

LOUIS HESSELDEN, A.I.A.

—Edna Heatherington Bergman

The news of Louis Hesselden's death this March brought a shock of surprise even though he was in his eighties and had been ill for some time: that surprise which is really an unwillingness to accept a loss. Hesselden's death is a personal loss to those who knew and cared for him, and the conclusion of a career which reached from that now almost mythological period of "the Beaux Arts" into the times now revealing themselves to be "post-Modern."

He was born in 1895 in Oklahoma in his grandmother's home, but the Hesselden family was already established in Albuquerque. His father, Wallace Hesselden, had come to the United States from England at the age of 18, and after a brief period as a miner in the middle west and in Colorado, moved to Las Vegas, New Mexico, with his friend Jack Strong, to take up carpentry. There he met and married Annie Peltier, whose family had come west in a covered wagon from Plattsburg, New York; soon deciding that Albuquerque was a more coming town than Las Vegas, the Hesseldens and the Stronges moved south.

When I talked to him in late 1976 about his career and training, Hesselden said it began when he went to work with his father and older brother. He enjoyed designing the houses which they were building on speculation, and spoke with rueful pleasure of the lessons he learned as he stood by and listened to the comments of prospective buyers. His older brother Wallace continued in the contracting business and Louis, though his career was delayed by his service in the Army in World War I, studied for two years at the University and then set out for the University of Pennsylvania in 1924. He drove his car across the country, a real adventure at a time when daily blowouts and breakdowns were commonplace and paved roads were not.

He studied at Pennsylvania under Paul Phillippe Cret, and after graduating in 1927 worked in Cret's office; he also attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts 1930-31, but returned to Albuquerque because of the Depression and organized his own firm in 1932. Schools are some of his best known work, because for some twenty years, starting in 1934, he was the architect of all the Albuquerque Public Schools.

In the early twenties, architectural education was still following the traditions, both in ideals and in techniques, of the preceding century: Hesselden told me, "Of course, I had no background when I went to Pennsylvania . . . so I buried myself in the library—especially the current magazines: *Architectural Forum*, *Architectural Record*, *Pencil Points* . . . We got the publications from the Beaux Arts Institute in Paris. That's where the ideas came from. A lot of them crazy, we used to think—but now they're



Louis Hesselden, AIA, 1895-1978
(photograph courtesy Mrs. Louis Hesselden)

coming to be used." The task of the architects of his generation was a formidable one. Between their Beaux-Arts education and the new ideas, old construction methods and the Depression, each individual had to find a new way, everyone was a pioneer. It was in the midst of his own struggle to integrate these disparate forces that Hesselden produced some of his most attractive work, of which the Bandelier School of 1939 is perhaps the best example.

The Second World War again interrupted Hesselden's professional career, but was also the time of his marriage to Mary Lou Carney. He recalled the lessons of management and problem-solving he learned with the Seabees, and said of the post-war boom period, "we didn't have too much time for aesthetics." Arthur Marshall, who was to work with Hesselden until his retirement in 1976, joined the firm after the war. They were soon caught up in the expansion which transformed Albuquerque from

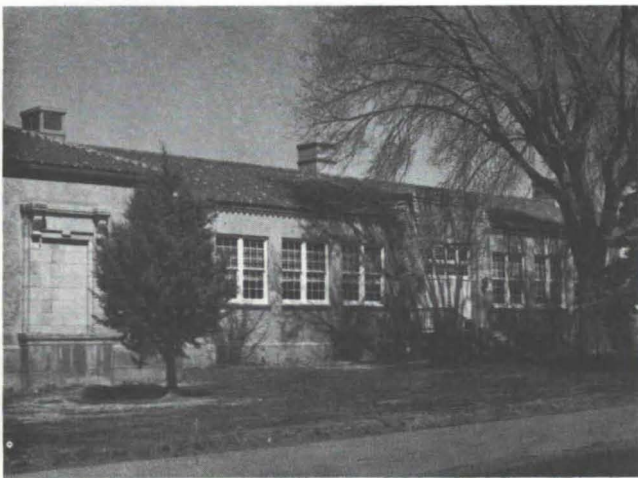


Bernalillo County Courthouse, Albuquerque, as remodelled 1964. From the west. (photo E. H. B.)



Bandelier School, detail. (photo E. H. B.)

Bandelier School, Albuquerque, 1939. Entrance facade (south). (photo E. H. B.)



a small city (population in 1950 was about 97,000) to an enormous suburb.

His practicality and preference for the concrete helped Hesselden keep in touch with architectural styles as they changed. He believed in the simplification of forms, and admired the work of Eliel Saarinen and Mies van der Rohe. He disapproved of floridity and drama in architecture, and when he talked with me returned constantly to the values of solidity of structure and functional problem-solving. He pointed out the distinction between the user and the client, and brought out pictures of recent works which had caught his attention in the literature: a renovation using a glass and metal exterior shell, and a large institutional building taking advantage of a hillside site to preserve human scale and create an interesting articulation of masses.

Louis Hesselden did not find it necessary to condemn his teachers and their traditions, nor to take an embattled position against modernism. He looked at buildings to learn from them, and went on thinking about how to make buildings serve human needs. And yet he felt a lack of resolution of the aesthetic problems presented by the revolution in styles which he had lived through, and encouraged me, as a beginner in the profession, in my own attempt to resolve theoretical aesthetic issues: "I think it would be very interesting to do what you're doing, and try to find out what architecture's all about." Hesselden was among those who lived through the revolution of modern architecture and who bore the costs of revolution. He did so with dignity and generosity.

—E. H. B.

Edna Heatherington Bergman interviewed Louis Hesselden in 1976 as part of her master's thesis research. The interview summary, and discussions of a number of Hesselden's school buildings and of Nob Hill Business Center (Albuquerque's first shopping center), are included in her thesis, "The Fate of Architectural Theory in Albuquerque, New Mexico: Buildings of Four Decades 1920-1960."

Bandelier School, West Wing. (photo E. H. B.)

