



DESIGNING THE NEW COURTHOUSE, AS SEEN THROUGH AN OUTSIDER'S EYES

By Frank A. Parsons

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After a decade of controversy and rejection by the voters of proposed solutions, and finally given no alternative by the state, Rockbridge County and Lexington in 2007 set out to build a new, larger courthouse a block from the historic old court building. The new, \$29-million facility opened for business in 2009. This article, written as the courthouse planning drama was reaching its climactic moments, turned out to be more an autobiography than a chronicle of civic turmoil.

AS ALL OF YOU KNOW, Lexington and Rockbridge County need a new courthouse. We're one of only a handful of places in Virginia where a county and a municipality share the legal responsibility together to provide their citizens with adequate facilities for their courts. Buena Vista is not involved, and with no disrespect for B. V., this is probably fortunate.

As a resident of Lexington, I was for many years during the courthouse saga an interested person who read some of the news accounts from time to time, but surely not all of them. In my work at Washington and

Lee University,¹ I had had many occasions to appear at meetings of City Council, its Planning Commission and the Architectural Review Board, but courthouse matters didn't draw my attention. Never did I go to a County Board of Supervisors meeting. Nowadays, though, it's not uncommon to even find me at various meetings, including the Supervisors'. The agenda almost always involves the Courthouse.

So, how come?

In my retirement, I found the time and inclination to become more involved in civic matters and other outreach activities, which, for reasons of time and energy,

1 Which included oversight of construction projects during the administrations of two presidents from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Frank Parsons (1928-2006) managed Washington and Lee University's construction projects in the last quarter of the 20th century. After he retired in 1999, he supervised the meticulous reconstruction of Lexington's historic Presbyterian church, devastated by fire in 2000. Photo above: Lawyers Row, behind the historic Old Courthouse.



The Old Courthouse, completed in 1897. When judges complained that it was inadequate, Rockbridge and Lexington residents refused to build a new one, partly because of cost and partly because of sentiment. The judges prevailed.

my W&L responsibilities had never allowed. I agreed to serve on the board of the venerable Historic Lexington Foundation, and in this capacity was brought close indeed to the courthouse matter.

HLF and other preservationists had long followed the evolving courthouse needs closely, but they didn't get really involved — a better word might be excited — until architectural schematic elevations, site plans and space utilization information began to appear in the local press.

That was when I got really drawn into the matter — when I began to realize what a can of worms we had on the table.

As most here tonight know, I spent the last thirty years as the coordinator of facilities planning at W&L, working with architects and engineers, master planners and the like in meeting the university's physical needs and planning. For much of this time, I had other

responsibilities as well, but in my last decade at the university, planning and building were my sole concerns.¹

It was around 1969 when I began to keep serious company with professional people known collectively as “A & E” — architects and engineers.

NOTHING in my professional life had prepared me for this assignment. But in the 1970s I was told by my friend and boss, Bob Huntley, W&L's president, to deal with these folks, given the university's urgent need in four major areas: a better gymnasium, a better library facility, a better law school building, and a better commerce school. There were other needs, but these were top priority.

The athletic facility challenge became the easiest to address, and suddenly I found myself with professionals

¹ This was W&L's era of nonstop construction, from the Lenfest Center for the Arts and the Science Center to the Fraternity Renaissance. Others are mentioned by the author.

who had worked with W&L on earlier projects. They spoke a language unfamiliar to me. They were well educated, smart, articulate. I would nod knowingly when they spoke. I listened attentively, and gradually got bold enough to use some of their terms in our conversations, as if I knew what they meant.

I felt I had some kind of Providential protection over this period, but it is more likely it was Washington and Lee that enjoyed the protection of Providence from me. Much of what we did — the architects, engineers and I — turned out O.K., some things better than others. But a lot of stuff did get done, about \$150 million worth.

When I was a young Army newspaper editor, on the staff of the *Pacific Stars & Stripes*, we used to critique each day's work in late afternoon over cold Asahi beer. In journalism, that was the lifetime of a project: one day. Now, however, in associating with A & E types, I found myself confronted with time-spans of geologic scale before I could draw any gratification from a job reasonably well done — before an evaluation could be made on how well a project served its purpose.

I found myself enjoying my new work immensely. My satisfaction had to do with the nature of the professionals with whom I worked: their talents, their skills, their competence and expertise. It was fun! Even when things weren't exactly going smoothly, we seldom got angry or betrayed our impatience one with another. In the main, when something went wrong, we avoided finger-pointing and blaming the other guy. I found that architects and engineers absolutely hate to make mistakes, and if they do, they hate to admit it, and will do so only under the most unusual of circumstances. Contractors, I learned, have ways of turning mistakes, theirs and those of others, into profit, if you're not very careful. (This fact was corroborated by no less an authority than Robert E. Lee, who once wrote to one of his sons who was building a new home: “You must attend your contractors. They will bear the closest scrutiny, and even then circumvent you.”)

There was one element in my work that I didn't particularly enjoy. In dealing with my bosses, the presidents and the trustees, I was often the bearer of bad news — of

rising project costs or the need for something called “change orders” to a contract (almost always expensive). There might be construction delays and costly extension of project schedules.

On the occasion of my retirement, Bob Huntley recalled how I sometimes managed a “bad news, good news” balance in bringing him such information. For example, when we were building apartments for upper-class students along the old Chesapeake & Ohio right of way on the back campus, by Woods Creek, I had to report that we had fallen another six months behind schedule. “What's the good news?” he demanded. Well, I explained, all the furniture has arrived.

Throughout this auto-didactic education, I had the good fortune to work with some very good architects and engineers, and I acquired an understanding of what I think are some of the characteristics of good ones.

Engineers, by necessity and inclination, are men and women of precision. Our very lives depend on the expertise of structural engineers. Civil, electrical and mechanical engineers must also be exact in their calculations and designs.

Mechanical engineers, I learned, are elated when they succeed in designing a closed loop to distribute steam and hot and cold water about a college campus. When this first came up, I asked why they thought we needed a loop. The engineer said, “You can feed in either direction. If there's a break in the pipes, almost everyone stays on line.” But creating a closed loop was more expensive than not creating one. Only when the board of trustees insisted [in the late 1990s] on air-conditioning the new sorority houses were we able to extend the project to complete the coveted loop.

These are some of my perceptions of architects:

- **They must have thick skin**, able to endure the criticism that even their best efforts often attract. They must accept the fact that almost everyone else in the civilized world thinks she, or he, is capable of being a better architect. Almost everyone can criticize a building's design. It's easy to find fault, often hard to explain why, even harder to suggest useful



These news articles appeared in just the first half of 2006, while the author was writing this article.

ways to make a design better. The current courthouse architect, in my opinion, is a veritable rhinoceros. A word about this later.

- **Architects must be good salespeople.** They must convince prospective clients that they have special competence, experience, creativity and a track record that their competitors lack. [An architectural firm came to the campus to conduct a review for the state Council on Higher Education, and Parsons and Huntley found themselves in conversation with two of the firm's principals.] Huntley asked the two senior partners if they'd ever designed a law school. Some architects would be inclined to say that law schools were their specialty without a moment's hesitation, even if it weren't true. One of the visiting architects said, "No," and the other added, "But we'd sure like to try." When Huntley asked how they'd go about it, the senior of the two suggested that he and his partner talk about it on the ride back to Richmond. Then, in a few days they would provide W&L with a written proposal on how they would go about it. They got the job,¹ and over the next decade helped W&L build a half-dozen major projects.

- **Sometimes, architects who create good outcomes are chosen for the wrong reasons.** Case in point: Before he became W&L's president, John Wilson was a trustee at Hollins College [now University], where he admired the work of a New York architect engaged there. Wilson was especially attracted to the architect's long, delicate fingers, believing that they contributed to his skill as a designer. When W&L needed an architect [in 1993] to design the building we call the Watson Pavilion, President Wilson selected his New York friend and negotiated the fee himself. When the facility was completed, President Wilson admitted in his dedication remarks how he had come to the fortuitous choice of the architect, long fingers and all.
- **Architects must be flexible.** They should be able to depart from a design they would love to implement and accept the modifications that the client demands.
- **They must be imaginative and creative.** Often the client doesn't have any notion of what a building that addresses his needs might look like. Some architects are more inclined than others to create monuments to themselves. In work with colleges, their design often must be compatible with existing buildings. In this respect, no better examples

can be found than our two local colleges. If there is reason to depart from such patterns, the architect must be able to articulate the reasons successfully. Such departures must stand the test of time.

- **Architects must be acrobats with superb balance.** They almost always walk a tightrope in providing a building of suitable form and function that the client can actually afford. Many outstanding designs fall to pieces on the rocky shoals of limited budgets and available resources.
- **And they must be technical wizards.** Today, architects must work with the magic of PowerPoint¹ in presenting concepts, design, all kinds of drawings, site plans and alternatives. They now use sophisticated computer programs in every phase of their work, including their essential roles as construction supervisors and managers once a building is under contract.

THEIRS IS A PROFESSION that I admire and respect greatly. Friends who know that I've worked with such persons sometimes will ask me if I've had architectural training, or if I wish I'd become an architect. The answer to both questions is a resounding no! I have enjoyed my thirty-year role as an Owner's Representative in working with them, but I don't think I would ever enjoy being an architect.²

And one overriding truth I learned is that no matter who the architect, or how good, few buildings will please everyone. Witness what we've seen so far in our courthouse adventure.

The project architect, BCWH of Richmond, is a successor firm to one whose principal partner was an architect with whom I worked at W&L, the late Everette Fauber of Lynchburg, who knew more than a little about Lexington as well as about Washington and Lee.³

1 Remember, this is 2006.

2 The author did, however, design a very small project: the marker in front of the Liberty Hall ruins, west of the developed campus. He said he did it himself only because the architect hired for the job just didn't "get" what the "owner's representative" wanted.

3 When Kappa Alpha national fraternity bought the 1824 Barclay House (also called Beaumont) on Lee Avenue and proposed to

- BCWH's courthouse project architect, Chuck Wray, has been criticized both privately and publicly as committed to promoting only the most hideous designs and ineffective responses. To these critics, whom I have come to call "the coalition of the disturbed," he is the devil incarnate. Yet he has produced complete drawings and specifications of two different courthouse designs for two different sites, only one of which will ever be built. Indeed, some of the disturbed folks believe that the county and city should engage an entirely new architectural firm to produce a third courthouse that conforms to local sensibilities.

I agree with the critics that the now-favored design at the corner of Nelson and Randolph Streets is, in the very kindest evaluation I can bring myself to make, a building of little or no architectural distinction. Chuck Wray and his associates have undertaken difficult assignments on both the current site and the earlier attempt

transform it into a "utilitarian" headquarters building, Everette Fauber was brought in to propose modifications, and when the KA plans fell through in the face of fierce local opposition, he was retained by Beaumont's new owners, Colonel and Mrs. Carrington C. Tutwiler, to restore it. The house became and remains an anchor of Lexington's historic residential district. Fauber later directed the restoration of the 1848 Presbyterian Manse on White Street.

COURTHOUSE TIMELINE

- January 1997 — The city and county are told by the state court system that the old courthouse has become inadequate and must be replaced.
- June 1999 — Fauber Architects (later BCWH) is hired to design a new courthouse.
- November 2002 — Voters reject a \$13.5-million proposal for a new courthouse, 59% to 41%.
- March 2004 — A new proposal would have adapted the old courthouse, adding an underground level and skylights. For the first time, all sides join in agreement.
- Summer and fall 2006 — City and county debate and approve a plan for a new courthouse and parking garage at Nelson and Randolph Streets.
- February 2007 — Ground is broken.
- February 2009 — The courts move into the new building, which cost \$29 million.

1 Lewis Hall, the law building, was completed in 1976. The architects were Marcellus Wright Cox & Smith.



The new courthouse

at reconfiguring the historic courthouse at Washington and Main Streets.

Yet he has succeeded in responding to his clients, or at least in squaring the circle of their irreconcilable differences.

In my opinion, he has made good efforts to be responsive to suggestions from the preservationists and the city's Architectural Review Board. Only once did I see him come close to losing his temper in his presentations that drew sustained criticism and induced frustration. In my opinion, he has handled himself in a very professional manner in the service of his client.

Sometimes it has been difficult for him to know who speaks for his client.

The courthouse, I believe, will wind up with a lot of factions pointing fingers at one another. The project appears to have been botched from the start. Everyone involved in the process — county, city, preservationists, architects, the commonwealth — all will bear a share of the blame for the long, star-crossed process.

The whole thing has given me new incentive to try to prolong my life as long as possible. I'd like to know how it's all going to turn out. ■

