REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
MARTIN S. KERMACY

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Martin S. Kermacy, professor emeritus, architecture, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
MARTIN S. KERMACY

Professor Emeritus Martin Stephen Kermacy passed away on June 8, 2007. Born on April 6, 1915, he had recently turned 92. His life was thus coincident with momentous changes that took place in the world and in the world of architecture. Young at heart, enthusiastic – infectiously so – Martin approached these various evolutions in culture with open-mindedness, intellectual curiosity, and a voracious appetite for travel. He brought these qualities to his teaching, and he was widely liked and admired by students and fellow faculty alike. Martin was able to aptly bridge the more conservative concerns of a faculty rooted in pre-Modern sensibilities and the more progressive Modern desires of the students, and his particular character – modest, soft-spoken – was such that he was able to do so without threatening either.

In the words of Eugene George, a former student and later teaching colleague of Martin’s:

    Martin never stopped being a student. He was teaching students, but he was continually learning from his students. He was broad ranging, encouraging the investigation of the solutions of Vitruvius, Palladio, and Brunelleschi as these might be useful in utilizing the precepts of the Modern movement. This was the post World War II period and years in the military had enhanced the maturity and experience level of many of the returning students who were avidly curious and motivated – add to this the talented future architects who were too young for the war. It was a good mix for a creative program. His classes were a forum for learning. The subject matter was apt to drift but always in a stimulating way.

Martin was born in Kula, Hungary. His family immigrated to the United States when he was six. Raised in Philadelphia, he remained there for his education and professional apprenticeship, receiving a Bachelor of Architecture in 1938 and a Master of Architecture in 1939, both from the University of Pennsylvania. Educated in the Beaux-Arts tradition, Kermacy was a standout student, with an extraordinary design eye and ability to draw: he was awarded the Second Medal for the Society of Beaux Arts Paris Prize, the Summa Cum Laude medal from University of Pennsylvania architecture faculty, the Arthur Spayd Brooke Memorial Prize for merit in architectural design, the Thornton Oakley Medal for achievement in creative art, and the Paul Philippe Cret Prize for Architectural Design. Later in life, he received the University of Pennsylvania Alumni Award.

Martin began his professional practice working for the office of the architect Paul Cret in Philadelphia. Cret, who had taught at Penn until 1937, was known for work fully in the Beaux-Arts style; but, beginning with the Folger Library, finished in 1927, Cret’s work evolved to balance the classicism and monumentality of that style with the stripped down and anti-historical functionalism of the Modern style, then in the early years of its ascent. Cret was exceptional at finding a middle ground between these two seemingly irreconcilable styles, and Martin entered the office at this time of creative ferment. In 1931, Cret had been hired to create a master plan for The University of Texas at Austin, and, coincidentally, Martin worked on some of the twenty-odd buildings that Cret ultimately designed for the Austin campus. Cret’s own words aptly describe both his work at The University of Texas and Martin’s mindset: “In working on important modern projects, an architect must achieve a satisfactory balance between the tradition he inherited and the originality of his own mind.”
Martin moved from Cret’s office to Perkins & Will Architects (later called Perkins, Wheeler, and Will, and now called Perkins + Will), a young firm founded in 1935 in Chicago that made its reputation with a series of innovative educational buildings that were substantially more progressive than Cret’s later work. At Perkins & Will, Martin developed into an experienced practitioner, working on large commissions. Thus, it was with some ambivalence that Martin came to Austin when he was hired to teach by The University of Texas in 1947. In many ways, the same issues he had confronted in Cret’s office marked Martin’s early tenure at the School of Architecture. At that time, the wholesale changes that followed from the arrival of functionally-oriented Modernists in the United States prior to and during World War II – with their emphasis on use and circulation, asymmetrical composition, stripped-down form, and structural order – were profoundly impacting how architects were taught; or, at least, they were causing disension and argument in traditional architecture schools across the country. The School of Architecture at UT had, on the whole, resisted these changes, but a generation of students returning from service in the War added fuel to the discussion. To this situation, Martin brought worldliness, a vast patience, and a mindset (he was deeply interested in the geometries underlying all great buildings) able to see the advantages of both camps. In 1949, he neatly encapsulated this balance when he wrote: “The pursuit of knowledge is worthy in so far as it contributes to the progress and happiness of the society of man. The ideal progress and happiness embodies a sense of responsibility in the individual, both to himself and society,” (“The Schools and Adult Education”, Journal of the American Institute of Architects, September, 1949).

In the same article, Martin wrote: “The architect is a competent and practical man; so competent he can properly detail almost anything – and often so practical he does not realize the creative potentialities of coupling his knowledge and experience with philosophic conviction.” Martin was drawn to the work of the early Modernists working in Vienna, perhaps because of these architects’ ability to express a philosophic conviction that included notions of the relationship of the work of the present and that of the past, as well as complex ideas of the relationship of the individual and society at large. He received a Fulbright Award to Austria and served as a lecturer at the Technische Hochschule Wien from 1955-56. During this time, he began collecting books, documents, photographs, and drawings of important buildings of the Viennese Secession, some quite rare, that formed the nucleus of the Martin S. and Evelyn S. Kermacy collection, which was endowed to the Alexander Archive at UT in 1998 and supported by the Martin S. and Evelyn S. Kermacy Collection Endowment, also established in 1998.

Martin remained quietly active in architectural practice while serving as a full-time faculty member. He designed a series of houses notable for their balance of modern and regional aspects. These included the Old West House, designed for Good Housekeeping magazine in 1949, and built in Paris, Texas, in 1951 and the Conrad Fath Residence, built in Austin in 1965. However, most of his designs remained unrealized, including a master plan for the Unitarian Church and Education Complex in Austin, designed in 1958-59. His colleague, Eugene George, writes: “professionally, it is a great loss that several of the buildings he designed which would have been landmarks of the Modern movement in Austin were unbuilt, such as the Unitarian Church — a major breakthrough in the application of historic proportional systems to modern design.” Martin was elected president of the Austin Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1954, testimony to the regard in which he was held by other architects.

Martin retired as professor emeritus of architecture and planning in 1983, but he continued to visit his office in the school, to serve on reviews, and to maintain the friendships formed through long service to the University. He had a calm and modest presence, and he was particularly supportive of the younger faculty. Martin established the Martin S. Kermacy Centennial Professorship in Architecture in 1983. To date, three professors — Lance Tatum, Anthony Alofsin, and David Heymann — have held this professorship.

Martin was preceded in death by Evelyn G. Stein of York, Pennsylvania, his wife of 57 years. After Evelyn’s death, her friend and his, Jayne Klein of Austin, was a loving companion. Immediate family includes a sister, Anne Mayer, of Lithia Springs, Georgia; Anne’s son, Kenneth Mayer, of Collegeville, Pennsylvania; and Anne’s daughter, Joanne Mayer Trew, of Whitesburg, Georgia.

Martin Kermacy was an inspiration to his students, his colleagues, and his friends. For many of us, this inspiration will remain in perpetuity.
This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors David Heymann (chair), Anthony Alofsin, and Eugene George. Substantial information in this document was gathered for a memorial exhibition in the Architecture and Planning Library in Battle Hall by Jayne L. Klein, Mary Carolyn and Eugene George, Christine Wong, Donna Coates, Eileen Wu, Daniel Orozoco, and Katie Pierce.

Distributed to the dean of the School of Architecture, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on November 13, 2008. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, WMB 2.102, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.