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# THE “GENIUS OF THE PLACE”: WILLIAM WILSON COOK AND THE MICHIGAN LAW QUAD

*Kenneth A. Breisch\**

THE USES OF ART: MEDIEVAL METAPHOR IN THE MICHIGAN LAW QUADRANGLE. By *Ilene H. Forsyth*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 1993. Pp. ix, 168. 99 ill. \$29.95.

Amplifying a theme she first took up in the Distinguished Senior Faculty Lecture Series at the University of Michigan’s College of Literature, Science, and the Arts in 1991, Dr. Ilene H. Forsyth wrote *The Uses of Art: Medieval Metaphor in the Michigan Law Quadrangle* to explore “the influence of medieval cloisters and monastic metaphors of cloistrality on our academic environment” (p. vii). As a medievalist and Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of Art History at the University of Michigan, Forsyth notes that in undertaking such an exploration, she “expected that some of [her] thinking about Romanesque cloisters would inevitably seep through and guide [her] in a search for its secrets” (p. vii). Forsyth also presents us with an extended study in architectural patronage — in this case, the philanthropic endeavors of William Wilson Cook, who spent more than eight and a half million dollars on the construction of the Michigan Law Quad between 1919 and 1933.<sup>1</sup> “My hope,” the author writes in her introduction, “is that my findings may illumine the general subject of patronage in art as I present this case history” (p. 3).

William Wilson Cook, as Forsyth informs us at the outset of her book, remains something of an enigma. Not only did he supervise the entire construction of the Michigan Law Quad from his homes in New York, but he also apparently never set foot in any part of it. When asked repeatedly for a likeness of himself to be used in a commemorative booklet published in conjunction with the dedication of the first of his gifts to the Law School — the Lawyer’s Club, which was completed in 1924 — Cook declined. In fact, no photograph of this significant benefactor seems to have survived. As

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1. Wilfred B. Shaw, *The Law Quadrangle*, in 4 THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA SURVEY 1670, 1674 (Walter A. Donnelly ed., 1958).

Forsyth observes, we seem to possess an equally vague understanding of his persona.

William Wilson Cook was born in Hillsdale, Michigan, in 1858, the fourth son of nine children born to John Potter and Martha H. Wolford Cook.<sup>2</sup> He apparently attended Hillsdale College for a short time and then went on to the University of Michigan, where he received his A.B. in 1880 and his L.L.B. in 1882. Following a brief stop in Toledo, Cook moved to New York City, where, in 1883, he was admitted to the New York State Bar and entered the office of Frederick B. Coudert. Cook later became personal counsel to Nevada silver magnate John W. Mackay (1831-1902) and general counsel to Mackay's Postal Telegraph and Commercial Cable Companies and to the Mackay Companies. He seems, however, to be best known for his work in corporate law, in which he became an authority on railroad legislation and the workings of the Interstate Commerce Commission. He authored a number of books in this field, including his best-known work, *A Treatise on the Law of Corporations Having a Capital Stock*,<sup>3</sup> which ran through eight editions between 1887 and 1923, as well as *The Principles of Corporation Law*,<sup>4</sup> published in 1925, and *Power and Responsibility of the American Bar*<sup>5</sup>, published in 1922.<sup>6</sup> In 1927, as Cook was nearing the end of his life, he published the much more controversial *American Institutions and Their Preservation*.<sup>7</sup>

Cook's philanthropic endeavors at the University of Michigan began in 1910, when he agreed to contribute \$10,000 for the construction of a women's dormitory. At the urging of Harry Burns Hutchins — who had been Dean of the Law School from 1895 to 1910 and who had just assumed the presidency of the University, a position he held from 1909 to 1920 — Cook helped erect the Martha Cook Building, an exclusive residence for women. In 1915, Cook dedicated this now-much-beloved campus landmark — along with the idyllic garden that he added to his gift three years after the opening of the dormitory — to the memory of his mother. York and Sawyer, a New York architecture firm that had earlier planned Cook's New York townhouse and that would later construct the Michigan Law Quad, designed the Martha Cook Building. During this same period, Cook apparently began to consider endowing a

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2. The following account of Cook's life is taken from pp. 5-15.

3. WILLIAM WILSON COOK, *A TREATISE ON THE LAW OF CORPORATIONS HAVING A CAPITAL STOCK* (8th ed. 1923).

4. WILLIAM WILSON COOK, *THE PRINCIPLES OF CORPORATION LAW* (1925).

5. WILLIAM WILSON COOK, *POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE AMERICAN BAR* (1922).

6. For a review of Cook's work in corporate law, see Alfred F. Conard, *Cook and the Corporate Shareholder: A Belated Review of William W. Cook's Publications on Corporations*, 93 MICH. L. REV. — (1995) (this issue — Ed.).

7. WILLIAM WILSON COOK, *AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR PRESERVATION* (1927).

men's dormitory as well, which he envisioned in connection with the University of Michigan Law School he had attended.

This second benefaction, which eventually came to fruition in the form of the Michigan Law Quad, took more definitive form in 1919 when Cook requested that the building contractor, Marc Eidlitz, work up preliminary estimates for a "Quadrangle Building." As Forsyth carefully charts, this initial concept, which was originally intended for a site near the intersection of Washtenaw and North University streets in Ann Arbor, was ultimately moved to its present location and metamorphosed into its current form through the complex interactions of Cook, Hutchins, Henry Moore Bates — Dean of the Law School from 1910 to 1939 — and the architect, Edward Palmer York of York and Sawyer. Because he was apparently ill with tuberculosis during the years in which the law school was constructed,<sup>8</sup> Cook — on his doctor's orders — retired from his New York City residence to his estate near Port Chester. From both of these locations, Cook painstakingly directed the distribution of his gift through his voluminous correspondence with the architect and through drawings and photographs, all of which Forsyth ably unravels. "Cook's consuming interest poured out in words, chiefly in his private and public letters" (p. 7). These letters form the primary evidence for Forsyth's interpretation of the intentions of this reclusive, but strongly opinionated, patron.

Although the building was conceived as a unified whole, the actual construction of the Law Quad took place in four phases stretching over a period of just more than a decade. The Inns of Court in London seems to have provided the formative concept for the ensemble of buildings Cook envisioned, as well as for some of its architectural forms. To promote an interaction between students, professors, practicing lawyers, and sitting judges, Cook conceived of a complex that would include a law library, classrooms and offices for the school, dormitories, a dining hall, and guest rooms for visiting lawyers and judges, all arranged around a central courtyard. Because Cook intended that income derived from the residences be used to support the research facilities, he insisted upon the erection of these portions of the complex first. As a result, the first buildings constructed were the dormitories — or Lawyer's Club — completed in 1924. This L-shaped block, which sits at the intersection of South University Avenue and State Street, included the dormitory wing and prominent entry tower that stretches along the north side of the quadrangle, a student recreation room, and offices. Also erected at this time were the lavish, Renaissance-inspired lounge, which was surmounted by visitors quarters, and the impressive dining hall, with its fifty-foot-high

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8. Cook died in June 1930, three years before the completion of the law school.

hammer-beam ceiling and seating for three hundred residents and guests of the school. Six years later, the John P. Cook Dormitory, with accommodations for one hundred and fifty-two additional students and named for William Cook's father, opened on the eastern edge of the quad. Next came the William W. Cook Legal Research Building — completed in 1931, a year after William Cook's death — and Hutchins Hall, with its administrative offices and lecture, class, and seminar rooms. This last edifice, dedicated in the fall of 1933, was named in accordance with the donor's wishes for the former Law School Dean and President of the University, Harry Burns Hutchins. More recently, Gunnar Birkerts designed an underground addition to the Legal Research Library.

With the exception of the addition to the library, the buildings of the Law Quad exemplify what has come to be labeled the "Collegiate Gothic" style of architecture. Although most immediately modeled after buildings on the east coast campuses of Princeton and Yale, the symbolic inspiration for Michigan's Law Quad ensemble lay in the mediæval quadrangles of Oxford and Cambridge. The exterior massing of the library and dining hall, for example, recalls salient elements of King's College Chapel — constructed between 1448 and 1515 — at Cambridge, while the open-beam ceiling of the dining room can trace its lineage back to monastic refectories and the popular college dining halls of England, as well as those in this country. Other details, such as oriel and dormer windows, multiple chimneys, and vaulted and towered gateways, likewise evoke an eclectic melange of associations with mediæval and early Renaissance academic and aristocratic institutions in Britain. Like its Ivy League cousins and mediæval ancestors, Michigan's law buildings also have been decorated with symbolic stained glass and sculpture, as well as a series of pithy inscriptions penned by Cook himself. The windows in the dining hall, for example, display the seal of the State of Michigan and the twelve signs of the zodiac, while the glass in the Legal Research Building depicts the coats of arms of prominent universities and colleges. The most popular of these mediæval features, of course, are the often-humorous corbel figures that support the ribs of the stone vaults in the passageways leading into the quadrangle. Through a careful study of the correspondence that passed between patron and architect, photographs of the original plaster models for these figures, and sketches used by the sculptors, Forsyth has pieced together the definitive story of the genesis of these metaphors and the minor controversies and confusion the sculptures have engendered. In her chapter entitled "Modern Uses of *Mediaevalia*," Forsyth explores the possible meanings of all these "mediæval metaphors" and compares this iconography to its sources in the Middle Ages. Her description of the school's ornamental programs, along with the photographs and the appendices in which

she lists all of the inscriptions and the subjects of the stained glass, constitutes one of the most useful contributions of the book, ensuring that it will be consulted by curious students and visitors for years to come.

As Forsyth observes, “evoking” associations with English colleges in the built form of American universities became something of “an academic commonplace in the 1910s and the 1920s” (p. 76). By this time, schools such as Yale, Princeton, Bryn Mawr, and the Universities of Chicago and Pennsylvania all had, or were in the process of erecting, Gothic Revival buildings. In the words of Woodrow Wilson, then president of Princeton:

[B]y the very simple device of building our new buildings in the Tudor Gothic Style we seem to have added to Princeton the age of Oxford and Cambridge; we have added a thousand years to the history of Princeton by merely putting those lines in our buildings which point every man’s imagination to the historic traditions of learning in the English-speaking race. [p. 77]

In spite of its European medieval origins and the Eastern pedigree of this revival, Forsyth concludes that the architectural “style” of the Michigan Law Quad is reflective of “the style of [the] place (Michigan)” (p. 87). As proof of this, she argues that the particular constraint with which the Gothic forms were presented and ornamented at Michigan “is consonant with the region’s own temperate idealism” (p. 88). The University of Michigan Law School’s architectural character or personality, however, appears more elusive than Forsyth’s conclusion and, in fact, might be interpreted in any number of ways. Many of William Cook’s contemporaries, especially critics in the Midwest, would have strongly disagreed with Forsyth’s assessment. Irving K. Pond, for example, who graduated from Michigan’s nascent architecture program with a degree in engineering in 1878 — just two years before Cook received his A.B. — wrote in 1918 that he considered the revival of both the Gothic and the Renaissance styles of architecture as “nothing more than mere scene painting, — mere theatrical picture-making in three dimensions on a more or less stupendous scale.”<sup>9</sup> Pond, like many of his colleagues at the time, felt that architecture should be reflective of its own era, not just a revival of past forms: “Has the Modern Age an inheritance of its own? If so, why not enter into it? Let us cease to dwell in the shadow of the past . . .”<sup>10</sup> Significantly, one of this Chicago architect’s most successful attempts to answer this challenge stands catercorner to York and Sawyer’s Law Quad

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9. IRVING K. POND, *THE MEANING OF ARCHITECTURE: AN ESSAY IN CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM* 197-201 (1918).

10. *Id.* at 199-201.

in the imposing form of the Michigan Union.<sup>11</sup> In this edifice, Pond combined references to Tudor Gothic windows with industrial brick, step-backs — reflecting, according to the architect, its modern structural system — and, inside, a distinctive and colorful glazed terra-cotta ornament, which represented modern building material and which Pond claimed to have derived from the study of Gothic and Greek tectonic principles.

Elsewhere on the Michigan campus, one can find additional and compelling attempts to forge a new, “regional style” of architecture through the merging of elements from the past with those of the present. This quest is especially evident in the early buildings of Albert Kahn — publicly financed structures such as Hill Auditorium (1913), the Natural Science Building (1917), and the General Library (1919).<sup>12</sup> In these buildings, Kahn and his brilliant draftsman at the time, Ernest Wilby, combined classical motifs with a distinctive, polychrome brickwork intended to express directly the functional character of these buildings, as well as the nature and form of the innovative reinforced concrete structure that underlies it. According to an article on Hill Auditorium published in 1912 in *The Michigan Alumnus*:

Architecture in America is often divided into two schools — the Eastern and the Western. The Eastern school is best known for its adherence to classic tradition; the Western school by its freedom from traditional form. Considering this fact, some may discern in this building a character which is appropriate to the ideals of a middle-Western University, because it fuses the spirit of the classic and conservatism of the East with the freedom of ideas which becomes the new West.<sup>13</sup>

The introduction of the more academic revivals in the guise of the Collegiate Gothic of the Law Quad, or the elegant Renaissance of Albert Kahn’s Clements Library — which was erected between 1922 and 1923 — reflects, not so much the nature of the place, but instead, the inherent conservatism of the patrons who erected them, in contrast, perhaps, to the publicly commissioned buildings that surround them. The privately funded edifices, however good they may be — and I believe they are good — mark the end of a significant period of progressive architectural experimentation at Michigan. It is this earlier progressive era that is ultimately more responsible for creating the overall character of the campus than is the focus of Forsyth’s study, a complex she rightfully recognizes as a

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11. The Michigan Union was designed by the architecture firm of Pond & Pond and was built during the years 1916-1919. Wilfred B. Shaw, *Michigan Union Building*, in 4 THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, *supra* note 1, at 1685.

12. FEDERICO BUCCI, ALBERT KAHN 148-55 (1993).

13. *The Arthur Hill Memorial Hall*, THE MICHIGAN ALUMNUS, Feb. 1912, at 187, quoted in FEDERICO BUCCI, *supra* note 12, at 151.

“place apart” (p. 1). This reviewer finds the architecture of the Michigan Law Quad — though special in its own right — to be less characteristic of the place than the “brick” buildings Forsyth rather summarily dismisses in her study.

Be that as it may — and given that the current postmodern era is one in which we are much more willing to recognize the positive contributions that “scene painting” can make to our environment — Forsyth is certainly correct in her assessment of the Michigan Law Quad’s unique and exceptional qualities. These she identifies most particularly with the quadrangle itself, the heart of the Law School and the real focus of her study, one that naturally arises from her own long-standing interests as a medievalist in “the subject of cloistrality.”<sup>14</sup> These are the kinds of qualities often striven for but rarely attained in the making of architectural space, whatever its style. At Michigan, they combine to create what architects and critics have often referred to as the spirit of place.<sup>15</sup> As Forsyth maintains, “The monastic roots of Michigan’s Law Quad design are distant, yet they ineluctably underlie the choice of a quadrangular plan for the ensemble” (p. 77). The reasons for this choice “included the belief that collegiate ‘cloisters’ would harbor the examined life by providing the quiet and distance from distraction conducive to sustained reflection. . . . Knowledge might come easily in the classroom, but lingering wisdom requires quiet rumination, made up of weighing and considering, and a special place to foster it” (p. 79). Forsyth rightly points out that this atmosphere of contemplation at Michigan combines with an interchange of intellectual ideas fostered by the gathering of residential and nonresidential functions about this space. Although the Cook Law Quad is indeed a “place apart,” it still opens itself to a wider university and nonacademic audience through the presence of its guest quarters, its ample gateways, and its welcoming greensward.

More problematic, however, is Forsyth’s association of the ideals she perceives in the finished form of the Law Quad with the intentions of its patron. William Cook, she writes, “must have expected that as the traditions [upon which the forms of the school] were recognized, understood, and absorbed by students and by the world at large, the Gothic architectural environment would articulate in monumental form the high ideals he sought for the legal profession” (p. 80). Although Cook’s standards for his profession may have been high in some respects, his underlying social beliefs

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14. P. vii; see Ilene H. Forsyth, *The Monumental Arts of the Romanesque Period: Recent Research*, in *THE CLOISTERS: STUDIES IN HONOR OF THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY 3* (Elizabeth C. Parker ed., 1992).

15. For a discussion of this term and the qualities that define it, see CHRISTIAN NORBERG-SCHULZ, *GENIUS LOCI: TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE* (Gabiella Borsano ed., Rizzoli Intl. Publications 1980) (1979).

were somewhat less than "ideal," a fact that Forsyth alludes to only in a footnote, in which she observes: "Questions regarding Cook's social philosophy, which would surely seem to modern readers to be dated if not antediluvian in its ethnic bias, are best taken up by social historians, and there is no intent to pursue them here" (p. 16 n.4). Indeed, William Wilson Cook was, it seems, a virulent xenophobe and racist. He intended the Michigan Law School to foster and sustain his image of a racially pure, Anglo-American society, a concept he makes more than explicit in his self-published, two-volume diatribe, *American Institutions and Their Preservation*.<sup>16</sup> In this work, he states unequivocally that immigration into the United States of all but Anglo-Saxon and other Northern European peoples should be prohibited, and that "immigrants now here but undesirable" — Jews, as well as peoples of southern and eastern European and Asian origins — should be encouraged to return to their homelands, so that "the lowering of American character by lowering of the race will be averted."<sup>17</sup> Blacks and mulattos in particular should be induced to emigrate to new colonies in Africa and Asia.<sup>18</sup> The same "menace" that faced the nation as a whole also faced the legal profession, which likewise needed to be protected from the influx of the children of the more "undesirable" immigrants.<sup>19</sup> Given the pervasive belief of the time that architecture directly reflected the character of the people who produced it, Cook's insistence on English models for his law complex becomes more than just an allusion to British academic and political traditions: he clearly intended the choice of style to recall the inherent genetic superiority of the race that had founded, and in Cook's mind, should continue to lead the nation.<sup>20</sup> The Law Quad's separation from the rest of the campus, likewise, might be seen to reflect Cook's wish that the school remain the bastion of the white, Anglo-Saxon male that was to guide the profession toward the realization of his ideals.

Especially troubling in this respect is Forsyth's projection of the "character" of the Michigan Law Quad backward onto the intentions and persona of its founder. This, it seems to me, can be misleading and dangerous when one — as a reader of this book might very well be — is unaware of the true nature of that persona. In her conclusion, Forsyth argues, without intended irony, that

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16. 1 WILLIAM W. COOK, *AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR PRESERVATION* x-xii (2d ed. 1929).

17. 2 COOK, *supra* note 16, at 673.

18. 1 COOK, *supra* note 16, at 198-200.

19. William W. Cook, *A Letter to the Lawyers Club*, 28 MICH. L. REV. 1004 (1930).

20. For Cook's views on the genetic superiority of Northern European races, see his chapter entitled *Foreign Races in America — Warnings from Biology, Genetics and Eugenics*, 2 COOK, *supra* note 16, at 562-96.

[Cook's] choice of late Gothic as the major stylistic vehicle for his aspirations is thus explained by its compatibility with his aims. It was currently in fashion and appropriate for university purposes. It was the style of the Anglophilic work of Cram and Rogers at Princeton and Yale. . . . In his drive to develop the emergent Michigan law school, he was obviously aware of the uses of art. The architectural forms he commissioned were considered inspiring and were meant to be powerful in promoting his goals. They were to convey the traditions he sought to associate with his venture and aid in insuring its greatness. [p. 80]

Early in her book the author expresses her hope that "the discoveries that emerge from research on the Cook Law Quad" will contribute to a greater understanding of "art in its social context" (p. 3). However painful or embarrassing William Cook's ideas may be, they are, just the same, clearly embodied in his decision to endow the university and in the forms that endowment took. Still, the message of architectural forms can be equivocal. Although it is possible that the aesthetic character and meaning of buildings for subsequent generations will ultimately stand apart from the intent of the patron, we still have an obligation as historians to confront that intent.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, many of the social views that William Cook may have sought to associate with the Michigan Law School Quadrangle were, at some point along the way, subverted by the fundamentally democratic nature of the American university. One might say, with some relief, that the success of this work resulted, not so much because of, but in spite of Cook's intentions.

Despite these differences in interpretation, this reviewer is delighted to see the Michigan Law Quad at last begin to receive the serious academic attention it has long deserved. Let us hope that the same level of primary research and scholarship this volume represents will soon be expanded to encompass the rest of the University of Michigan campus.

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21. While true here, perhaps, this is not always the case. For a discussion of similar problems in patronage and the interpretation of intent and meaning, see Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, *Italian Architects and Fascist Politics: An Evaluation of the Rationalist's Role in Regime Building*, 39 J. SOC'Y. ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS 109 (1980). For a difference of opinions concerning the meaning of the architecture that Albert Speer produced for his patron, Adolf Hitler, compare Leon Krier, *Krier on Speer*, ARCHITECTURAL REV., Feb. 1983, at 33 with Colin St. John Wilson, *Speer and the Fear of Freedom*, ARCHITECTURAL REV., June 1983, at 22.