Not Quincy Market, Not D/R

Before his urban work brought renown, Ben Thompson found fame on school campuses.

It started with a cluster of dormitories around a pond on the campus of Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Within a few years, Ben Thompson, then a principal at The Architects Collaborative (TAC), was perhaps the foremost practitioner of a style that branded progressive New England educational institutions as much as the more familiar Georgian style had half a century before.

TAC had almost a decade of public-school projects behind it, as well as Harkness Commons at Harvard, when Thompson took on the Andover commission in 1956. The Rabbit Pond dormitories drew upon Andover’s brick tradition but were purposefully house-like, their domestic scale and informal siting on a wooded slope a marked contrast to the three-story Neo-Georgian residence halls of the 1920s set into quadrangles with the deliberation of chess pieces on a board.

Shortly after receiving the Andover commission, Thompson embarked on the “Academic Quadrangle” (now Mandel Quad), a cluster of classroom buildings for the new Brandeis University campus, for which he developed an architectural vocabulary that he refined in subsequent projects at Andover and Amherst College: poured-in-place, bush-hammered concrete framing and waffle-slab construction with infill panels of Flemish-bond waterstruck brick and glass — symmetrical elements combined in asymmetrical compositions of almost classical proportion. It was a language that shared roots with New England’s earliest academic buildings — much as Chaucerian and Modern English are distinct variants of a common tongue.

This was a period of enormous creative energy in Thompson’s career, with a flurry of work that foreshadowed ideas that would be developed in his later work. Modern additions and renovations were fearlessly grafted onto historic structures, most famously at Boylston Hall in Harvard Yard, but also at Andover’s library and chapel. Glass walls at libraries and classrooms exposed the process of education, implicitly ennobling teachers and students — people — over buildings and institutions. Buildings embraced their sites, unlike the chess pieces of the earlier era, encouraging social encounters and forming outdoor spaces that students inhabited as easily as their dorm rooms. Color and natural materials, including butcher-block wood furniture designed by Thompson, underscored the human scale of the structures, enlivening centuries-old traditions of austerity.

By the mid-1960s and with the establishment of his own firm, Thompson’s academic style had evolved from the deceptively light classicism of column-and-slab construction to a heavier expression of the same materials palette using bearing-wall construction. The buildings of this era, which historian Dennis DeWitt has called Thompson’s Rationalist period, include the Music Building at Amherst, Gutman Library and Pound Hall at Harvard, and dormitories at Colby College. Marked by even greater informality but also a more rugged urbanity, they presage the transition to urban projects that later dominated the firm’s portfolio.

Thompson’s academic work continued into the 1980s, with projects for New York University School of Law and the Soldier’s Field Park student housing at Harvard, adjacent to the business school. By then, most academic institutions had experienced almost two decades of construction, and it was hard to imagine the effect of Thompson’s early work in the context of New England’s buttoned-up school campuses. It would be wrong to call that effect the shock of the new: Thompson’s buildings were not provocative or contentious. But they were fresh and sophisticated. These were the buildings that introduced a whole cohort of young Americans to Modernism.

— Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA
Above, left: Olin-Sang American Civilization Center, Academic Quadrangle (Mandel Quad), Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, 1957–60. The Academic Quadrangle was the first of several Thompson projects for the new campus, which also featured work by Eero Saarinen, Max Abramovitz, and Hugh Stubbins. The Shiffman Humanities Center is visible in the background.

Right and above, right: Music Building, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, 1964–68. A transitional work featuring mastery of materials and detail, the Music Building applies the lightness of Andover’s Evans Hall to a hybrid structure with extensive use of bearing walls.

Ben Thompson shared design credit for his early academic work with many talented professionals. Perhaps most noteworthy were two associates: Thomas Green was part of his TAC studio before joining him at Benjamin Thompson & Associates (BTA) and later became a principal of BTA; Joseph Maybank, also a TAC alum, left BTA with Henry Reeder, Colin Smith, and Arthur Cohen to form Architectural Resources Cambridge (ARC) in 1969. The concrete structures that were key to the aesthetic of the early work also depended on the more technical talents of two other individuals who were part of the local design community: William LeMessurier, the noted structural engineer, and Herman Protze, an internationally recognized expert on concrete.
Above: Dormitories, Colby College, Waterville, Maine, 1966–68. Housing 200 students, the Colby project was recognized by an AIA National Honor Award. White-painted brick bearing walls break the campus red-brick tradition, softened by the white-birch landscape and, in the interiors, by extensive use of bright colors, supergraphics, wood-slat ceilings, D/R butcher-block furniture, and folk-art portraits and artifacts from the college collections.