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Claude F. Bragdon, Architect, Stage Designer, and Mystic

By ERVILLE COSTA

The partial destruction of Rochester's New York Central Railroad station in 1966 stimulated a renewed and sustained interest in its architect, Claude Fayette Bragdon. It had been his masterpiece, and it is a nationally famous building. (To cite only one source, Bragdon and the station are mentioned in *The Architecture of America* by John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown). Now, Bragdon's First Universalist Church may be destroyed. The Society for the Preservation of Landmarks in Western New York has prepared an exhibit of the architect's work, which opens in Midtown Plaza on September 25, 1967. Coincidentally, the Editor of the Historic American Buildings Survey of the United States Department of the Interior wishes to record for their archives *all* of Bragdon's work in Rochester. Moreover, an architect and architectural historian, Professor Harley J. McKee of Syracuse University's School of Architecture, expresses the hope that "Bragdon will one day be honored as he deserves to be." These developments prompt a review and appraisal of Bragdon's contributions to Rochester and to American architecture.

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“The Child is Father to the Man”

Claude Bragdon traced his paternal lineage to an Aide-de-Camp of General Washington, who lived through Valley Forge to enjoy the final victory at Yorktown. Like so many New England soldiers after the American Revolution, Samuel Bragdon moved his family to New York. Travelling by oxcart from Maine, they settled at Port Ontario, where farming was the family occupation through Claude's grandparents. Claude, his sister, and their cousins spent happy summers on the farm; the hard outdoor labor the boys were expected to contribute toughened and satisfied him. Close to Canada, the farm had been the last Underground Railroad station on that particular route. This was a tie to Claude's maternal forbears, some of whom had been abolitionists in New England, and in Ohio, where his maternal grandfather was a Congregational minister, and where Claude was born in 1866.

Excessive mobility marked his childhood; apparently it left no permanent scars. His father, George Chandler Bragdon, according to the son, was “an excellent and forceful writer, but a poor businessman.” He failed in every attempt to publish his own newspaper, each time in a different town or city. Occasionally he accepted employment by another publisher; the Bragdons then remained long enough in one place to put down some temporary roots. His mother stoically bore the painful changes; she contributed to their support by writing articles for women's magazines. Claude's pre-teen years were otherwise uneventful. However, he began to reveal a precocious intelligence. At nine, he “published” an illustrated newspaper. One number announced a performance of Shakespeare's “King John;” he was its director and star! Another number contained directions and designs for the construction of a stage, with footlights. About the same time he learned some Dutch, German, Italian (though

not all at once), "just for fun." Claude and his younger sister May had the usual childhood spats, but they built and retained a closeness which survived both distance and time.

Their mother was a feminist. Their father filled his library with Emerson, Thoreau and other Transcendentalists, Shakespeare, Ruskin, Carlyle and, somewhat unusually for the late 19th century, with classics of the ancient Eastern religions. These seeded and fertilized young Claude's imagination, for he read them eagerly while still in his teens; in his maturity he would harvest the fruit, as his father had before him, in a commitment to a religious philosophy that combined Transcendentalism with Buddhism and Hinduism. Including a belief in reincarnation, this body of thought was called "Theosophy." Claude did not immediately react to this rare intellectual initiation, but it remained a potent subterranean current which eventually would emerge to dominate his thought.

Not all of his time was occupied with reading, of course. In Watertown he was first exposed to the lure and magic of circus, minstrel show, and legitimate theatre; in Oswego he completed high school, held his first draftsman's job (after school) in the office of its only architect, A. J. Hopkins, and enjoyed sledding and skating on the river. But more than any sport, he loved the theatre. Good road companies performed in Oswego; his father gave him the free tickets *he* had received as a newspaperman. An indifferent scholar, more interested in pleasure than study, Claude was nevertheless chosen as class valedictorian; he graduated from high school in 1884, and that year, the family moved to Rochester.

George Bragdon became an editorial writer first for the *Union and Advertiser*, and after that, for the *Post-Express*. His son held several inconsequential jobs; finally, twenty-year old Claude found a non-paying position with L. P. Rogers, a leading architect. The profession almost lost a promising talent at

this point, for Claude disliked the man's work, especially the Warner Building, and the long stretches of inactivity. He therefore accepted a paid position as cartoonist on a local comic paper, but was soon discharged for irreverently mocking the city's leading citizen, D. W. Powers, and the latter's art collection. Next, Bragdon drifted into and out of a five-dollar-a-week job, which fortunately was succeeded by a more significant opportunity that at last launched his career, the post of head draftsman in the office of Charles Ellis. Here he was given the chance actually to carry out a design, in work on the Stein-Bloch building. By this time an excellent draftsman, he still knew nothing of construction techniques; he would have been unable to erect the building without the generous help of the construction engineer. Thus began his education in practical solutions to problems faced by architects. Still, time dragged, with few commissions to occupy him. To kill some of the boredom, Claude and Fritz Trautmann, who then worked in the same building, successfully practiced mental telepathy, using playing cards.

Bragdon breezed through the eighties with little awareness of the great currents blowing through the nation or through architecture, but he perfected his art as a draftsman—he was one of the best—by sharpening his wits and his pen in national competitions; he won many mentions. He was equipped to produce the high-quality work demanded of him by Bruce Price in New York, when with only \$32.00 and a high spirit of adventure, Claude tackled the big city and asked him for employment. Price was glad to have him. He had judged a competition in which he thought Claude had deserved first prize (gold medal), but other jurors had prevailed, awarding him the second (silver) medal. Bragdon did beautiful work there, but after a year or so, Price, recognizing talent, advised him to strike out on his own. This Claude could not yet afford, so he

left New York for a two-year stint in Buffalo. "Thoroughly selfish and self-absorbed," he took no part in the city's social or civic life, but devoted his free time to self-education in the public library. A voracious reader, Bragdon now expanded his acquaintance with the authors whom he had first sampled in his father's library. He gave himself a sound foundation in religion, philosophy and art. The Hindu *Vedas* and *Bhagavad Gita* particularly fascinated him; in this period he consciously committed himself to Theosophy. Claude prospered economically in Buffalo, but professionally—as he later regretted—he failed to appreciate Louis Sullivan's Prudential Building.

At last he returned home. Rochester in the Gay Nineties was a "happy city, predominantly youthful." Here, Claude Bragdon formed his first partnership with Messrs. Edwin S. Gordon and William H. Orchard. Young, enthusiastic, the three men participated in the L'Art Nouveau movement then circulating from Europe to the United States. Claude whimsically dubbed this the "Purple Cow Period," after a nonsense poem written by Gelett Burgess. "It was a time when life did not make sense and nothing seemed important." In art, it was the "poster period," after the joyous craze which swept the cosmopolitan cities of two continents. Bragdon, who admired Toulouse-Lautrec, did several advertising posters for Harper's, and for Chicago's Stone and Kimball, publishers of a stylish miniature literary magazine called "The Chap Book." Some of Bragdon's work resembled that of Aubrey Beardsley. He designed, in addition to the posters, end papers and bookplates for publishers and friends. In time, he made enough bookplates for Rochester's prominent people to fill a "Who's Who" of the city.

Continuing to participate in competitions, Claude and his partners won the most important, the design for a new city hall for New York City, but they had to sue for their \$2,000 prize, and their design was never executed. The nineties were years of

tempering for Claude Bragdon, a time for finding himself. There was a growing acquaintance with alert, gifted young artists in all fields, and a continuing search for new modes of artistic architectural expression. He became a regular reader of and an occasional contributor to the professional journals of architecture.

Exploration, Discovery, Development

His constant searching was rewarded with the discovery of Harvey Ellis, European architecture, and Louis Sullivan. A brother of Charles Ellis, Harvey had, for a time, been associated with him in this city. Harvey designed and together they built several buildings here. Then Harvey settled in the mid-west, where he reached a peak of achievement in architectural design. When Claude met him, he had returned to Rochester a sick man, but Bragdon found him inspiring. Despite the difference in age, they became close friends. Each thought the other a genius, and said so in print. From Harvey Ellis, Bragdon learned, in part,

that a picture, like a growing plant, should look finished at whatever stage of its progress; that hiding behind every colour is its complementary . . . and can be made to show itself; that symmetry is death, but balance livingness; that 'chairs were made to sit in,' and that 'one should go sketching with one's hands in one's pockets.'

Bragdon, a master-draftsman in black and white, first absorbed an appreciation of color from Ellis. Harvey taught him the Japanese method of drawing a heavy charcoal outline, putting in "notan" (light and dark), and then adding watercolor, a technique at which Ellis was the master. (Bragdon would later apply these ideas and methods in his work for the theatre). He and Ellis organized the Rochester Society for the Arts and Crafts; to encourage excellence in young people's work, they often judged competitions sponsored by the Society. Claude frequently drew their catalogue book covers.

With Claude's other good friend, Trautmann, he and Ellis were members of the Vagabond Club, an informal group of bright young men whose purpose was to entertain each other. Both Ellis and Trautmann insisted Bragdon was the main entertainer! Harvey called himself Claude's "disciple;" Fritz believes Bragdon charmed his listeners because he was "a genius with a child-like enthusiasm for whatever engaged his attention at the moment." (This annoyed some professional associates, but Claude's intimate friends welcomed his naif exuberance). Carl Schmidt remembers his wonderfully imaginative flights of fancy; he could hold the circle spellbound.

Yet, in 1895, Bragdon left these good friends and dissolved the partnership. As the leading school for architects, L'Ecole Des Beaux Arts in Paris, was financially beyond him, he would go to Europe and teach himself. (This was a characteristic decision for, with a limited formal education, Claude transformed himself over the years into an urbane, educated, cultivated and cultured gentleman). He stayed abroad nearly all of the following year (his 30th), savoring the stability and beauty of European cities. Impressed by the serenity and grandeur of London's art and architectural splendors, he made measured drawings of many of its buildings. But the city which captured him completely was Venice. For the first time he began to paint. He drew so many of its treasures that, upon his return home, he contributed several beautifully illustrated articles to architectural journals. About this time he discovered a preference for the vitality of the Gothic to the too neatly arranged Classic buildings, acquiring, according to his younger son Chandler, "a reverence for (early) Renaissance Italy."

Possessed of an agile, inquiring, restless imagination, Bragdon rejected, in theory, imitation in art and architecture. He thought the classic orders were unsuited to America in an age of mathematics, science, and industry. Yet, he disliked materialism;

what he wanted was a revival of the Gothic *spirit*, but expressed in an art idiom uniquely American. When he “discovered” Louis Sullivan, therefore, he naturally hailed him as a prophet of that very spirit. Possibly one of Bragdon’s greatest services to his profession (Dorothy Cantor, who in 1963, made a critique of his architectural theories for her Master’s Thesis at the University of Rochester, thinks it is his greatest contribution), was his popularizing of Sullivan’s ideas and buildings in numerous articles, books, and lectures. In 1922 Bragdon wrote the Foreword to *The Autobiography of an Idea*, written by Sullivan; in 1934 his *Kindergarten Chats* were edited and introduced by Claude Bragdon. (This was poetic justice, for the “Chats” were Bragdon’s first introduction to Sullivan—they had been printed serially in one of the professional journals).

The Successful Architect

When Claude Bragdon returned from Europe in 1896, he formed a new partnership, known as Bragdon and Hillman. The Livingston County Courthouse, which they built in 1898, reflects Bragdon’s conviction at the time that colonial architecture was a more honest expression of a truly national spirit than either the eclectic or Richardsonian architecture which dominated the scene; yet, paradoxically, he admired Richardson. As he travelled about interior New York on business, Bragdon became interested in the original solutions provided by cobblestone houses. He wrote a few magazine articles on those that survived in western New York, and he wrote the preface to Carl Schmidt’s first book on the subject. After the turn of the century, Bragdon built several homes and some public and private buildings. The Fire Department and Town Hall in Leroy, and the Library and Historical Building in Canandaigua, are his. Sometimes he designed additions: for example, the portico and sunken garden at the Eastman House and the exterior

and lobby of the YMCA on Gibbs St. The really important commissions did not come until after his marriage in 1902 to Charlotte Coffyn Wilkinson of Syracuse, and probably because of it. Their eldest son, Henry, writes of his mother, "she was a gregarious, social, civically-minded person who kept him more in touch with the life of the city than he was later." They joined the Genesee Valley Club, Country Club, and Chamber of Commerce; they attended meetings, balls, dinners; they often entertained.

The houses Claude built for some of the people he met at these functions were characterized by fine proportion, beautiful workmanship, and unusual attention to decorative detail. Reflecting his clients' tastes and the professional eclecticism of the times, they added nothing new to American architecture. (He complained years later that he could never do his best work in Rochester because this "carriage trade" was so conservative; however, elsewhere in his writing, he admitted his own acceptance of the prevailing tastes). Significantly, though, his own modest home at 3 Castle Park had been built with other, more modern principles: adapted to the woodland site, the exterior is the color of tree trunks; only a bay window modifies its simplicity; and inside, surprisingly, there is a free flow of space.

He was much in demand in these years before World War I. Yet, he found time in his office to welcome, entertain, and advise beginning draftsmen. Both Carl Schmidt and the late Leonard Waasdorp have attested to his popularity and his kind encouragement; he always sternly enjoined them, however, to produce the best in draftsmanship and craftsmanship. Bragdon aligned himself with the developing nation-wide city-beautiful movement. In 1904 he presented plans and designs for a civic center. In 1907 he wrote a short, disparaging item about Rochester for a column in "Collier's Weekly," that drew much defensive criticism. Some months after this, the local press pub-

lished a long, comprehensive article of his, detailing concrete proposals, similar to those of today, for transforming Rochester into a beautiful model city. "Our cities have been growing like weeds," he wrote, "(when) they should blossom like flowers."

Meanwhile, his architectural commissions increased in number and importance. Later on, when Bragdon's taste and philosophy had clarified, he recalled only a few of his buildings with satisfaction: First Universalist Church, Bevier Memorial Building of R.I.T., the small Italian Presbyterian Church (no longer known by that name), and above all, the N. Y. Central Railroad station, his most important commission and his masterpiece. He liked the Bevier Building because its exterior horizontal lines reflected its function: floors of classrooms and lecture halls. "The little gem of a church," so-called by one of its founders, Frank Valenza, is now a Pentecostal Church, but it retains the "faintly Italianate air" Bragdon built into it. Valenza believes the building was modelled on those of the Waldensian Sect in northern Italy, the origin of the Rochester congregation. Bragdon was pleased with it because he had "created a thing of beauty for little money," and because he had successfully executed something he had never done before: the decorative sgraffito (etched figures) over the portal (unfortunately, now covered with a sign).

Perhaps the most important of the remaining Rochester buildings is the First Universalist Church. Built in 1907 as a memorial to the parents of Jennie Van Zandt Balkam, it, too, satisfied Bragdon. Its design, he thought, "conformed to the religious philosophy of the Universalist Church," and its "mass piled up pleasingly." Professor McKee, a contemporary architect who has carefully analyzed its every detail, writes that "it deserves to rank (as an early 20th century church) among the best in the United States . . . one of the finest works of its architect, (it) is unified in concept, harmonious in proportions and color, and

replete with interesting details." Terra cotta and brick form the exterior; colorful tiles with meaningful symbols are distributed inside and out; the dome has pleasing modifications of its essential roundness.

In each of these buildings, and in the Chamber of Commerce, Bragdon applied his gradually evolved ideas, published in essays later gathered into a book called *The Beautiful Necessity*: the common denominator of music, architecture, and nature (and of beauty) is mathematics; buildings should express function *and* beauty. However, the railroad station's unique features best embody these precepts:

On a piece of paper I drew five equal, aligned, tangential circles, like the driving-wheels of a steam locomotive. Of these, the two end ones defined the height and width of the office divisions at right and left of the waiting room, and the three remaining circles circumscribed the great round-arched windows which gave it light. The station was built in just that way. It has at least this merit: no one could mistake it for anything else.

Its arches and some of the decorations reflect the locomotive, for Bragdon had studied the engines as a source of inspiration. The steel roof trusses, supporting each other, needed no other support. (He was thrilled when they were first raised against the blue sky). The reference to music was actually tested when he designed the station this way:

(I made use of) . . . those numerical ratios subsisting between the consonant intervals within the octave—namely: 1:2, the octave; 2:3, the fifth; 3:4, the fourth; 4:5, the major third; and 4:7, the subminor seventh. The waiting room is twice as wide as it is high and twice as long as it is wide—the interval of the octave; or, . . . the proportions of a root-four rectangle of Dynamic Symmetry. There also occur the ratios of 2:3 and 4:7. . .

Bragdon took a friend, a former opera singer, on a tour of the station just before it was opened to the public in 1914. As she sang the diatonic scale, she struck a certain note which made the waiting room become "a resonance chamber, (and) the

entire building seemed to cry aloud." Yet not even Claude could say for sure that the musical ratios employed in its design had determined the remarkable acoustics.

For the exterior, he realistically chose dark clinker brick trimmed with brownstone and cinder-matched paint for the ironwork. The interior construction was its decoration: Grueby tile wainscoting, brick, tile, faience, and Guastavino vaulting, warmed by the architect's favorite autumn hues. With the station's decorative motifs, however, he was dissatisfied.

The Creative Artist

Having investigated ornament which would not pre-date the age of steam, Claude discovered there was nothing which in this case would unify decoration with function. He therefore modified classic motifs, but when the building was finished, he launched a search for a completely new ornamentation. Although he admired Moorish designs and those that Louis Sullivan had devised for himself, Bragdon wanted something original and creative with *him*, but in keeping with modern times. He found the solution, once again, in mathematics. As he deepened his study, he became an expert; fascinated with the subject, he extended his studies to space and time. Before Einstein's work was well-known here, two of Bragdon's books had been published: *A Primer of Higher Space* and *Four-Dimensional Vistas*. These brought him invitations to lecture before mathematicians, but he modestly refused as he "knew nothing about mathematics."

By tracing lines through various "magic" squares (on Ben Franklin's model), and by extending the lines of solids (which he called "projective geometry"), he introduced an infinite variety of ornamentation in harmony with his mathematics-conscious age. He wrote Fritz Trautmann that with this ornamentation, he now felt ready to call himself a radical in architecture. The designs, together with explanations for extracting

them, were set forth in several articles and books, notably *Projective Ornament* and *The Frozen Fountain*, his most important book on architectural theory. He hoped these would inspire architects to develop a contemporary ornamentation which would become as acceptable and influential as the classic. He never extended his discovery into a Kandinsky-like art, but he employed his geometric designs in diverse non-architectural forms, and in his last important Rochester building, the Chamber of Commerce.

George Eastman engaged Claude Bragdon to design this building in collaboration with Messrs. Foster and Gade. Eastman wanted Bragdon to do the designing and planning; in the process they entertained each other socially and came to know each other well, "though I was never one of his intimates," Claude reveals in his autobiography. Bragdon's impressions of "the most powerful man in Rochester" are perhaps worth recording:

To certain of life's aspects and issues—aesthetic, philosophic, ethical—Eastman seemed blind, content to accept the opinion of others, professing his own ignorance. But concerning those things which really interested him he was extremely well informed and efficient, a master of clear, straight thinking. A man of steel in an age of steel, a stoic, a slave of duty, . . . there was never any joy in him; he lived a loveless, wifeless, childless existence, its loneliness aggravated rather than mitigated by his enormous wealth.

The Chamber of Commerce was built according to plan. Inspired by the Doge's Palace in Venice, Bragdon had designed for the large hall on the second floor a fairly simple room, in order to achieve a striking contrast in gold and color on the plastered, molded ceiling. Eastman had earlier approved this design, but at the end balked at spending the \$5,000 to \$20,000 (depending upon whom they chose) for the special artist. He could send an ambulance to France for \$5,000, he told Claude, and the ceiling was already perfect. "You architects are full of expensive notions; engineering is all there is to architecture,

anyway," he concluded, as Bragdon remembers the conversation in *More Lives Than One*. Claude argued that without color the room lacked distinction; without it he would have designed it differently; but Eastman was adamant, the collision between temperaments appeared final, and Claude refused to work again for George Eastman.

In his autobiography, Claude also recalled his dismay at Eastman's use of his beautiful, Bragdon-created sunken garden for potato-planting "as a wartime gesture." He called on Eastman shortly before the latter's death, however, and the two made their peace. Nevertheless, his resentment must have smoldered, for Claude wrote "the darker side to the Eastman story" in a letter to a friend (to comfort her), dated Easter Sunday, 1937:

When I incurred his enmity for no reason [other than] that he lost his temper and I didn't, he literally drove me out of Rochester. I had the job of building the new Genesee Valley Club of which I was the architect, and whose work I had always done. He, the president of the club, offered to give them \$50,000 if they would not have me for their architect. They accepted . . . because they needed the money. My friends in the club were highly indignant, and wanted to make a fight for it, but . . . I would not consent . . . and withdrew.

It is a fact that no important Rochester commissions came his way after the Chamber of Commerce incident.

The Writer and Publisher of Mystical Works

In 1907 Claude's wife Charlotte, who had been leading an exhausting civic life while caring for her first infant, died while giving birth to her second. Her husband subordinated his own unhappiness in his new role of substitute mother. From this period, when he had to "mother" his babies physically and emotionally, he developed an understanding of the problems, needs, and special psychology of women. This initial empathy was extended, later on, toward women with psychic powers. He called them the "Delphic Sisterhood," after the Greek Oracle at Delphi. It surprised no one that his second wife, Eugenie, whom

he married in 1912, should possess occult powers. Claude described his wife as "a creature from a more radiant sphere . . . marvelously beautiful, [who] had in everything a passion for perfection." Her occultism was expressed in prophecies, originating from her Oracle, delivered by means of automatic writing. Claude explained this phenomenon in *The Oracle* and in *Delphic Woman*. The former concerns Eugenie, mainly, but in the latter, he considered the full implications of occultism, believing that there are women the world over who are "tuned in" to another dimension. Yet his son Chandler writes, "he never let his interest in the psychic dominate his life; he was much more hard-headed and 'Yankee' than perhaps he himself realized."

A shared interest in Theosophy and the occult brought unusual people to the Bragdon home (and sometimes to his office). Among them was the Hindu mystic, Krishnamurti, who exerted a profound influence on Claude. Organizing the Genesee Chapter of the Theosophy Society, acting as its president and chief publicist, he also developed a world-wide correspondence with people who were united in their mutual faith in a non-Western view of life.

Bragdon's rather unique contribution to this movement was the publication in Rochester, by his own Manas Press, of its keystone, *Tertium Organum*, by Peter Ouspensky. This work was similar to Bragdon's *Four-Dimensional Vistas*, which appeared first. The coincidence made them friends. He published the works of Nicholas Roerich and others in the same philosophical-religious stream, and a few works outside it.

One of these was a slender volume of poetry written by "Rochester's one true poet," Adelaide Crapsey. In *Merely Players*, Claude gave an unforgettable insight into her personality and writing.

When not occupied in building, therefore, Bragdon was happily engaged in writing and publishing. Of course he designed

the books and the end-plates for each of the manuscripts he published. But even these activities did not exhaust his manifold interests.

The Artist in Color and Light

One lovely summer evening the Bragdons gave a party—notable because its unusual features evolved into tremendously popular, public “Festivals of Song and Light.” These—we should now call them “total environments”—were staged in Highland Park in 1915, and in the parks of several eastern cities in the succeeding two years. Claude, who had long before investigated the physics of light and color with Fritz Trautmann, now created beautiful backgrounds of color-light patterns, while his friend, Harry Barnhart, trained and directed non-professional community choruses for the concerts. Beginning modestly, they gradually enlarged their productions, until in New York’s Central Park, more than a thousand geometrically-patterned lanterns, strung among the trees, cast their colored beams and eerie shadows upon the crowd below. Though hardly as frenetic as today’s “happenings,” movement was obtained. Strolling bearers of exotic lanterns and torches ended their walk by embarking in the lake’s boats; quietly rowing about, they created a fairyland fabric of light and color to surround the opulent sound of massed voices, singing in harmony.

The war put an end to public entertainment in 1917, but one last, grand “apotheosis” was staged in 1931 at New York’s Madison Square Garden. Claude costumed the 600 Negro singers, chosen for their vibrant, harmonic mastery, whose music Harry directed. Immense colored spotlights, used by Claude to poetic effect, replaced the outdoor lanterns. He color-cued the lights to the costumes and music, so that the whole beautiful production provided a merger of visual and auditory beauty to a moved and responsive audience.

Claude would have loved today’s opera and symphonic suc-

cesses in Highland Park, and the innovative concerts offered by the Hochstein School, but assuredly, he would have created beauty in the treetops to accompany them. Expo 67, with its many examples of inter-woven art forms, initiating and communicating multi-sensory experiences, would have delighted Claude Bragdon. And in him, Marshall McLuhan would have had an instant admirer!

The Artist and Architect in the Theatre

Bragdon had known the happiness of artistic satisfaction in his work with Barnhart. But the year after their park association ended, his unhappy feud with Eastman grew to its greatest dimension, leaving him little to do in Rochester. With enthusiasm, therefore, Claude accepted in 1918 the invitation of Canadian bridge engineer, Frank Barber, to design the Hunter Street Bridge, Peterborough, Canada. As Claude had wished to make the railroad station "an illustrious example of architectural art . . . a monument to the railroad, to the city, to myself," so now he wished to make the bridge "the most beautiful of its kind in the country." It was one of the few structures to please its creators in retrospect. They planned another, which was never built, and a third, which was. But in his own city, Rochester, only one more home would be requested of Claude, and that was finished in 1922. For the last few years, it had seemed to Claude Bragdon that his architectural career had all but collapsed. Miraculously, a third career—one marvelously creative—now opened to him.

As early as 1911, still in the sunrise of his appeal, Bragdon had casually met actor Walter Hampden. They had discussed the possibility of Bragdon's becoming a designer of sets for Walter's plays, sometime in the indefinite future when Walter would be his own producer. Just in time for Claude, this association began in 1919, when he undertook the design of unusual

sets, costumes, and lighting for Hampden's Chicago production of "Hamlet." Though its visual beauty was highly praised, Bragdon returned to Rochester. In the following year, however, his beloved Eugenie passed away, and it then seemed easier to think of a permanent move from Rochester to New York. (His sons were away at school).

Claude Bragdon left Rochester in 1923, ending a sedate existence here for one of uncertainty and excitement. In New York City he entered "a younger, gayer, and less conventional group of people," as designer and art director for all of Walter Hampden's theatrical productions. At this time he was fifty-seven years old.

This artistic team then produced many beautifully set, lighted, and costumed Shakespearean works, some lesser-known plays, and the magnificent classic, "Cyrano de Bergerac." Theirs was a road company. Bragdon, who was ingenious as well as artistic, devised sets that collapsed for travelling, flats on wheels (called wagons), and sets whose main structures could be used for different scenes, with changes only in lighting and accessories. But his major impact was in the creation of visual beauty. Walter Hampden wrote, "Claude achieved beauty through his knowing use of mass, line, color and light." Even critics who otherwise disparaged the acting or direction expressed appreciation of Claude Bragdon's colorful sets, subtle lighting, symbolic costumes. These achievements, the result of systematic study and experimentation, were carefully set forth by him in *Merely Players* and in other writing. He would have been pleased to see this aspect of his career, represented by excerpts from his books, together with appropriate sketches and watercolors, assembled and exhibited in 1964.

Bragdon loved New York. He enjoyed his encounters with actors, critics, playwrights, at the Players Club and at Sardi's; he experienced in his creative work for the theatre a fulfillment

denied him in architecture; in writing for magazine readers, he captured vividly the din, variety, and tragedy of the city.

The Final Years of a Versatile Talent, And Some Assessments

Illness brought Bragdon's theatrical career to an untimely close in the 30's. He therefore increased the amount of writing and lecturing he had always done, but which now became the main source of livelihood. He continued to lecture on Theosophy, but curtailed his visits to other cities. One of his later books was *Yoga For You*, the first on this subject published in the United States. Another was his autobiography, *More Lives Than One*. Supplementing his published works, one may read through his voluminous correspondence, finding among unfamiliar names, some which are famous. J. B. Priestley, Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Leopold Stokowski and Robert Shaw wrote to him concerning his work; photographer Alfred Stieglitz, dancer Ruth St. Denis, and many others, exchanged letters with him, to inform each other of news within the world (or sub-culture) of Theosophy.

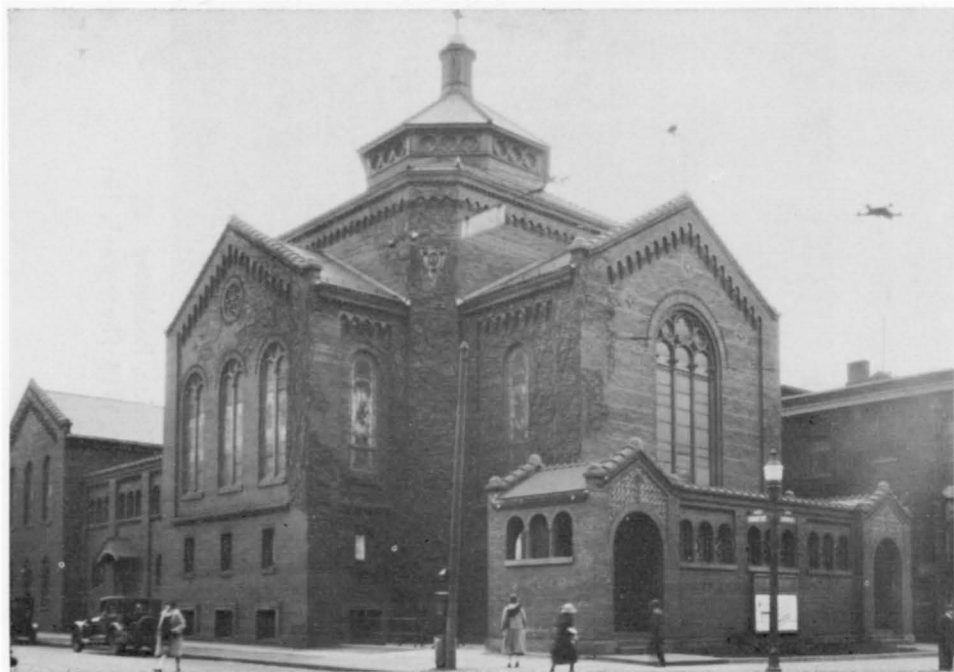
A latter-day Walt Whitman, Claude called on confined patients, including his friend, Eugene O'Neill, at the hospital on Welfare Island. He wrote their letters, "swapped" anecdotes, comforted them until he died in New York on September 17, 1946. His sons remember best their father's fine traits of character and personality. Chandler recalls, "Although his ideas did not affect me, his attitude toward life did: his stoicism, his gentleness with people, his belief that there was a purpose in life, his sense of craftsmanship, his tolerance." "He hoped his work would endure," writes Henry, "that people would read his books and heed his message, but he was as honest as any man I have ever known in following his own line without thought of rewards as the world counts rewards."

In assessing his artistic merit, critics recognize first of all the fresh innovative approaches Claude brought to every endeavor. As an interpreter of those even more creative than he, Bragdon had no peer. Perhaps he dissipated his versatile talents by engaging in too many fields; possibly he could do no less.

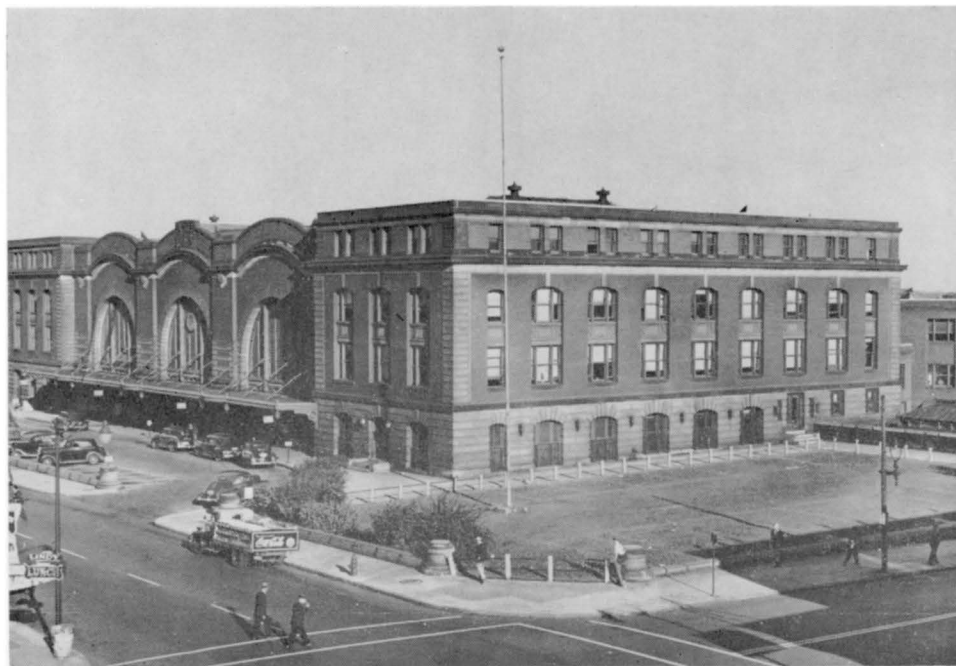
Professor McKee appraises Claude Bragdon as "a highly important figure in American architecture." He cites those buildings "which were of the highest quality in terms of function, design and craftsmanship;" he calls the architect "an original and gifted individual, (having) great ability in several branches of his profession: planning, proportioning, ornamental designing, choice of handling forms and details of past architectural periods, able to adapt them to his specific purpose."

Professor McKee concludes that Rochester should preserve Bragdon's best buildings, especially the First Universalist Church, as part of the culture of a passing age, the better to understand the cultural values of the early 20th century.

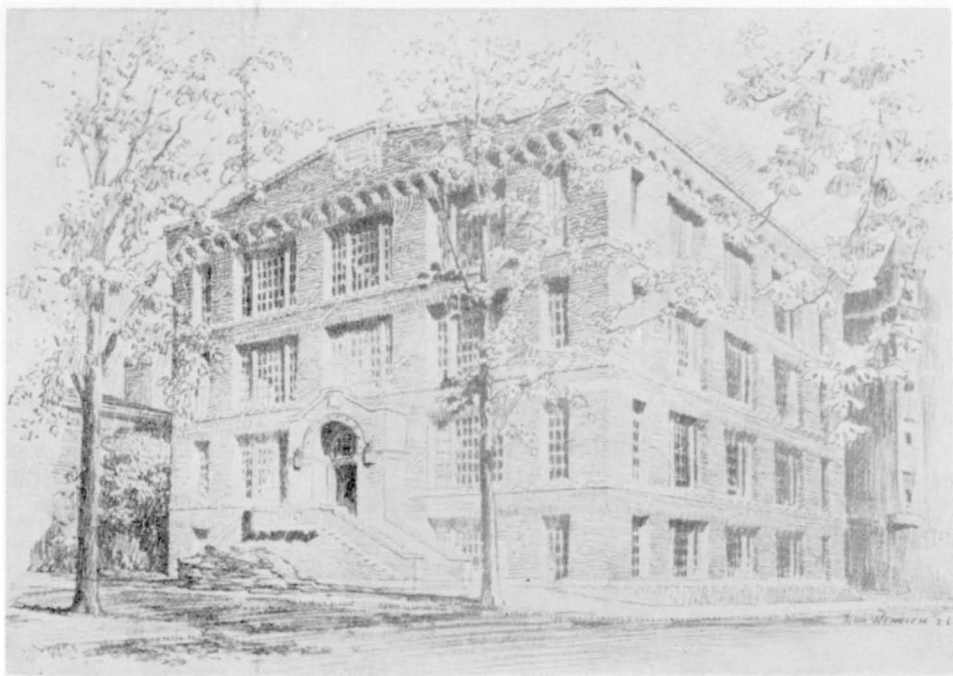
In spite in his faith in the value of his *theories*, Claude Bragdon's greatest legacy may well be the buildings he designed and produced in Rochester.



Universalist Church, Rochester
Claude F. Bragdon, Architect, 1908



New York Central Station, Rochester
Claude F. Bragdon, Architect, 1914. Photograph, 1941



Bevier Building, Rochester Institute of Technology
Claude F. Bragdon, Architect, 1910



Rochester Chamber of Commerce Building
Claude F. Bragdon, Architect, 1916