

ARCHITECTURE FOR THE NEW LEFT

Benjamin Thompson
Associates' Kirkland College

Kirkland College, Benjamin Thompson Associates, 1966–1972, Clinton, NY. Photo: © Ezra Stoller/Esto

Kirkland College opened its doors in fall 1968, right into the middle of a ferocious rupture in higher education. In the course of examining gaps between authority and social equity, academic communities throughout the US and Europe had become painfully aware they were far from blameless themselves. By the late 1960s, this realization was fueling widespread demands for radical educational models; Kirkland, however, arrived on the scene more moderately positioned between exploration and continuity. As a new women's college with both a pointedly democratic curriculum and a symbiotic connection to a traditional men's school, Kirkland suggested that the values of American academia could be productively extended rather than polemically overturned. Not coincidentally, the campus environment designed by Benjamin Thompson Associates expresses this ambition in built form.

Kirkland originated from the postwar surge in higher education, or rather, from the anxieties this surge created for traditional small-town colleges. Remote and often overtly patrician, these schools saw themselves being overtaken by a host of up-to-date, accessible institutions. Fears of obsolescence were particularly resonant for Robert McEwen, the president of Hamilton College: isolated in the hinterlands of upstate New York, Hamilton provided its all-male student body with a moribund curriculum shaped by a small tenured faculty. A 1961 Ford Foundation grant for long-range planning enabled McEwen to make an end run around entrenched interests by proposing an "undergraduate university" of new institutions to complement Hamilton's mission. Given the pent-up demand for women's colleges (and the fact that they could charge correspondingly higher tuition), the first initiative was to establish a sister school for Hamilton emphasizing social sciences and the arts.

By spring 1964, McEwen was in a position to appoint an advisory committee led in practice, if not title, by Millicent McIntosh, president *emerita* of Barnard. In a nod to the past, the committee proposed naming the new college after Hamilton's founder, Rev. Samuel Kirkland. Otherwise, academic planning caught the spirit of the time in its focus on student self-determination and freeform community-building. The committee settled on an orchard just across the road from Hamilton as the site for a campus that would, within four years, serve 500

students. In contrast to Hamilton's postwar architecture (epitomized by the Bristol Campus Center, an Edward Durrell Stone work of almost metaphysical torpor) this new environment was to align with Kirkland's progressive trajectory, and in January 1966 Benjamin Thompson of The Architects Collaborative was engaged as its designer.

At the time, Thompson was highly regarded for his academic buildings and poised to move into much larger urban projects; that he is only dimly remembered today raises real questions about what gets into the history books. Thompson's output could be the most socially consequential of any American architect in the past half-century, providing powerful templates for urban revitalization and lifestyle retailing, as well as their mutual correlate, gentrification. His pioneering concepts for festival marketplaces (Faneuil Hall 1966–1979), curated merchandising (Design Research, 1953–1970), and casual dining (Harvest, 1975 onward) crystalized trends that continue to shape American consumer culture and the renaissance of US cities. More relevant to Kirkland, Thompson's appealing, deferential buildings for academic institutions including Amherst,

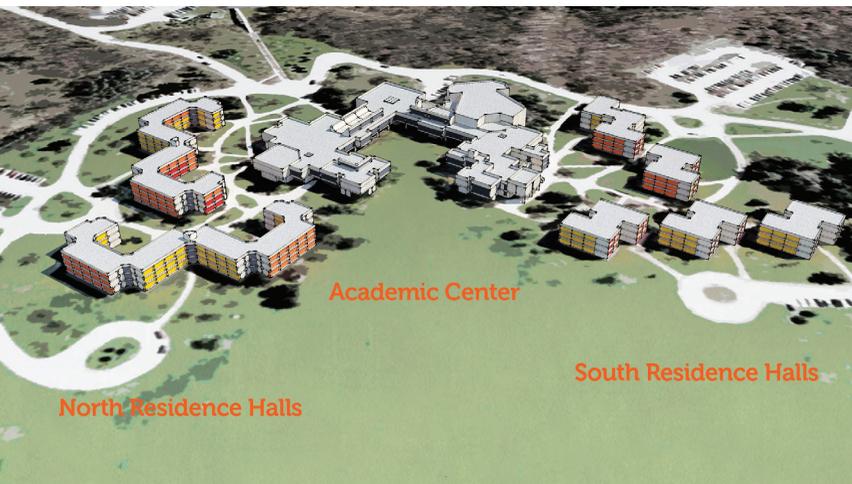
THE INVENTIVE ACUMEN UNDERPINNING THOMPSON'S WORK GREW OUT OF CLOSE EXPOSURE TO MODERNISM.

Williams, Andover, and Harvard and his tenure as Chairman of Harvard's Graduate School of Design (GSD) played a significant part in establishing the Northeastern power elite's image of acceptable Modernism in the 1960s.

The inventive acumen underpinning Thompson's work grew out of close exposure to Modernism. Born into a relatively cosmopolitan Minnesota family, Thompson received a BFA in Architecture from Yale and served as a Navy officer in World War II. Even before he was out of uniform Thompson was making plans to team up with a group of his Yale classmates, and in 1945 their young practice won an open competition for a new dormitory at Smith College. Their Bauhaus-inspired proposal served as a calling card to entice Walter Gropius, then Chairman of the GSD, into a partnership that would become one of the most influential offices of



Central academic yard looking north. Photo: Ezra Stoller/Esto



next 15 years, Thompson refined a synthesis of structure and expression based on concrete waffle slab construction, a system of deeply coffered decks cast over a grid of inverted pans that offered a contemporary analogue to New England mill structures. While the Brandeis buildings were simple blocks, subsequent projects exploited the waffle grid's fine grain with building footprints that jogged in and out, tracking the arrangement of interior spaces. Thompson also refined the material character of his projects, sandwiching water-struck brick infill laid in Flemish bond between thick slab edges of bush-hammered concrete; windows were often just enormous sheets of glass in full-height openings. Thompson was especially concerned with interiors and developed a recurring palette of exposed masonry, hefty laminated millwork, and bright-colored carpet and paint. Graphics were usually oversized and always in Clarendon, a personable serif typeface. Whenever possible, contemporary furnishings and signature Marimekko fabrics were specified from Design Research.

While TAC was, eponymously, a collaborative practice, in

its time: The Architects Collaborative (TAC).¹

The Smith commission initiated TAC's (and Thompson's) focus on educational work, although it fell through when the architects refused to relate their design to the surrounding campus in any way. TAC moved on to polemically Euro-Modern projects like the Harvard Graduate Center (1948–1950), but Thompson seems to have taken the Smith episode to heart. Beginning with a group of classroom buildings for Brandeis University (1957–1960), he committed to developing an “anonymous” architectural mode compatible with the laconic Yankee environments in which he was working. Over the

truth it functioned as a community of ateliers and Thompson's work had become distinct within it by the late 1950s. However, Thompson was emphatically not an auteur: within his own studio, he fostered a shared empirical approach he likened to jazz improvisation, and this extended into a deep curiosity about the constituencies that would use his buildings. To encourage client input, Thompson developed multi-projector slideshows of impressionistic imagery and music that led into open-ended conversations about sensibilities of place. These presentations positioned Thompson as something of a guru, exasperatingly difficult to pin down on

specifics—which was a little perverse since all his buildings turned out looking remarkably similar. Nonetheless, Thompson, whom Amherst’s president George Plimpton recalled as “a nice interesting whimsical soul with a dreamy look in his eyes,” had an uncanny ability to maintain his clients’ confidence.²

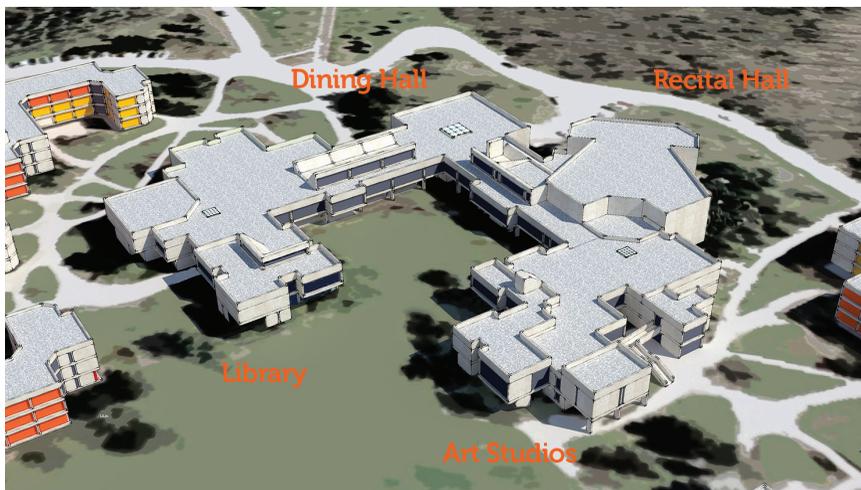
Almost as soon as they had engaged Thompson, Kirkland’s trustees learned that he was leaving TAC but there was little question they would continue with his newly established 12-person office, Benjamin Thompson Associates (BTA). Samuel Babbitt, Kirkland’s first and only president, has recounted Thompson’s idiosyncratic client rapport from the first design presentation: Kirkland’s trustees were nonplussed by the randomly clicking slide projectors and Beatles’ tunes of BTA’s multimedia introduction, and in the discussion that followed Thompson conspicuously avoided committing to anything—yet the meeting generated real enthusiasm.³ There was much talk about gender symbolism, and BTA’s initial campus layouts were purposefully circular, or “receptive” as Babbitt piquantly noted. The curvaceous literalism eventually subsided into an orthogonal meander composed of a central southwest-facing academic oxbow tailing off into two dormitory clusters. It was only late in the process that Thompson revealed a major deviation from his previous work: without a historic context to harmonize with, he wanted to forgo brick infill at Kirkland in favor of cast-in-place concrete for both frame and enclosure. The trustees resisted, but BTA pressed them with examples of appealing aggregates and finishes (none of which are evident in the straight-

forward concrete treatment of Kirkland as built). In the end, Thompson had recourse to budget arguments and the project proceeded as all-concrete.

In September 1968, Kirkland welcomed its first freshman class with Marimekko pennants



Dining Hall. Photo: Ezra Stoller/Esto



All drawings: Kimbro Frutiger

flying over a campus in construction. Three dorms were complete and foundations had been laid for the dining hall, but otherwise students would use Hamilton's facilities for the first year. Adding to the giddy atmosphere, Hamilton was hosting location filming for *The Sterile Cuckoo* (aka *Pookie*) starring 22-year-old Liza Minnelli. As it happens, this points to a significant issue framing Kirkland's design: when *The Sterile Cuckoo* was released in 1969, reviewers were quick to point out that its story of neurotic undergraduate love, drawn from John Nichols's 1965 novel, had been rendered quaint in the space of only four years by the counterculture and Vietnam War. BTA's designs for Kirkland might be expected to suffer from similar cultural lag time, and in fact there were some anachronisms stemming largely from expectations that gentlemen callers would never be invited further than the common lounge. On the whole, though, Kirkland remained valid as it passed the critical horizon of 1968, arguably because BTA's work was less a forecast of cultural upheaval than an optimistic counterproposal. Thompson's success on Northeastern campuses up to this point depended on his skill mediating academia's conflicting impulses toward tradition and investigation, or, to

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be more forthright, mediating left-leaning upper-middle-class desires for both continuity and progressive contemporaneity. Kirkland presented itself a way forward without demands for traumatic rupture.

As Kirkland was built out over the next five years, its emerging environment revealed Thompson's capacity to synthesize recognizable precedents with leading-edge developments using only a few materials and operations. At a distance, Kirkland's horizontal concrete gestalt evokes the megastructures of high-concept 1960s campus design, but seen closer up its unity breaks into a play of overlapping volumes. As one enters the campus, these volumes resolve into legible aca-



Diagram of late-stage campus design (Faculty Houses were cut from built program).

ademic building types: a central cloister flanked by groups of binuclear residence halls. (The halls in the western group were joined up into two winding structures for budget reasons.) Thompson insisted on the importance of "spaces between," and Kirkland's orthogonal layout is enriched with implied diagonals, oblique vectors, and landscape grading that merge a spectrum of impressions from abstract spatial flow to traditional quad-angle. This culminates in the central academic yard: counterintuitively depressed below the landscape to which it opens at its southwest corner, this space is both familiar and novel.

BTA's empirical place-making gave Kirkland a casual demeanor strikingly resonant with contemporaneous "outsider" architecture—itsself a negotiation between traditional (folk) and countercultural attitudes. Much of Kirkland's ad hoc ambience comes from the almost fractal planning supported by the waffle slab grid and the campus's incremental build out.⁴ There's also a hint of *Whole Earth Catalog* in the implied partnership between occupant and environment (tellingly, Thompson was excited to discover students transforming their dorm rooms with self-made supergraphics) and the optimism about reconciling technology and human experience. The

latter is most evident in BTA's vigorous attempts to make enjoyable environments out of frankly tectonic constructions. While the building exteriors are concrete and nothing but, the interiors introduce complementary materials—mainly floor finishes that shift from brick to carpet to wood, signaling different kinds of spaces while leaving concrete walls and ceilings exposed. Enormous windows, clerestories, and visual layering counteract potential sarcophagus-like enclosure. Close attention was given to often-overlooked furnishings, notably the red, orange, and yellow venetian blinds that make the dormitory facades into animated semaphores.

Despite the convergences with fringe experimentation, Kirkland's architecture is undeniably polished and it's fair to ask if its designers basically sanitized radical strategies to suit the social positioning of "scrubbed Hippies" (as President Babbitt described the college's first students). Against that charge, BTA's work can be understood as a realist effort to merge experimental techniques into the existing sensibilities of progressive (specifically, academic) institutions. Thus freed from an avant-garde mandate to disrupt, Thompson's lively restatements of Northeastern liberal arts campuses could engage and convince. However, in offering an equivocal counterproposal to the extremes of the 1960s, Thompson risked letting academic establishments off the hook: Kirkland's design was vibrantly WASPy in ways that eased the restrictive covenants around that ambiance but left it largely in place. The elysian campus fit a little too smoothly into contemporary New Left thinking, particularly the intelligentsia's self-revelation that they, not the working class, were the most likely drivers of social transformation. While broad-spectrum universities had epitomized the meritocratic opportunity of the 1950s, elite small colleges—cloisters and all—could now reposition themselves from relics of social stratification to progressive environments for personal growth.

Problematic as this may have been for egalitarianism, it was good for architecture. Efforts to integrate contemporary buildings into small, historic campuses—often inflected by the example of Thompson's work—became increasingly convincing over the 1960s. Kirkland itself wasn't specifically influential only because BTA's work was so widely

known by the time the campus was completed in the early 1970s. Indeed, BTA-derived forms and strategies were ubiquitous in the last wave of construction at New England colleges before the energy crisis.⁵ But this was not to last: Thompson became preoccupied with festival marketplaces

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from the mid-1970s on and the thread of investigation into an anonymous Modernism was dropped. Kirkland itself was affected by the financial instability of the 1970s and absorbed into Hamilton in 1978.

As the most comprehensive of Thompson's realized campuses, Kirkland's overlay of old Yankee and New Left sensibilities remains productively debatable. Was it too conciliatory, or too abstract? Or could it still offer a way forward? If current US Modernism tends toward agnostic styling or self-validating invention, Kirkland presents a real architecture of values—and for once this means more than all-purpose humanism. Thompson's provocative alignment of Modernist optimism, upper-middle-class propriety, academic tradition, and democratic enjoyment of place is readily legible in the campus as built.

— KIMBRO FRUTIGER

1. Given Gropius's commitment to collaboration, it's a great irony that most of his closest collaborators were educated in Yale's open-ended, empirical tradition while his own program at the GSD notoriously produced a roster of proto-starchitects.

2. Quoted in "American Architecture and the Amherst College Campus" Andrew Blum, 1996

3. See Babbitt's "Limited Engagement, Kirkland College 1965-78: An Intimate History of the Rise & Fall of a Coordinate College for Women" *Xlibris*, 2006

4. While the campus was largely finished by 1973, a bright yellow BTA-designed bridge spanned the final gap in the academic quadrangle until 1988, when a Ewing Cole-designed recital hall was completed.

5. Beside BTA's own buildings at Harvard, examples include Hampshire College's campus (Hugh Stubbins, 1967 onward), Wesleyan's Center for the Arts (KRJDA, 1973), and Sawyer Library, Williams College (Harry Weese & Associates, 1975).