

The ideological ends of mid-century Student Union buildings: a study of disciplinary connections

Clare Robinson

University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona

ABSTRACT: This paper closely considers the ideological underpinnings of Student Union buildings during the postwar period, when there was general agreement among student union proponents that the programs and buildings should prepare students for the political and economic realities of the postwar period. Underlying the ideological purpose of mid-century Student Union buildings were a crucial set of interdisciplinary professional connections that made the ideas of Unions manifest. Using the writing and professional work of two Union proponents – Union Director Porter Butts and architect Michael Hare – as well as several built and un-built mid-century Union buildings, this paper illustrates the disciplinary contributions of these men, what ideologies shaped the form and function of Unions, and what buildings effectively taught students in the postwar period.

KEYWORDS: mid-century, College Unions, consultants

INTRODUCTION

Members of the Association of College Unions helped establish Student Union buildings on North American campuses during the first half of the twentieth century. In these early years, a new, heterogeneous group of professionals drawn from the ranks of university presidents, Union directors, and architects, believed these buildings were instruments of social education and subsequently cooperated on the architecture and programs that would best teach students important social lessons.¹ In this way, the physical Union building represented an essential social enterprise on college campuses for the diverse group of Union proponents. The building type, however, came of age during the postwar period when G.I.s (and later baby boomers) populated college campuses in unprecedented numbers. For Student Union proponents then, the buildings and the activities in them remained important instruments for social education, but the meaning of social education, and the way architecture responded to it, transformed. The architecture and social programs after World War II were best if they allowed young college students to learn the meaning of democracy and citizenship, freedom and consumption, during the cold war period.

While Student Union proponents at large wrestled with the meaning and application of social education in the buildings they already had or desired, Union director Porter Butts and architect Michael Hare busied themselves serving as consultants for the burgeoning Union industry by offering their services to universities planning new Student Union buildings. Trained in different fields – one in student services and the other in architecture – their efforts were guided by several agreed-upon social concerns, namely activities and spaces necessary to ensure desirable student character and citizenship, the reintroduction of GIs into civilian life, and the possibility of unruly student behavior. Although particular solutions to achieve these goals on campuses varied, Porter Butts and Michael Hare were representative leaders of a heterogeneous group of Union proponents that shared an ideological vision for mid-century Student Union buildings. With the buildings seen as instruments to attain the goals of collegiate life, this analysis of Student Union buildings reveals inseparable disciplinary connections among the social aspirations outlined by proponents, assumptions about the didactic role of architecture, and the architecture pursued by Student Union proponents on North American college campuses.

1.0 STUDENT UNIONS ON THE EVE OF WORLD WAR II

Unions built before World War II housed recreational activities which were thought to be essential for a productive adult life. Thus, leisure activities in a building devoted to recreation, culture, and the social life of campus were part of a comprehensive educational approach. Educators concluded then that leisure, if defined and ordered, would increase productive hours at school. Moreover, because schools trained students for life, teaching students how to spend leisure time meant that graduates would become more efficient and well-behaved workers. With Union facilities available, graduates stood a chance of exhibiting good character and values.² This meant that learning, once coveted by faculty in the confines of the classroom, found a place in Union buildings. Thus, Student Unions were valuable buildings on college campuses, with the potential to translate ideological aims into desired social behavior.

Early Student Union buildings accomplished social education through a formal set of spaces designed to guide student conduct. The Wisconsin Union, for example, like other Unions constructed during the 1920s and 1930s, housed formal lobbies, offices, lounges, dining rooms, committee rooms, a theater, kitchen, library, game room, art gallery, craft room, and barber shop. Through these spaces, students received cues about behavior and activities. Upholstery, wood paneling, and built-in cabinetry framed rooms for formal occasions and quiet study. In contrast, informal spaces for socialization and games, such as cards and billiards, contained more appropriate, durable interior finishes.³ Together these environments balanced the various activities favored by students, and social conduct expected by administrators. The spatial organization of Wisconsin and other early Unions also adeptly defined environments for men, women, and staff, further establishing expectations about appropriate leisure.⁴

The problem with early Unions arose when the tenor of the United States changed during World War II, and when politics and economic realities of the Cold War took hold. Because of the G.I. Bill more students entered college after World War II, crowding older Union facilities, more administrators concerned themselves with student behavior. Unions required larger dining rooms and cafeterias, more flexible spaces, and the recreational activities popular during the postwar period, including environments for coed socialization.⁵

2.0 NATIONAL VISIONARIES BRING EXPERTISE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

To achieve the desired social and programmatic changes, Student Union leaders at the national level orchestrated discussions about Student Union buildings at conventions between 1946 and 1950 and bolstered the role of official Association of College Union consultants for new and planned Student Union buildings.⁶ These efforts fueled a building boom, consolidated expertise, and gradually helped define key characteristics of the postwar Student Union building as a place for leisure and casual consumption.⁷

Most instrumental were Porter Butts and Michael Hare. Butts, the long-time Director of the Wisconsin Union and Editor of Publications for the Association of College Unions was *not* an architect, but saw errors in the early pioneer buildings he hoped future buildings would avoid. Thus, he diligently organized a panel with architect Michael Hare on the subject in 1946 and again in 1947.⁸ In 1948, a group of Association leaders from Unions across the country organized sessions on topics that ranged from coeducational Unions, men's Unions, small coeducational unions, temporary Unions, and Unions in large cities. Each year session topics became more specific and varied. Hoping to consolidate expert advice, the Association of College Unions promoted Porter Butts and Michael Hare as the official consultants for planning and designing new buildings.

2.1. Porter Butts, Union Director

As a Union Director and consultant, Porter Butts advised the University of California at Berkeley, Boston University, Kansas State, and the State College of Washington in Pullman on the social and programmatic aspects of Union buildings. Although Butts tailored his recommendations to match the needs of each university, most Unions shared several elements, but his advice was not unchanging boilerplate prose, nor did the results of his work duplicate the interiors of other buildings.⁹

Among the programmatic amenities recommended by Butts for the University of California at Berkeley were a ballroom, lounge, cafeteria, bookstore, and theater. These were the largest spaces and the most predictable pieces of postwar Student Unions. Butts, however, also recommended several smaller rooms for specific needs and social activities: a place for students to stash belongings while enjoying Union facilities; quiet rooms furnished with cots and bedspreads; and dressing rooms and individual lockers for commuting students. Other recommended spaces to be vital assets were a record-playing room, browsing library, photographic darkrooms, craft room, woodshop, art gallery, and outing office.¹⁰ Butts included a post office and athletic ticket office, as well as a cumbersome list of spaces that supported the daily operations of a Union building.¹¹ Between his advice – a long list of carefully crafted descriptions of programmatic amenities – and the buildings themselves lay a new building type that promised the best possible social etiquette for the postwar period.

An example of this new type of building was the Kansas State Union. Celebrated by college business administrators for its thorough planning, it had many traditional Union features but in a new architectural form (Figure 1).¹² Unlike Butts' own Union, designed in the monumental Beaux-Arts style, the Kansas Union was modern. Its ballroom was easily divisible into four smaller banquet rooms. Moreover, unlike the recreational facilities found in basements in older Unions, Kansas placed them on the ground level and dedicated nearly the entire building footprint to leisurely pursuits. The longstanding Union sport of billiards met rooms for table tennis, bowling, and crafts. On the main floor, the lobby divided the snack bar and cafeteria from an art lounge, a library, music rooms, and a lecture hall. All of these spaces were expressed in modern architectural materials. Columns visibly bore the weight of the building, while non-load-bearing walls divided activities. Gone were the heavy stone, ceremonial thresholds, and symmetrically arranged rooms many of the older Union had. In their place came glass, aluminum, stone veneer, columns, and lightweight walls that created seamless connections between activities.

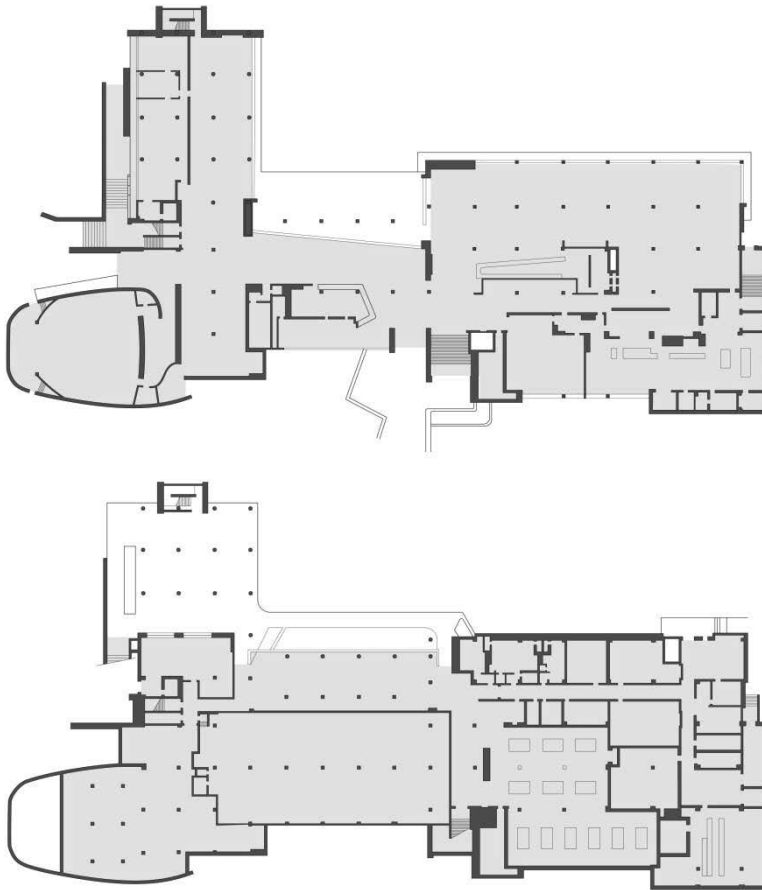


Figure 1: Plan of the Kansas State Union, c1958. Source: (Author, 2013)

2.2. Michael Hare, Architect

Michael Hare steered many of these architectural changes by championing the reorganization of space within the Union building. Although Hare's principal aim may have been to secure design work for his architectural firm, he more often answered inquiries by mail about buildings and equipment costs, assisted college authorities and architects with planning problems, and worked alongside Porter Butts.¹³ The promotion of an architectural consultant by the Association streamlined how technical and design expertise reached schools planning Unions, and acknowledged that Unions were complicated, specialized buildings that ought to be designed with expert guidance. To this end, Hare's leadership was invaluable. He cemented the importance of both the architectural *and* ideological vision for Student Unions.

By 1945, Hare had either drawn plans or assisted with the plans for postwar Unions at Rhode Island State College, University of Oregon, Washington State College, William Jewell College in Missouri, DePauw University in Indiana, Case College in Cleveland, and the University of Maine.¹⁴ At the Wilson Compton Student Union building at the State College of Washington in Pullman, Hare worked alongside Butts (Figure 2). With Butts' steadied professional opinion and Hare's architectural ambition, the consultants guided architect John Maloney and campus architect Philip Keene. Completed in 1952, the Union was among the first postwar Student Union buildings to open and demonstrate how tested programmatic elements could readily and successfully adapt to modern architecture and social agendas. On the ground floor, students could easily survey activities in the bowling alley from an outdoor terrace. Moreover, students passing the table tennis room could view tournaments and causal games through an interior glass wall. On the main level, ceiling finishes and walls hovered above and between structural

columns, which visually linked the soda foundation, lobby, and lounge. Without dedicated corridors, the plan was free, open, and ambitious.¹⁵ In this way, the Wilson Compton Union combined new ideas about architectural space and materials with desirable leisure activities of the postwar period.

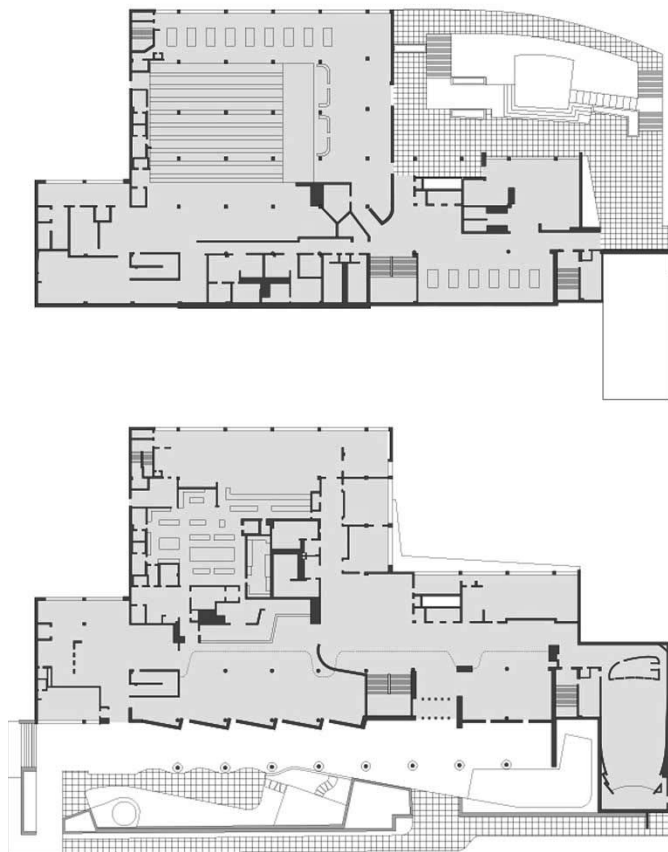


Figure 2: Plan of the Wilson Compton Union at the State College of Washington in Pullman, c1951. Source: (Author, 2013).

Michael Hare claimed many of these ideas as his own. Looking to Lewis Mumford's pointed critique of the machine in *Technics and Civilization* (1934), Hare ventured to argue that only College Unions could satisfy the fundamental needs of college students because these buildings could recalibrate the balance between civilization's new-found love for the machine and human life.¹⁶ In addition, sounding much like his colleague Butts, he thought that the Union gave students an environment for activities that are "naturally" part of life, including art, entertainment, and self-governance.¹⁷ But Hare distinguished himself from his predecessors by showing what he described as a well-rounded program. In place of previous creeds calling for social order among men, women, staff, and students, Hare blended social spaces together, distinguishing only between staff and users, and promoted spatial flexibility as an essential component of Union buildings.¹⁸

As an example, Hare used plans for the Rhode Island State College to illustrate how a single co-educational lounge, social room, browsing room, music room, Ping-Pong room, billiards room, bowling alley, craft shop, and auditorium could be arranged and adapted for specific needs over the course of day or long-term capital building program.¹⁹ Although older Unions had many of the activities of Rhode Island's Union, Hare's example reconstituted the program

in an entirely new form. Approached obliquely, the Union retained only a suggestion of formal symmetry. More important, however, was how Hare grouped activities and streamlined circulation. Hare's circulation system organized discrete programmatic elements by floor. Programs demanding a degree of social etiquette were on the first floor while active recreation was tucked into the lower floor. Large formal spaces and an obvious means for Union staff to monitor the activities of students were gone and replaced by a tacit understanding about the rituals and rules of recreation. Hare assured readers that well-roundedness (a desirable personality characteristic of the postwar period) was maintained because the building provided specific activities and a degree of flexibility with the spaces themselves. The social room on the first floor, for example, could double as dining rooms and be reconfigured to accommodate different-sized gatherings. He even supposed that the auditorium could be added later, if construction were phased. Flexibility in a larger set of interconnected spaces, rather than discrete spaces for men and women, dominated Hare's architectural ideas and reinforced the broader ethos of postwar collegiate community life.

3.0 THE IDEOLOGICAL ENDS OF STUDENT UNION BUILDINGS

The belief that buildings could embody community ideals, or teach occupants desirable virtues, is an old one shared by early Union proponents who reflected the ideas of John Dewey. Although Dewey did not write about college education, college educators and students were astutely aware of Dewey's philosophical principles. Dewey's primary message in *Democracy and Education* (1916) – that education has a social purpose that requires formal as well as informal settings – gave educational credence to leisure time's importance and to the social forces at work in a Student Union.²⁰ Thus, early iterations of the "Union Idea," fleshed out by Union directors and college presidents, resonated with the educational philosophy of Dewey and his followers. For example, President Clarence Dykstra of the University of Wisconsin, who would later serve as Chancellor at UCLA, formed his opinion about the purpose of the Union at Wisconsin after living in one of its hotel rooms. In his mind, education could not be a "cloistered or removed-from-life experiment." Education, Dykstra thought, must prepare a student to be an individual in society.²¹ Other early Wisconsin presidents, such as President E. H. Fred, invoked the idea of a laboratory for the Union, where students would partake in a community enterprise and continually practice democracy.²² The value of social education pivoted on preparing successful leaders of the industrialized world. Students properly socialized were educated and therefore prepared to live among others. A campus without a Student Union might fail to achieve such socially minded goals.

After World War II, the goals of social education shifted from business culture to managerial culture, and from democracy and citizenship to also freedom to choose among a variety of Union activities, making social education all that more important. In particular, Porter Butts believed that Unions should be laboratories for citizenship. "Good citizens," he wrote, "are not made through the advancement of science or by reading the history of our democratic past" but are made "when men begin to feel a responsibility for their general welfare, when their interests include not merely vocational matters, or personal gains, but the destiny of the group to which they belong."²³ In other words, citizens were made through the practice of citizenship. In Butts' opinion, the social programs and spaces Unions allowed students to join activities, to discover and express themselves, and to develop themselves into whole individuals.

In parallel, architect Michael Hare vehemently argued that new Student Union buildings were the architectural answer to social education on campus and tried to persuade readers about the value of their thoughtful design. Hare feared that after World War II young men no longer knew how to think or live, and to his dismay saw them find extraordinary pleasure in food, money, and women.²⁴ He also thought that the years preceding World War II witnessed the construction of too many buildings without enough thinking. Great architecture, Hare imagined, was not just plumbing, wiring, brick, and stone but a philosophy of life made manifest in physical form. Cautioning architects against trivial matters, he asserted that woodshops and dining halls served a purpose in Unions but that Unions were not built to provide schools with these facilities. Instead, Hare argued that if administrators wanted students to appreciate the pleasures of life, students must be shown what those pleasures in life were. Thus, any Union

architect should weigh what is important in living – during college and *after* graduation – before determining the design of Union buildings.

If Student Unions were to prepare students for life as Porter Butts and Michael Hare thought, then they also prepared students to be ardent consumers of leisure activities and food. With more space dedicated to affordable cafeterias, bookstores, and bowling alleys, students learned to choose among numerous activities and vendors. These choices, and the underlying importance of consumption, paralleled broader efforts to ensure that families during the postwar period achieved material wealth and experiences expected by members of the middle-class.²⁵ Thus, the ideological position of Union proponents of the postwar period placed the longstanding ideals of democracy and citizenship in the buildings themselves, as well as the freedom to choose and consume.

CONCLUSION

Porter Butts and Michael Hare understood from their own disciplinary perspectives that Union buildings played a crucial role in human development and held convictions about how Union buildings and programs in them could usher students through the rites of college years. Both believed as well that, upon graduation, students who had participated fully in Union programs during college would be well prepared for adult life. Porter Butts stressed the importance of specific spaces that together would represent a model building for social education and citizenship. Michael Hare stressed the importance of specific activities and the architecture that would best support and encourage them. In addition, built unions gave students ample opportunities to choose (and consume) among many different activities.

Although particular solutions to attain community life on campus varied, Porter Butts and Michael Hare represent the heterogeneous group of Union proponents that shared an ideological vision for mid-century Student Union buildings. Viewed as instruments to attain the goals of collegiate community life, Student Union buildings reveal how disciplinary connections mattered to the underlying goals and physical expression of social education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Advisors, mentors, family, and friends have supported and offered guidance on this Student Union research. For this paper, Bernardo Teran, my research assistant enthusiastically assisted with the production of figures for this paper.

REFERENCES

- Berry, Chester and Alfred Looman, editors. 1964. *College Unions ... Year Fifty*. Stanford: Association of College Unions.
- "Building Planning Service Offered." March 1941. *The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions*. Pages 1-2.
- The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions*. January 1933. Page 2.
- The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions*. July 1945. Page 5.
- Dewey, John. 1916. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: MacMillan Company.
- Hare, Michael. March 1949. "The College Union Building Offers Substitute for Home" in *College and University Business*. Pages 14-15.
- Hare, Michael. February 1945. "Thoughts on Union Architecture" in *The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions*. Vol XIII No 1, page 1.
- Humphreys, Edith Outz. 1946. *College Unions: A Handbook on Campus Community Centers*. Association of College Unions.
- Kottner, Loren. September 1958. "Thorough Planning Makes Union" in *College and University Business*. Vol 25 No 3, pages 28-31.
- Peabody, Arthur. July 1929. "The Memorial Union Building, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin" in *The American Architect*. Vol CXXXVI No 2572, pages 1-8.
- Pond, Irving. June 1931. "The College Union" in *Architectural Forum*. Pages 771-778.
- Robinson, Clare. 2012. "Postwar Student Unions as Crucibles for a Middle-class Art of Living" in *Student Union: The Architecture and Social Design of Postwar Campus Community Centers in California*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

"Wilson Compton Student Union Building." December 1951. *Architectural Record*. Pages 32-32, 32-33.

Archives

Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley

National Student Affairs Archives, Bowling Green State University

University Archives, University of California Los Angeles

University Archives, University of Wisconsin

ENDNOTES

¹ See Edith Outz Humphreys, *College Unions: A Handbook on Campus Community Centers* (Association of College Unions, 1946) for synopsis for this ideology and cooperation.

² See Eugene T. Lies, *The New Leisure Challenges the Schools: Shall Recreation Enrich or Impoverish Life?* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1933); Paul P. Boyd, "Extra Curricular Activities and Scholarship," *School and Society* XIII (February 5, 1921); Donald S. Bridgeman, "Success in College and Business," *Personnel Journal* IX (June 1930); Delisle C Burns, *Leisure in the Modern World* (New York: The Century Co., 1932); Stuart F Chapin, "Extra-Curricular Activities of College Students: A Study in College Leadership," *School and Society* XXIII (February 13, 1926); Alzada Comstock, "Time and the College Girl," *School and Society* XXI (March 14, 1925); W. H. Cowley, "Explaining the Rah Rah Boy," *New Republic* XLVI (April 14, 1926); Irwin Edman, "On American Leisure," *Harper's Magazine* (January 1926); Christian Gauss, *Life in College* (New York: Scribner's, 1930); L. P. Jacks, *Education for the Whole Man* (New York: Harper's, 1931) and *Education Through Recreation* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1932); and Woodrow Wilson, "What is College For?" *Scribner's Magazine* Vol XLVI (November 1909).

³ See Arthur Peabody, "The Memorial Union Building, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin" in *The American Architect*, July 5, 1929, Vol CXXXVI No 2572, pp1-8, (p6); *The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions*, January 1933, p2.; The Association of College Unions Convention Proceedings, 1929, p13 (National Student Affairs Archives, Bowling Green State University); and "Short History of Memorial Union" (University Archives, University of Wisconsin, General Files of Porter Butts [Series 26 11 1 Box 1]).

⁴ See for example Irving Pond, "The College Union" in *Architectural Forum* (June 1931): 771-778.

⁵ See Clare Robinson, "Postwar Student Unions as Crucibles for a Middle-class Art of Living" in *Student Union: The Architecture and Social Design of Postwar Campus Community Centers in California* (Ph.D. Dissertation University of California, Berkeley, 2012).

⁶ See Convention summaries in Chester Berry and Alfred Looman, editors, *College Unions ... Year Fifty*. (Stanford: Association of College Unions, 1964), specifically years 1946, 1947, 1948, and 1949.

⁷ See especially *Bulletins* published between 1947 and 1960 for the "roll call" of Union buildings remodeled and added to college campuses in the United States. The number and geographical breadth are impressive.

⁸ This was the same year Edith Ouzts Humphreys published her seminal and first-of-a-kind book *College Unions: A Handbook on Campus Community Centers* (Association of College Unions, 1946).

⁹ The congruency of Butt's consulting work and ideas published in the Bulletin suggest one of two things: Butts' editorial comments shaped the mission of the Association, or Butts ably synthesized and mirrored the viewpoints of the Association presidents and the diverse group of proponents on individual campuses. Regardless, the California report on Student Union buildings observed that Butts was known throughout the Association of "Mr. Union Himself" (meeting minutes from the Student Union committee, University Archives UCLA [RS 359 Box 276 F88]).

¹⁰ The craft room and art gallery were Butts' favorite suggestions because he had nurtured art education and gallery programs at the Wisconsin Union.

¹¹ See Office of the President files on the Student Union 1941-1955, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley [CU-5 Series 3, 20:11] for the complete report.

¹² Loren Kottner, "Thorough Planning Makes Union" in *College and University Business*, September 1958, Vol 25 No 3, pp28-31.

¹³ See “Building Planning Service Offered” in *The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions*, March 1941, pp1-2.

¹⁴ *The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions*, July 1945, p5.

¹⁵ “Wilson Compton Student Union Building” in *Architectural Record*, December 1951, pp32-32, 32-33.

¹⁶ Michael Hare, “The College Union Building Offers Substitute for Home” in *College and University Business*, March 1949, pp14-15.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p14.

¹⁸ Hare’s predecessors were arguably Pond and Pond who built and wrote about the merits of Student Union buildings in the 1920s and 1930s. See Irving Pond, “The College Union” in *Architectural Forum*, June 1931, pp771-778.

¹⁹ Michael Hare, “The College Union Building Offers Substitute for Home” in *College and University Business*, March 1949, pp14-15.

²⁰ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1916). Also see Dewey’s *School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915).

²¹ C. A. Dykstra at curtain talk at theater opening in 1939. Before moving into the president’s house in 1937, he lived in the Union and served as president until 1945 (General Files of Porter Butts, University Archives, University of Wisconsin [series 26 11 1 box 1]).

²² President E. H. Fred, n.d. Served as president 1945-1958 (General Files of Porter Butts, University Archives, University of Wisconsin [series 26 11 1 box 1]).

²³ See University of Wisconsin archives and also concise summary in Bancroft Library, “Student Unions at Some Universities” compiled by Wm. J. Norton, business manager [CU-5 Series 2, 1949:120]. Provost Dykstra of UCLA and President Sproul of UC Berkeley joined Butts as proponents of citizenship in public addresses and official welcome statements.

²⁴ Michael Hare, “Thoughts on Union Architecture” in *The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions*, February 1945, Vol XIII No 1, p1.

²⁵ See Clare Robinson, “Postwar Student Unions as Crucibles for a Middle-class Art of Living” in *Student Union: The Architecture and Social Design of Postwar Campus Community Centers in California* (Ph.D. Dissertation University of California, Berkeley, 2012) for a discussion of these parallel histories.