



Christian F. Otto

June 16, 1940 – March 27, 2013

Professor Christian F. Otto died on March 27, 2013 after serving more than forty years on the faculty of the College of Architecture, Art and Planning. He was 72. Known as a passionate and committed educator, he counted modernism among his architectural specialties, a circumstance that placed him at the very center of teaching and intellectual life in the Department of Architecture for more than four decades.

Chris was born on June 16, 1940 in New York City. His orientation to the architectural traditions of Central Europe, the key geographical and cultural focus to his life and research, was shaped early during his undergraduate years at Swarthmore College (1958- 1962) during which he studied at the University of Freiburg (1960- 1961). After receiving a B.A. from Swarthmore in 1962, Chris spent a postgraduate year at the University of the Saar. He then entered Columbia University to begin doctoral work under the renowned art historian Rudolf Wittkower. He received an M.A. in 1966 for his work on German architecture and the November Revolution, and a Ph.D. in 1971. His dissertation, which focused on 18th century Central European church architecture, later formed the basis for numerous publications including his influential monograph *Space into Light: The Churches of Balthasar Neumann*, MIT Press 1979.

Chris joined the Cornell faculty as an assistant professor in 1970 following short term appointments at Vassar College and the University of Wisconsin. Over the next decade, he became a well- known academic figure on the national canvas through his leadership roles at the *Journal of Architectural Historians (JSAH)*, the publication of record in the field. He was the book review editor from 1970-73 and the general editor for two terms from 1974-1981. His colleagues in architectural history came to know him through these roles as well as through an ever expanding list of publications which included works on modernism. *Weissenhof 1927 and the Modern Movement in Architecture* (with Richard Pommer) University of Chicago Press 1991 was a major work that appeared in the following decade. Chris' next major publication was an unusual and poignant extension of his experience as an editor and teacher. A former Ph.D. student, Samuel John Klingensmith, then a newly minted assistant professor of art history at Tulane University, was killed in New Orleans in 1986 during a robbery. Klingensmith's

dissertation was edited for publication by Chris with the assistance of colleague and close friend Mark Ashton. It appeared posthumously as *The Utility of Splendor: Ceremony, Social Life and Architecture in Bavaria 1600-1800*, Chicago University Press 1993.

It is thus Chris' scholarly profile and academic leadership in the History of Architecture and Urban Development Program (HAUD) at Cornell which has been quite naturally central to his legacy among his colleagues and graduate students. A detailed and eloquent tribute to his work as a scholar by Lauren M. O'Connell (HAUD Ph.D.1989), now a professor of art history at Ithaca College, appeared in the *JSAH* in September 2013. Nonetheless, a much more broadly constituted band of students, primarily design students in the flagship five-year undergraduate professional program, was introduced year after year to architectural history through the rigorous two semester freshman architectural survey.

Chris was the public face of this two term baptism into world architecture for nearly the entire time he taught at Cornell. In this role he is remembered as a paragon of pedagogical preparation. This is how Margaret Webster, the long term director of the College visual resource facility, also known as "the slide library" has conjured up our collective visual memory of Chris at work, "I remember Chris as a gifted teacher, mentor, and scholar. In some respects the slide library was a catalyst for both his teaching and mentoring activities. He, of course, built large portions of the collection mainly in the areas in which he taught and published, but he was particularly uncanny in his ability to find images that others had ordered and using them to construct his own lectures. I remember seeing Chris in the slide library pulling a huge quantity of slides, placing them on a light table, then placing image pairs on another light table, and finally placing the paired slides first into boxes for the projectionist and then later into carousels. The magic occurred in the transformation of that big, undifferentiated pile of slides into a coherent, well organized lecture. It gave me great pleasure to watch this process from beginning to end. He was always thinking visually. I also remember Chris working with his TA's as they developed discussion sessions for the introductory course. Sometimes Chris would work one on one with a student who needed help in the slide library organizing images for classroom presentation. For a long time, the slide library was the locale for an active process that promoted learning, teaching and collegial interaction on many levels. Chris in his gentle way contributed to building this community."

Chris was keenly interested in exporting the material of architecture outside of the classroom as well as to non-traditional and general audiences. He was an active participant in the dining discussion program in Residential Life for many years. He led undergraduates on summer study trips to Europe and with his wife Roberta (HAUD Ph.D. 1995) co-taught summer courses in Cornell's Adult University. He taught in the College program in New York. He also participated in a university-wide introduction to architecture organized with colleagues during the 1990's which at its peak attracted more than 800 students a term. By this time, he had acquired a pair of illuminated running shoes whose blinking red lights sparkled in the dim light as he strode across the stage in Statler Auditorium.

Chris was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in January 2012. His medical team at Weill-Cornell made a valiant effort to effect a cure. Chris continued to teach and advise students until his death in March 2013. He is survived by his wife Roberta and four children.

The authors express their gratitude to Roberta Moudry, Lauren O'Connell and Margaret Webster for all the assistance they provided.

Bonnie G. MacDougall, Chairperson; D. Medina Lasansky, Leonard J. Mirin