

## DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR  
ROBERT GEORGE MATHER**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution Robert George Mather, Professor, architecture, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary  
The General Faculty

**IN MEMORIAM  
ROBERT GEORGE MATHER**

The exceptional emotions evoked by the untimely death of Professor Robert G. Mather on July 7, 1984, at the prime of his scholarship at the University and the coalescence of all his contributions to the City of Austin, have left this memorial resolution languishing on the chair's desk for thirteen years after being assigned to this committee by President William Cunningham in the fall of 1986. By the fall of 1987, eighty-three pages of text and appendices were completed but, of course, such an unwieldy length would have taken away too many trees to distribute to the entire University faculty. That long version is now available on file in the Office of the General Faculty, and what follows is a summary of Professor Mather's remarkable life.

Robert G. (Bob) Mather was a wonder to us all. The extent and depth of his intellectual inquiries were legendary, but it was only after his untimely demise that the full dimensions of Bob's rich and varied background began to take shape for those of us who survived him.

Bob Mather was born April 4, 1921, in Plainfield, Illinois, to Catherine Retz and Asa Frisbee Mather. His father, who was a World War I veteran and a salesman of farm implements and Buicks, died when Bob was fifteen years old, leaving Bob and his brother, Richard, to be raised by their strong mother, who was a nutritionist. The family of three moved from Plainfield to Pasadena, California, where they temporarily lived with Catherine's sister Jeanette.

The Pasadena environment, especially his exposure to the Greene and Greene designed houses in his neighborhood, seems to have sparked an interest in art and architecture, because after he graduated from John Muir High School in 1939, Bob enrolled in art classes at Pasadena Junior College. There he completed his associate arts degree in 1942, just five months after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor.

In Bob's own words: "During World War II, I was classified '4E, Conscientious Objector,' assigned to alternative service under civilian direction." As a CO he served as a subject for medical research and worked in various building trades. With characteristic irony, Bob and his brother referred to this time as "educational" and valued the associates they encountered, among them Aldous Huxley. Bob also became intrigued with the ideals of the Quakers, which he absorbed and carried with him throughout his life.

After his release from detention at the end of the war, Bob took graphics courses at the Art Center School in Los Angeles until his acceptance into the architecture program at the Illinois Institute of Technology in the fall of 1946. Thus began his formal training under the "Father of the International Style," German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. While the rigidity of the program at IIT was not to Bob's liking, its rigor led to his discipline in drawing, creativity in graphics, and the understanding of integrity and efficiency of structure.

In his first year at IIT, Bob met an Antioch College political economics student, Jean Neville Allen (1925-), and they began working together on projects in their coed cooperative dormitory. Shortly thereafter they

were married. Jean completed her bachelor of arts degree in 1949 and went to work while Bob finished his architecture degree, with the tacit agreement that after graduation he would work while she engaged in a master's program.

During Bob's studies at IIT, the curriculum was extended from four to five years. At the same time, he took a year off to attend to family matters. Thus his graduation date, when he finally received his bachelor of architecture degree, was delayed until 1952. However, the unexpected and postponed fifth year turned into a blessing, because it provided Bob with unanticipated opportunities to engage in studies of city and regional planning, an area that became a major interest in his career and landed him his first real job.

In 1952, when the Mathers moved to Cambridge so that Jean could enroll in Harvard University's graduate program in landscape architecture, Bob sought a job in which he could gain experience with large-scale projects. With the planning option on his resumé, Bob found work in Boston with the Planning Division of the Massachusetts Development Commission, working on the shoreline of Cape Cod. From this work came two major publications: *Ocean Beaches: A Massachusetts Master Plan Report*, 1954, and *Past, Plan, Promise in Barnstable County: A Study of the Economic Specialization on Cape Cod*, 1955 (with J. Turley). Both of these reports were published by the commission, and the latter also appeared as an article in *Shore and Beach*, the Journal of the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association.

In 1955, Bob joined The Architects Collaborative, whose principle partner was Walter Gropius, in their Bow Street office in Cambridge. He worked on the firm's U.S. Air Force contracts: the Master Plan, and Family Housing for Otis Air Force Base, Cape Cod. (The chair of this *In Memoriam* committee joined TAC and met Bob in the fall of 1955.) After six months, Bob had tired of military regulations and planning, and looked for a smaller office in which to attain some purer architectural experience. He went to work for James L. Harris, architect, and was afforded gratification creating preliminary design studies and presentation and production drawings.

When Jean completed her master's degree in landscape architecture in 1956, they began to plan a future of working together. With their mutual interest in helping developing countries, they went to New York City to visit the United Nations. However, their idealistic aspirations were quickly thwarted as they encountered the bureaucracy of that ponderous organization (this was long before the Peace Corps came into being).

Discouraged, but not disheartened, they decided to explore the world on their own, and searched for a way to travel as far as possible on the four thousand dollars they had somehow saved. A *Christian Science Monitor* article led them to the Putney (Vermont) Graduate School of Education, which was sponsoring a world study/travel program. Armed with their own money and a supplementary scholarship from the school, they set out on their "epic journey," their first trip abroad. This real adventure took them through Western Europe, the Middle East, Pakistan and India, East and North Africa, Greece, and Eastern Europe, finally terminating in Sweden where their money was exhausted. During this incredible odyssey their experiences covered a wide array of extremes, from some of the most primitive villages in the world to some of the most sophisticated and urbane cities. Bob brought back stunning black and white photographs to share with others, but there were countless untold images that remained locked in his and Jean's minds.

In Sweden, Jean found an ideal job with the Stockholm Park Department, while Bob went to work with a fine architect, Lars Erick Lallerstedt, doing preliminary studies and development details on an eleven-story building for the city. After completing this building, he transferred to Lars Myronberg's office and worked on the site design of a new campus for Stockholm University.

Eventually, Bob earned enough money to return to the U.S. and went to College Station, Texas, to find employment with the prestigious firm of Caudill, Rowlett and Scott. Meanwhile, Jean stayed in her happy position in Stockholm. CRS offered Bob a job as a planner, but he turned it down because he was seeking more experience with buildings. He then tried Austin and was welcomed into the office of Jessen, Jessen, Millhouse and Greeven. At the Jessens' office he did an outstanding job of developing and detailing the design for St. Martin's Lutheran Church, Austin, 1960. It still stands gracefully on the northwest corner of Rio Grande and West 15th Streets.

During his first year with the Jessens, Bob came to the attention of Philip Creer, director of the School of Architecture, 1956-1967. Impressed with Bob's variety of experience, Creer hired him to fill a vacancy on a

temporary, one-year basis. Bob performed so well that he was continually rehired and was on tenure track in four years, thus launching him into a successful and passionate twenty-six year teaching career.

Bob was a natural and brilliant teacher who assigned significant design projects. The projects were broad in scope and high in ideals, furthering the students' knowledge of architecture, providing them with a sense of value, and stimulating their efforts while inspiring others outside of the school, as well. For example, his spring 1970 advanced design studio aided the Graduate School of Management in finding their "place" on campus and assisted them in securing sites and facilities. Later projects focused on such diverse topics as regional "urban field studies" covering Travis County, a proposed city hall program for Austin, and his "Bridge Communities" project that investigated developing with the least impact on the physical environment. At the opposite end of the spectrum Bob taught a course in the school's design laboratory with Mike Farmer, dealing with the influence of the act of "crafting" on a design's result. With all his offerings he was most creative in encompassing a wide range of thoughts and resources.

Immediately, Bob was very influential in the school's efforts in establishing a research program. He coordinated the research activities within the school and set up a laboratory space at Balcones Research Center. In almost all cases, his research and theories were actually applied in some form or other, whether it be in fabricating concrete shells, managing data, or designing development strategies and citizen input in planning procedures.

In the latter category, Bob was a major leader in the Austin Tomorrow program, from its origin in 1972 until he died. (See: *Urban Pathfinding: Charting Austin's Growth toward a Consensus Growth Strategy*, by Clancy Mullen, published by We Care Austin, Austin, September 1985.) He also worked on reports for the city on the following planning topics: open space, transportation, growth management, sustainability, renewable energy, land use, and water and waste-water systems (see the longer "In Memoriam," 1987, on file in General Faculty Office).

Bob and Jean's own house, on Alameda Drive, purchased in 1963, contains many excellent examples of his ingenuity and craftsmanship and their partnership in landscape and outbuilding design, including everything from a suspended bookcase to a combination playscape and carport.

After his 1966 registration as an architect, by examination in Texas, he continued his personal hands-on approach to the design of houses for others. Of about a dozen private works, the concrete masonry house for Jean Hejl in Lago Vista, 1970, and the carefully woodworked house for Marlan Blissett in Austin, 1982-84, are of particular interest.

Bob proceeded through the academic ranks as follows: lecturer, fall 1958; assistant professor, 1962; associate professor, 1965; and professor, 1970. Early in his teaching career (February 1963 to January 1965) he was a visiting associate professor in the Department of Architecture, College of Engineering, at the University of Baghdad. He lectured and taught design studio for a total of twenty-eight contact hours per week and consulted on both a new six-year curriculum and physical facilities. Seven years later, he taught advanced design at the University of Oregon during their winter and spring quarters.

As chair of architecture graduate studies in the early '70s, he helped define "thesis" and taught a methodology seminar, "Designer's Tools," which he had developed for graduate students who lacked goals and needed procedures, thought stimulation, and scheduling skills. Signal amongst his papers on this subject was, "Upholstering the Inside of Your Head: Some Tools for Second Generation Designers," *Man-Environment Systems*, Vol. 3, No. 5, September 1973, pp. 363-366.

In his late years, Bob formulated his own theory of architecture and vehemently opposed the fashionable postmodernists. He labeled his theory a "post-historic" architecture: "The expressive content of post history is social change and the central insight of post history is that the environment is the ultimate work of art and that people are the ultimate artists." Again his own words still ring true, "...the world is both developmentally closed (nature seems a finite reservoir and sink) and conceptually open (culture displays pluralistic models of good-bad, right-wrong, truth-untruth)."

Bob died quietly during a nap one hot summer afternoon. His bright mind, quick wit, and immense talent simply went to sleep, and didn't wake up. At least, not on this plane, where the merest of mortals, left

toiling behind, will forever remain humbly grateful to Bob Mather for his legacy of thoughtful detail, his immense conscience, and his love for one's fellow man. During his commendable life, he indeed left his mark on this campus, this city, both the East and West Coasts, and the capitals of Sweden and Iraq.

Professor Mather is survived by his wife Jean and their two children: Emily, born in Austin, 1961, who completed her Bachelor in Architecture in 1984, the year her father died, and Richard Emery, born in 1965, in Baghdad, whose interests are focused on art and music, and Bob's younger brother, Richard, who is a professor of history at the University of California, Santa Clara.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Richard P. Swallow (chair), C. Owen Cappleman, and Gerlinde Leiding.

Distributed to the Dean of the School of Architecture, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on December 7, 1999. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/>