

Proceedings

at the Dinner in Honor of

the late

HARVEY WILEY CORBETT,

at the

Architectural League of

New York,

Thursday Evening,

17 February 1955,

under the Chairmanship of

JULIAN CLARENCE LEVI

* * *

as transcribed by

Jeffrey Ellis Aronin,

M. Arch., M.R.A.I.C., A.R.I.B.A.

TOASTMASTER:

Mr. Julian Clarence Levi *

GUESTS:

Mr. and Mrs. Max Abramovitz
Mr. Jeffrey Ellis Aronin
Mr. James Bacon
Mr. C. Dale Badgely
Mr. Martin Beck
Mr. Minor Bishop
Mr. Ernest J. Bolduc, Jr.
Mr. and Mrs. Allyn Cox
Miss Martha Crawford
Mr. John Corbett
Miss Jeanne Daverne
Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Douglas, Jr.
Mr. Ferdinand Eiseman
Mr. Duane Everson
Mr. Frederick H. Ecker
Mr. Edwin A. Farlow
Mr. and Mrs. Albert Flanagan
Mrs. Sina Fosdick
Mr. Robert Frantz
Mr. Howard Greenley *
Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Genz
Mr. B. Sumner Gruzen
Mr. and Mrs. Millard Henlein
Mr. and Mrs. David Harriton, Jr.
Mr. and Mrs. Hart
Mr. Arthur Holden
Mr. Ira Hooper
Mr. James Hornbeck
Mr. Robert Hudspeth
Mr. Jack Lenor Larsen
Mrs. Julian Clarence Levi
Mr. and Mrs. Morris Ketchum
Mr. Moissaye Marans
Mrs. Hildreth Meiere
Mrs. Lyda M. Nelson
Mrs. Carol H. Nuytkens and Mr. Nuytkens
Mr. William F. Otto
Mr. and Mrs. Chester B. Price *
Mr. Lauros N. Phoenix
Mr. Louis Walsh
Mr. and Mrs. Lorimer Rich
Mr. Walcott

Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Walker *
Mr. and Mrs. Howard F. Whisler
Mr. J. Scott Williams
Mr. and Mrs. Paul Wood

* Indicates Past President of the Architectural League

As a preamble to the evening's deliberations, Mr. Julian Clarence Levi called upon Mr. Ralph Walker to submit his testimonial concerning the late Harvey Wiley Corbett. Mr. Walker told how he was well acquainted with Mr. Corbett for many years, but reminisced with particular fondness about his experience when Mr. Corbett was Chairman of Design for the Chicago World's Fair and Mr. Walker, together with Raymond Hood, were also members of the Board. Mr. Walker related some amusing incidents which occurred when they frequently shared drawing-room compartments on the New York-Chicago trains; it often caused the Pullman porters much consternation to see such a tall man (Mr. Corbett) travelling with one of much smaller build.

It was during this Chicago World's Fair period, said Mr. Walker, that he was able to perceive at first hand Mr. Corbett's capabilities as an outstanding architect. The most remarkable thing about Mr. Corbett, he maintained, was that whenever there was a problem of getting a client to agree with the architects' suggestions, Harvey Wiley Corbett could resolve it. He was a master salesman. He had the ability to sell architectural concept and design. He was a welder of diverse opinions. He was a man of foresight.

Harvey Wiley Corbett, said Mr. Walker, made the most of his abilities. He used his slender fingers in an expressive manner. His effective voice, almost as if framed for the theater, also helped him achieve results. Sometimes he did get discouraged, though; that was when he could not get everyone to agree. But he merely rationalized, "You can't always sell everybody."

In tendering his remarks, Mr. Levi recalled that he first met Harvey Wiley Corbett in Paris in 1897 at the funeral of French President Faure. Mr. Levi told how Mr. Corbett, being quite tall, was ably equipped to see the procession over the heads of ten rows of French citizens. Mr. Levi, however, was a little too short for this and it was not until Mr. Corbett hoisted him up on his shoulders that he could see anything.

Mr. Levi said that Mr. Corbett did not like to maintain a large architectural office. He found he could only feed ideas to ten men. If there were eleven men there, they fed ideas to him.

Mr. Levi recalled Mr. Corbett's many qualifications and listed his memberships in professional societies and honors awarded him. He noted his interest in many fields, as the development of the skyscraper, parking problems in urban centers, traffic flow and prefabricated housing.

Mr. Frederick H. Ecker, Honorary Chairman of the Board of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Co., testified as to Mr. Corbett's abilities in the design of their home office. He also recalled the many happy moments he had with Mr. Corbett.

Mrs. Sina Fosdick, Vice President of the Roerich Foundation, Inc., had this to say:

At the dedication ceremony of the opening of the Roerich Museum building in 1929 Mr. Corbett presided as Chairman, welcoming the distinguished guests and representatives of many European countries. In his own opening address he said about the building which he had built:

"It represents a unique event in the history of New York; in fact, in the history of the nation, because you put for the first time in the same building a center of art and a center of living, indicating a truly ideal existence of people living in intimate contact with their art.

"Now, it is rather unusual for the architect of a building to be Chairman of an occasion of this kind, because, generally, when he has finished the work he is no longer a friend of his client.

"But this building was unusual in that respect as well, because the spirit of hearty cooperation started it and was carried through to the very finish."

My recollections of Mr. Corbett are quite vivid. Our association with him during the erection of the Roerich Museum building was of the most pleasant nature. He used to come frequently at that time to discuss with the trustees various phases of the construction. It is most noteworthy that he was more occupied with beauty of line and form than with the practical aspects of the plan, always visualizing the building as a whole, and never forgetting the essential purpose for which the building was to be erected, namely, to house the Roerich Museum. The problem of apartments in the

building was discussed mostly with someone else, working under Mr. Corbett.

Mr. Corbett deeply appreciated Professor Roerich's art and was interested in the cultural institutions which were at that time launched into life under Professor Roerich's guidance. He became an honorary advisor of Roerich Museum and on many occasions expressed his interest in its various undertakings.

I feel that when Mr. Corbett departed this life there passed from the American scene a truly great architect, a man of high culture, keenly sensitive and alive to beauty in all forms, one who had dedicated his life to beauty in architecture, his chosen profession. Many unique buildings in this country, of most varied types and destinies, testify to this.

Let us hope that in the Valhalla into which undoubtedly all great men go when they pass from life, he continues creating lofty structures, not any more for mortals, but for the angelic host.

President Lauros Phoenix of the N. Y. - Phoenix School of Design used as his theme, in talking of Mr. Corbett: "Let your adorning be the hidden man of the heart." (I Peter, 3.) He told how Mr. Corbett was always fond of helping younger people. In fact, he always said very apt things to his students. One of his favorites was: "Don't follow the example of the dodo bird, which always looked at where it had been, not where it was going." Another was: "The greatest time saver of tomorrow is today." Also: "Technique is always a means, but never an end. Technique is the presentation of an idea, but the idea is the main thing. A trained man can see; an untrained man just looks. The thing that is not seen is most important. A house is seen, but a home is not. You can see a brain, but not a mind."

Mr. Phoenix noted that Corbett liked this verse:

"How very feminine trees are;
They do a strip tease in the fall,
Almost bare their limbs in the winter,
Deck themselves out in the spring,
And in summer they live off the saps."

Mr. Phoenix read the text of an illuminated manuscript citation, which was exhibited in the hall and had been given to Harvey Wiley Corbett.

Mr. Levi then read the following message from Mr. Wallace K. Harrison:

I am terribly sorry that I can't join you in paying tribute to Harvey Corbett on Thursday night.

As you know, he was not only my patron in the early days but also my senior partner for many years. He was a great citizen, teacher and architect and, above all, a man of rare courage who devoted and gave his life to the enrichment of his profession. His hand was felt in so many great enterprises that it is redundant to mention all of them but outstanding are the buildings which he did for the great cities of Chicago and New York, namely, the Chicago World's Fair, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Building in New York, and his work on Rockefeller Center. In these days of "isms" we all miss both his understanding and his great devotion -- we will not meet many like him.

I can't tell you how sincerely I regret that it is impossible for me to be with you on this occasion.

Mr. Albert Flanagan eloquently remarked how Corbett has the tremendous gift of getting to the heart of any problem.

Then, Mr. James Bacon, a long-time employee of Mr. Corbett, recalled many amusing incidents in Corbett's life. He said that at the time Corbett was only 6 or 7 years old he ran into a room (as all children do) when his parents were entertaining guests at their home in California. The company asked his mother and father, both physicians, what they wanted Harvey to be -- a doctor? To which the mother replied, "I don't care if he is a peanut salesman, as long as he is the best one." Mr. Bacon added that it is probably true that whatever Mr. Corbett would have done in life he would have done it well.

Mr. Bacon said that Corbett was told he became the most famous architect in this way. When he had an office on 23rd Street, next door to him was the Prebuilt Housing Corporation. Accustomed as Corbett was to receiving all kinds of people, and especially youngsters, the son of the President of the Prebuilt Housing Corporation was soon enabled to have a chat with him. The boy was very impressed and when he went back to prep school in Columbus, Ohio, he told all his friends that that summer he had met the most famous architect in all the world.

"Oh, you mean Frank Lloyd Wright," they said.

"Oh, no, someone far more important than that," the boy replied, "I

mean Harvey Wiley Corbett."

"Who's he?"

"Only the world's greatest living architect!"

A great argument ensued, but it was finally agreed that the greatest architect would be determined by which person had the biggest write-up in Who's Who. "And do you know," the boy later told Corbett, "you had 1-1/2 more lines than Frank Lloyd Wright?"

Bacon said that one of Corbett's principles of design was: "Always make it big enough to look well." That was his way of doing things.

Mr. Allyn Cox, who did many murals for Corbett's buildings, noted his ability to analyze instantly any problem.

Lorimer Rich then gave his estimate of Mr. Corbett's accomplishments. He first met him, he said, as a student 40 years ago. Corbett, he stressed, was a towering individual, who commanded awe and admiration wherever he went. In 50 years of practice he built many wonderful structures, as Bush Building, Bush House, the Criminal Courts Building and Rockefeller Center. However, he was not only an educator and teacher but also a dreamer of city problems. One of his finest qualities was that he always addressed his students by their first names. It gave them a warm feeling and meant much. He always surrounded himself with youth. He liked youngsters because they always asked, "Why?" He then said that Corbett's philosophy was in part summed up by General Douglas MacArthur, in a speech on 26 January 1955, in Los Angeles, when he said:

... that youth is not entirely a time of life -- it is a state of mind. It is not wholly a matter of ripe cheeks, red lips or supple knees. It is a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a vigor of the emotions, a freshness of the deep springs of life. It means a temperamental predominance of courage over timidity, of an appetite for adventure over love of ease. Nobody grows old by merely living a number of years. People grow old only by deserting their ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up interest wrinkles the soul. Worry, doubt, self-distrust, fear and despair -- these are the long, long years that bow the head and turn the growing spirit back to dust. Whatever your years, there is in every being's heart the love of wonder, the undaunted challenge of events, the unfailing childlike appetite for what next, and the joy and the game of life. You are as young as your faith, as old as your doubt; as young as your selfconfidence, as old as your fear; as young as your hope, as old as your despair. In the central

place of every heart there is a recording chamber; so long as it receives messages of beauty, hope, cheer and courage, so long are you young.

Harvey died young, said Mr. Rich.

Mr. Howard Greenley then rose to say that when some people die, to the rest of the population it is like losing a penknife. It is just an inconvenience. When Harvey Wiley Corbett died, however, it was like a mountain being removed from the landscape. He then reminisced of his association with Mr. Corbett ever since he first met him in Paris in 1897.

Mr. Julian Clarence Levi then read a message from Mr. Hugh Ferriss, who was giving a speech that same evening in St. Louis, Missouri. In the message, Mr. Ferriss said:

The first time I met Corbett, he was standing, a tall figure silhouetted against a bird's-eye view of Times Square, in his drafting-room on the top floor of a building he had recently designed (Bush Building, in 42nd Street). He was working on what appeared to be a model of a 20-story structure. Actually, this was a box, about two feet square, four feet high, with indication on the sides of 20 stories of fenestration. But this box was a surprise package; when secret strings were pulled, a second box, inside the first, came up and you had the impression of a 20-story building mounting before your eyes into a 40-story building. I got the point a little later on when the clients came in; they were duly impressed when the 20 stories turned into 40 stories; but the cream of the jest was when a third box, inside the second, shot up to 80 stories and hit the ceiling. This made a hit on the clients, too; they were so delighted by the performance that, later on, they built a real building considerably higher than the one originally intended.

It has sometimes occurred to me that a few of Harvey Corbett's acquaintances may have been so bemused by the light touch that they failed to grasp what he really was: an intensely serious man. On another day, also in the 1920's, I again saw him in the same surroundings, leaning over a drafting board that seemed diminutive under his tall frame and long limbs. He was making diagrams of envelopes; that is to say, the "envelopes" or Maximum Masses, permitted buildings by the recently-enacting Zoning Laws. He had caught the serious architectural implications of these laws, and his thoughtful studies became the basis of many subsequent forms, whether built by himself or by other architects. He was engaged at the same time, and with the same native

enthusiasm and intensity, on basic schemes for ameliorating the complexities of city streets; he was plugging, 30 years ago, for what is still needed and may yet be accomplished: separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

In the once-loved novel, Trilby, DuMaurier wrote, "You don't know a face until you've drawn it." This may not apply to buildings, but any of the artists who have drawn numerous perspectives of Corbett's designs have been privileged to see the evolution, over the years, of an architect belonging to that interesting generation which, grounded in a complete Beaux Arts training, found themselves practicing in one of the most transitional and problematical periods of architectural history. Corbett's trail can be traced through such markers as the early Springfield group -- to the Masonic Memorial near Washington, and Bush House, London -- to plainer forms such as One Fifth Avenue and Roerich Museum -- to more "abstract" forms such as the Memorial Union Theatre at the University of Wisconsin -- and to his numerous famous collaborations, e. g., Chicago World's Fair, Rockefeller Center, and (in the last three or four years of his practice) the proposed future development of the Avenue of the Americas.

Looking at the earlier drawings now on these walls -- some of them faded and yellow under the fixatif of the years -- one is apt to forget what should be an obvious truth: a designer should be read in the context of his times. Today, the absence, on steel frame buildings, of a corner column, or the presence of a corner window, would surprise no one; when they first appeared, in Corbett's Roerich Museum, people were aghast. Corbett was one of those whose conservative early training in no way incapacitated him from endless experiment. His forbears had explored the West Coast; Corbett himself explored the coasts of a changing architecture. In the 1920's, Corbett was an architectural pioneer. He should be remembered as such, and remembered with gratitude.

The second-to-last time I saw Corbett was one Sunday afternoon, not long ago, when I happened to be near the home he had long occupied in the Chelsea district. My wife and I had attended many happy gatherings in this four-story house -- gatherings graced by his wife, the sculptor, Gail Sherman Corbett, and enlivened by many congenial designers. So I rang the doorbell, and to my surprise Corbett answered himself and behind him I saw an empty hallway. I knew that Mrs. Corbett had died, but did not know until then that the house had been sold and the furniture moved out that morning. Yet Corbett was standing there, imperturbable; his handclasp as strong as ever, his humor as

keen, and that same air of kind and encouraging interest in people less mature and less distinguished than himself. For while Corbett took justifiable pride in his own generation and was prepared to go out with it, as he had come in with it, it was his hospitality to those coming after that especially distinguished him. Perhaps he liked younger people because he himself was always young at heart.

The last time I saw Corbett, he was coming onto the stage at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the evening of March 30th, 1954, to receive the highest award possible from his confreres in the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. In composing the citation which accompanied the Gold Medal, many of us had labored to find, for our long-standing regard and affection, some adequate words. In receiving our offerings, he seemed in every way the kind, imaginative and generous personality we had known for so many years. When, twenty-two days later, and apparently after only a moment's warning, he suddenly died, it seemed very right that we had been able to say those words when he was there to hear them said.

Mr. Levi announced that he had received this testimonial from Miss Malvina Hoffman:

These photos of Bush House reached me today. Alas, a puppy ate most of the caption on one of them before I received it! They do show Harvey's big plan for Bush House, however, where I made the two big stone figures of "England" and "America" holding a torch over a Celtic altar. The inscription under the group reads, "Dedicated to the Friendship of English Speaking Peoples." I think the figures were 16 feet high -- carved in America, and shipped to London in 6 ton and 9 ton sections. To complete one of the heads (which was not quite ready at time of shipment) I had to perch on the shoulder of "England", 90 odd feet above street level. At the end of World War II a buzz bomb clipped off the hand and forearm of the American, leaving "England" carrying the torch alone -- 1941. Sir Winston and the powers that be decided to leave it as a sample of Nazi destruction. I regret extremely that I cannot attend the dinner on the 17th to honor Harvey Corbett.

Leopold Arnaud, Dean of the School of Architecture at Columbia University, also could not attend, and this message by him was delivered by Mr. Levi:

Harvey Wiley Corbett, in his long and productive life, engaged in many activities. In addition to an active practice he found time

to be a teacher, and for many years was associated with the School of Architecture at Columbia University.

He began as Associate Director of an atelier for Columbia in 1907, and from then until 1935 remained as a critic in design; sometimes more, sometimes less active. During the five summer sessions from 1936 to 1940 he offered a series of lectures on the development of architectural expression, so that all in all for 33 years he was a frequent visitor and warm friend of Columbia and its School of Architecture.

Aside from his degree in Engineering from the University of California and the Diplome from the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, Harvey Wiley Corbett was awarded an Honorary Master of Architecture from the University of Liverpool in 1925 and an LL.D. from the University of California in 1930. Columbia University recognized his talents in 1929 when it awarded him an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.

Harvey Wiley Corbett was a great teacher, for he combined the capacities to transmit information and to inspire his students. He was an able teacher of architectural planning, and he developed in his students a conscious feeling for scale, for proportion, and for the refinement of detail. Those who studied under him also admired the quality and the strength of his personality. His charm and wit were born of inner charity and human understanding, despite the fact that at times he could be a biting critic. His great poise was the result of his unswerving integrity.

Harvey Wiley Corbett remains a vivid influence to those who worked with him, and I personally am proud to have had the privilege of having been one of his pupils.

Mr. Joseph Judge, Chairman of the Committee on Architecture of the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, sent in these anecdotes, which Mr. Levi brought to the attention of the gathering:

Mr. Corbett loved people -- he was consequently an easy man to interview. Also he would receive and talk to anyone, almost anytime and about almost anything. One story has Mr. Corbett in his office one bright day talking with a visitor, probably a salesman -- the visitor stayed nearly two hours. They covered subject after subject, finally the visitor left. Mr. Corbett looked up musingly, "Who is that man?" he enquired.

Mr. Corbett said that the Architectural League was comprised of architects, sculptors, painters and others in allied professions,

However, the president must be an architect. Mr. Corbett said that was because architects didn't do much themselves but were very apt at telling other what to do.

I have seen Mr. Corbett reading a treasurer's report on the Architect's Emergency Committee. He struggled a while and said, "All of the other organizations to which I belong are in the red -- I just can't get used to these black figures."

Mr. Corbett's story of the 3 bulls: There was a big bull, a medium-sized bull and a little bull. They were from New York State and one day they set out to see the world, starting west over field and meadow. They travelled for some days and saw many wonderful things. They reached Indiana and the big bull saw the rich prairie land with the fine herds. Well, he said to the others, "I don't know about you fellows, but as for me, this is it -- I'll never be able to do any better than this; this is where I stay." The other two went on until they reached Illinois when the medium-sized bull, enthusiastic for the excellent pasturage and splendid-looking cattle said, "Well, this is about as far as I go. It's a wonderful country and a promising future." But the little bull was determined. He wanted to go farther -- see more of the world -- so in the last scene, with the rays of the setting sun, we see him slowly disappearing over the horizon -- all of which goes to show that a little bull goes a long way.

Mr. Corbett would not change the name of the Architect's Emergency Committee -- he said it was still an emergency, this time for the employers.

Mr. Corbett wanted a swimming pool at his country house. He had a couple of hired hands start digging, but after a day of this, they soon tired of the assignment. The next day, pausing to lean on a shovel, Mr. Corbett said to his wife, "Dear, what we need is a bulldozer. I wish we had a way of getting one." Well, do you know, that no sooner had he uttered these magic words, and to the wonderment of his wife, than a faint rumbling sound was heard in the distance. The rumbling grew louder, soon swelled into a roar as a giant bulldozer hove into view, down the road a bit. It seemed that the bulldozer was in transit from one location to another to start a new job. Mr. Corbett talked to the driver, then went back to the house to phone the company that owner the machine. He was able to make arrangements and the bulldozer made short work of his excavation problem. A few days later, as he stood contemplating another piece of work, a great noise was heard down the road. Said his wife suspiciously, "Now what did you wish for?"

I wish I could tell them like Harvey Wiley.

Other persons who were called upon by Mr. Levi to speak, and who made brief remarks, included Mrs. Hart, Mr. Corbett's secretary for many years, and Mrs. Lyda M. Nelson of the Architect's Emergency Committee, with which Mr. Corbett was connected over a long period,

Mr. Chester B. Price recalled one of Mr. Corbett's characteristically whimsical stories, told at the Metropolitan Museum on receipt of the Chapter's Gold Medal in 1954. Harvey commented on this, the Chapter's 85th anniversary and his recent 81st birthday. He wondered "how the Chapter had gotten along without him those four years."

At the close Mr. Chester B. Price, requested that the Chairman, Mr. Julian Clarence Levi, ask everyone to rise for a minute of silence in respect to the memory of Harvey Wiley Corbett.
