

The background image shows the interior of a grand, circular building. At the top, a large circular skylight with a radial grid pattern allows light to filter through. Below it, a series of vertical bars or columns form a grid, creating a sense of depth and architectural complexity. The lighting is dramatic, with warm yellow tones from the interior lights and cooler blue tones from the skylight area.

# UAlbany's Uptown Campus

*a mark  
of art*

**New generations of admirers discover the beauty and genius in Edward Durell Stone's design.**

By Greta J. Petry, M.A.'01

## “Dazzling.” “One-of-a-kind.”

Those are adjectives author Thomas A. Gaines used to describe the University at Albany’s uptown campus in his book *The Campus as a Work of Art*. And it appears that Gaines speaks for many other admirers in assessing the beauty of the campus designed by renowned American architect Edward Durell Stone (1902-78) and regarded as an important example of modernist architecture.

In the 40 years since construction was completed, the campus’s design has often elicited stronger – and less flattering – reactions. The wind tunnels that make frigid temperatures feel even colder cause walkers to wonder if the design was intended for a warmer climate or a foreign country. Critics comment about the “cold” appearance of the concrete that shapes buildings and columns, walkways and roofs.

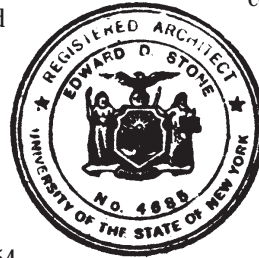
But Stone believed that great architecture should “lift the spirit, feed the soul and transport people out of themselves,” according to Paul Heyer in *Architects on Architecture*. With its soaring colonnades, reflecting pool and pierced overhanging roofs, Stone’s design seems to achieve those aims. It also exemplifies the signature style he used in his major projects between 1954 and 1970, including the United States Embassy in New Delhi, India; the Hotel Phoenicia in Beirut, Lebanon; the Church of All Souls, First Unitarian Society of Schenectady, N.Y.; the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.; and the Aon Center, originally the Standard Oil Building, in Chicago.

Prior to 1954, Stone was known for his International Style of architecture, characterized by clean lines and simplicity. That was before he met his second wife, Maria Elena Torchio, who greatly influenced his later work. (Please see sidebar, page 20) By the time he designed UAlbany in 1961-62, Stone was a world-renowned modernist heading a large consulting firm that specialized in designing major public buildings, campuses and corporate headquarters.

Stone’s grand design for Albany complemented then-Gov. Nelson Rockefeller’s dynamic plans for the growing State University of New York system. Designing a spacious new campus at Albany, initially intended for just 7,500 students, required a leap of imagination. The plan would expand access to quality education for greater numbers of veterans, women, students of color and post-war babies. Stone was the man for the job.

Al Marshall, Rockefeller’s former secretary, recalled how strikingly different the design was. Anthony Adinolfi, Ph.D., who directed the State University Construction Fund, brought in a model of Stone’s proposed design one day. Marshall thought it looked like an ancient Greek university. “I said: ‘Get that thing out of here, Tony. That’s terrible.’” Adinolfi left the model with Marshall, saying it wasn’t so bad.

A few minutes later, Rockefeller himself walked into Marshall’s Capitol office, took one look at the model and said: “Oh my God. What is this? This is wonderful.” The governor got down on his knees to get a better look. “This is the greatest thing,” he repeated. Marshall replied, “I think it stinks.” Rockefeller, who knew a great deal about architecture and art, had the last word. He told his secretary: “You’ve got no taste. You don’t understand this.” (Marshall stayed at the governor’s mansion for a time – but couldn’t stand Rockefeller’s collection of modern art, which covered its walls. “The governor used to tell me all my taste was in my mouth,” he remembered.)



And so Stone’s plan was chosen for Albany; other leading architects were commissioned to design other SUNY campuses. “By October 1963, nearly two dozen designs, including a scale model of the Albany campus on display in the lobby of the Capitol, had been presented to the trustees of the State University,” noted Samuel E. Bleecker in *The Politics of Architecture, A Perspective on Nelson A. Rockefeller*.

Marshall said Stone didn’t go out of his way to be controversial, “but his product was certainly different than that of most of the architects. Maybe that’s what grabbed Rockefeller.”

Rockefeller’s grand vision for the State University of New York system built on the existing state normal schools and created four “university centers.” The most dramatic expansion would be at Albany, which was intended to be a flagship center in the state capital. Stone’s model was a white canvas on which the painting of the University at Albany could be created. For example, as the



Edward Durell Stone

# A Work of Art

## Stone's Muse

Courtesy University of Arkansas Libraries



Behind every great man, it's said, is a great woman. Edward Durell Stone would probably agree.

In the early 1950s, the Arkansas-

born architect met the stunning, sophisticated Maria Elena Torchio on an airliner. He proposed to her before they landed.

"Stone married Maria in Beirut in 1954, when he was working on the Hotel Phoenicia design," said Professor of Planning, Geography and Public Policy Ray Bromley, an expert on Stone. "They honeymooned in north India while he was working on the New Delhi Embassy project."

Beautiful and stylish in her European tastes, Maria – Stone's second wife – undoubtedly influenced his work. His designs became more ornate, reflecting what Bromley called "his Oriental Style – part Venetian, part Byzantine, part Mughal – a sort of Mediterranean/Islamic Modernism. And Ed was lucky because many Middle Eastern rulers wanted modern architecture with an Islamic flavor, so he got lots of contracts, especially for Islamabad."

Alas, the couple later divorced, and in 1972, Stone married again. His third wife, Violet Campbell Moffat, worked with Stone in his business and remained with him until his death in 1978.

Still, the impact Maria Elena Torchio had on her husband's work was undeniable.

Stone's employees noticed her influence, too, according to Bromley, who also serves as interim vice provost for International Education. "I love the nickname his staff gave to the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi: 'the Taj Maria.'"

– Greta J. Petry, M.A.'01



late UAlbany historian Kendall A. Birr pointed out in his history of the University, "the College had to plan space for an anthropology department when there was not yet a single anthropologist on the faculty."

Since its opening, the campus has evoked strong responses. As University at Albany Professor of English and art critic Thomson Littlefield noted in the *Times Union* in 1967: "The place is so huge, so imposing, so beset with illusion, so far out of this world, that people are blinded to the actual, at least until they have looked assiduously for a very long while. A glance at the University is like a glance at the sun."

As recently as September 2006, UAlbany student Nicholas M. Fahrenkopf defended his campus in a letter to the editor of the *Times Union*. "The entire campus is a work of art – and I am not the artsy type," he wrote in response to the opinion that the campus is unsightly.

Stone told the *Albany Student Press* in the Jan. 12, 1965, edition, "When all of the wonderful landscaping plans are fulfilled, I think this campus will compare to Versailles, where there is also great formal architectural composition."

The podium on which Stone clustered the academic buildings brought the disciplines together in a unified way, giving them all the same architecture

and connecting them through stairways and walkways. Living and learning went hand in hand, with dormitories built within walking distance of classroom spaces. In the original design, automobiles were relegated to the perimeter of the campus.

Stone also took Albany's climate into consideration, revealing that he intended to protect students from rain and snow with a concrete canopy. When the campus was new, he told reporters, "This compact plan also allowed us to dispel the idea that a student should have to put on an overcoat and overshoes and struggle through a blizzard from a lecture on biology to a lecture on English."

Though unique in its scale and architectural style, UAlbany's design had traditional elements, as well. In 1966, Stone wrote that "many colleges were started on the quadrangle plan, which I consider an ideal grouping for educational buildings. The traditional quadrangle, like those at Oxford and Cambridge, is in effect an outdoor room that unified a group of buildings, even though they differed in architectural design."

Shortly after the UAlbany campus was constructed, one columnist called it "the crown jewel of a growing state educational system." Many years later, it remains a testament to Edward Durell Stone's signature style.

Albany Mayor Erastus Corning 2<sup>nd</sup> and Gov. Nelson Rockefeller (center) view Stone's model of the uptown campus in 1962.



Times Union

## Looking Ahead – and Preserving the Past

As is the case with any physical property, time, age, weather and use have left their marks on the uptown and downtown campuses. A \$25 million provision in the 2006-07 New York State budget, however, will enable the University at Albany to address some crucial revitalization needs in the near future.

The plan calls for “combining priority maintenance needs with projects that will provide a high quality-of-life impact and improvement in campus recruitment and retention,” notes John Giarrusso, associate vice president for University Facilities Operations.

### Funding has been earmarked for:

#### Interior sign improvements and replacements:

Capital dollars were recently invested in creating a standards manual for all campus signs, and implementing a program for installation of a new exterior signage and wayfinding system. The current phase will focus on replacing and upgrading interior signage, with the downtown campus and such high-traffic uptown sites as the Campus Center the first priorities for installation.

**Lighting:** The University has launched a comprehensive study of interior and exterior lighting fixtures and lighting levels. A standards manual and an upgrade plan will be created to address energy efficiency, safety, architectural preservation and maintenance considerations. Once they are completed, UAlbany will begin replacement and upgrades of lighting.

**Grounds and site improvements:** Funds will be directed to improve pedestrian walkways, enhance landscaping and address general beautification of the grounds on both the uptown and downtown campuses.

#### Podium canopy, window wells and entries:

This work will repair the concrete canopies on the podium, and seek to install additional sky domes (similar to those over the entrances to the Campus Center and the PAC) over the stairwells at the Humanities and Chemistry corners of the podium. Improvement of doorways and entries to other high-priority areas will also be addressed.

**Downtown building envelope:** These funds will address potential window replacements on the downtown campus, and cover repairs to the exterior masonry at Page Hall and refurbishing of its clock tower.

– Carol Olechowski

