sketch plan" was still the main touchstone for development of the lower campus (Park Street to Murray Street, and from Lake Mendota to University Avenue). This plan assumed that the area would be gradually developed for a wide range of uses, leaving large open formally landscaped areas. The committees began with this plan in mind which allowed for three separate buildings for the departments. Early in 1962 there was proposed an architectural competition for the lower campus area. It was recognized that the area would have to carefully and sensitively designed to provide a unified design approach to provide a suitable transition between the city and the University. A committee for the competition decided that such a contest would be desirable but not feasible, because of difficulties in coordinating several different projects, with different purposes, funding and time periods. The committee recommended rather that the "area in question, and all of its buildings, should be designed as a whole." Late in 1962 the architect for the lower campus was selected, apparently by University planner Leo Jacobson and state architect James Gailbraith. This architect was Harry Weese of Chicago.²

Weese's first report, dated September 1963, covers the needs of Art, Art Education, History, Music, the establishment of an Art Center and a Center for Communication Arts. The estimated cost is about \$15 million. All these departments were to be located in the lower campus area. In this plan Weese is already thinking in terms of a single structure for Art, Music and History, although the

accompanying sketch shows a building with considerable open area around it for landscaping and pedestrian circulation. As the numbers came in from the various departmental planning committees, the building began to grow larger and larger.³

The regents took up the design issue at their meeting in August 1964. A model of the building was shown (see Fig. 2). At this meeting the regents mainly discuss financing of the lower campus building. They had already decided to combine all three projects (History Art, and Music) into one, and additionally had used all the money available for a communication arts building, which was deferred until the next budget biennium. The estimated cost was now \$9.9 million. Regent Debardeleben asked a question regarding the combination of the buildings into one, and the planners explain that separate buildings would require high-rise structures which would conflict with the style of existing buildings in the area. High rise structure would also be more expensive, and inefficient in handling the estimated 7000 student station in the building. It was pointed out that the building would give better land utilization than the Bascom Hill buildings even considering the amount of open area inside the building (which was necessary for pedestrian traffic circulation for those 7000 students). Regent Debardeleben also asked if anything could be done about the design of the skylights, which gave the building "the appearance of a factory." He was told that a proper treatment would be developed. After more than two hours of discussion the concept of the building was approved. It was pointed out that the building could not be expanded; if the building and the lower campus became saturated (estimated to occur at a student enrollment of 40,000 maximum), a west campus would be needed.⁴

The next step was taken at the September 1964 regents meeting, when the preliminary plans were approved. The cost estimate had risen to \$9.9 million, due to land costs in the area. The preparation of final plans took all of 1965. Dr. James Watrous, who was involved with the project as a planner of the Elvehjem, says that the personnel of the building committees was in constant flux, and that this caused much planning difficulty. The final plans were approved in August 1965. The planners were becoming worried about the delays because of a very tight labor market, and conflicts with other building projects. In January 1966 the project was put for bids; the project was so large that several bidders asked for an extension until February, which was granted.⁵

The regents discussed the bids at their March 1965 meeting, and the news was all bad. There was only one contractor who bid the entire job, and that bid was almost \$2 million over the budget. The regents were faced with delaying or eliminating other building projects, or delaying this project for redesign. After a very short discussion, the regents decided to let the Executive committee handle the problem. What followed was a round of cost cutting that eventually determined what the building would be like.⁶

The architect and building committees developed independent lists of features that could be altered to reduce the cost of the building. The University complained that the architect seemed ready to sacrifice anything except items that would produce some architectural effect. These lists show the wholesale removal of trim and decoration items, including plastering bare concrete, stone entrances, carpet in offices and other items that would have made the finished building a great deal more attractive. Some idea of what the original plan would have produced can be gotten by examining the Elvehjem, which was nearly immune to the budget cuts because its funding was privately raised. A major casualty of this cost cutting was the interior courtyard, which was to be developed as a sculpture garden, but became an unused space known by building users as "the gravel pit." The replacement of stone facing by brick was avoided by moving \$350,000 from the next biennium's budget.⁷

In April 1966 the regents approved the schedule of costs and financing developed by the Executive Committee, which had gotten the State Building Commission to add \$400,000 to the project, and had reshuffled other construction budget money, without delaying or dropping any other projects. The regents also authorized the Executive Committee to award contracts. On April 18, 1966, the general construction contract was let to Corbetta Construction of Des Plaines Illinois for \$7.49 million. Total

contracts for the project, which included the Elvehjem, were \$13.7 million. Construction began on May 17, 1966, with an estimated completion date of August 1968.⁸

Strikes and shortages delayed the project for a year. The building went into use in September 1969. In January 1969 the regents voted, in what may stand as the greatest unintentional sarcasms in University history, to name this stark, graceless, and unadorned building "Humanities Building".⁹ A more charitable view holds that whatever the actual result, Humanities was at least an attempt to deviate from the truly ugly high-rise boxes (e. g. Meteorology and Engineering Research), then commonly being built.

The grand opening of Humanities, dedicated in the words of vice president Robert Clodius to "beauty, harmony and grace", took place the week of November 17, 1969. Two dedicatory concerts in Mills hall, by the University Orchestra, and the Pro Arte Quartet, were seriously marred by acoustical problems that would not be worked out for years. The three main music halls are named for long-time music faculty members: Charles H. Mills (#2340), Edson W. Morphy (#2330), and Irene B. Eastman (#2320). In the fall of 1969 both the Music and History departments registered complaints about excessive sound transmission between their respective areas. These problems have never been adequately solved. The University suggested that the state have the attorney general try to recover expenses from the architect for design errors. The art department is now overcrowded and badly ventilated, exactly their position in 1959 when planning for the building began.¹⁰

The building is 532 by 164 feet of concrete, seven stories (92 feet) high, with two auditorium blocks inside its perimeter. The exterior is concrete and lannon stone. The exterior walls slope inward over the first and second floor to provide a break from flat walls on such a huge structure, and to provide some natural light on those levels through small triangular skylights.

Music has 127 practice rooms on the first floor, and staff offices on the second. History occupies the third floor, with art on floors five through seven. The top floor studios are lit by the huge skylights that makes the building look "like a factory". The sixth and seventh floors have a connecting link across the open inner court yard areas.

1) University directories; Proposal of the History Building Committee, May 18, 1959, series 24/9/2 box 12.

2) *Regent's Minutes*, November 14, 1959 Lower Campus Area Plan, exhibit C, May 4, 1962; Architectural competition: series 24/9/2 box 13 "Art Center Complex" folder; Calls for committees: Wendt to Burns et al. February 6, 1962, series 24/9/2 box 13, "Music, School of" folder; Wendt to Logan et al. undated, Wendt to Jensen et al. undated, series 24/9/2 box 13.

3) Building Program Analysis, September 11, 1963, Harry Weese and Associates, series 40/1/7-1 box 24.

4) *Regent's Minutes*, August 14, 1964, September 25, 1964.

5) *Regent's Minutes*, September 25, 1964, August 20, 1965; Preliminary Budget Estimates September 25, 1964, series 4/0/3 box 189; Fleming to Harrington, August 16, 1965, series 40/1/7-1 box 125; Orr to Gilbert et al. September 9, 1965, Peterson to Culbertson, July 7, 1965, series 24/9/3 box 7; Interview with Dr. James Watrous, summer 1995. Orr to Edsall et al. January 27, 1966, series 24/9/3 box 7.

6) *Regent's Minutes*, March 4, 1966, April 1, 1966.

7) Orr to Yamamoto, March 10, 1966, Orr to Gilbert et al., March 10, 1966, Orr to Wenning, March 8, 1966, series 24/9/3 box 7, Engman to Debardeleben, April 7, 1966, Fleming to Harrington, April 8, 1966, series 40/1/7-1 box 125.

8) *Regent's Minutes*, April 18, 1966; Wisconsin State Journal, June 6, 1966.

9) *Regent's Minutes*, January 10, 1969 (presumably unintentional); I thank Steve Masar for the counter-argument.

10) *Capital Times*, November 17, 1969; *The Daily Cardinal*, January 28, 1969, October 30, 1969; *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 16, 1969, January 28, 1973; *Capital Times*, November 17, 1969; Gilbert to Young, August 15, 1969, Rothstein to Powers, October 21, 1969, series 40/1/7-1 box 125;