

Laying the Foundation for Excellence

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By

Matthew Hamilton

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## Laying the Foundation for Excellence

### I. Introduction

The California Polytechnic School, now known as California Polytechnic State University, was originally founded in 1901 as a college to give a practical education in the fields of engineering and agriculture for working people of California. Over time, the school grew in popularity, and eventually became a university. Over the course of time, Cal Poly not only became a name brought up when mentioning exceptional schools for engineering and agriculture; but one that was now brought up when mentioning nationally renowned architecture schools. In 2015, Cal Poly was named the number two architecture program in the nation by the *Architectural Record*.<sup>1</sup> But Cal Poly had not always been known for this, so what led them to become nationally recognized? The answer lies in their “Learn by Doing” philosophy, a passionate leader in the faculty, and the usage of an incredibly unique location on the Cal Poly campus: the Architectural Design Village.

Cal Poly has always dabbled in the field of architecture, although it was not prominent at the school until much later. Since the school was founded in 1901, classes were featured that dealt with architecture, such as Engineering Mechanics and beginners’ courses in Reinforced Concrete. Although they were not under an architectural department yet, these classes show that students were still interested in learning about building and design. A year after the school became a college in 1940, the Architectural Drafting Department was established underneath the college of engineering. However, things were not optimistic at the start of this new program. Too few teachers led to student unrest, and as a result, new staff needed to be hired to aid in the learning process. Mr. Ralph Priestly came to teach at Cal Poly from Chicago in the winter of

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Stephens, “America’s Top Architecture Schools 2015,” *Architectural Record*, 2015, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.architecturalrecord.com/topics/146-america-s-best-architecture-schools>

1947 with one goal in mind, to bring national recognition to the school. The following decade would prove critical for the department, hiring numerous faculty members, including George Hasslein who would lead the program to success. In 1964, Poly Canyon (which would later be called the Architectural Design Village) became available to students for use on their senior projects. By 1967, Cal Poly's very own College of Architecture was created, marking the beginning of a nationally renowned program.<sup>2</sup>

This paper will argue that the "Learn by Doing" philosophy, which is seen through the usage of the Design Village, and a passionate teaching staff better prepare students for the real world, which in turn create a more successful program. Programs such as "Design-Build" offer advantages that Cal Poly has had for years due to the Design Village, and faculty such as George Hasslein led the Cal Poly architecture program to success much like the numerous Deans of Cornell did for their College of Architecture.

This paper and the argument it presents are important because it shows the importance of the Village and Cal Poly's "Learn by Doing" philosophy along with the educator who facilitated this massive growth. Cal Poly had been using a unique pedagogical technique that was attractive to architects and educators alike, and further shows how Poly's unique philosophy spurred a hugely successful architecture program.

## **II. Historiography**

According to James P. Cramer in his 2010 *Architectural Record* article, "Learning from America's Best Schools," "Stepping into a successful architectural practice begins with education... If the purpose of a professional degree is to prepare students for professional

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<sup>2</sup> "Program History." *Architectural Engineering*, California Polytechnic State University. <http://www.arce.calpoly.edu/content/programs/index>, Web. 8 Feb. 2016.

practice, then how well are degree-granting institutions performing the task?"<sup>3</sup> Cramer's article discusses the rankings of various top architecture schools in the US, their degrees and general nature of the professional field of architecture. *Architectural Record's* ranking system is based on information supplied by architecture firms who employ recent graduates and who responded to the question, "In your firm's hiring experience in the past five years, which schools are best preparing students for success in the architecture profession?"<sup>4</sup> One new industry-inspired pedagogical change that has come about in recent times is the use of "Design-Build" programs, in which students are put in charge of community building project where they are able to gain experience building a myriad of things.<sup>5</sup> The students that partake in these programs are assigned projects that benefit their community as a whole, building projects small and large. Some of the things that they are tasked to build include small parks and pavilions and even large scale projects such as community centers. This "Learn by Doing" experience is highly attractive to architecture students, and today, more than 100 universities across the nation now use this practical learning model, including schools featured in the *Architectural Record's* top ranked universities, such as Auburn University.<sup>6</sup>

Now, what makes an architecture program good? Cornell University's architecture program provided the perfect example. Cornell was chosen for numerous reasons, for one it has been either the number one or two architecture school ranked by the *Architectural Record* for the past 10 years, and serves as a good comparison.<sup>7</sup> Another is the importance it played in the founding of Cal Poly, as it was looked at as one of the main examples upon which Cal Poly was

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<sup>3</sup> James P. Cramer, "Learning From America's Best Schools." *Architectural Record* 198, no. 11 (November 2010): 69-71. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 1, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Cramer.

<sup>5</sup> Kevan Williams, "Learning by Design." *Parks & Recreation* 49, no. 11 (November 2014): 48-51. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 28, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Williams p. 2; Cramer.

<sup>7</sup> Stephens.

based. Myron Angel, after visiting the Eastern United States and seeing the importance of a normal school on the west coast was convinced after seeing the success at Cornell University. In *History of the California Polytechnic School at San Luis Obispo*, Angel repeatedly uses Cornell as the example that Cal Poly should set, an example of which can be seen in the title of this article, “Our Polytechnic School. Its Necessity and Scope – Let it be the Cornell of the Pacific.”<sup>8</sup> Angel saw the similarities between the area where Cornell was founded and San Luis Obispo, and sought, “to found an institution in where any person can find instruction in any study,” much like Cornell had.<sup>9</sup> Angel saw Cornell as the perfect school to compare Cal Poly to, as it was a great example of a small town school spurring academic and community growth.

Cornell University also has a great history to look at for its architecture program. Interestingly enough, Cornell in 1871 became the first university in the United States to have a College of Architecture.<sup>10</sup> Being the first school in the United States to offer an Architecture degree, students enrolled immediately, and the program gained increasing prominence. The first classes to be featured under this program were classes such as architecture history, building technology, and mechanics.<sup>11</sup> Another class that was part of the curriculum was fine arts, something that seemed tertiary at first, but soon became a staple of the major. This is what made the Cornell program so unique, their focus on the arts.

This tie to the arts didn’t last for long, however. When Francke Huntington Bosworth became dean in 1919, drastic changes were made to the program. Firstly, Bosworth wanted to shy away from an arts-centered architectural philosophy to develop a unique architectural

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<sup>8</sup> Myron Angel, *History of the California Polytechnic School at San Luis Obispo, California* (San Luis Obispo: Tribune Print, 1907), 45.

<sup>9</sup> Angel, 47.

<sup>10</sup> “My Pet Extravagance” *125 Years of Achievement: The History of Cornell’s College of Architecture, Art, and Planning*. Cornell University, 1996. Web. 8 Feb. 2016.

<sup>11</sup> “Charles Babcock”, Cornell.

philosophy. He expressed the main philosophy of the program when he wrote that, “architecture...is a part, not of construction alone, not of art alone, but of the art of building.”<sup>12</sup>

The new program stressed a synergy of the two fields to make a comprehensive and holistic program for architecture. It proved successful, by the 1930s, there were 170 students enrolled in the program with 18 teachers, and in 1940, “...place[ing] twelve winners in the seventeen competitions for the Prix de Rome fellowship.”<sup>13</sup> By 1967, the college became known as the one it is today, the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning. At this time, Cornell was world renowned as a school of architecture, preparing students for the real world in an ever changing profession. Today, many architecture schools took note of what Cornell was doing and applied it to their own curriculums, including many architecture firms applying the principles founded at Cornell University.<sup>14</sup>

By looking at the Cornell example, a good architecture school is one that innovates and incorporates all aspects of building into their curriculum. A school can not only focus on building or design, without a healthy mix of the two the scales of knowledge would be unbalanced. Another important aspect to look at is the role of faculty. Many of the deans and teachers featured in the history of Cornell’s architecture program were passionate about the subject and wanted to make great strides in improving the school overall. Architecture is an ever changing field, so schools need to be able to be malleable and willing to change to keep up with the rapid pace being set by professionals.

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<sup>12</sup> “The Art of Building.”

<sup>13</sup> “The Art of Building.”

<sup>14</sup> “The College of Architecture, Art, and Planning.”

### III. George Hasslein

Much like Cornell, one of the reasons that Cal Poly gained such prominence in the field of architecture was a man who had the passion to make something great out of this central coast polytechnic school. He was the most prominent Dean of the College of Architecture and Environmental Design that Cal Poly has ever had. His name was George Hasslein, and without him, Poly might not be where it is today. His teaching philosophy was that, "The function of a teacher is to help each student gain his or her rightful potential as a human being. I look at every student and ask how I can help release that life energy, that fulfilling force which is every person's gift."<sup>15</sup> This outlook on the teaching profession and passion for his students only shows how much he was willing to work to make the school great. As stated earlier, when the architecture program first started at Poly, it was off to a rocky start; not enough educators were there to guide along these prospective students and more educators needed to be hired to help move the course along. Hasslein was one of these people, and arguably the most important. In an article in the *Cal Poly Magazine*, a former student of Hasslein's, Peter Hoyt Berg, recounts the experiences he had with this teacher and why he made his learning experience so great. Berg described Hasslein as a mentor before a teacher, a man who went out of his way to make sure that his students had the best experience possible. During field trips, Berg recounts that Hasslein, "...let me sleep on the floor of his hotel room at California Council of the American Institute of Architects and American Institute of Architects conventions so I could meet the accomplished architects of the day."<sup>16</sup> Not only did he do things like this, he also attended numerous events that took place in student lives, such as bar mitzvahs and weddings, and made sure to always get the best of the best in the architecture field to come speak at Cal Poly. A

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<sup>15</sup> "A Chair for the King of Hearts," *Cal Poly Magazine*: Vol. 6: Iss. 3, Article 7.  
[http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/calpoly\\_magazine/vol6/iss3/7](http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/calpoly_magazine/vol6/iss3/7)

<sup>16</sup> "A Chair for the King of Hearts"

teacher such as this is much more than just a teacher; they have to power to inspire, and being able to light the fire of motivation and determination under students is something that is rare. If he was not such a prominent figure, former students of his would not still be donating money in his name.

Hasslein's work did not go unnoticed. Throughout his time at Cal Poly, he received numerous accolades and shot the school to national fame. In the November 17, 1977 *Cal Poly Report*, a front page article titled "Dean Hasslein honored by California architects" says just this. The article talks about Hasslein receiving the highest educational award available to obtain from the California Council of The American Institute of Architects, from which he received nominations from architects throughout the state of California. Architects lauded him, commenting that, "Cal Poly architecture's phenomenal growth was neither predestined nor accidental...the direct result of the energy and devotion of one man ...to create not only the largest but the best educational system in the design professions."<sup>17</sup> And that is only one of the many praises presented in the article, others explained how he created a truly unique school within his lifetime, or that his work gained Cal Poly international fame. Whatever praise there may be, it all goes to show how important the work that Hasslein put into building the school itself and how important an educator he is. Much like the Cornell example, without this incredibly involved and devoted teacher who wanted nothing more than the success of the program itself, it would more than likely not be where it is today. A successful architecture program needs faculty who are willing to put time and effort into their curriculum, and create a stimulating field of study, much as Hasslein did.

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<sup>17</sup> *Cal Poly Report*. vol 29, Issue 15, November 17, 1977, p 1-6. University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA. [http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/pao\\_rpt/1597](http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/pao_rpt/1597)

This article also contains another important piece of information regarding this paper; mentions of the Design Village. According to the *Cal Poly Report*, "...the uniqueness of Cal Poly has been publicized worldwide!" The Design Village, or Poly Canyon as it is called in this article, was being featured in the 108<sup>th</sup> issue of *Topic*, "a US Information Agency magazine that was published for distribution in Africa." The article within the magazine shows pictures of the different structures built in the Village and describes the School of Architecture and Environmental design, in which it is said that Poly Canyon is used as a method to link the practical knowledge that students learn in class with "job-site reality".<sup>18</sup> Without all of this extra land, it would be hard for Cal Poly to host such a unique learning grounds. The reason that Cal Poly was garnering international recognition was not because of great engineering or agricultural feats, but because of these unique buildings that captured the attention of architects and the lay person alike.

#### **IV. Design Village and Poly Royal**

During the academic year of 1963-64 in *El Mustang*, the Village is hardly mentioned. The first nod towards the Design Village is in an article titled, "Geodesic Dome Moved," which talks about students moving the Geodesic Dome (which is still there today) to Poly Canyon to be converted into a seminar pavilion.<sup>19</sup> With the intended conversion to a seminar pavilion, one can draw a simple conclusion; the land in Poly Canyon was not originally intended to host a unique array of buildings on the Cal Poly campus. Also during this period of time, the architecture program is hardly mentioned within the writings of the *El Mustang*; the engineering and agriculture programs dominate the pages. This shows the lack of focus given to the Architecture program at the time. The next mentions of activity in the Village is on April 3, 1964, in which

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<sup>18</sup> *Cal Poly Report* p1-3

<sup>19</sup> "Geodesic Dome Moved; No 'Rally' This Time," *El Mustang*, vol. 26, no. 9, 22 October 1963, p 1.

an article talked of a group of senior architects that built a “Shell House” in Poly Canyon using a fast and cheap alternative to wood.<sup>20</sup> This Shell House played an important role in the popularization of the Village, because come Poly Royal, mentions of it are made again.

In the April 24, 1964 Poly Royal issue of *El Mustang*, there are no real mentions of Architecture except for one that boasts a “New and Unique” design in Poly Canyon, the Shell House, as well as some other senior design projects.<sup>21</sup> At this time, only one bus took visitors out to Poly Canyon, which indicates that the school did not really think that many people were interested in seeing what it had to offer. After the Poly Royal issue of the *El Mustang*, Architecture is not really mentioned much, except for one event of the utmost importance; on May 12, 1964, the Architecture Engineering department head, George Hasslein, received the highest architectural honor from the American Institute of Architects for changing the architecture program from a nonprofit program into one of recognized status.<sup>22</sup> This is notable because it is also the first year that Cal Poly used the Design Village (or Poly Canyon as it was referred to back then) to showcase its unique buildings during Poly Royal. Hasslein begins to show his importance in the growth of the program here, this award shows the hard work and dedication he put in to make the program great. Before the program was struggling to make students happy, and now the head of the department was being recognized for outstanding work. Most architecture students at universities around the nation do not have much to show for their work, and the “Learn by Doing” policy of Cal Poly gives these future architects something to show; using the expansive space provided by the Village to apply the skills they learned in class to actually gain experience building things.

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<sup>20</sup> *El Mustang*, vol 26, no. 33, 3 April 1964, p 2.

<sup>21</sup> “New Building Concepts Shown By Architects,” *El Mustang*, vol 26, no. 38, 24 April 1964, p 3.

<sup>22</sup> Edna Togawa, “ American Institute of Architects Confers Fellowship on Hasslein,” *El Mustang*, vol 26, no. 41, 12 May 1964, p 1.

By 1979, there is a significant difference in the amount of attention paid to the Village and Architecture students in general during Poly Royal. On April 26, 1979, an article in the *Mustang Daily* talks about the Design Village and the program that has been hosted there at Poly for the past six years. This piece explained, “Students from five departments of Cal Poly’s school of Architecture and Environmental Design and students from 12 other schools, mostly from the Los Angeles area, will meet for three days of fun and sharing design ideas.”<sup>23</sup> This is an interesting point to see, Cal Poly’s of this event with 12 other schools reveals how Cal Poly provides a unique architecture experience within the Design Village, one that is not common among other schools. To host an event that 12 different schools go to implies that Cal Poly is the school to look at when it comes to architecture. One may ask what made this change, and the answer is simple. When the architecture program started to use the Village as a spot to host senior projects, people were captivated by what they saw. Not many other schools can boast such a unique feature, and certainly not any of the big names on the west coast. This set Cal Poly apart from the rest. People were coming from all over to compete and to see the new structures each year, and for a prospective student, being able to see these structures could only create excitement and longing to join a school that offers such a unique program. This sort of recognition is one of the factors that led to the success of the Architecture program; as more and more people saw and heard about this wonderful place, the more people that wanted to be involved with it.

During Poly Royal, one can really see how much more attention is given to the Design Village. For starters, the previous one bus that had been taking people out in the 1960s had been

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Howard, “Soaking in the New Design of Cal Poly’s Solar Structure,” *Mustang Daily*, vol 43, no. 84, April 26, 1979, p 3.

increased to two buses and three vans that left Kennedy Library at regular intervals.<sup>24</sup> With an increase in traffic, one can infer that there is an increase in popularity of the area. The article describes the Design Village as an immensely popular location during Poly Royal, one that people came to every year, whether an experienced architect or not, to see what this new year had to offer. Every year since 1973, competitions had been held within three different categories to see who got to leave their mark at Cal Poly and to showcase their designs during Poly Royal. Also, it should be noted that the people in charge of the Design Village during Poly Royal wanted to create a sort of “camp” atmosphere, with games and entertainment, to make people feel comfortable whilst enjoying the architecture.<sup>25</sup>

The main goal of Poly Royal had always been to showcase the campus to prospective students, generally showing what each major had to offer and the work that students had to show. Previously, the focus was mainly around Agriculture and Engineering, but with the 1979 Poly Royal *Mustang Daily* one fact seems blatantly obvious, the school now wants to show off and promote its architects. An increase in traffic, competition, and the comfortability factor out in this Architectural showcase show concrete evidence that Cal Poly was selling its Architecture program to anyone interested in seeing it, something that was not seen as much before. At this point in time, Cal Poly was as much of an architecture school as an engineering one, and this article shows just that. Why else would there be so much advertisement for it during Poly Royal? Cal Poly was proud of and wanted to showcase its Architecture program, one that it felt stood above and beyond the expectations people had for other schools, proving that with the Design Village, the Architecture program was able to become amazing. Prospective Architect students are given a unique experience in the Design Village; what other school offers a beautiful

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<sup>24</sup> Paula Kregel, “The Archies: Using brains, they’ve built a city,” *Mustang Daily*, vol 43, no. 84, 28 April 1979, C6.

<sup>25</sup> Kregel.

valley in which students used what they learned in class to actually build something? This unique and engaging experience is what helped shoot Cal Poly ahead of its competitors.

## **V. Conclusion**

On February 25, 2015, Cal Poly received the American Institute of Architecture Students Chapter Honor Award in recognition of, "...its consistent growth and stability while providing outstanding education and professional programs to its members."<sup>26</sup> Persisting even today, the architecture program at Cal Poly remains prominent in the field of collegiate architecture. The Architectural Design Village, along with the guidance of George Hasslein, really helped build the reputation and prestige of the Cal Poly College of Architecture. The "Learn by Doing" philosophy created a unique program at Cal Poly that was much before its time, and the guidance provided by Hasslein is in line with the guidance provided at Cornell to create such a great institution.

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<sup>26</sup> "Cal Poly Receives AIAS Chapter Honor Reward," *Cal Poly ARCE Recent News*, Accessed February 29, 2016. <http://architecture.calpoly.edu/news>.

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