

Thomas Jefferson Baird

March 1, 1902 — March 21, 1993

Tom Baird, professor emeritus, died on March 21, 1993 at the age of 91. He was involved for almost 74 years with Cornell and the Ithaca area in activities ranging from being an undergraduate student to becoming a significant benefactor to Cornell, financially and professionally, after his retirement.

Tom spent his early years in Cleveland, Ohio where he was born, the son of Frederick Baird, a prominent Cleveland architect, and Mamie Zangerle Baird. In 1919, he entered Cornell University as an undergraduate student in the College of Arts and Sciences. Two years later he transferred to the College of Architecture, where he entered the five-year bachelor's program. An outstanding student, in his senior year he received the American Institute of Architects medal for excellence and placed first in the preliminary round for the International Paris Prize in Architecture. He received his Bachelor of Architecture degree in 1925 and was awarded a fellowship for continuing studies in architecture.

In 1926, Tom joined, as designer and draftsman, the Ithaca office of Bryant Fleming, architect and landscape architect. Mr. Fleming was responsible for many fine estates throughout the U.S. and for introducing landscape design courses into the curriculum of the College of Architecture at Cornell. The demand for estate designers decreased greatly in the Depression and the firm was dissolved in 1932 after the death of Mr. Fleming. There was little demand for the services of architects, and Tom took the opportunity to study landscape design at Cornell in the period 1932-34.

In 1935, Mr. Baird accepted a position with the Finger Lakes Park Commission as Architect and Landscape Architect to supervise the design and construction of Stony Brook Park in Western New York. On one of his return visits to Ithaca, he met Kerstin Thorin, a former member of the Swedish Olympic Swimming Team, who was teaching in the Women's Physical Education Department at Cornell. They were married in 1936.

Upon completion of the facilities of Stony Brook Park in 1939, Tom returned to Ithaca to enter private practice in architecture and neighborhood planning. At this time he was also hired as an instructor in the Department of Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture in the College of Agriculture. In 1940, he received a prestigious fellowship to study at the renowned Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, where he interacted with some of the most famous architects, designers, and artists of the time, including Saarinen, Eames, Bertoia, and Milles.

Imbued with the spirit of the contemporary art movement, Tom returned to Ithaca in 1941 to begin graduate study in regional planning in the College of Architecture at Cornell. During the next five years of part-time study he continued his private practice, on a greatly reduced scale, while serving as an instructor in landscape planning in the College of Agriculture (1940-42), a research associate in housing in the College of Home Economics (1941-45), and an instructor in engineering drawing in the Sibley School of Mechanical Engineering (1941-46). The latter part-time position was the direct result of his interest in helping Cornell meet its educational commitment during the war years, when engineering instructors were scarce, and was instrumental in setting the direction for his life's work in the years to come.

In addition to the more than full-time work load described above for the period 1942-46, Tom found time to redesign the Baird's small lake cottage near McKinney's Point on a slope overlooking Lake Cayuga. His design was very modern in concept—using cantilevered decks, window walls, secluded terraces, and ingenious noise shielding. The home received national recognition and was praised in two professional architectural magazines. He also published some ten papers and articles in professional and popular architectural magazines, such as *House and Garden*, *America Home*, *American Nurseryman*, *Progressive Architecture*, *House Beautiful*, and *The Ideal Home Magazine*. The articles covered topics ranging from “Spatial Planning in the Community”, to “Remodeled American Homes”, “A Plan for the Great Lakes Region”, and “Homes—Small, Medium, and Large.”

In February, 1946, Tom was awarded the degree of Master of Regional Planning from the College of Architecture. Professor C.E. Townsend, head of the Department of Engineering Drawing in the Sibley School, with great foresight relative to the direction in which post-war mechanical engineering education should head, immediately offered Tom a promotion to the full-time position of assistant professor of engineering drawing. To mechanical engineering's great good luck—and most likely to Professor Townsend's happy surprise—Tom accepted the offer.

A new elective course in freehand drawing and perspective drawing was introduced by Professor Baird. This course—with its goal the stimulation of habits of creative thinking and imagination by using freehand drawing and other techniques—was a pioneering effort in the area that would be called “creative design.” The course content and method of presentation changed throughout the years with his increasing knowledge and interest in mechanical engineering design. His collaboration with Professor George B. Du Bois, of the Department of Machine Design, was of great value to both men and to the Sibley School. Professor Baird continued his association with the College of Home Economics by teaching courses on house planning in summer school from 1946-50.

Tom was promoted to associate professor of drafting and industrial design in 1952. In 1953, the title of the elective course was changed to “Creative Sketching” In 1967, the title was changed again, to “Introduction to Industrial Design” and a project course in industrial design was added. In 1961, the programs in the College of Engineering were restructured and the Department of Engineering Drawing disappeared. The course announcements no longer included drawing, descriptive geometry etc.—only Creative Sketching, Introduction to Industrial Design, Special Investigations in Industrial Design, and Industrial Design Project, all of which were Professor Baird’s courses. In 1965, the students recognized his excellence in teaching freshmen by voting him as one of the two winners of the Philip Sporn Prize. Tom became a member of the Department of Machine Design. In 1966, he was promoted to professor of machine design and in 1967, to professor emeritus.

Professor Baird was a member of Tau Beta Pi, the American Institute of Planners, the Industrial Designer’s Society of America, and the American Association of University Professors.

Beneficence to Cornell by the Baird family began in 1927 when Professor Baird’s mother established the Baird Prize Fund in the College of Architecture (currently the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning). The prize was awarded in open competition to a second-year student in the college and the fund has been maintained up to the present by Professor Baird.

For many years, after retirement, the Bairds maintained an active life at Cornell, especially enjoying the concerts and other musical events. They spent their summers in Maine, part of their winters in Sweden and part touring Europe, especially Italy and Sicily. When Mrs. Baird’s health declined they settled down in their Ithaca apartment and devoted themselves to Cornell and to activities with their local friends.

In 1981 Professor Emeritus Baird and his wife made a bequest of half a million dollars to Cornell University, \$400,000 of this amount to create the Thomas J. Baird Visiting Critic Fund to sponsor visits to Cornell by architecture scholars and practitioners in the College of Architecture, Art and Planning. The remaining \$100,000 was bequeathed to the Music Department of the College of Arts and Sciences to support the Thomas and Kerstin Baird Concert Fund for free public concerts, lectures and related presentations of classical and chamber music sponsored by the Department of Music. A plaque in their honor was dedicated in 1982 in Barnes Hall, the site of the annual Baird Concerts.

In 1986, the Bairds suggested that a terrace be placed on the north side of Sage Chapel where they frequently rested after their usual Sunday morning walks on the Cornell Campus. In August of 1987, Professor Baird dedicated the

Kerstin Thorin Baird Garden Courtyard in honor of his wife who died earlier in the year. The garden courtyard has been described as a “haven of beauty—a particularly appropriate memorial to a woman who was a devoted supporter of the cultural arts of Cornell.”

In 1989, seeing the need to balance the overall design of the Sage Chapel exterior, Professor Baird dedicated a matching terrace, which bears his name, on the south side of the chapel.

Still looking for projects that might benefit his beloved Cornell, Professor Baird was introduced to the newly created Newman Arboretum by his longtime friend and former student, Raymond Fox, professor of floriculture and ornamental horticulture. Professor Baird was immediately attracted to the Arboretum because it gave him a quiet place of beauty to walk and to contemplate nature in its changing moods. Inspired by Autumn drifts of goldenrod and bedstraw growing on the slopes of the natural bowl-shaped Arboretum, and encouraged by Professor Fox, Professor Baird approached the director of Cornell Plantations and suggested that similar effects with other wildflower plantings could provide colorful effects throughout the growing season. Thus was born the Baird Field Flower Meadow Project, to which he gave his generous support.

Professor Baird also contributed a substantial sum to help establish a memorial grove of white birches in the Cornell Arboretum in honor of his and Kerstin’s longtime friend, Mrs. Ruth Cavetz.

Professor Baird’s talents in architectural design were greatly admired by his college roommate and great friend Mr. Richard Belcher, class of ‘28, Bachelor of Architecture ‘30 at Cornell. Mr. Belcher also worked in Bryant Fleming’s office before moving to New York City eventually becoming chief architect for the R.H. Macy Company enterprises. To honor his good friend, Mr. Belcher recently established a \$100,000 fellowship bequest for students enrolled in the Master of Architecture Program at Cornell. It will be an annual award to “inspire, encourage, and reward fine architectural talent at Cornell” and is to be known as the Richard G. Belcher-Thomas J. Baird Award for Architectural Design.

Professor Baird was predeceased by his three brothers. He is survived by his sister-in-law, Mrs. Mary Baird Hefner; his nephew, Mr. Lincoln Baird and wife Carol; a niece, Miss Lucy Baird; two grandnephews, Lincoln and Graham Baird—all residents of California; a cousin, Mr. Willis Zangerle of Cleveland, Ohio; and by his wife’s nephew, Mr. Bengt Thorin, and his family of Sweden.

His friends and relatives will greatly miss Tom Baird for his gentlemanly, courtly manner, his sincere interest in his students, his caring ways, his ability to observe and to point out the beauty of nature and the aesthetics of good

taste and, not-the-least, for his enjoyment of a good joke, his sense of humor, and his ability to laugh at himself—all too rare attributes in today's world.

Bart Conta, Raymond T. Fox, Richard M. Phelan