

# SITUATING RAMSEY AND SLEEPER: A GENEALOGY OF ARCHITECTURAL GRAPHIC STANDARDS

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After almost seventy-five years of continuous publication, *Architectural Graphic Standards* has become such a fixture of architectural practice that we rarely think of it in any but the most transparent of terms. It is an authoritative aid for practitioners, a compendium of planning standards, optimum dimensions, and normative construction details. Its authority is that of our collective experience, an index of the profession's accumulated knowledge of building. In a real sense, however, *Architectural Graphic Standards* is simply taken for granted. It is there when we need it, and its significance is its utility, its assumptions rarely questioned.

The tendency of our tools to fade into the background of everyday experience signals their adequacy to the tasks at hand and mirrors our human nature to become comfortable with what works. Only when the familiar becomes strange to us again—for instance, when a tool breaks or becomes outmoded—do we really appreciate how much we have come to depend on it and how centrally it has become ingrained in our daily routines? The process of revising a venerable text like *Architectural Graphic Standards* elicits just this sort of recognition, where we are forced to look at the book anew, to think about the changes that have precipitated previous revisions, and thus, to reflect on the changing nature of practice itself.

This reflective attitude was surely present in the foreword to the third edition of *Architectural Graphic Standards* in 1941, when Frederick L. Ackerman ruminated on “how much a book of this kind, because it contributes to the distribution of knowledge of new materials and new techniques, affects the rate at which our environment grows old and becomes obsolete.” As an intimate witness to the birth of *Architectural Graphic Standards*, Ackerman was well positioned to critically reflect on the book's broader impact. The authors, Charles George Ramsey and Harold Reeve Sleeper, who had been employees and then associates in Ackerman's office, applied their skills and entrepreneurial spirit to the challenges of Depression-era practice. In so doing, they devised a tool that was particularly well suited to the needs of a profession increasingly challenged by processes of cultural and technological modernization. Ackerman recognized even then that the character of *Architectural Graphic Standards* was more than a neutral instrument of practice; he recognized the capacity of our tools to change us, to be agents in the transformation of practice itself. Architects have been using *Architectural Graphic Standards* for the better part of a century, but the book has been acting on us as well, even as it has been revised, brought up-to-date, and tailored to the new tasks at hand.

Beginning with the sixth edition published in 1970, the American Institute of Architects assumed corporate authorship for *Architectural Graphic Standards*,

yet, the names of Ramsey and Sleeper are still attached to it and ring synonymous with the book long after their participation as active authors ceased. As the book undergoes another major editorial transformation in this 11th edition, it is appropriate to reflect on the significance of Ramsey and Sleeper's contributions to architectural practice and the continuing relevance of their original vision. But if *Architectural Graphic Standards* is not simply an instrument of practice but rather has participated in the formation of the practice of which it is now a part, how can we weigh its significance today, even as we still reach for it on the shelf? One way may be to set it in its historical context, to begin with Ramsey and Sleeper themselves, two architects from very different backgrounds who over their careers witnessed and participated in epochal revisions in architectural practice. Their story is in many ways the story of the profession itself, a story for which their book provides an ever-ready index.

## WHO WERE RAMSEY AND SLEEPER?

Forever joined as their names now are in the pantheon of American architectural practice, Charles George Ramsey (1884–1963) and Harold Reeve Sleeper (1893–1960) entered the profession from two very different worlds (Figures 1 and 2). Ramsey, an immigrant draftsman from Ireland, and Sleeper, a socially-connected architect with an Ivy League education, became acquainted in the New York office of Trowbridge & Ackerman. Ramsey's craft as a draftsman and Sleeper's early interest in specifications provided them with the sort of complementary skills in the drafting room that paved the way for their later professional and publishing collaborations.

Ramsey was born and educated in Dublin, Ireland. He trained there as a draftsman at the Architectural Association of Ireland, a loose association of draftsmen that promoted the study of architecture through regular lectures,

CHARLES GEORGE RAMSEY  
FIGURE 1



HAROLD REEVE SLEEPER  
FIGURE 2





office of Starrett & Van Vleck, a firm especially known for its department store designs. Sleeper gave two years of military service in World War I as part of a camouflage unit in France, and upon his return to the United States, he gained a drafting position in the office of Trowbridge & Ackerman in 1919 where he first came into the acquaintance of Charles Ramsey.

The climate of Trowbridge and Ackerman's office, and later that of Frederick L. Ackerman, with whom Ramsey and Sleeper eventually became associated, was a fertile setting for the hatching of *Architectural Graphic Standards*. The Cornell connections ran particularly strong in the office. Both Ackerman and Trowbridge were Cornell alumni, and each had supplemented their university education with travel and study in Europe. Alexander Buel Trowbridge, a native of Detroit, was appointed dean of Cornell's architecture program before the age of 30 and served in that position during the time Ackerman was a student there. Following his deanship, Trowbridge worked for a time in the office of Albert Kahn back in Detroit before forming a partnership with Ackerman in 1906. The two continued as partners until 1920, when Trowbridge moved on to Washington where he was involved in projects such as the Folger Shakespeare Library and the National Cathedral. Sleeper's Cornell affiliation and Ramsey's previous employ by another Cornell alumnus contributed no doubt to a climate of kinship in the office as well as to the firm's important Cornell commissions.

Following Trowbridge's departure, Ackerman's socially and politically conscious principles imbued the firm with what Sleeper described as "an atmosphere in which architecture was practiced as a social service."<sup>i</sup> As a disciple of economist and social theorist Thorstein Veblen, who most famously coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption," Ackerman was actively engaged in the intellectual challenges and debates of his time. He held strong views and wrote prolifically about the social inequities of capitalism and advocated a role for architecture, and in particular, for housing, in raising the quality of life of the working class. Ackerman was especially pessimistic about the capacity of market forces to provide adequate housing to those who needed it most, and during the years of World War I, he became a strong advocate for publicly financed housing. His participation as a founding member of the Regional Planning Association of America, beginning in the 1920s, and his involvement with Clarence Stein and Henry Wright on significant developments such as Sunnyside Gardens and Radburn, allowed him to act on these beliefs as he and his office associates both implemented revolutionary planning guidelines and helped to define new standards of function and use.

Ramsey and Sleeper were thus immersed in an office culture in which architects engaged not only in designing buildings but also in designing new standards of design.

Architects in the early decades of the 20th century, especially in the years following World War I, struggled with the challenges of practice that accompanied the return to peacetime production. New products, as well as new standards, were revolutionizing the construction industry and transforming social relations in homes and workplaces alike. Ackerman grasped the potential for architects to influence the direction of these developments in the private as well as the public sector, especially in the realm of standardization of construction components. Ackerman was ambivalent, however, about the costs and benefits of machine production. While he acknowledged its capacity to raise levels of quality and availability, he was also concerned about the negative impacts on machine workers and the deadening of human creativity that standardization implied.<sup>ii</sup> It was with these reservations that his office undertook the project of designing a whole line of standardized interior and exterior woodwork and its accompanying product catalog for the Curtis Companies in 1920. Here the genealogy of *Architectural Graphic Standards* becomes particularly intriguing.

#### ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS AND GRAPHIC STANDARDS

The Curtis Companies, established from a small sash-and-door mill in Clinton, Iowa in 1866 had grown by 1920 to a corporation of 10 separate manufacturing ventures in 10 cities of the Midwest. The return of the economy to peacetime production following World War I provided the company an impetus for revamping its product line and catalog. By combining Ackerman's architectural insights about housing with the cost savings of standardization and efficient distribution of mass-produced millwork components, the company hoped to realize its avowed "ambition to bring beautiful homes within the reach of all." The interior and exterior woodwork catalog that Ackerman's firm produced was more than a simple index to an inventory; it was also a primer on modern domesticity.<sup>iii</sup>

Texts addressed to the homeowner, and often more specifically, to the housewife, accompanied a portfolio of scenographic details of the "permanent furnishings" of each of four regionally inflected standard house designs. For example, the catalog advised, "The design of the entrance is the index to the architecture of the house itself. Isn't it the first thing on which your attention is focused when you see a beautiful home? The well-designed entrance