



# A Brief History of American Higher Education Architecture

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## ABSTRACT

This article highlights the stages that the American Higher Education Architecture have been going through and people perception toward it. It takes us in a historical approach using the American eras as a base to follow the impact of the immigrants' homelands on the American Higher Education Architecture. The results shows how people perception from their old world drew a line in how they expect a college or a university in America should be nowadays (an old brick building!).

**Keywords:** universities and colleges; architecture; higher education; buildings; America.



## Introduction

When we talk about a college or a university, most of us will imagine a classical brick buildings hold together. This perception that accumulated over years was driven from the European college buildings. Until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were no real strong buildings that hold an educational institution. Rudolph described the University if Carolina as “a two-story empty brick building that called itself a University!” (Rudolph, 1991). This university was established by David Stone 1795 (Battle, 1907) which is almost 160 years after the establishment of Harvard University 1636 (HarvardUniversity, 1902). The college architecture is as important as the education itself. “One of more different obligations of these new institutions has been the creation of an atmosphere, tradition, sense of the past which might play as important part in the education of sensitive students as any other influence” state Allan Nevins the author of the State University and Democracy (Nevins, 1962).

All beginnings start weak then get stronger. When a baby comes to this life, we need to take care of him until he stands up by his own. However, we cannot know the health history for this baby until we know his environment. Therefore, we cannot study the history of the American higher education architecture without knowing the circumstances that was surrounding it. And because we cannot ignore the history influence on the architecture, this paper will be based on some of the historical events of the American history. These events were chosen chronologically based on its impact on the higher education architecture. Colonies, wars, philanthropy, education and many other factors had changed the people perception toward the architecture over years. However, most people still have a solid mental picture in what a college would be like.

### The Colonial Era 1626-1789

When we want to start talking about the history of the higher education American architecture, we need to have in mind that it starts mostly with the arrivals of the European immigrants to the east cost of America. This area called later New England referring to the old England in Europe. These immigrants were the core for the first higher education building. More than one hundred Oxford and Cambridge men had immigrated to the new land. Therefore, they carried with them the framework and were emulating what they were doing back home (Rudolph, 1991).

With the effort of these immigrants Harvard University was founded 1636 (HarvardUniversity, 1902). Even though Harvard University was established by the Massachusetts legislature (Rudolph, 1991), it was named after its first benefactor John Harvard who was an Emmanuel college, Cambridge graduate back in the Old England (EmmanuelCollege, 2012). There was no enough money to emulate what was Emmanuel college of Cambridge looks like in the colonial era. However, years later it starts shaping as the new Cambridge University. Lack of money was the most common people that the higher educational institutions face that time. Sometimes colleges do not complete what they start due to the lack of funds (Thelin, 2011).



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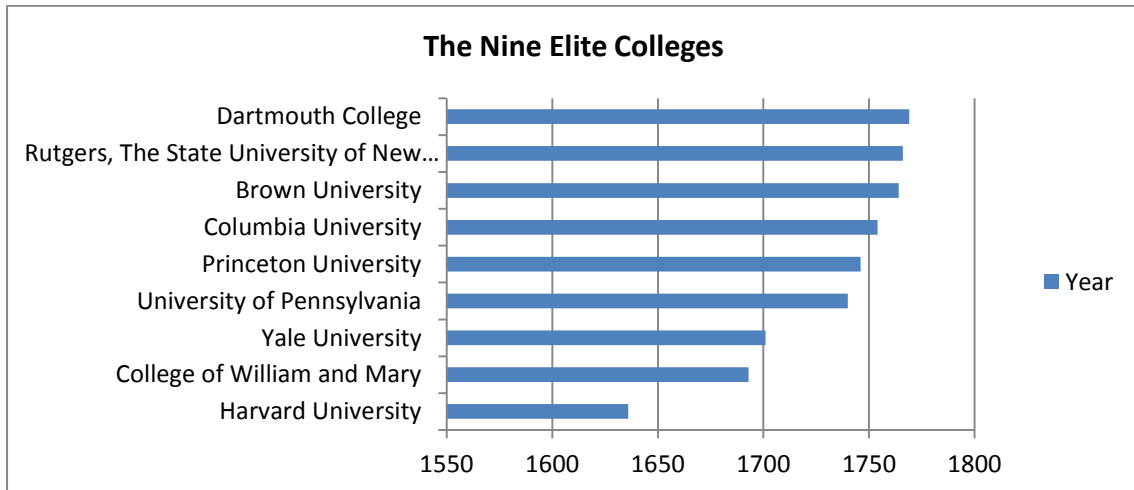
Emmanuel College



Massachusetts Hall (HU oldest building)

The example of Harvard University was chosen because it represent the oldest higher educational institution in the US. Yet, most of the colleges and university established later in the colonile era were following the same steps. However, like Harved Universiry, they start mostly modest with a wooden buildings then they start growing. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> Harvad University was built mostly by wooden buildings. One of the reports of the president of Harvard College was “The present building could then be converted to the use of the valuable library of the Observatory, which is now distributed through various rooms in a wooden building” (HarvardUniversity, 1902). Hence, the colonial higher education architecture wasn’t shiny enough to draw a clear line in the history of the American higher education architecture. Also, most of the other colonial had followed the same modest designs of architecture. They were like a small child who was tring to stand and walk like his father which they did later.

Furthermore, only nine colleges was founded before the American revolutionary war. Nowadays, these colleges considered as an American heritage because they was flares of the independence light and because of their fabulous architecture where each one represent a unique colonial design.





Wren Building - College of William and Mary's



Connecticut Hall - Yale University



College Hall – Upenn



Old Queens Quad Rutgers

When we look at these colleges architecture with a critical eyes, we will find that they are different based on what colonial they are follow. For example, Old Queens Quad building for Rutgers was built based on the Dutch architecture. However, the College Hall at the University of Pennsylvania was built on the British architecture (Rudolph, 1991).

### The Revolutionary War 1775-1783

The eve of the colonial many institutions were lack of funds because some of them were depends on what they were receive from the Europe. The revolutionary war had I clear impact on the higher education architecture. Like any war, social buildings mostly occupied by troops or turned to be temporary hospitals. During the revolutionary war, the patriotic speeches were held in the classrooms. The dormitory received the wounded soldiers and people. Other building became a base for some troops and some others was destroyed or set on fire (Thelin, 2011).

Nassau Hall at Princeton was the largest building in North America. However, during the revolutionary war it went in to many events. Between 1776 and 1783 it was



occupied by the British troops then attacked by the Americans then used as hospital and finally became a capital for congressmen. The only college that remains opened during the revolutionary war was William and Mary. However, it stopped operating for a short-term hosting the American and French troops. Nevertheless, it was set on fire by an accident by the French troops (Rudolph, 1991).

Yet, the revolutionary war did not only leave wounded and dead men but also it left a wounded historical building and some of them were totally destroyed. Because of the huge impact of the revolutionary war on the higher education architecture, it was a turn point to make a distinction between what was built before the war and what was built after.



Nassau Hall - Princeton University

### The Calm before the Storm 1783-1861

The impact was clear on the nine pioneer colleges after the revolution and they were never the same after it (Rudolph, 1991). Nevertheless, the end of the revolutionary war was a chance for the nine colleges' buildings to breathe and recover after what they went through. However, right after the signing of The Treaty of Paris 1783, some institutions found it a chance to start a new era in the new world. Dickinson College considers the first American higher education institution after the revolution located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. It was a grammar school with a small one building until it became a college 1783 by Benjamin Rush. In 1786 another building was added constructed of stone. The first one set on fire and they vote to build a new bigger one instead because of that the "supposition that the stone end was the older was a mistake" (Biddle, 1920). Yet, these buildings were still modest due to the lack of funds (Biddle, 1920).

Dickinson College – 19<sup>th</sup> century

Although there was no real college building revolution during the period between the revolutionary war and the civil war until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a perception that America was on the threshold of a new era of an AMERICAN college buildings. In 1851, ten years before the civil war, captain Absalom Peters said “Our country is to be a land of colleges” (Rudolph, 1991).

This thirst for constructing higher educational buildings coincided with the new American ethos. When the revolutionary war broke out, there were only nine colleges. However, during the period between the wars there were seven hundred colleges but when the civil war started 1861 there were almost two hundred fifty colleges; one hundred eighty two still operating (Rudolph, 1991). This ethos was shaped through the revelation the immigrants rebelled against the British regime.

Yet, the architecture that was followed during this period was not far from what was before. Because the higher education system had a religious nature, it was difficult that this architectural style would be changed. Most of the colleges were built to prepare students for the missionary. Also, one of the reasons that America became the land of colleges was the home missionary movement (Rudolph, 1991). Cambridge & Oxford and other British colleges were built in England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century for the same reason (EmmanuelCollege, 2012). Also, some colleges in the new world were built by churches. Therefore, it is common to see similarities between the churches and the colleges' architecture. This influence still around starting from the Old England until nowadays because it became a prove of excellence.

Even though this period was calm for the architecture and had no significant change. However, it moved some winds to build new colleges. Yes, one hundred eighty two survived of seven hundred colleges that time but they still operating for One hundred fifty years. These colleges are a prove of a great constructions.



### The Civil War 1861 - 1865

Even though the civil war did not long more than five years, only one hundred eighty two colleges survived out of two hundred fifty when the war started. Yet, the civil war was a great opportunity to pass what was stalled over years (Thelin, 2011). The main event that had in impact on the higher education constructing in this period was the passing of the Morrill Federal Land Grant Act in 1862. Many colleges have benefit of this act which helped the states built their own colleges (Rudolph, 1991). However, the colleges still simulating the colonial architecture which was driven from the first land.

### Stability and Growth 1865 - 1914

In this period due to the Morrill Federal Land Grant Act in 1862, the colleges' expansion was obvious. Also, many philanthropies wanted to build a college to be monomers for them. Moreover, a clear line had drawn between the first nine colonial colleges and other colleges came later. These nine pioneer colleges became a sample of excellence for America. They considered as an American heritage.

In 1870 a Harvard student told Henry Adams "The degree of Harvard College is worth money to me in Chicago" (Rudolph, 1991). The perception that these nine colleges had left in peoples' minds was a motivation to stimulate their architecture. Even the first women's dormitory for Cornell University that had been built in 1872 followed the same architecture for the colonial colleges.



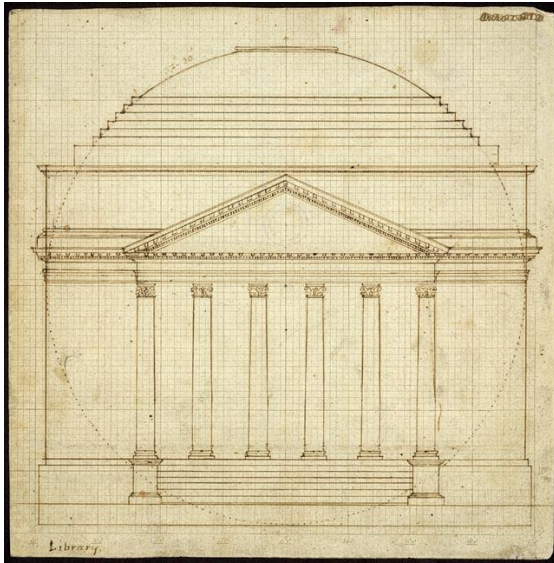
Sage Hall - Cornell University  
Women's Dormitory

Moreover, the Collegiate Gothic architecture had its foot print in this period. In 1878 the Seabury and Jarvis halls was built at Trinity College in Hartford. Also, in 1894 Pembroke Hall was built on the campus of Bryn Mawr College. It was a compensation between Cambridge and oxford Gothic styles on one hand and the Collegiate Gothic architecture on the other hand (BMC, 2001).

In the field of architecture during this period, many names became known by their higher education buildings designs. Because of Thomas Jefferson's unique work in buildings' design, this style became known as Jeffersonian Architecture. This



extraordinary style by Thomas Jefferson was as a result of the influence of the French and Italian Architecture. One of his greatest masterpieces is The University of Virginia. He used to use the octagons in his designs. His works, alongside with the Collegiate Gothic architecture were the main lines for the American higher education architecture in the years after (Kern, 2009).



The Rotunda, University of Virginia, designed by Thomas Jefferson

### World Wars 1914 - 1945

When the first great war broke out, there were a lot of American colleges that were constructed using the Collegiate Gothic Architecture and the Jeffersonian Architecture. These institutions were like a shiny rosary made of education. Some of them had got advantage of the Morrill Federal Land Grant Act. However, others were built by philanthropies who wanted to make a finger print in the higher educational history.

In this period, due to the life changes, the architecture filed start to form to serve the community needs. The needs that prefer functionality more than the massive designs. Around 1900 a movement toward the “new style” in architecture was arising. However, this style did not take its place until the First World War started.

Frank Lloyd Wright was one of the known American architects. He used a compensation of what was in the nature and the society's needs. His works was controversial for many people that era because of the old perception of how should the American college or university look like. His masterpiece Florida Southern





College designed 1938 was an evidence of his excellence. Because of his the extraordinary work, Florida Southern College made his design as its logo. He had revolutionary thoughts in modern architecture. These new thoughts did not take its place in the higher education architecture until the second decade of the 21ed century (McCarter, 2006).



The Pfeiffer Chapel - Florida Southern College

### Knowledge and vision 1945 - present

During the last seventy years an expansion of the free knowledge and technology had been spreading. The higher education architecture was part of this growth. It is not surprising that we see a new modern glass college building. These building mostly concentrate on the functionality, safety, and energy more than the expansive artistic architecture. However, these modern colleges still have the sense of history on their outlines. The history that had been a prove of their excellence.

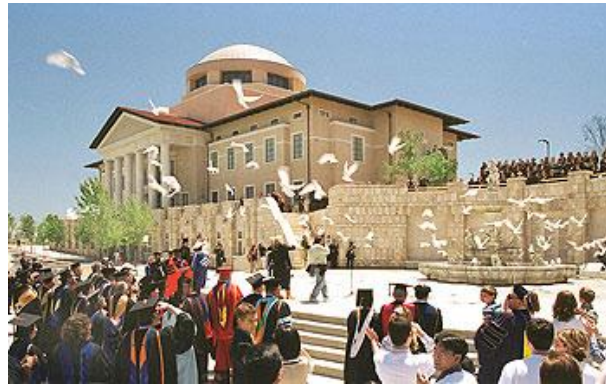
The new architecture movement started 1900 did not reached its peak until the arrival of the “European architects who immigrated to the United States before World War II” (InfoUSA, 2012). They established a dominant movement in architecture (InfoUSA, 2012).

When John R. Thelin stats that “Today campus is large but often neither inspire nor inspiring” (Thelin, 2011), he was talking about the college atmosphere more than the architecture itself. Even though the collegial soul of the buildings starts to vanish especially in the elite campuses, the sense of the history still flying around. The new Harvard University research building is like a glass cube. However, they keep maintaining the old buildings by adjusting them to the new technology and safety systems to keep their legacy (School, 2012).



New HU research building

“Architecture is essential for capturing and conveying the historical motifs that each campus projects via by it monuments and memorials” (Thelin, 2011). Therefore, the new campuses start to mimic what the elite ones have to convince others about their excellence. Soka University of America is a new university established 2001. However, they built their campuses following the Jeffersonian Architecture.



Founders Hall, Soka University of America



## Conclusion

The past is pages of the human life story. If we skip these pages, we would not understand the future. Remembering our past is a motivation for us toward a better future. Living in the past is not bad as it looks like. The cave man used the knife and we still do. Carrying a sense of the historical architecture reminds us with our persistence for a better life. Human life is based on stimulating each other. However, this stimulus does not stop on what we are stimulating because what we are doing usually is adding a new thing to it.

Thus, Harvard University was built using the Gothic architecture style which was a stimulus to what was the Emmanuel College of Cambridge looks like. Also, the University of Virginia was built by the influence of the French and Italian that Tomas Jefferson was amazed with. Then finally the Soka University of America 2001 had something from all these elite institutions. It is not surprising when a small child try to walk in the way his father walking because when he gets older he will learn how to walk by his own way. However, the soul of his father will still inside him.

The transition in the higher education architecture toward new urban styles is not a total shift. Because of the perception of the education quality linked to the elite colleges, new colleges cannot resist their temptation. Therefore, many institutions nowadays stimulated the elite once architecture.

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