

Forbes 'partial to' Ionic With

By Lynn G. Ketchum

Photos by Allan Fertig and Lynn G. Ketchum

In 1913 when the Arizona Legislature appropriated \$165,000 for a new agriculture building on the University of Arizona campus, Robert H. Forbes, Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station, already knew what he wanted.

"We are distinctly partial to the Ionic treatment and good classical outlines so far as these are consistent with useful construction," Forbes wrote.

Besides the columns he wanted a Spanish tile roof and the chemist-turned-administrator wanted the three-story building to surround the courtyard. In that same letter to consulting architect Myron Hunt of Los Angeles he described what would be the centerpiece of the grand project . . . an auditorium. The space would be unique. Forbes wanted an auditorium that would accommodate Arizona audiences in the cool



Spanish-tiled Roof

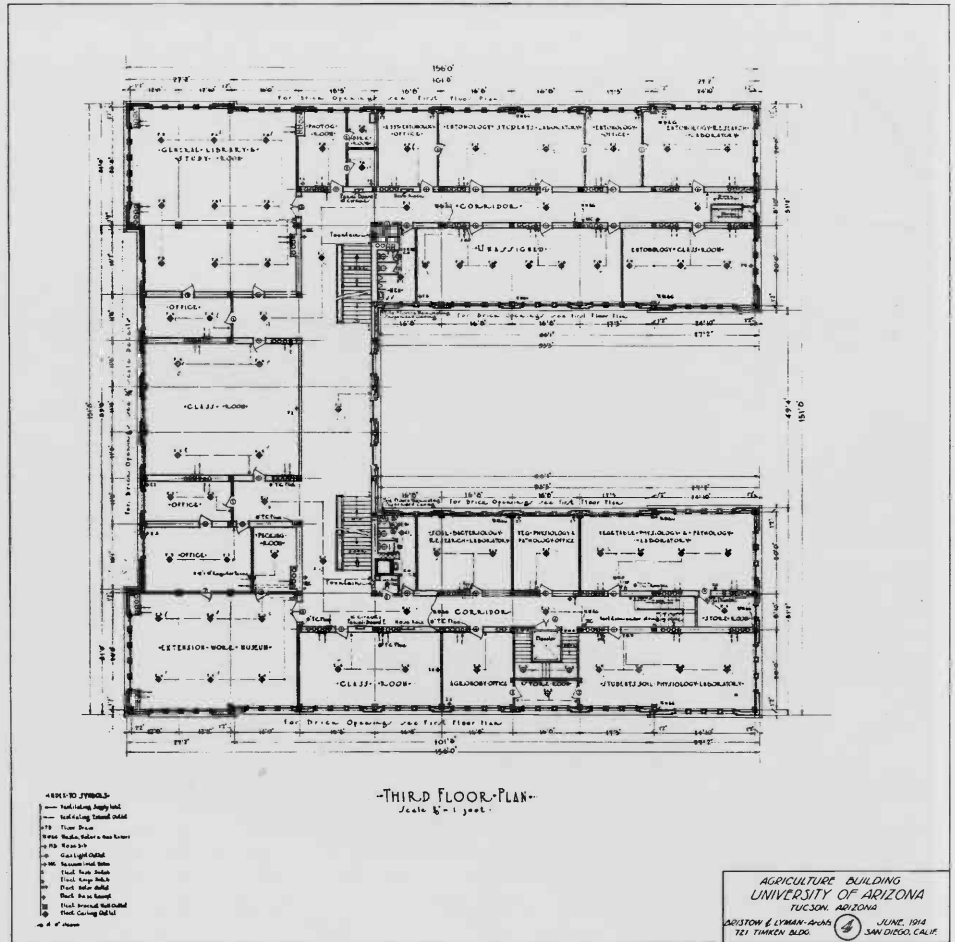
of winter and in the heat of summer.

"The auditorium and stage as marked upon the sketch are intended to be covered by the patio, but the patio is open to the sky. I had hoped that the stage could be constructed as to face either way so that small audiences and winter audiences can be addressed in the auditorium from the stage, while large summer audiences in the evening such as commencement, could be addressed in the patio from the stage. The idea is somewhat novel but I hope it can be worked out by means of an arrangement of sliding screens, etc., housed in anterooms at the sides of the stage . . .," Forbes wrote architect Hunt.

The original appropriation called for \$150,000 for construction, roughly 20 cents a "cubic" foot and \$15,000 for furnishing the new building. That appropriation included \$1,200 for a new water well.

Finding an architect or an architecture firm to meet those fiscal require-



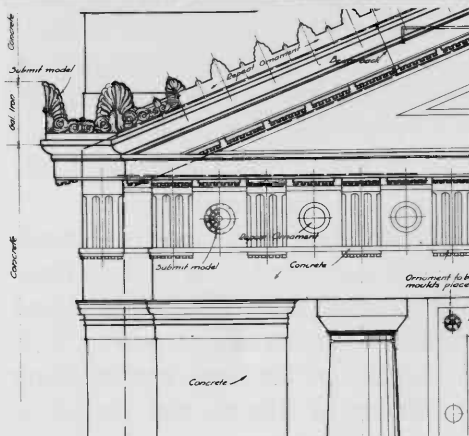
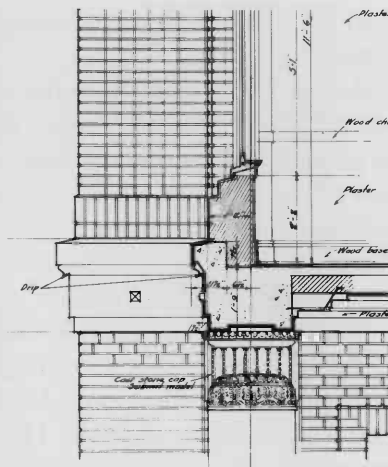
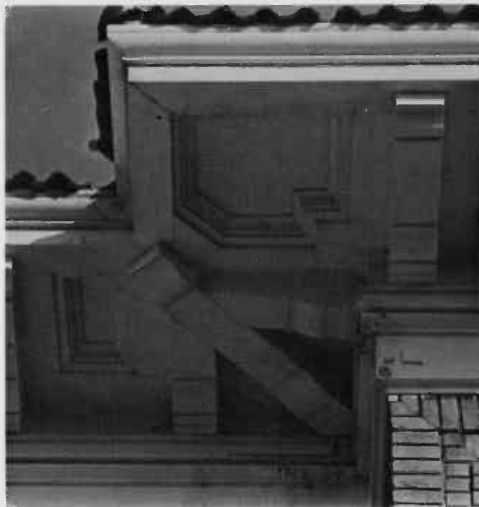


ments and Forbes' own specifications required a design competition. Originally Forbes worked with Los Angeles architect Myron Hunt to organize such a competition. But, when the Arizona Attorney General's Office ruled that whoever won the bid would have to be both architect and contractor, Hunt backed out. He felt the American Institute of Architects could not endorse such an arrangement.

Undaunted, Forbes put together his own competition, advertising the university's need for an architect in professional journals and national trade magazines.

Nineteen architectural firms replied to the advertisements and to the design program. In addition to the need for classic columns and a courtyard with an auditorium, the program called for a local stone foundation, local brick exterior, reinforced concrete, concrete first floor and thermodynamically controlled heating and cooling.

By April of 1914 the Arizona Board of Regents and Robert Forbes had agreed on an architect. The San Diego firm of L.T. Bristow and Jack Lyman would supervise the design and construction of the 990,000 "cubic" foot agriculture building. Experiment Station Director Forbes described the winning design this way: "... a Spanish Renaissance with a colonnade of eight Ionic columns extending across the middle front of the building between two well proportioned wings. The roof is of Spanish tile and is so constructed of reinforced concrete as to afford an immense space available for a roof garden or other purposes. The treatment of the



auditorium facing the patio is a pure Greek pediment; the stage being arranged to front either into the auditorium or into the patio.”

The agriculture plans set the style and scale for later University of Arizona buildings . . . neo-classic with a Spanish treatment.

The agriculture project was only the first of a series of campus buildings partner Jack Lyman would help design. In 1917 Lyman and Roy Place moved to Tucson from San Diego after winning the design competition for the university’s mining and engineering building. The partners followed that project with the Steward Observatory, the Main Library and the memorial fountain on the west side of Old Main.

Once the agriculture design had been settled upon, the Board of Regents hired another architect. The legendary Tucson architect H.O. Jaastad would represent the university’s interest during construction. The construction contract went to the Winget Company of Los Angeles.

By August 1914 the excavation work had started and the foundation was taking shape next to Herring Hall, the school’s gymnasium. In 1914 Herring Hall’s landmark status was questionable, a fact that became apparent in a letter from Forbes to consulting architect Myron Hunt.

Forbes wrote, “It is expected that this new building will crowd the gymnasium building (Herring Hall) on the south but this building is a small, cheap structure considered to be temporary and removeable at a future time.”

As it turned out, there was room for both. The 82-year-old Herring

Hall survives today and houses the Department of Landscape Architecture.

Robert Forbes had from the very beginning made the new agriculture building a pet project. It was a landmark for the wiry, former track star, an event he thoroughly documented. Forbes snapped pictures from the first brick to the last. He kept much of his correspondence concerning the building project. He filed letters to architects, contractors, suppliers, copies of bills for materials and labor.

“Fifty dollars for hardware . . . ”

“Three dollars paid to H. Swaney for painting . . . ”

“Fifty dollars to hang doors, place hardware and glass . . . ”

Gangs of carpenters and brick masons worked through the fall and winter and into the spring of 1915 creating a showcase of early twentieth-century workmanship. Brass doorknobs with leaf engravings opened hardwood doors. A marble staircase moved visitors from the first floor to the second. Outside, eight Ionic columns with intricate cast capitals supported a Spanish tile roof. Engraved lintels over courtyard doorways let the world know this building would be devoted to agricultural study. The legends read “Plant Industry,” “Chemistry,” “Agronomy” and “Irrigation.” At the front another set of lintels told the goals of this modern college: “Research,” “Education” and “Extension.”

With its round greenhouse and Greek auditorium, the College of Agriculture was nothing less than grand. That feeling was shared by an *Arizona Daily Star* reporter in an article published in May of 1915: “This beautiful and commodious structure now nearing completion on the campus is in the style of the Italian Renaissance, the Ionic columns of the front portico being proportioned after those of the Erechtheum at Athens, and the Doric auditorium front being proportioned after the Parthenon.

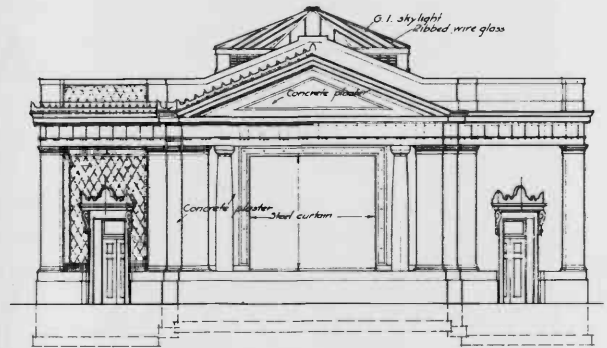
“Aside from its utilities, the building is architecturally beautiful, affords an example of modern engineering construction, and those in charge hope marks the beginning of a new order of building operations upon the University grounds . . . ”

Although funded, built and billed as the agriculture building, it was not long before the newest campus space assumed additional roles. In the years ahead, Robert Forbes’ “Ag Building” also served as headquarters for the university administration, The Arizona Museum and the alumni office. But despite its double duty, the new building was a welcome relief to those professors and researchers who had spent the previous 20 years cramped in the basement of Old Main.

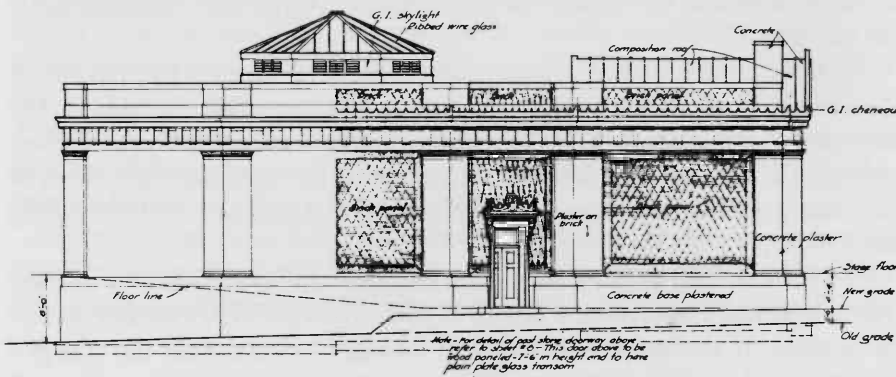
The building changed very little for the next 45 years. However, in 1962 the attached greenhouse and auditorium were demolished to make room for the new agricultural sciences building. The interior was remodeled that same year.

Despite 70 years of wear and tear the original look has survived. Today, a visitor can walk through the grand portico and climb marble staircases. And, there are some subtle reminders of those early years. A sharp-eyed visitor still can find one or two “flora” brass doorknobs.





FRONT ELEVATION
SCALE 1/8" = 1'-0"



SIDE ELEVATION
SCALE 1/8" = 1'-0"

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Robert Forbes

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The Arizona Daily Star, May 1915



The eight-sided auditorium served UA audiences for 47 years before its demolition in 1962.