

What would you do with 29 French architects?

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You may have noticed something strange last week. For the entire afternoon, scattered around the entire campus, there were 29 (count ‘em 29) French Architects wandering about, complete with cameras, accents, and many, many comments.

The group, members of an official French organization, “Architecture et Construction,” were the guests of SMU President Donald Walker, and Mr. Foster Jacobs, director of Plant and Planning. The group visited the US under the guidance of Bernard J. Barraque, an employee of the “Bureau d’Etudes et de Realizations Urbanis” (Bureau of Study and Urban Realization) of France. The theme of the New York, Boston and Southern New England tour was Architecture, Urban Design and Urban Environment.

Although the day got off to a rather slow start, the bus was 1 and 1/2 hours late due to misdirection, the situation was soon remedied by lunch, good wine, toast and story swapping, and attempts at conquering the language barrier.

Sister Madeline Vaillot was the savior of the SMU delegation as her flawless native language bailed us out of many tough situations.

The first place we showed the architects was the Campus Center. Releasing all of them at about 2:30, created quite a row. As students gazed in disbelief, shouts of “Allons-y-magnifique-allons-y” rang out. I think we left 2 or 3 still gazing at the student offices on the second floor.

In the auditorium we lost Jean-Louis to the grand piano where he stayed and played all afternoon. The architects though, although disappointed at the sight lines offered by the stage, were impressed by the lecture halls which expand into the auditorium balcony. Did you know that the colors in the auditorium are, “very nice, very French.”

Leaving Jean-Louis to his piano, we proceeded through the Group 1 building. As our numbers slowly dwindled, one to the sprinkler system, one to the cut of the carpet, one to the stairwells, Dan Aldrich, assistant to the President remarked that the Continuing Education enrollment had just increased from 2007 to 2012.

Certain members of the delegation described Group 1 as “tres lyrique, tres generouse” (very flowing and magnificent). Monsieur Barraque attempted to put it all together, (in English, thank God!). “Here at SMU, you get several things together; technical prowess, artistic beauty, and practicality. The students here utilize the building; they are not intimidated by its majesty. The structure is monumental; this is not a compliment, merely a statement of fact.”

In the Group 2 building we lost more members of our crew to the Engineering labs and television studios. One woman seemed intimidated by it all as she characterized it as, “puissante, lourde et trop forte,” (powerful, heavy and too loud). Others commented that the AV labs were more technically advanced than TV studios in France.

One of the areas of continuing amazement to the Frenchmen was the student reaction. I saw at least 15 or 20 students respond to their questioning all very enthusiastic. Curriculum, contract learning and impressions of the administration, as well as minority representation were the questions most often asked.

In the amphitheatre, the reactions flowed. “Tres bien fait execution extraordinaire” Very well done, extraordinary). The architects even noticed things we probably take for granted, the green grass and red curtains of the Campus Center, and the Concert Series sticker on the window.

One man however was not pleased. He stated, “If I had to live in this concrete for five I’d go crazy. I find the architecture imposing. There are perfect locations for gun battlements here. Especially the Administration Building. Its front contains the only straight, uncut line. It is most clearly a fascist expression of power and intimidation over students.”

As we all solemnly shook hands, kissed cheeks or murmured our au revoirs, Monsieur Barraque took me aside and said; “I’m sorry we could not give you better answers, but in France they hide concrete. Here it is so massive, blatant and magnificent that we are shocked by it. We are impressed by the adaptability of American students who refuse to be intimidated by the structure, but instead find it workable. Now could you please show me the auditorium, Jean-Louis is still there.” Au revoir, et merci beaucoup.