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An Analysis of Media Portrayals of Edward Durell Stone's University at Albany Campus 1962-2014

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An Analysis of Media Portrayals of
Edward Durell Stone's University at Albany Campus
1962-2014

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of Communication,
University at Albany, State University of New York
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in Communication
and
graduation from The Honors College.

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Research Advisor: Nancy Roberts, Ph.D.

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Abstract

The University at Albany campus designed by Edward Durell Stone has been a frequent topic in the media throughout the past fifty years. Coverage was analyzed in a sample of 80 local and national publications including magazines, newspapers, yearbooks, and architectural journals. The tone of coverage was rated from very negative to very positive. A variety of themes were found in the publications including discussion of Governor Nelson Rockefeller's vision for the SUNY system, higher ideals of architecture and art, an evolving campus, and how limited funding reduced the scope of the design. Most of the articles were fairly positive or neutral, and very few were negative. The coverage declined after the 1960's and tended to become more positive as time went on.

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Introduction

Since first stepping foot on the University at Albany campus I was completely in awe; from the towering concrete arches, grand podium, and the stunning fountain, everywhere I looked was a refreshing and astounding sight. The campus is unlike any other and SUNY Albany has the famous architect Edward Durell Stone to thank for its unique and somewhat controversial campus. The campus has been the topic of discussion in many publications over the past fifty years and this paper analyzes that broad range of content. Many publications have printed articles of varying tone and topics about Stone's design, and there is evidence of agenda setting in both national and local coverage. Though the content in the publications varies, the campus itself still stands strong today, fifty years later, and is still a topic of conversation.

Methods

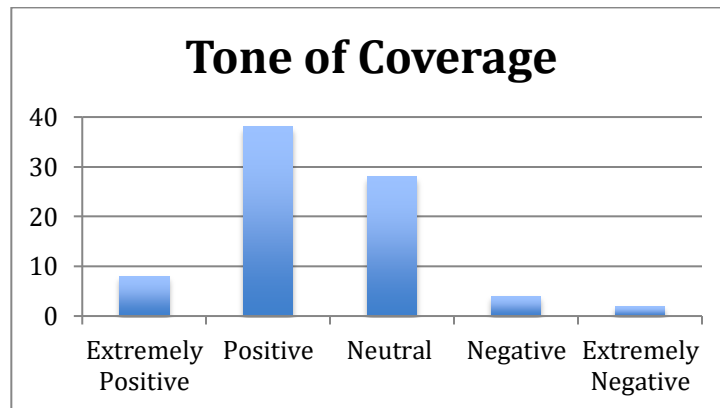
This research seeks to discover how a sample of media content has portrayed Edward Durrell Stone's design of the University at Albany campus, over the period of over fifty-some years (1962-2014). Types of publication scrutinized were: newspapers, both local (*Albany Student Press* and *Knickerbocker News*) and national (*New York Times*); magazines (*Newsweek*); school yearbooks; and trade journals (*Architectural Review* and *Architecture Forum*). The search included finding relevant articles both from online databases, newspaper archives, as well as in the University at Albany's M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives. The UAlbany archive included a very extensive collection of newspaper clippings regarding the construction of the campus, dating back to 1962. The analysis of content includes media portrayals from 1962 until 2014. I categorized each article by tone on a scale from 1 to 5. The most negative content was given a one, the more neutral content a three, and the most optimistic and positive content was given a five. A score of two for the tone was an article that was mostly negative but made some neutral or positive points, and a four was a positive piece that included some negative comments. The articles were then categorized by year, type of publication, and whether or not each was published locally or publicly. Overall there was quite a variety of coverage on the subject, from a wide range of sources.

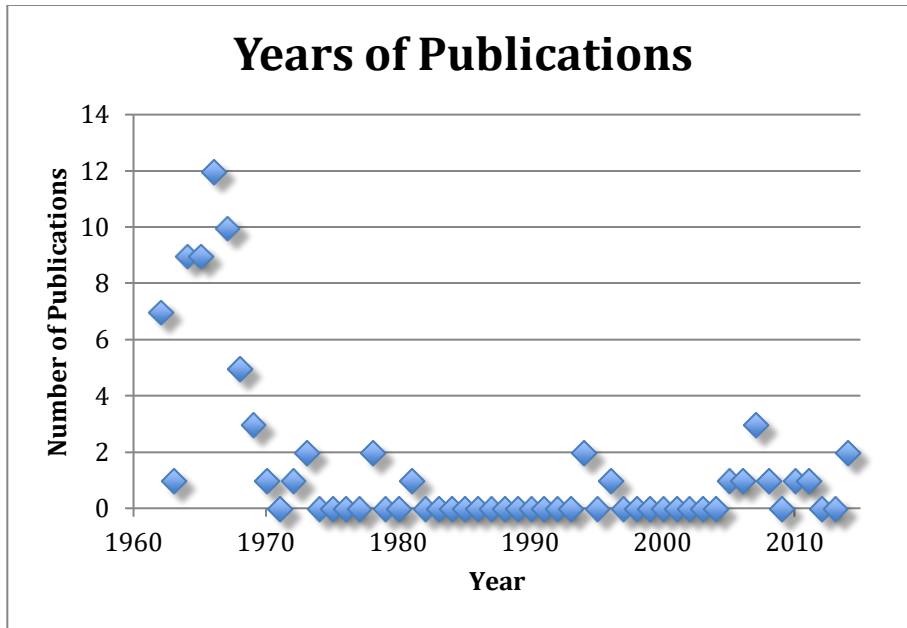
Findings

Overall, the media portrayals were much more positive than I had expected. The initial hypothesis was that there would be a significant amount of negative coverage about the campus; however, of the eighty articles that I analyzed, a majority was categorized positively, rating a score of four or five in tone. Twenty-eight articles were rated as a neutral three, and surprisingly, only six articles were considered negative. Because of the contrasting and passionate views I have heard from students and professors over the years, I had assumed that the campus would have been portrayed more negatively in the media. I found that the tone of local coverage tended to be very favorable toward the campus while national coverage was both positive and neutral.

Various themes were found throughout the media portrayals. Mentioned most frequently was the idea of the higher ideals of art and architecture when discussing the University at Albany campus. Many articles also mentioned that the campus was a direct reflection of New York Governor Nelson D. Rockefeller's vision for higher education. There were seven articles that discussed the idea that Stone designed an evolving campus and five articles explained that the somewhat limited design is a result of lack of funds. The tone of the articles stayed neutral or slightly positive over time; however in 1966 the coverage ranged from very negative to very positive and everything in between. I also had hypothesized that there would be differences in coverage from student press in relation to other local and national publications. The coverage from the *Albany Student Press*, *UAlbany Magazine* and the yearbooks does tend to be more opinionated and specific, with details about life on

campus, and the articles from the 1960's were more negative than those published more recently. Overall, newspapers and local publications consisted of mostly positive coverage while national publications were more neutral. Specialized publications like *Engineering News* and *SIKA News*, a concrete and construction publication, tended to be more positive in tone. This is not surprising considering that the positive reception of the UAlbany campus would be significant advertising for their products. Of the articles analyzed, those published in 1966 formed the largest group. They also showed the greatest variety of tone, earning ratings that ranged from one through five. Because the campus was well on its way to completion and both students and the general population were getting accustomed to the new structure around 1966, this type of coverage is to be expected. As a whole, the coverage over time was mostly positive or neutral and discussed a variety of themes throughout when discussing Edward Durell Stone's architecture.





Discussion

Edward Durell Stone had already established his architectural career as both a widely successful and controversial architect by the time he designed the University at Albany campus. With designs all over the world that displayed his unique modernist style, Governor Rockefeller was pleased to include Stone as one of the thirty architects who were commissioned to design twenty-two State University of New York campuses. Rockefeller stated, “I think we’re going to restore dignity and excitement to public buildings and add a whole new dimension to community planning” (Company Architects, 1962). As New York State Governor, Rockefeller had immense plans to revitalize the SUNY system that began with the creation of the University at Albany campus. Rockefeller believed in the power of public education and sought to bring the quality of Californian schools to New York with campuses in Albany, Binghamton, Buffalo, and Stony Brook, that would be the “key to the future”

(State U. Sees Place, 1966). This new college boom is said to “reflect the optimistic American faith in change and experimentation” at the time (The Campus Boom, 1967). The University at Albany campus in its grand scale was in some ways a figurehead of Rockefeller’s larger vision. The campus was described as “the \$100 million piece de resistance of a billion dollar state wide construction program” (University on the Rise, 1966) and also “the most significant (campus) in the nation, but takes second place to our primary goal – education” (Coffman, 1964). It is worth noting that Rockefeller greatly valued design and the expertise of architects and it is said “his knowledge of art was enough to convince some of the architects that they were dealing with a different force in state government. They felt this man could be trusted; he would not sell architecture short. He had too much affection for art of high quality” (Bleecker & Stoller, 1981). The campus was a statement piece for both Rockefeller and SUNY education and with both significant monetary funds and support, Edward Durell Stone set out to create his masterpiece.

The media coverage in the early 1960’s tended to describe the connection between Rockefeller’s vision and Stone’s design, making it evident that University at Albany campus was a combined effort. Coverage at this time also tended to be very factual and optimistic about the future campus. Stone described his distinctive commission in the *Albany Student Press* with the statement, “I was presented with the opportunity to design one great formal architectural composition; it is unique when a campus for 7,500 plus students is all built at one time” (Lynne, 1965). The campus was to be built on 300 acres of land that was previously a golf course. And was one of the few campuses to be constructed all at one time. Keeping this in mind,

Stone included some of his personal ideals of education and architecture while incorporating Rockefeller's ideals as well. Stone believed that respectable architecture should not be compromised for an architect's economic survival and also the architecture of a campus could have lasting effect on its students. "Not only can they emphasize the best of our cultural heritage, but they can be examples themselves of what long range planning can mean in architecture and environment. When the university raises the general level of appreciation of architecture, the results will eventually be seen everywhere" (Stone, 1966, p. 9), he wrote in *University Review*. It is clear that his vision is much broader than the singular task at hand, and his work on the UAlbany campus is both a reflection of his values as an architect and his appreciation for the arts and education. He stated that his hope is that his design "will somehow evoke larger images of truth and beauty" (Loh, 1973). It is clear that his design was fashioned with great care and thoughtfulness, and after reading the reasoning behind its features, it is a wonder how anyone can view his work negatively. Although some were quick to criticize the rectangular, symmetrical, and compressed design, Stone states, "By using a compact plan, we were able to build a complex of much finer quality than expected, and well within New York State's regular square footage budget" (Stone, 1966, p. 10). He also explained, "Vertical buildings have always been built at the wrong time – after we have run out of land and there is no place to go but up" (Collins, 1962), clearly conscious of his condensed design. He also took into account the climate of the area, and created the design to protect students from the undesirable elements of weather while walking across the podium with a roof along the perimeter. He also

specifically isolated automobiles to the periphery of the campus because they did not fit with the formal design of the campus and to also prevent them from disturbing students. He stated, “Nothing is more fatal to architecture than to have buildings located in a parking lot” (Fairhall, 1971). Curiously enough, over the years many publications discuss how impractical and inconvenient the placement of the parking lots is, sadly ignorant to the intentions of the design. Stone also included elements of wholesome beauty into the campus including fountains, domes, and gardens throughout. He stated that, “When all the wonderful landscaping plans are filled, I think this campus will compare to Versailles where there is also great formal architectural composition” (Lynne, 1965). While he considered the significant and inspiring architecture of the past in his design, he also looked to the future. He included in his plans ideas for expansion, which is both highly practical as well as innovative, as educational systems were expanding immensely. His design not only was created with current students in mind, but it was also a grand gesture toward the higher ideals of architecture and education. His sincerity is clear in his hope that the UAlbany campus “is a source of pleasure to this and other generations of students to come” (Fairhall, 1971).

The Dean of the University at Albany in 1967 expressed his gratitude to Stone in a letter that reads, “My excitement for our campus is renewed each day as I cross its threshold and my hope is that our academic achievements will at least match the beauty of your buildings” (Perlmutter, 1967). The architecture and engineering publications matched the Dean’s tone and were quite enthusiastic when describing the campus. As earlier noted, this is no surprise because the campus

features their products, including concrete and brass piping. The *SIKA News* publication mentions the grandeur of Stone's design but doesn't miss an opportunity to discuss how their concrete products are both weather resistant, durable, and have the capability for intricate forms. The article is quite direct in stating, "Campus masterpiece sets concrete standard" (Campus Masterpiece, 1965). *Architecture and Engineering News* also praises the architect's expertise while promoting the benefits of their copper tubing (Huge, New State U. Campus, 1967). The Steel Plate Fabricators Association Inc. awarded the "Steel Tank of the Year Award" to the water tower that stands 251 feet high and holds 320,000 gallons of water, at the center of the UAlbany campus (Albany State Water Tower, 1968). From a purely architectural standpoint the campus is received quite positively and considered a marvel piece of architecture. As anticipated, architectural publications were very receptive to Stone's design because he was a notable figure in the field. Those in the field appreciated his work for the superb qualities of the design alone, and only later when the campus was inhabited did structural issues and visual preferences began to be brought up.

Many publications both from local and state newspapers were much more subtle in their praise or actually neutral in reporting on the design and construction of the campus. There are numerous articles that merely state the facts and figures of the creation of the UAlbany campus and include coverage on the improvements to the SUNY system as a whole. In 1965, *Newsweek* put out an article that discussed the potential for greatness in the UAlbany campus, but points out the impatience and frustration with the ongoing construction. The article consists mostly of college

enrollment statistics and politically correct statements from current university presidents (In Search of Identity, 1965). Many other national and local publications are composed very similarly to the *Newsweek* article, which is an example of Agenda setting in the media. Agenda setting is the theory that what the media chooses to cover and how they cover it, sets the agenda for what people should think and care about. Agenda setting involves the idea of framing, which explains how people tend to perceive information and news in the way it is presented by the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). So in this case, national publications like *Newsweek* took a relatively neutral and informative approach to covering the construction of the University at Albany campus, therefore the public and most other publications would similarly be in support of construction, but aware of its potential downfalls. Publications like the *Long Island Star Journal*, *Time Magazine*, *The Knickerbocker News*, and *Times Union* all include articles over the years that are fairly neutral when describing the campus. Because there was coverage about the campus in both local and national press, the public is both aware of the topic and also views it as important.

On the other hand, there are quite a few examples of both strong criticism and enthusiastic praise in a variety of publications. The University at Albany yearbooks are a source of unforgiving and truthful statements from the student body that are a first hand accounts of the reception of the campus by its first inhabitants. The 1965 UAlbany Yearbook begins with a paragraph that states, “Albany reflects contrast and change. Within the city there are many types of architecture – Gothic, Modern, hideous, beautiful”. As the students settle in on the

incomplete campus it seems they are both overwhelmed by the size and scope but also hopeful for the future. They even joke about the “biggest flower pots in the state”. Which are still present on the campus today, I might add. “No one really knows where the new campus is going. It is modern, strange, and perhaps a bit dehumanizing” one paragraph reads. Despite their initial perceptions, the yearbook reminds us, “The University is useful to us. We should never forget this” (Torch, 1965). The 1966 Yearbook is similar in tone and blunt style. One paragraph states, “Isolated, tyrannized by the disorder of construction, and stripped bare by the harshness of its design, the New Campus provided both panoramas of genuine beauty and scenes of naked desolation...it’s size and scope frequently seemed to dominate both its inhabitants and purpose”. It is no surprise that the students struggled to adjust the quite large and uniquely modern design. The students explain, “Life on the New Campus could be challenging, if somewhat unreal” (Torch, 1966). The most critical commentary is found in the 1967 Yearbook. The book begins with the statement, “It is a brave new world indeed that banishes cars from its midst, but even braver are those who walk incredible distances across the bleak, Fellini landscape every day”. They also explicitly state, “In the winter, it is torture”. The yearbook includes a photograph of a bit of graffiti on a column that reads, “Let’s put Christ on the New Campus...He can suffer with us”. A bit dramatic but nonetheless very revealing to the thoughts of students who interacted with the campus on a daily basis. Nevertheless, an acceptance is inevitably reached, “the campus itself becomes less of a dream or a nightmare and more of a fact” (Torch, 1967). Although coverage in the yearbooks consists of opinion pieces, their

observations should not be dismissed. It is both enlightening and somewhat comforting to read what students felt about the campus almost fifty years ago, in part because their statements still hold value today.

The most significant example of criticism is found in an article from *The National* that was printed in 1966, even before the campus was completely finished. The author, Ervin Galantay, was an associate professor of architecture at Columbia University and consulted in urban design projects. The opinion piece mockingly states, “Mr. Stone, according to Reader’s Digest, is the greatest of our living architects. The Albany campus is perhaps his masterpiece”. He also mentions that the “relentless repetition of elements cut costs and time in comparison with the chore of inventing” and compares the vast parking lots to a dreary shopping center and the overall design to a Miami Beach hotel. As if this weren’t enough he writes, “This raises a question that must be asked even if it hurts: since the campus projects such a self-conscious image, is it a desirable one for American higher education? The plan does not allow for variety and choice; it is hostile to imagination and invites conformity of thought and behavior” (Galantay, 1966). Clearly he is not fond of Edward Durell Stone’s handiwork. In specific response to Galantay, a UAlbany art professor, Edward Cowley, wrote an article expressing his thoughts on the matter in *The Knickerbocker News*. He defends the compact campus that Stone creatively designed and praises the isolation of the automobile. He also states, “The gracefully arching columns are modern (and alike) but they do permit an ever-changing pattern of sun and shadow, one vital architectural feature that has been unfortunately drained from most of the work of this century” (Cowley, 1966, July).

He is evidently appreciative of Stone's design and appalled by the aforementioned article. In similar fashion, the *Times Union* printed another article by Cowley, titled "An Artist Looks at Albany's New University". He explains that although the scale of the campus is quite extreme and prone to criticism he claims, "One essential requirement of any art form is that it must unsettle the viewer. He must pause to reflect, he must be aware. The new campus does this to everyone. Some are disturbed by what they see, but it should be recognized that there are people who resist anything new" (Cowley, 1966, December). He also emphasizes the beautiful landscaping and how the quadrangle design highlights the "historic and cultural contributions" of both the library and the performing arts center. These articles reflect the contrasting opinions of the media as well as the people who interact with the campus on a daily basis. It is also very telling that an urban designer and artist differ in their opinions, showing that those in the field of architecture are not in favor of all projects. Some students and professors have grown to love its grand scale and formal design and others love to hate it. At the end of the day, it's all a matter of opinion. Stone may have foreseen the controversy in his design because in 1966 he defensively wrote, "The educated man knows the best of the past, and knows that he should not be premature in judging the work of the present" (Stone, 1966, p. 8).

Another significant theme in media coverage throughout the years is the idea of evolution and expansion in the UAlbany campus. Like I mentioned earlier, Stone himself was aware of the potential for expansion and actually included planned for it in his design. Over the years as expansions projects were actually carried out,

every firm involved was aware of the architecture of the original campus and made sure the new structures would complement Stone's original design. In 1996, the first major addition to campus was the \$22 million science and technology laboratory and library was initiated. The architecture firm that designed it, RGA Architects of New York City, was actually the successor firm to the one Edward Durell Stone was associated with when he designed the original campus. The plans included, "a three story atrium and skylight and will be designed to match in color and design the precast concrete paneling that encompasses the rest of the campus" (Abbey, 1996). The University Hall that was completed in 2006 was designed in a similar fashion. Robert Siegel, of the Gwathmey-Siegel Architects firm, explained, "part of the plan was to make the building 'a sculpture' and a counterpoint to Edward Durell Stone's unique architectural design of the main campus...the uniform, serpentine glass curtain wall and the curved metal clad entry piece establish these contrasts and heighten the sculptural distinction of our concept" (Petry, 2006). The most recent expansion to the campus is Business Building that was designed by Perkins + Will Inc. and was completed in 2014. An article in Architectural Review clarifies that "the new design is conceived as both a tribute and corrective to Stone's vision". The firm created a building that was both highly functional for business students and includes elements of "accessibility, visibility, privacy, and sustainability" (Melvin, 2014, p. 80). It is rather remarkable that the original design of the campus was so influential to the creation of expansion projects and it reveals how significant Stone's design is over fifty years later.

The most recent media coverage of the UAlbany campus is mostly positive and is quite reminiscent of the many articles written through the years because it praises the good and condemns the bad. In 2014, an article titled “Stone’s UAlbany Design Draws Criticism, Praise 50 Years After Creation” in the *Daily Gazette*. The article explains that there are many structural problems including that, “they skimmed on the landscape and signage, and there are some bad interior configurations, but no significant work of architecture is without criticism”. The article also points out the positive aspects of the campus including, “its scale and sweep, the shifting patterns of light, the fountains, and the unified design” (Buell, 2014). An article published in 2009 acknowledges that the campus is a hub of student life and learning but also points out that the campus has at that time been voted among the nation’s most unattractive, “with many students and visitors finding it both cold and confusing”. The article further clarifies, “Some of what’s unattractive about the campus can be blamed, at least in part, on state decisions to cut costs in ways that undercut Stone’s designs” (Churchill, 2012), including domes that were never built and gardens that are instead used for parking. Although the article is fairly critical, the recent publication takes the blame off Stone himself and places it on the university. Many articles printed since the 1990’s are quite defensive of Stone and his unique design and claim that both budget cuts and neglect from the university itself are responsible for the less than ideal aspects of the campus. After a few decades harsh criticism becomes a bit milder, it seems. In 2007, *UAlbany Magazine* published an article titled “UAlbany’s Uptown Campus A Work of Art: New Generations of Admirers discover the beauty and genius in Edward Durell Stone’s

Design". The article describes Stone's relationship with Rockefeller and cites interviews with Stone that were published in the 1960's that have been cited earlier. It also describes that the campus has both elements that are unique and traditional that have led to a controversial reception over the years. They also refer to his design in the statement, "The podium on which Stone clustered the academic buildings brought the disciplines together in a unified way, giving them all the same architecture and connecting them through stairways and walkways. Living and learning went hand in hand" (Petry, 2007, p. 19). A bit of the text is dedicated to "looking ahead and preserving the past" and mentions both the plans for revitalization and expansion in the coming years, with a very hopeful tone. Overall, recent coverage does not ignore the many criticisms about the campus structure, though they tend to focus on a more forgiving and positive tone when describing Stone's creation.

Conclusion

The University at Albany has had its fair share of media coverage throughout the past fifty years and will no doubt continue to be mentioned in the future. Its absolutely grand and unique design is both admired and disliked by architects to university students and everything in between. Despite its divided reception, it is undeniable how significant its construction and evolution have been. The campus was meant to be a figurehead for the improved reputation of SUNY education, and we now live in a world where state schools hold their own in competition with private schools, just as Rockefeller had hoped. The coverage on campus shows how

publications can be quite favorable and forgiving toward new and controversial projects, despite their controversial reception by the public. Research also shows evidence of agenda setting and the idea that media coverage followed steady patterns that were frequently found in the press. Both national, local, and student press covered the campus in their media, and set the agenda for discussion about the campus. It is also quite significant that many additions and renovations to the campus were completed with the original campus in mind, making it clear how exceptional Edward Durell Stone's design was. Whether you have come to admire the grandeur of the campus or are bitter about the exaggerated use of concrete, you cannot deny the immense consideration and planning that went into the creation of the distinctive campus.

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