Press release

The Architects Collaborative 1945–1995: Tracing a Diffuse Architectural Authorship: MIT Exhibition Examines Massachusetts Vernacular Through a Forgotten Narrative

On view March 1, 2022
MIT Keller Gallery, 77 Mass Ave, 7-408, Cambridge, MA

Cambridge, MA, March 1, 2022 – MIT announced that The Architects Collaborative 1945–1995: Tracing a Diffuse Architectural Authorship, an exhibition by Gabriel Cira, James Heard (SMarchS HTC ‘22), and Emma Pfeiffer (MArch ’21), is on view at MIT’s Keller Gallery through the month of March. The exhibit takes as its subject the prolific yet under-examined Cambridge-based firm The Architects Collaborative (TAC), with a particular focus on their works in Massachusetts. Through archival research, the exhibition highlights the firm’s unique collaborative design ethos and weaves through projects ranging from the monumental to the pedestrian, surfacing a body of work that has been relegated to the outskirts of the canon of architectural history.

About the project

The Architects Collaborative (TAC) was a Cambridge-based architecture practice founded in 1945 by eight equal partners—Norman Fletcher, Jean Fletcher, Walter Gropius, Chip Harkness, Sally Harkness, Louis McMillen, Bob McMillan, and Ben Thompson. The partners desired to create a value-driven practice, espousing democratic principles and the then-new idea of professional architectural teamwork. In the office’s early years, this meant equal salaries and profit distribution among partners and no rewards or bonuses for bringing in new projects or efficient management.

The majority of TAC’s early work included public schools and single-family homes throughout the Northeast, but their profile quickly rose and twenty years after opening their doors, they had an office in Rome and were working on commissions in Iraq and Germany, pioneering the model of global practice for architects in the United States. It was at this time that TAC produced its only monograph (1966) documenting their meteoric rise, and their best-known work today is from this publication. However, TAC existed for another thirty years and, during that time, became the largest architectural firm in the United States, opened a West Coast office in San Francisco, and completed nearly another 100 projects in Massachusetts alone. TAC was known fondly to insiders as “The Cambridge School,” as generation after generation maintained, TAC’s culture of collaboration and shaped the in-house body of architectural knowledge.

Despite the impact TAC has had on the practice of architecture, their history remains
largely unwritten. This is, in part, due to the difficulty of applying art historical methods to collaborative (and later, corporate) practice. Further complicating authorship, the architectural press would alternately author TAC’s projects by the name of the partner-in-charge and the entire practice. While there was an identifiable “TAC style” that developed, the partners deployed this style in unique and at times traceable ways.

Another reason for TAC’s absence from the architectural canon is the type of contracts they pursued. While they certainly have their share of monumental and iconic work, such as the John F. Kennedy Federal Building at Boston’s City Hall Plaza, most of their projects are humble, formally quiet, and contextually appropriate. The public libraries, public schools, public housing, and parking garages that make up a majority of their domestic work intentionally recede into their surroundings, whether a forest or a city. TAC’s dedication to public and institutional work at times led them into conflicts with their own values. During the Vietnam War they attracted attention for their projects for the US military and as investment in public education declined during the 1980s the firm applied their knowledge of prefabricated concrete to prisons and correctional facilities.

There has yet to be a retrospective or catalogue raisonné of TAC’s built work, and this exhibition doesn’t attempt to correct that. Rather, it brings original research on TAC’s built work in Massachusetts to the public, with a focus on historically contextualizing their extant built work through unpublished archival photographs. Moreover, it makes a case for their position in the vernacular architectural history of the Northeast, and in the local cultural unconscious. At the time of this writing, several of these projects are under threat of demolition—TAC’s historic contributions to both local and international architectural culture are largely unrecognized.

About the curators
Gabriel Cira is a licensed architect based in Massachusetts. His design firm ARCH CIRA and network of community collaborators work on historic preservation, socially-engaged architectural design, and coastal resilience projects. He teaches architecture and art history courses at MassArt.

James Heard received his BArch from Virginia Tech and is currently enrolled in the SMArchS HTC program at MIT. As a licensed architect he studied and implemented cooperative models of practice in architecture and is currently researching the intersections of housing and political activism in 20th century Los Angeles.

Emma Pfeiffer is an architect and researcher from London and currently based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 2021, she completed a Master’s of Architecture at MIT. Her recent work examines cultural and structural arguments for material reuse in the design of public space.

About the MIT Department of Architecture
The MIT Department of Architecture opened its doors in 1868 as the first Architecture department in the United States. MIT Architecture is currently home to around 250 graduate and undergraduate students. Numbered among the Department’s over 5,000
alumni are Sophia Hayden ’1890, Robert R. Taylor ’1892, I.M. Pei ’40, and Charles Correa ’55.

About the Keller Gallery at MIT
The Keller Gallery was established in the fall of 2011 with a generous donation of materials and labor in kind from Shawn Keller, principal at C.W. Keller & Associates. The 200 square foot gallery presents faculty, student, and experimental work, including work from alumni and friends.

The Architects Collaborative 1945–1995: Tracing a Diffuse Architectural Authorship was first exhibited at pinkcomma gallery in Boston, MA.

Visitor Information
The Keller Gallery at MIT
77 Massachusetts Avenue, Building 7, Room 408, Cambridge, MA 02139

Monday through Saturday, 9AM to 6PM

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