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Profile of Ratcliff

By Clark Kellogg

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Walter Ratcliff was excited. He was going to spend the day on the job site. That morning he decided to wear the gold pocket watch his uncle in London has given him upon his recent graduation from Cal. Though he was only an apprentice in the office, his boss, John Galen Howard, was fond of the young and eager Walter.

As he often did, Ratcliff jogged over to the big hole in the ground on the UC campus. Howard and Morgan had sent him to watch and learn as the concrete foundation of the Hearst Memorial Mining Building was being poured. Walter watched intently as ton after ton of concrete flowed into the formwork. While talking to the foreman Walter was leaning over the edge of the pit when his prized gold watch slipped out of his vest and fell 40 feet into the wet concrete below and where it remains to this day.

Walter Ratcliff's watch was not to be the only valuable thing he contributed to the campus, but in many ways it laid the foundation for a century of architectural service to the university. Walter completed his apprenticeship with John Galen Howard and became Licensed Architect No. 331 in the State of California one month before the great earthquake of 1906.

After a trip to England and Italy Walter returned to his family home in Berkeley. He soon opened his own office, Walter Ratcliff, Jr., Architect, in downtown Berkeley where, today, the circular Berkeley BART entrance stands. There began the oldest architecture firm in the Bay Area. Now in Emeryville, the office has been practicing architecture for 100 years and has been led by three generations of Ratcliff architects: Walter, his son Robert and his grandson, Kit. All three are Berkeley grads and all three have left their mark on the campus.

In the early years Walter's busy practice was devoted to designing homes in the fast-growing Berkeley neighborhoods. But he always found time to help his good friend, Bernard Maybeck with the business side of his studio. Mrs. Maybeck would bring over agreements that her husband had written and Walter would rewrite them to make sure "all the bases were covered."



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The first work Walter did on the campus was the 1927 design of the Morrison Reading room in the Doe Library – a building designed by his old mentor John Galen Howard. To this day the room remains a favorite spot for quiet relaxation, poetry readings, and special events.

Building on the campus was slowed during the Depression and the early years of WWII when building materials were rationed for the war effort. In 1945 the Ratcliff office was asked to design student housing for the massive influx of GI's that were coming home and going to college. The university needed housing and needed it fast. Walter needed help and he turned to his oldest son, Robert, a graduate of Berkeley's architecture school, who was working for the Navy in Chicago. That brought father and son together and it started the post-war era of the firm. The resulting buildings, Fernwald Dormitories on the Clark Kerr campus, was built like wartime housing to bare minimum standards in record time.

Over the next 25 years the firm, with Walter retired and Robert at the helm became known as Ratcliff, Slama & Cadwalader. They expanded and diversified their practice. Along the way, they did a long series of renovations to campus science labs and facilities to accommodate the huge growth of these disciplines on campus. In the late 60's the university commissioned the firm to design more student housing on the south side of campus. This project earned a small footnote in the protest history of the era: Ratcliff designed the housing that never got built on People's Park. One that was built seems to fits on the other end of the spectrum. In 1969, the familiar cantilevered, metal-clad press box was added to Memorial Stadium.

The next decade ushered in more change for the firm. In 1973, at the age of 93, founder Walter Ratcliff died in his home in Berkeley. The next year, his grandson Kit, himself recently returned from time spent in England, joined the firm. Once again, there were two Ratcliff architects under the firm's roof.

In the late 80's, the firm, now known as The Ratcliff Architects with its new CEO, Kit Ratcliff, had done work on several other UC campuses. In 1989, it teamed with William Turnbull, to produce Foothill student housing at Hearst Avenue and Gayley Road. This shingle-clad building was the largest student housing project the university built that decade. At the same time, The Ratcliff Architects began a six-year project to completely renovate the Valley Life Sciences Building, dramatically increasing its useable space and converting to its new use as the Department of Integrative Biology.

Today, with their office in Emeryville and their name shortened simply to Ratcliff, the firm is working on a campus project on the site of Walter Ratcliff's first university commission, Doe Library. Ratcliff, with associ-



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ate architects Noll and Tam, has designed a completely new interior space for the Doe Annex, the home of the Bancroft Library– itself 100 years old. The addition will improve circulation, provide seismic safety and create a climate-controlled environment for the invaluable Bancroft Library collection.

Ratcliff has also designed a new space adjacent to the library in Wurster Hall. Like almost 20 others currently in the 80-person firm, and hundreds of others over the century of practice, Kit Ratcliff is a graduate from the College of Environmental Design.

Its hard to imagine what Walter Ratcliff would think if he walked into Ratcliff today. He'd be familiar with – and might even play – the baby grand piano off the main entrance. But when he walked into the studio there is little he'd recognize. It's filled with computers. Drawings are made with a mouse not a pencil. Models are built with 3-D digital software tools. And no one jogs between job sites. They just log-on. But he would recognize one thing: hanging above a worktable toward the back of the studio is picture frame. Inside it is State of California Architecture License No. 331 granted to Walter Ratcliff in 1906. What a century.