

## DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR  
ROLAND GOMMEL ROESSNER**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Roland Gommel Roessner, professor emeritus, architecture, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary  
The General Faculty

**IN MEMORIAM  
ROLAND GOMMEL ROESSNER**

Roland Gommel Roessner was born November 19, 1911, in Terre Haute, Indiana. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Miami in 1935 and received a master's degree in architecture from the University of Cincinnati in 1942. He served during World War II, achieving the rank of lieutenant commander in the navy's civil engineering corps. During his tour of duty he had the opportunity to build numerous large-scale air bases in the South Pacific, an experience that oriented him towards construction and exceptional architectural detail for the rest of his career.

Recruited by Hugh McMath, chairman of the Department of Architecture, which was at that time lodged in the College of Engineering, Roessner began teaching at The University of Texas at Austin in 1948, becoming professor of architecture in a career that spanned over 30 years. According to Professor Martin Kermacy, his longtime colleague and friend, Roessner's familiarity with professional practice and real life experience made him a particularly appealing figure to postwar students in the early 1950s, who were both mature and eager to enter the profession. Throughout his teaching career, Roessner presented himself to his students as a model practitioner and a dedicated studio teacher. His early teaching coincided with the years when the so-called Texas Rangers, the young group of radical teachers, including Colin Rowe, Bernard Hoesli, and others, came to the School of Architecture. They emphasized the theoretical side of architecture while Roessner pursued a more pragmatic approach. Over time, Roessner maintained an emphasis on teaching principles rather than style and on connecting learning with practice by involving local practitioners in the academic reviews at the School of Architecture. His pragmatism also prompted him to found the first Architectural Professional Residency Program at the University. It placed students in private practice as part of their educational experience, thus giving them an essential link between the world of academia and the world of the profession. Beginning with professional practices in Texas, the program expanded nationally and, eventually, internationally.

Always known to his students, even long after graduation, as "Mr. Roessner," he was respected as a consummate design instructor. Roessner passionately believed in the Beaux-Arts model of architectural education, and he taught his studios, which students eagerly anticipated, and conducted his practice within the constructs of Beaux-Arts education and ideology. He typically taught Fifth Year Design Studios and Undergraduate Thesis Studio; thus students were generally able to have a close association with him only as a studio instructor in their fifth year in the undergraduate program. Despite the subsequent advancements in architectural education and strategies for teaching architecture, many of Roessner's students still felt fortunate to have had an undergraduate education based on the model of the *École des Beaux Arts*.

Student projects produced in Roessner's studio were expected to demonstrate the same rigor, with special attention to strong conceptual underpinnings and technical resolution, as the projects in his professional office. Excellence in design and technical communication were always required in his studio and lack of performance brought failing grades. His reviews of student projects were extremely thorough, extending from the idea, the organization, and the clarity of the concept, on through the development of the project down to the minute details. One valuable studio experience was that of designing projects in school that were similar to projects on the drawing boards in Roessner's office, then driving with him to visit those projects, some of which were in construction and others complete, thereby learning firsthand about the process of design and construction.

Few, if any, architect-teachers at The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture tied professional practice as close to studio teaching as Roessner. He was only one of a very few faculty practitioners achieving

significant architectural work to which students could aspire. Several other faculty members during that time were beginning to establish small practices with work that was meaningful in terms of intellectually-driven design strategies, but Roessner presented the highest standards for his practice and projects. His student and faculty colleagues always described him as “an architect’s architect.”

He perceived the academic studio not only as an extension of his architectural practice but his architectural practice as an extension of his academic studio. In Roessner's small private practice in Austin he typically hired one to two of the top design students in the school who were in their last two years of the undergraduate program. He ran his office practice like an academic design studio and directed his studio at the school like an architectural practice. It was indeed a privilege to be among those select few students who were fortunate to be employed by him. The true benefit of working in his practice, especially while simultaneously having him as a studio instructor, was the opportunity to learn design and technical skills from a master architect and, perhaps more importantly, to learn valuable lessons from his expectations for high standards of ethics and morals. Students in his employ then were placed in a hands-on learning environment under the close scrutiny and tutelage of an internationally-recognized designer. Lance Tatum, one of his students, worked for Mr. Roessner in his architectural practice from his fourth year in the architectural program until he graduated with a bachelor of architecture degree. Some years later, Roessner urged Tatum to return to Austin to teach at the University, which he did at Roessner's insistence. He began a teaching career at the School of Architecture in 1977 that reflected Roessner's values.

Roessner's practice was essentially driven more by motivations of intellectually-based design excellence in significant projects for worthwhile clients than motivations of profit. Most of his projects were constructed by one contractor who demonstrated excellence in craftsmanship and attention to details and finishes. His projects were not “trendy” or “flashy” but rather demonstrated an understanding of well-founded lessons of architectural history, composition of elements, and an understanding of the scale of spaces occupied by humans. His successful architectural practice spanned from Ohio and Florida to Texas, and his projects were premiated and published throughout the United States and abroad. [*Architectural Record*, (May 1955) 117, pp. 155-186; *Architect and Building News*, (February 1966) 229: 7, pp. 291-306.] Among the most noted buildings were The Oaks Apartments, one of Austin’s most significant examples of urban housing. The project was cited for an international design award, but sadly demolished when the University acquired a vast tract of land east of Memorial Stadium. The Glen Foster residence was a distinctive town house and the Wilson residence utilized a 180 degree view of the Colorado River. Despite the differences in scale and site, Roessner used a similar palette of materials and similar zoning considerations for each of these projects. He also designed numerous other projects in Austin from the 1950s through the 1970s, including, among others, the Foster House, the Goehrs House, and the Whittington House. He received numerous awards for design excellence from the American Institute of Architects, and was elected a Fellow of the professional organization in 1968.

During his time at the University, Professor Roessner served in numerous capacities and worked on several boards and committees, including the UT Campus Planning Board, the Athletic Council, the University Co-op Board of Directors, the Family Center Board of Directors, the Swimming Natatorium Planning Committee, and the Student Union Board. An avid sports fan, he followed teams with great enthusiasm and even attended UT baseball spring training in Florida.

Prodigiously well-rounded, Roessner also contributed to his community. He was a board member of the Trustees of Tarrytown Methodist Church, the West Austin Optimist Club, and the Westwood Country Club, and he was a charter member of Tarry House Country Club. He supported various swimming organizations and received love and appreciation from the many children and coaches touched by his efforts.

Professor Roessner died Monday, February 26, 2001, in Austin, Texas.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Anthony Alofsin (chair), Martin Kermacy (emeritus), and Lance Tatum.

Distributed to the Dean of the School of Architecture, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on August 24, 2001. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/>.