It Was the Right Design After All

By BILL EAST
Sentinel Staff Reporter

When the N.C. chapter of the American Institute of Architects held its summer meeting in Morehead City in 1948, some of its members had just seen Jens Fredrick Larson's ideas for the new Wake Forest College campus here.

"Georgian style?" one asked. "What is he trying to do — take us back to the Middle Ages?"

Henry Kamphoefner, dean of the School of Architecture and Landscape Design at N.C. State University, said Wake Forest was missing a chance "to exert a dynamic and leading force in the culture of the Southeast."

William R. James Jr. of Winston-Salem, secretary-treasurer of the chapter, said if there were any chapter members who approved of Larson's plans, they were keeping quiet about it.

Larson, who died here yesterday at the age of 89, believed that a time would come when most of the architects who disagreed with him then would end up praising him for "the strength I am trying to give to the new campus." He said he was trying to design "a spiritual home" for its alumni.

But right then the mood was for a modern campus. "After all, it's a new campus and a new life for Wake Forest and let's show that new life," said one chamber of commerce leader here at a meeting on the Wake Forest situation in 1949.

"Why go back to 1834 (the year Wake Forest was founded)?"

Jack Roland of Kinston, one of the state's leading modernist architects, said Larson would put North Carolina architecture "back 20 years."

Although Larson stuck to his guns and gained the support of many of the Wake Forest trustees and faculty members, he never forgot the dispute.

"When I die, you reporters will rehash all of this dispute and refresh everybody's memory about it. But by that time remember Wake Forest will have been here a long time and you can really make a judgment on whether I was right."

Wake Forest is observing two anniversaries this year. Construction of the campus started 30 years ago and the university moved to Winston-Salem 25 years ago.

John P. Cone, who was Larson's office manager for the Wake Forest project, said yesterday:

"A lot of people have come to swing that opinion around, and it (the design) elicits more respect than it did at the time."

When Larson moved to Winston-Salem from New York City in 1951 to work full time on Wake Forest, he was internationally known as a traditionalist college architect. He worked on 30 campuses ranging from Bucknell University to Dartmouth College to American University at Cairo to Lehigh University.

Although he did much other work after he finished Wake Forest, he never left Winston-Salem. "I fell in love with the place," he once admitted. "The atmosphere is conducive to good work."

Even when Larson dissolved his firm in 1969 after 50 years as a practicing architect, he passed up a friend's suggestion that "perhaps you will want to move to Florida."

"Why, what's down there?" Larson shot back.

Larson was born in Boston on Aug. 10, 1891. He gained an affection for drawing while a sixth-grader and made up his mind then that he wanted to be an architect.

He was a student of the Boston Architectural Club from 1907 to 1910, where he taught himself architecture. He attended Harvard Graduate School from 1910 to 1912.

He served in World War I as a captain in the Canadian Air Force attached to the Royal Flying Corps. He received the Star, Victory and British War medals.

He received numerous awards for architecture including the Legion of Honor from France for his design of the International House at the University of Paris.

He was married Oct. 12, 1920, to Elisabeth Goodale Frost, who survives. Other survivors include a son, Nils, an architect who worked with his father for many years, and a daughter, Sara Larson Harper.

No public funeral service is planned.
LARSON

Mr. Jens Fredrick Larson was born August 10, 1891, in Boston, Mass., to Leonard L. and Andresine Andersen Larson. He was a student at Boston Architectural Club from 1907-10, and then attended Harvard Graduate School from 1910-12. Mr. Larson served in World War I as a captain in the Canadian Air Force attached to the Royal Flying Corps. He received the Star, Victory and British War medals. Mr. Larson was the architect of the new Wake Forest campus when it moved to Winston-Salem. He also designed buildings for Dartmouth College, Colby College, Bucknell Univ., the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, Lehigh Univ., the American Univ. of Cairo, Egypt, Bowman Gray School of Medicine, including Davis Chapel, Pfeiffer College, Bennett Jr. College and the Univ. of New Brunswick, Canada among many others. His awards and degrees include an M.A. from Dartmouth College — 1928; an L.H.D. from Washington & Jefferson — 1940 and from Colby College — 1964; an L.L.D. from Upsala College — 1956 and from Bucknell Univ. in 1959, and a D. Sc. from St. Francis Xavier, Nova Scotia in 1957. He received the Legion of Honor from France for his design of the International House at the Univ. of Paris. Mr. Larson was married on Oct. 12, 1920 to Elisabeth Goodale Frost, who survives. Also surviving are a daughter, Sara Larson Harper, and a son, Nils Fredrick Larson, seven grandchildren and two great-grandsons. Mr. Larson was a member of the A.I.A., the Assn. of American Colleges (Arts Comm.), Boston Soc. of Architects, Harvard Engineering Soc., Boston Architectural Club and the Century Assn. of N.Y.C. and, locally, the Old Town Club. There will be no public service. The family requests memorials be made to Reynolda Gardens.
Famed Architect Dies; Designed WFU Campus

By Michael P. Massoglia
Staff Reporter

Jens Fredrick Larson, the traditional architect who said he designed the campus of Wake Forest University so it would be a spiritual home for alumni, died here yesterday. He was 89.

Larson, an internationally acclaimed architect, had a reputation as America's leading traditional college designer when he was chosen to plan the new campus here. And when that Georgian-style modernist campus of what today would be considered a leading traditional university, came to be, Larson stood firm in his architectural beliefs.

"He was a man of singular purpose," said John P. Cone, an architect who was Larson's office manager for the Wake Forest project. "He went right after his vision without any deviation, no question about it. He had the courage of his convictions and the tenacity to see them through."

When Wake Forest moved here in the 1950s, Cone recalled, last night, the face of the city began to change, and Larson's long-range planning was instrumental in the development of what has become the university today.

"It (Wake Forest) certainly changed the whole picture of Winston-Salem — it brought it out of the backwoods town and turned it into a real educational center," Cone said. And as for many who criticized Larson's design, Cone said, "A lot of people have come to swing that opinion around, and it (the design) elicits more respect than it did at the time."

A Record of Achievement

They said he had produced an idea whose time had passed. He was trying to make architecture back to the Middle Ages, they complained. But architect Jens Fredrick Larson, who died Wednesday at age 89, remained steadfast in his defense of "progressive" architects in the late 1940s. He designed a new campus for Wake Forest College which combined Georgian styling with modern construction techniques. He said later that he believed his opponents would eventually recognize "the strength I am trying to give the new campus."

That judgment has been borne out over the years. Many of the buildings of the early 1950s remain forever locked into the styles that were popular at that time. But the style of the Wake Forest campus has remained timeless. As Larson's office manager, he said, "a lot of people have come to swing that opinion of opposition around and it elicits more respect than it did at the time."

Larson's record of achievement in architecture is worthy of respect as well. His specialty was college architecture — and the 30 campuses, including those of Bucknell University, Dartmouth College, American University at Cairo and Lehigh University. The Boston-born Larson embarked on his productive career, he said, at the age of 12, when he found he had an interest in drawing "Since that day . . . I've been an architect," he once said.

Larson's death comes at a time when Wake Forest, site of one of his most enduring achievements, celebrates its 25th anniversary at the new campus. In defense of the campus' Georgian design, Larson once said, "I want to keep Wake Forest's soul." It is clear that Larson achieved that goal.