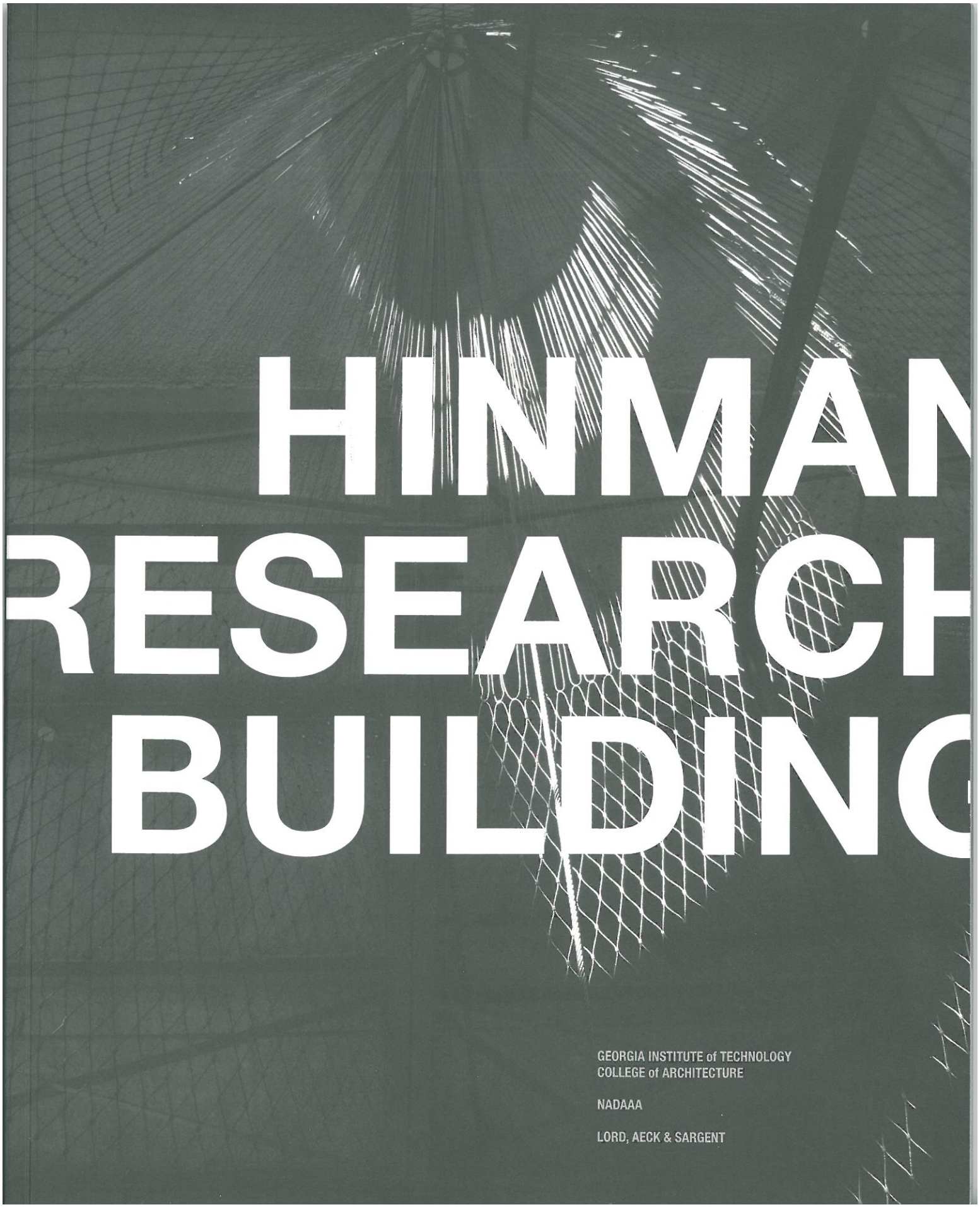
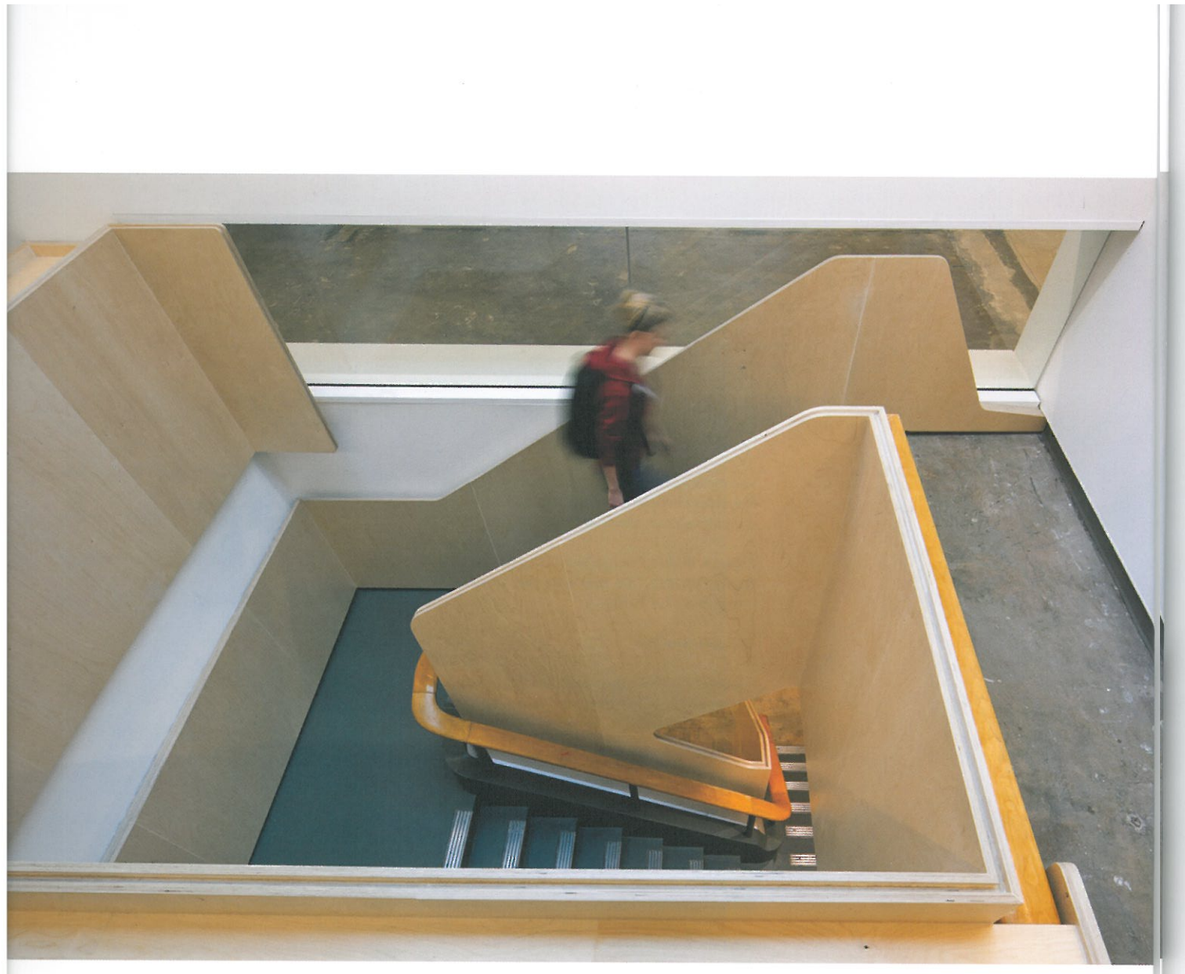


HINMAN RESEARCH BUILDING

GEORGIA INSTITUTE of TECHNOLOGY
COLLEGE of ARCHITECTURE

NADAAA

LORD, AECK & SARGENT



The Hinman Studio

Introduction by Alan Balfour
Dean, Georgia Tech College of Architecture

In a sense it was always a kind of studio. The commission to a very young Paul M. Heffernan, just returned from Europe, was to create a laboratory for the fabrication and testing of the products of engineering research. This was a public project supporting engineering research in the public interest—anything from power generation to military hardware. It was named the Georgia Tech Engineering Experiment Station (EES), and it would be the first of its kind in the South. It would have been seen as a heroic task in difficult times, with the nation, and particularly the South, emerging very slowly from the Great Depression. It was funded in part by the Public Works Administration, one of agencies driving the "three Rs"—relief, recovery, and reform—in the New Deal. The young architect must have seen his task as requiring imagination beyond the practical. He had to create a vessel that in some way would symbolize an energetic view of the promise of industry. And he would do so with all the memories still fresh in his mind of his travels through Europe.

Heffernan, called simply P. M., was a graduate of Iowa State and Harvard, and was named the twenty-eighth winner of the Paris Prize in 1935. This took him to Paris from 1935 to 1938 and to studies at the Beaux Arts. He would have attended the Exposition dedicated to Art and Technology in Modern Life held in Paris in 1937 ("modern life" defined much more by style than by politics). He would certainly have been aware of the fashionable architects

Expert and Tournon, both possibly his teachers at the school, and the work of August Perret would have offered him a satisfying and refined veneer of the modern to copy. Yet judging from his subsequent work, I believe that in France he would have most valued the imagination of Jacques Carlu, whose modernism was freer than Perret yet still suffering from bourgeois constraint.

But it would be in Germany, albeit in a culture profoundly conflicted, where he likely experienced the liberating power of the Modern. He would have tried to be in Berlin for the Olympics in 1936, and while in the city, would certainly have pursued as much of the new architecture as possible. Gropius would have been someone of great interest. Harvard was courting this former head of the Bauhaus, though he did not arrive in Cambridge until 1937—well after P. M.. Gropius had only recently completed his vast project for Seimens Electric to house their workers, and it would have astonished any American in its arrogant confidence. But it is the work of Eric Mendelsohn that I believe would have most pleased and satisfied him. I can see P. M. visiting Mendelsohn's spectacular display of urban theater on Lehniner Platz, with its cinemas, cabaret, hotels, and apartment housing, and being confronted by the realization that nowhere in the United States was the promise of the Modern in the future so clearly displayed. I think this memory and this experience is softly present in the form of the Engineering Experiment Station, which was renamed the Hinman Research Building in 1948.

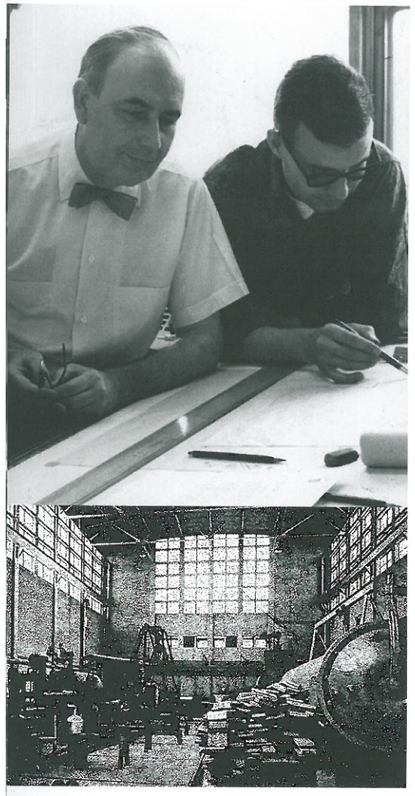
Heffernan was designing a new stage for a new enterprise. Georgia Tech's experiments in engineering and its great central hall would give rise to exceptional discoveries in the first decade. Here was assembled and tested the auto-gyro, the short-winged aircraft that foreshadowed the helicopter; and was conducted fundamental research for the Navy on radar, and much else in defense electronics that was so secret that the widows overlooking the shop floor were blocked up. (One of the joys of the restoration is to have let the light back into the building.) These were highly creative explorations at the edges of new science pursued often with as much wit as rigor. One professor noticed that certain radio frequencies transmitted inside a box would heat food. "The only things the EES would give him to cook were sweet potatoes and peanuts," said one of his colleagues. He remembered EES personnel being asked to periodically "taste the sweet potatoes to see if they were done." No one saw any commercial value in the idea. From its inception, this has been a place of invention and curiosity.

There is past here that the future must live up to, and in measuring the power of this new Hinman studio it is salutary to reflect back on the settings that have encouraged creativity. These are by necessity personal reflections. The studios in Edinburgh where I began to study architecture were typical painting studios from the late nineteenth century—regimented desks beneath high north-facing windows. I arrived in Princeton during the first year of a new building for the school of architecture. It had the qualities of the mid-twentieth century, large unenclosed spaces, low ceiling, corporate in mood, de-figured and anonymous in marked contrast to the monumental and decorative visions of Kahn, Graves, and even Eisenman.

I have no clear memory of the studios at MIT where I taught briefly. They were in keeping with the dull grandeur of the buildings but I do recall that a group of then young faculty had somehow got into the space above the dome of Barton Hall and created squatter studio formed in the dark out of an assortment of panels and two by fours. This suggested the presence of a radical deconstructing agenda in the design culture of MIT, and it was memorable.

I went from MIT to Georgia Tech and after twelve years left Tech for Rice in Houston and the recently completed extensions to their school of architecture by James Stirling. I increasingly take the view that only in use can one judge the strength and character of architecture. And in use Stirling's awkward planning and mannerist details survive in my memory as a distracting, trivializing architecture. I then went to London and the Architectural Association (AA) and that row of houses little changed from their construction in the 1770s. In performance it was an upstairs-downstairs kind of experience, and I was master of the house with the students as welcome guests on the piano nobile. This was in effect one large bar where all the teaching was done. And if the students were the guests, the faculty or unit masters behaved like downtrodden staff—only a few had offices and they would always be scrounging around for somewhere to teach. The heart of the AA experience was in the continual parade of widely varied, often brilliant lectures and an exhibition program, both of which consciously sought to challenge and drive imaginations.

In 2008 I returned to Georgia Tech and to a major work of Paul Heffernan, his design for the School of Architecture, a building from 1951 and the first modern purpose-made building for the study of architecture in the nation. Lost to the imagination for a while, it is now under construction. In the process it was rediscovered as a precise and elegant assembly of spaces, each distinctly framing all the experiences that support the education of the architect. When built the studios were on four floors of a north-facing wing, with light streaming in from both sides, each floor as it rises subtly different. The proposition was that students would progress floor by floor from year to year, starting with the first year not only level with the ground but also surrounded by workshops and industrial de-



sign students. (The Bauhaus was not just a distant influence but bodily present in the character of Hin Bredendieck, who had run the workshops in Weimar and had joined Mohly Nagy to establish Chicago Bauhaus and then to Georgia Tech as the director of the very new program in industrial design.) Sophomores were closest to the lecture hall; juniors to the library, exhibition, and jury rooms; and the fourth- and fifth-year students shared a grand atelier on the top floor.

The fifth-year group worked on their theses in a privileged gallery overlooking the studio, giving the admiring fourth year a sense of what awaited them and ready and willing to be called on to help with the final presentation. And every Friday afternoon all would repair to their own private roof terrace and drink beer until the sun went down. Those were the days. Humor aside, P. M. gave Georgia Tech a building that remains among the most thoughtful and creative settings for the study of architecture. Graduates from these years still remember fondly the creative and physical experience of ascending through stages to enlightenment. And our task is to provide in the Hinman building a creative experience unequaled in anywhere and one that our students will remember and value.

This newly reformed space is a powerful theater for the imagination, able to inspire not only the activities of the College, but also those of the Institute. As a studio space it is unequaled in any school of architecture in the nation. Imagine the kinds of activities it will encourage:

- full-scale fabrication of building structures and surfaces;
- full-scale modeling of spaces sufficient to enter, test, and experience;
- experiments with sound and light in space and surface—which will require the addition of theatrical lighting;
- experiments with blending the virtual and the real in the experience of space;
- large-scale multimedia experiments combining fabricated elements with projection, making full use of the extensive wall surfaces; and
- multimedia performances bringing together computer modeling and simulation from across the Institute.

Beyond performance and politics, this is a unique setting to renew the power of architecture in a continual exploration of spatial experience. Imagine the space evolving into a combination of Cirque du Soliel and the rehearsal room. If we are designing the sets for the plays of life why should we not explore how the actors respond to the stage? Imagine arranging the play and the players before forming the stage, the architecture. Poets muse on the relationship between architecture and music. Here we will experience their fusion.

It is fortunate that circumstance joined the vision of Paul Heffernan with the knowledge and imaginations Jack Pyburn of Lord Aeck & Sargent and Nader Tehrani of Office dA and NADAAA, along with their teams, to create a space that promises so much to the students and faculty. It has already enlarged our vision with all of its possibilities.