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AIA Chicago Lifetime Achievement Award 2011

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BEN WEESE HAS LONG MAINTAINED A STEADY, CALM HAND IN BUILDING AND IN COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

BEN WEESE HAS WON HIS SHARE OF AWARDS OVER THE YEARS. However, he has never generated the kind of publicity garnered by some of his more flamboyant colleagues. About this he has no regrets, since he never intended to grab the headlines or set the world on fire. Instead, he has been a long, steady and enormously effective career providing service to his clients, his profession and his city. In fact, I suspect many people will view his AIA Chicago Lifetime Achievement Award with considerable satisfaction, not only as a fitting recognition of what he has done but also as a reaffirmation of a long and noble tradition of architecture as service—a tradition somewhat neglected during the ascendancy of the strident avantgarde of the mid-20th century and the star-architect syndrome of more recent years.

Benjamin Horace Weese, FAIA, was born in 1929, the youngest child of Harry E. Weese, a banker, and his wife Marjorie Mohr Weese. Ben was born into a solidly affluent family in Kenilworth, but arriving as he did at the onset of the Great Depression, he witnessed firsthand the fear and insecurity caused by that great upheaval in American life and learned from his father important lessons of frugality, thrift and the duty to help others in less comfortable circumstances. He also learned a great deal from his brother Harry who, fifteen years older, acted as his mentor and almost a father figure.

In 1947, just as Harry was starting his own architectural firm, Ben left for Harvard with the intention to major in philosophy or sociology. While he was there he also discovered the Quakers and their attitudes toward social service. He started to frequent the Cambridge Meeting and volunteered in Quaker work camps. During the summers he returned to Chicago and worked for his brother. These brief stays in Chicago caused considerable disquiet in his family, as his evolving worldview increasingly clashed with that of his conservative father.

There was also a clash within himself. On the one hand his contact with Harry had exposed Ben to a great deal of architecture, and he deeply admired the work his brother was doing. On the other hand he was having a difficult time reconciling his social conscience with the elaborate and expensive buildings he saw on the pages of the glossy magazines.

However, Ben was also aware of another tradition in architecture—the tradition of simple vernacular buildings. He decided that perhaps there was a way for him to reconcile his social concerns with an architecture career, and he switched his course of study to Architecture. This was not an entirely comfortable transition though, because the School of Architecture at the time was dominated by Walter Gropius who, in his campaign to push out the old Beaux-Arts educational system, had minimized the place of history in the curriculum.

Ben finished his undergraduate degree in 1951 and started a graduate degree. This was interrupted by two years of alternative service he did during the Korean War working for the Church of the Brethren at a relocation camp in Germany. Dealing with refugees fleeing from violence and hostility in eastern Europe only reinforced his commitment to social service. At the same time, having the opportunity to absorb the vernacular traditions of the simple brick architecture of northern Germany reinforced his ideas of what architecture could be.

Returning to Harvard to finish his degree, Ben encountered newly arrived Eduard Sekler, the eminent Viennese-born architect and historian. He, together with classmates Fumihiko Maki and Roger

Montgomery, found in Sekler a mentor who was able to look beyond the current stylistic preoccupations of the profession and across the entire range of architectural history and building types. Sekler's interest in architectural preservation also reinforced Ben's propensity for saving and conserving. Capping off his architectural training was a summer at Fontainebleau, made possible by a traveling award from the university. A highlight was singing in a choir directed by the famous Nadia Boulanger.

After Ben's return to the United States in 1957, his brother Harry called him back to Chicago to work in his office. At Harry Weese & Associates—at that point a young but highly promising firm—Ben served as a trusted lieutenant and also had the opportunity to design a number of commissions pretty much on his own. Although the two brothers had a great deal in common in their attitudes toward architecture, Ben's work, for example at the Northside Junior High School in Columbus, Ind., or the Sawyer Library at Williams College in Mass., stands out for its simple sobriety and strong affiliation with vernacular traditions. In some cases, such as in the reinforced masonry of the school, he worked to infuse new life into earlier architectural practices. In other commissions, he experimented with new ways of planning: for the multifaceted Lake Village housing in Hyde Park, he looked for ways to minimize exterior wall surface but maximize usable space and views.

The two brothers played a conspicuous role in civic affairs. They were among the city's most prominent early advocates of architectural preservation and took the lead role in saving Glessner House, with Ben becoming the first president of the institution that took ownership of the house. The institution eventually became the Chicago Architecture Foundation.

Ben left Harry's office in 1977 and set up his own shop with his wife Cynthia and two associates. The new firm, after several changes in personnel including the arrival of their son Dan in 1992, eventually became Weese Langley Weese. Working with his associates during the early years of the firm, Ben did a group of high apartment Buildings, notably the Chestnut Place Apartments at 850 N. State Street and the renovations at 1211 N. LaSalle, both featuring Richard Haas trompe l'oeil murals.

Increasingly in later years he turned to academic buildings and to churches. In these commissions he tried to integrate the lessons of history while avoiding the superficial decorative detailing that characterized so much building during the heyday of "postmodernism." His Evelyn Chapel for Illinois Wesleyan University is a good example of traditional forms used in a fresh and modern way, but sensitive to age-old concerns like the way light enters and washes over walls. He also did a great deal of building renovation, specializing in extending the use of old library buildings by inserting specially designed new furniture that made more intensive use of existing space.

In addition to his architectural work, Ben was involved during the 1970s and 1980s with an ad hoc group spearheaded by Stanley Tigerman. Fashioning itself the Chicago 7, these individuals attempted to foster public interest in architecture through publications, exhibitions and competitions. Ben also played a critical role in the 1980s as a trustee of the Graham Foundation. When the state threatened to shut down this key pillar of the architectural world because of financial irregularities, Ben solicited letters of support from prominent architects the world over in a successful bid to save the institution. Between 1998 and 2011 he was a member of the city's Landmarks Commission, where his knowledge of construction made him particularly effective in the permit review process.

In a career spanning more than five decades, Ben Weese has been a strong positive influence on the city both in his buildings and in his advocacy. In everything he has done there has been a thoughtfulness, a desire to avoid ostentation and fads, a lack of concern for individual recognition and reward. It has been a life of exemplary achievement and service.

Robert Bruegmann is Professor Emeritus of Art History, Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His most recent book was *The Architecture of Harry Weese*, published by W. W. Norton in 2010.