

Frederick Morris Wells

November 2, 1902 — July 18, 1983

Frederick Morris Wells was born on November 2, 1902. He came from a tobacco-farming family in Baldwinsville, New York. Wells graduated from Cornell in 1927 with a degree in architecture, in a class that included such prominent architects as Nathaniel A. Owings. After a tour of Europe he practiced architecture for twelve years in New York City, in such firms as John Russell Pope, Charles Platt, and Madigan and Hyland, and for five years on his own. He was a senior architectural engineer with the navy for two years in World War II and worked on the naval hospital at Saint Albans, on Long Island. In 1945 Dean Gilmore Clarke brought Wells to Cornell, where he was given tenure in 1946, made a professor in 1948, and made the Andrew Dickson White Professor of Architecture and the head of architectural design in the college in 1950, positions he held until 1968, when, after a reorganization of the college, he became the first chairman of the newly formed Department of Architecture. He retired the following year.

During his twenty years as head of the architectural design faculty, Wells proved himself a skilled administrator. He kept the college's fractious, creative designers—so typical of architecture schools—going by means of a generous serving of his good-humored wit and his careful attention to overall planning and scheduling, resulting in a balanced program and a minimum of friction. Among his personal concerns were a hardheaded course in professional practice and a special design course to prepare students for their major individual architecture project, the thesis.

Two important contributions to education were associated with Wells's tenure. Working with Dean Thomas Mackesey to broaden the experience of the students and mitigate the isolation of Ithaca, Wells instituted a program that brought visiting architectural critics to Ithaca for periods of from two weeks to a full term. Many of these critics subsequently became the most prominent professionals in their field, in this country and abroad. They included Franco Albini, Fello Atkinson, William Caudill, Charles Eames, Kenneth Frampton, Buckminster Fuller, Aldo Giurgola, Philip Johnson, Dan Kiley, Paul Rudolpy, Hideo Sasaki, Stanley Tigerman, and Henry Wright. To have such a range of critics in class, and free access to them after class in the college's Heller House, was an invaluable asset of Cornell's program, and Wells made it work.

Wells's second major contribution was to that basic tool of design education, the Architecture, Art, and Planning Slide Library. A talented architectural photographer, he firmly believed in the importance of using visual material

in the teaching of architecture and in the establishment of a visual archive. For years he spent summers and time during his retirement traveling throughout Europe, adding to the college's slide collection. Recognizing the importance of his work, the American Institute of Architects awarded Wells its 1951-52 Langley Fellowship.

Wells's general services to Cornell included terms of membership on the Administrative Board of the Cornell Council, the Architecture and Engineering Advisory Board, and the Committee on Educational Environment. He was chairman of the Board on Physical Education and Athletics. Also, he served as consultant to the University of Puerto Rico in connection with the establishment of its first school of architecture. For many years during his tenure at the college, he and Thomas Canfield conducted a private architectural practice, building many houses in the Ithaca area.

Wells was a man of many talents. He loved good stories and excelled at telling them. He was a master of the shell game, never caught out. He was a wonderful traveling companion. And he made the best dry martini in Ithaca. He was devoted to his wife, Ruth, who died in 1980, and a warm father to the two daughters who survive him: Mrs. Marga McLeod of San Anselmo, California, and Mrs. Deborah Macomber of Indianapolis, Indiana. Wells died in Marbella, Spain, on July 18, 1983.

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