

JOHN CARL WARNECKE: HIS ARCHITECTURAL CAREER AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Paul V. Turner

April 2019; revised 20 Nov. 2019

John Carl Warnecke (1919-2010), a major American architect of the modern period, is less well known than he deserves to be. For an architect whose firm at one time had the largest volume of construction in the United States, and who was a proponent of controversial new ideas — especially about contextual design and architectural preservation — Warnecke's relative neglect in recent years is surprising. It is probably due in part to the fact that Warnecke's work does not have a uniform or easily-definable style, in contrast to architects of his period such as Louis Kahn, Philip Johnson, Eero Saarinen, Edward Durrell Stone, I. M. Pei, or Paul Rudolph. This lack of a distinctive architectural "look" was in fact intentional on Warnecke's part — a result of his conviction that, as he put it, "each new building requires the designer to come up with a design solution that is unique for [its] time and place."¹ This was one of several principles developed by Warnecke that were opposed to the conventional architectural thinking of the time, but which in retrospect contribute to the significance of his career.

An account of Warnecke's work must acknowledge the role of another architect: his father, Carl I. Warnecke, in whose office John Carl began his career and with whom he collaborated at various times. The extensive archive of the combined careers of Carl I. and John

¹ John Carl Warnecke, "Camelot's Architect: Life, Love, and Modern Architecture, A Memoir," unpublished memoir, p. 71. Henceforth referred to in these notes as "Warnecke's memoir."

Carl Warnecke, preserved intact today by the Warnecke family, may be unique as the complete record of a roughly 100-year architectural practice of distinction. This archive is also remarkable in its documentation of every aspect of John Carl Warnecke's unusually diverse career, with fascinating episodes such as the architect's productive relationship with President John F. Kennedy and his family.

Carl I. Warnecke (1891-1971), raised in Oakland, California, worked as an office boy for a local architect, took night classes, then worked for the Exposition Company on plans for the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, and in 1912 assisted Arthur Brown, Jr., in producing the drawings for his entry in the San Francisco City Hall competition, which was won by Brown's firm.² In 1913 Warnecke went to Paris and passed the exams for entrance into the École des Beaux-Arts, joining the Atelier Gromort; but the outbreak of World War I forced him to return home. He went to work for the Oakland architect John J. Donovan, and assisted Bernard Maybeck in his design of the Palace of Fine Arts for the Panama Pacific Exposition. Carl Warnecke was thus trained in the Beaux-Arts tradition of design, which involved the execution of detailed drawings of classical architecture (a number of his skillful Beaux-Arts drawings survive in the Warnecke archive). His son, John Carl, later spoke of his familiarity with this tradition, from his early training with his father, and how this shaped his own architectural character: "I recognize how different I was from other noted architects. From the start, I could

² Information from John Carl Warnecke, "A History of the Firm" (unpublished ms, 1958); "Profile: John Carl Warnecke," *Pacific Architect & Builder*, Jan. 1959; Jeffrey T. Tilman, *Arthur Brown, Jr., Progressive Classicist* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 64).

not ignore the beautiful Beaux-Arts architecture of my father and his contemporaries such as Arthur Brown, Jr."³

In 1917 Carl I. Warnecke entered into partnership with the Oakland architect Chester Miller, and the firm of Miller and Warnecke continued in operation until Miller's retirement in 1951. In the 1920s the firm produced several prominent buildings in the East Bay, such as the Tudor-style Castlemont High School in Oakland. During the Depression years of the 1930s, with greatly reduced construction in the country, Miller and Warnecke was one of the few East-Bay architectural firms that remained open; in 1938 the Housing Authority of Oakland appointed Warnecke to a board of three architects who designed some of the first public housing projects on the West Coast; and additional commissions came to the firm in succeeding years.⁴ All of these aspects of the career of the senior Warnecke are documented in the Warnecke archive.

John Carl Warnecke, born in 1919, was trained in architecture by his father from an early age ("I was lucky to grow up under my father's drafting board").⁵ In the 1930s, three East Bay architects who had been forced to close their offices were able to use Miller and Warnecke's office space for the few commissions they received, and John Carl later recalled: "As a teenager I worked for all of them and for my father as an apprentice doing watercolor renderings and making models of their potential projects. In fact, the Great Depression offered a great opportunity and apprenticeship for me."⁶

³ Warnecke's memoir, p. 464.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

For college, however, John Carl decided not to go to an architecture school but to get a diverse, liberal-arts education, and he chose Stanford University — partly, he later said, because he received a football scholarship there. (His athletic success, as a member of an undefeated Stanford football team, ultimately proved helpful to his architectural career in unexpected ways, especially in the friendship he developed with John F. Kennedy.) He continued his training for an architectural career, partly with Stanford courses and also outside school, for example by working in the San Francisco office of Arthur Brown in the summer of 1940.⁷ On graduating from Stanford in 1941, Warnecke was deferred from military service due to a football injury, and he went to the Design School at Harvard (because, he said, it was the main center of modernism at that time, with Walter Gropius as its new dean). Due to the extensive training he already had, he received his architectural degree after only a year, and he returned to Oakland to work in his father's firm — especially on the extensive war-time housing projects in Richmond, next to the Kaiser ship yards. "This experience of building a booming city of 100,000 for war workers would become a major influence on me."⁸

Warnecke was married in 1945, to Grace Cushing, of a prominent Marin County family, and they eventually had four children: John, Jr.; Rodger; Margo; and Fred. (Margo got an architecture degree and joined her father's firm, managing his New York office in the 1990s.) In 1946 Warnecke opened his own firm, in Oakland, and began receiving Bay-Area commissions either on his own or in collaboration with his father — commissions mainly for school buildings (such as the San Lorenzo High School of 1949) and libraries (notably the main Oakland Public

⁷ Ibid., p. 291.

⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

Library, of 1950, in a simplified cubic form that retained the classical spirit of Carl I. Warnecke's background).

In 1948, a controversy arose at Stanford University that led Warnecke to write a report in which he expressed ideas that were to shape his architectural thinking for the rest of his career. Following World War II, Stanford began construction of several new buildings, and the director of the planning office, Eldridge T. Spencer, favored modern design over the traditional Quadrangle structures of sandstone and red-tile roofs. Typical of the new buildings was a large dormitory, Stern Hall, an uncompromisingly modern structure of exposed concrete and flat roofs. Even before its construction was completed it triggered a barrage of opposition, especially from the school's alumni, who were shocked by the departure from Stanford's traditional architecture. Warnecke, as a Stanford alumnus who was now a Bay Area architect, was asked by several other alumni for his opinion on the issue. He took the matter seriously and in 1949 produced a lengthy report, entitled "Stanford's Architecture at the Crossroads."⁹ In it, he reviewed the controversy over Stern Hall and used the opportunity to formulate principles for designing new buildings in an historical setting such as Stanford's campus. He pointed out that the alumni opposed to the new, modern buildings were reacting emotionally, and that their attachment to the university — their "Stanford Spirit" — was based in part on their love of the school's distinctive architecture. In a section of his report titled "Should emotions have any bearing on the architecture of the University?," Warnecke argued that

⁹ John Carl Warnecke, "Stanford's Architecture at the Crossroads," 1949, unpublished manuscript; copy in the Stanford University Archives (SCM0129). An article about the Stern Hall controversy discusses Warnecke's report: Andrew Pearson, "Beyond Sandstone and Tile: Defining Stanford's Architectural Style," *Sandstone and Tile* (Stanford Historical Society quarterly), Spring 1990, pp. 1-11.

contemporary buildings must be functional and use up-to-date structural systems, but their design should take into account the appeal of the traditional character of their surroundings.

As he wrote,

How can emotions be divorced from the new buildings which must stand side by side with the symbols of the University? For good or ill, the architect must cope with them. He must find the happy combination of a functional building which will also incorporate the emotional qualities of the architectural styles of the existing buildings.¹⁰

Warnecke developed this idea in detail, arguing, for example, that the red-tile roofs of Stanford's traditional architecture, which were considered by most modern architects to be unnecessary and impractical, actually had advantages — even from a functional point of view — and that their emotional appeal was an additional advantage, which could not be ignored. He examined other aspects of Stanford's architecture in a similar way, and made a thoughtful case for balancing the functional needs of contemporary building with the positive qualities of an existing architectural environment or context.

Warnecke's report did not immediately change the approach of Stanford's planning office, but it did gradually have an effect — and it was no doubt a factor in Warnecke's selection, starting in the late 1950s, as the architect of several new buildings on the campus. For Warnecke himself, the writing of the report seems to have stimulated his formulation of a new philosophy of architectural design, which would later come to be called Contextualism — emphasizing sensitivity to the environmental and cultural conditions of each building, and rejecting the rigidity of modernism as it was generally practiced at the time.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

A somewhat different expression of this philosophy appeared in one of Warnecke's first buildings produced by his own firm: Mira Vista Elementary School in El Cerrito, constructed in 1951, by which time Warnecke had moved his office to San Francisco. Sited on a rocky and grassy hillside, oriented toward the Bay, this building was a response to its site and the local climate — composed of groups of classrooms stepping up the hill, unified by a continuous sawtooth-type roof of redwood shingles, sections of which had a "egg-crate" form that allowed sunlight to filter down into the classrooms. The design immediately attracted the attention of architects and educators. On its completion, the *Christian Science Monitor* devoted an article to the building, praising it for its "spectacular configuration" in relation to the site and the unpredictable weather conditions of the Bay Area.¹¹ And *Newsweek* magazine had an article on the school that described its innovative characteristics:

Increasingly, the trend in designing new public schools has been to make them as functional as possible. But John Carl Warnecke, 32-year-old architect of San Francisco, doesn't see why they shouldn't also be beautiful and centered around the child. Young Warnecke feels that his ideas are best illustrated by the Mira Vista Elementary School in El Cerrito near San Francisco. . . . By last week, visitors had flocked to see it from points as far away as Australia. The school is situated on the slope of the Oakland-Berkeley hills overlooking San Francisco Bay and seems literally to hug the side of the hill. Built on four levels, it has a continuous roof of redwood shakes which ties the whole structure together and provides covered walks. These are on the side away from the bay, so that winds and fog will not buffet or drench the children. To cut the glare of the afternoon sun on the bay side, attractive "eyebrows" of lattice work top the classrooms. Jutting from the rocky slope, the roof slants as though the wind had set its angle. . . .

Wallace Harrison, co-architect of Rockefeller Center and director of planning of the United Nations' World Capitol, has placed Mira Vista among the ten best buildings designed in the United States since the second world war.¹²

¹¹ *Christian Science Monitor*, ____ Dec. 1951; quoted in Warnecke's memoir, p. 72. [Find the article itself.]

¹² "School on a Hill," *Newsweek*, 18 February 1952.

At the same time, Warnecke received a very unusual commission: to design a large, streamlined, and luxurious \$250,000 trailer for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia (later King Saud), to be used to transport the prince and his family or harem through the desert.¹³ The commission had come by way of one of Warnecke's neighbors, who worked for the Bechtel Corporation, which was doing extensive work in Saudi Arabia. The design was the first of what would be many international projects for Warnecke.

Following construction of the Mira Vista school, Warnecke began receiving numerous commissions in Northern California — some for other educational buildings (such as an annex to the White Oaks Elementary School in San Carlos, of 1953, which won architectural awards and was praised in an *Architectural Forum* article for "beautifully proving how a fresh approach to an old problem can yield all kinds of rich results"¹⁴), but also commissions for other building types, such as banks, commercial and medical buildings, and religious structures. In 1955 *Architectural Record* had a cover story on Warnecke's just-constructed General Electric Microwave Laboratory in Palo Alto, and the following year the architect won a major competition for a group of student residence halls at U. C. Berkeley, which were constructed in the later 1950s.¹⁵

In 1956 the U. S. State Department awarded Warnecke with his most important commission up to this point, for a new U. S. Embassy building in Bangkok, Thailand. To prepare for designing it, Warnecke and one of his associates made an intensive study visit to Thailand — not only to compile the programmatic requirements for the project, but (as he described it in

¹³ Warnecke's memoir, p.66.

¹⁴ *Architectural Forum*, March 1954, pp. 20-26.

¹⁵ *Architectural Record*, Sept. 1955, pp. 206-09; *Architect & Engineer*, Sept. 1956.

an article on the design) "to meet with local architects, contractors, and artisans to learn the methods of local construction and study the conditions of the site and the climate; to study the historical and contemporary architecture of Thailand; [and] to study the people."¹⁶ Again employing Warnecke's innovative "contextual" concepts, the resulting design was very different from typical modern buildings of the period. An article in *Architectural Record* described it as follows.

The lacy white elegance of the design for the new Embassy at Bangkok blends with delightful ease the cultural traditions of two very different peoples — the Thais and the Americans — and yet achieves an identity of its own both as architecture and as symbol. In its subtle recollection of Thai religious architecture and in its more obvious reflection of local architectural detail — wide overhangs, balconies with their precast panels, marble floors, the *klong* [pool] which is the immediate site of the building, the columns on which the building is raised — the building imparts the feeling of serenity and peace so much associated with Far Eastern philosophies.¹⁷

The major modern architect Eero Saarinen, on seeing the design, wrote to Warnecke: "This is just a note to tell you that I was looking at your embassy in the last issue of the *Forum*, and I think it is very, very beautiful. Congratulations."¹⁸

The Bangkok embassy project was not executed (derailed by the coup in Thailand in 1957), but the general admiration for the design was a factor in the choice of Warnecke as architect of his next major project: the Hawaii State Capitol in Honolulu. As with the Thai embassy, Warnecke produced a design for Hawaii that was a response to the environmental, climatic, and cultural nature of its location. But the fact that it was also a modern design was an abrupt break with the American tradition of Classical-style state capitols. *Architectural*

¹⁶ John Carl Warnecke, "The United States Embassy in Bangkok; The Story of its Design," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, Nov. 1958.

¹⁷ *Architectural Record*, Oct. 1958, pp. 159-64.

¹⁸ Quoted in Warnecke's memoir, p. 75.

Forum, in publishing the design in 1961, emphasized this point, as well as the contextual components of the design:

The proposed capitol for Hawaii is the first major governmental building in the U.S. to be entrusted to a leading modern architect. The reason why state and federal governments have been so slow in commissioning anyone but a classicist is simple: while a classicist could always be relied upon to design a symbol (however hollow), none was sure that a modernist could produce anything but a functional administrative plant. When Hawaii's new capitol is built, such doubts should be put to rest. The architects of the new capitol, led by John Carl Warnecke, had to solve a series of complex functional problems; but, in addition, they created a symbol which reflects the tropical splendor of the island. . . .

The structure of the capitol is a ring of 24 concrete columns that rise to a height of almost 60 feet and recall the many trunks of the banyan tree in front. Most of these columns stand in a large reflecting pool that surrounds the open-air ground floor and cools the walls of the house and senate chambers. The symbolism is obvious, effective, and very handsome: a new and lovely state, in miniature, composed of many islands, surrounded by the Pacific, and fanned by ocean breezes.¹⁹

The construction of the Hawaii capitol was not completed until 1969, and in the meantime Warnecke's firm produced well over a hundred projects, which demonstrated in various ways Warnecke's principles of environmental and contextual design. An early example was a pair of structures on the Stanford University campus, for the bookstore and post office, in which Warnecke applied the principles he had formulated in his 1949 report on Stanford architecture. Using advanced pre-cast concrete construction techniques, the two linked buildings nevertheless echoed the arcaded forms of Stanford's original stone architecture, the Richardsonian Romanesque buildings of the Quad. This was pointed out in an article in *Architectural Record* in 1960, as the buildings were under construction:

In these new buildings for Stanford University, the design approach successfully combines a conscious recall of certain traditional elements of the earlier campus buildings and a strong expression of contemporary design, materials and construction methods. The long, flat-arched arcade, using the technical vocabulary of its own time,

¹⁹ "Capitol for the 50th state," *Architectural Forum*, June 1961, pp. 110-12.

ties together visually the two new buildings and subtly allies them with the old. The red tile roofs, the tan color of the concrete's stucco finish and its slightly roughened surface are a sensitive response to the overall context of the site, but they also satisfy the tradition of the Richardsonian buildings on the campus.²⁰

This issue of *Architectural Record* also featured another new project by Warnecke: a group of buildings for the Asilomar conference center in Pacific Grove, California. The original Asilomar buildings, designed thirty-to-forty years earlier by Julia Morgan, were stone and wood structures in an imaginative version of Arts and Crafts or Shingle-Style architecture — the largest collection of Morgan's buildings in one location. Unlike most architects of the 1950s, who would have produced completely "modern" structures, Warnecke adhered again to his contextual philosophy, designing the new buildings — housing units and a conference structure — in a manner which, although clearly contemporary, acknowledged and reflected Morgan's architecture, for example in the use of stone, shingle surfaces, and dramatic wooden roof structures. And they fit gracefully into the coastal landscape of the site. As the article in *Architectural Record* said,

Inherent in the design challenge of the new buildings at Asilomar . . . is the need for a sympathetic perception of the environmental relationships of the site. . . . The natural setting has the serene beauty for which the Monterey Peninsula is noted; the existing buildings, designed with a strong affinity for the place by the pioneering woman architect Julia Morgan, are still in use. [Warnecke's] new buildings are in rare harmony with both the site and these older buildings. Only in part is this harmony due to the materials used, although redwood interiors, hand-split cedar shingles, and the local stone recall Julia Morgan's buildings. The low lines, simple details and sensitive use of the site without disturbing sand or trees, give the buildings an unaffected serenity altogether appropriate.²¹

²⁰ "Post Office and Bookstore, Stanford University," *Architectural Record*, March 1960.

²¹ "Asilomar Housing," *Architectural Record*, March 1960.

Also in 1960, the architectural critic Allan Temko published a substantial article in *Architectural Forum*, entitled "The Humanist Architecture of John Carl Warnecke," in which he surveyed Warnecke's work up to this point, and said, "It is no secret to leaders of the profession that . . . 41-year-old John Warnecke has suddenly become a force to reckon with in U. S. architecture." Temko also noted the innovative way Warnecke had organized his practice, giving major responsibilities to his associate designers: "The Warnecke office may be showing the way to a new kind of design philosophy, permitting extraordinary freedom of expression to individual architects within the framework of a large organization."²²

In 1962, Warnecke found himself, unexpectedly, to be involved in a complex architectural project, in Washington, DC, which turned out to be probably the most significant and consequential endeavor of his career — and also an influential project for American architecture in general. One of Warnecke's Stanford fraternity brothers, Paul ("Red") Fay, had been a PT-boat captain in the Second World War, knew John F. Kennedy in this capacity, and following the war became a close friend and aide to Kennedy as he began his political career. In 1956 Fay introduced Warnecke and Kennedy, when the Massachusetts senator was in San Francisco for a talk, and the two of them immediately took a liking to each other, especially because of their shared passion for football (Warnecke later said, "In fact he knew more about me than I did about him. Red had regaled him with tales of . . . our Rose Bowl team of 1940").²³

In succeeding years Warnecke and Kennedy met on several occasions, and in 1962, when Warnecke was in Washington to serve on two architectural design juries, Red Fay (now

²² Allan Temko, "The Humanist Architecture of John Carl Warnecke," *Architectural Forum*, Dec. 1960, pp. 96-105.

²³ Warnecke's memoir, p. 2.

Under Secretary of the Navy) invited him to visit the president in the White House, at which time Kennedy learned more about Warnecke's architectural career, and the next day he asked Warnecke to give him advice about "an architectural problem involving Lafayette Square."²⁴ Warnecke changed his travel plans and spent the next several days in Washington dealing with the matter. The "problem" was that the buildings on the east and west sides of Lafayette Square, across from the White House — mostly 19th-century town houses and other structures, as well as some 20th-century buildings — were slated for demolition by the General Services Administration (GSA) and were to be replaced by large new government office and court buildings, which were already being designed by a Boston architectural firm. Jacqueline Kennedy, however, was opposed to this plan (Warnecke didn't know this until later) and she had asked her husband to look for an alternative — which seemed impossible if the new office and court structures were to be built.

The president put Warnecke in touch with his advisor on artistic matters, Bill Walton, who familiarized Warnecke with the project and asked if he would prepare his ideas about it for the president. Warnecke spent the next two days in research and analysis, and on March 19th he made a presentation to Kennedy, in the Cabinet Room in the White House, in which he gave an architectural-history overview of monumental and residential urban squares, explained the role of Lafayette Square in Washington's history, and argued that the residential character of the square should be retained — or rather, restored. He later recalled the proposal he made to Kennedy about how this could be accomplished and still provide for the necessary new buildings:

²⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

I [explained] my concept of designing a few new buildings which would be replicas of the existing town houses. The new townhouses would replace the . . . office buildings that were built in the 1920s. With this residential concept, he could have both — the existing historic buildings and the proposed new court buildings behind them. By designing the new buildings as backdrops to the older 19th-century buildings these smaller structures, many with meaningful history, would become a feature of the new design. . . . The key to the solution was to move the massive, large-scaled buildings off the Square and to re-establish its residential scale.²⁵

The president was intrigued with Warnecke's proposal and asked questions that led to discussion of more detailed aspects of the problem. Kennedy concluded the meeting by saying to the advisors who were with him in the Cabinet Room, "Let's do it!"²⁶ Warnecke assumed that Kennedy would pass the proposal on to the GSA and the Boston architectural firm that was planning the project. To his shock he learned from a GSA director, later that day, that the president "fired the Boston architects and he now wants you to do it."

Warnecke realized the many problematic logistical and conceptual issues this would entail, including the professional-ethics matter of his appearing to steal a commission from another architectural firm — but he couldn't refuse the president's wishes. He created a Washington branch of his office, and years of complex planning, negotiation, bureaucracy, and controversy ensued, before the redesign of Lafayette Square and the new office buildings behind it was complete and construction began in 1965.

Warnecke's conceptual approach to the Lafayette Square problem was innovative — and controversial — in a number of ways. One was his advocacy of the coexistence of older and newer buildings, and residential and non-residential buildings, which put him at odds with conventional ideas about zoning in American cities. He wrote about this in a 1965 article on the

²⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

planning of Washington, saying, "We have inherited the American attitude of separating private and public life . . . [whereas] in the great cities of the world public and private life are integrated. . . . Zoning regulations in Washington have had a limiting and retarding influence. . . . We should experiment with mixed zoning."²⁷

When construction of the new buildings was completed in 1967, an article on the project appeared in *Newsweek* magazine, in which Warnecke was quoted as saying, "The purpose of my design was the saving of the old historic buildings."²⁸ Such a statement, by an architect of a large project, was revolutionary at that time. The Preservation Movement in America was new in the 1960s and not widely popular, especially in the architectural profession, where nearly all of its leaders had little interest in, and sometimes were even opposed to, the preservation of historic buildings — especially groups of buildings whose only significance was the creation of an architectural context or environment. This became apparent in the heated controversy that erupted over Warnecke's Lafayette Square plans, which many influential architects thought were misguided or foolish. Warnecke later came across the minutes of the Commission of Fine Arts meeting that followed his public presentation of the plans for the square. One of the commission's members, Ralph Walker, a former president of the American Institute of Architects, had said, "To keep on using bad architecture and trying to preserve it [is wrong] because there is practically nothing except Decatur House on that side of the square that is worth preserving — the rest is junk, architecturally — it is junk." And speaking of the former Corcoran Gallery on the square (now

²⁷ John Carl Warnecke, "The Federal City: A Practitioner's View," *A.I.A. Journal*, June 1965.

²⁸ *Newsweek*, 2 Oct. 1967, as quoted in Warnecke's memoir.

called the Renwick Gallery and considered one of Washington's architectural treasures), Walker said, "I don't see why anybody wants to save that thing. It is just a deplorable piece of degenerating architecture. . . . [W]e live in an age of bigness. We don't live in an age of tiny little things put together." Another influential architect on the commission, Douglas Orr, seconded Walker's views: "I think all these little bits of houses sitting along the street are going to make the United States look perfectly ridiculous architecturally speaking in the eyes of the world. I think that to preserve the old Corcoran Art Gallery or the Dolley Madison House is pure folly."²⁹

The fact that these were the standard views of the architectural profession at that time underscores the degree to which Warnecke's positions were radical. In later decades they became more accepted, as the contextualist movement developed, but at first the ideas were considered peculiar, at best, by much of the architectural profession, and it took some courage on Warnecke's part to advocate for them. Two decades later, the architectural critic Peter Blake organized a symposium on the Lafayette Square design; among the participants was the writer Donald Canty, who called Warnecke's approach "radical."³⁰

Warnecke did not, however, want to be pigeonholed as an architect of limited or fringe interests; he had always wanted to have a large and diverse practice, and he aggressively solicited commissions for all types of buildings (except for domestic houses, which were never a significant part of his work). In the 1960s and 1970s his firm — now with offices in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington, New York, and Honolulu [correct?] — produced an

²⁹ Warnecke's memoir, pp. 116-17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

unusually large amount of architecture. In 1977, in fact, the journal *Building Design & Construction* devoted an issue to the ranking of the most productive firms in the building industry (dividing them into the categories of architects, engineers, combined architect/engineering firms, contractors, designer-builders, and construction managers), and in the architect category the Warnecke firm ranked first, with \$10,500,000 in business for that year.³¹

The Lafayette Square project, and the large amount of time Warnecke was spending in Washington to work on it, led to his increasing contact with President Kennedy and his family, and to new commissions. Kennedy asked him to work on a problem somewhat similar to that of Lafayette Square, at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, where historic houses were to be demolished for new buildings; and Warnecke again produced a plan that allowed for the preservation and restoration of the houses — as part of a larger campus plan Warnecke proposed.³² He also designed an addition to Robert and Ethel Kennedy's house in Maryland, and he discussed the Lafayette Square plans with Jacqueline, who was intensely interested in the project. And in early 1963 the president asked Warnecke to help him select a site at Harvard for his presidential library. They conferred on the matter in Washington, using maps and other documentation about the potential sites, and Kennedy then went to Cambridge for a day, to visit each site with Warnecke. Warnecke's account of this episode provides fascinating insight into Kennedy's interest in architecture. Despite having little formal knowledge of the

³¹ *Building Design & Construction*, July 1977, p. 41. Warnecke's business was described as being 50% institutional, 45% commercial, and 5% industrial, with 5% of it being for foreign projects. In an earlier ranking by *Newsweek* in 1967, Warnecke's firm had come in second (with \$3.5 million in business, after Edward Durrell Stone's firm), though SOM's architecture/engineering firm earned over \$11 million. (*Newsweek*, 20 March 1967, p. 90.)

³² Warnecke's memoir, pp 156ff.

subject, the president expressed a genuine interest in it during this visit to Cambridge, not only regarding his presidential library and its siting, but also about other buildings and planning matters at Harvard — for example the newly-constructed Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, designed by Le Corbusier:

I told him we were going to pass the new Carpenter Center, designed by the famed architect Le Corbusier. . . . JFK said he was not familiar with Le Corbusier and asked if I would tell him more about him. He was particularly interested in hearing that he was a leader of modern architecture. I told JFK how Le Corbusier expressed his inner spirit in his own philosophical way by using concrete as a method to express construction in a fluid manner. Jack proceeded to look out the window at this structure with great intensity. One of the Harvard people [said] "This is the rear of the building." . . . [Later] we did manage to drive by the front of [the building]. As we neared it, the President indicated to the driver, "Please stop. I would like to get out — I would like to see it." Once we were out . . . Jack and I walked up and down in front of the building, where he appeared immensely interested in the structure. He seemed to find its abstract form quite difficult to comprehend. . . . However, after he looked it over for a while, he then pointed to the top, where there were three concrete beams coming out, protruding from the building, supported by three circular concrete columns. . . . The president, smiling, turned to me and said, "They are a bit heavy up there, don't you think?"³³

Such details of the Kennedy-Warnecke relationship add special interest to Warnecke's career — and to the Warnecke archive in which it is documented.

Following Kennedy's assassination, only six months after his visit to Cambridge, Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy asked Warnecke to visit the Arlington grave site with them, to discuss what should be done with it, and after hearing his ideas they asked him to design the entire setting for the "Eternal Flame" and the surrounding area. This turned into a lengthy and complicated process, as Warnecke developed a design and had to get it approved by all the central members of the Kennedy family — some of whom (especially Eunice Shriver) had strong

³³ Ibid., pp. 163-64.

ideas about it that conflicted with Warnecke's. But Warnecke's final design, once it was executed in 1966, was widely praised for its understated power and its sensitivity to its environment. An article in *Architectural Record* said:

The noble Kennedy grave site at Arlington National Cemetery, designed by John Carl Warnecke, occupies such an important space in Washington's great axial fabric that its symbolic value is immensely enhanced. The placement of the essentially modest tomb on a gentle grassy slope . . . at the end of a long axis leading to the Lincoln Memorial, confers upon the late President's grave a civic consequence comparable to that of the Washington and Jefferson as well as the Lincoln memorials. [Warnecke] has made inspired use of every dramatic, expressive and evocative potential the land provides.³⁴

In developing his plans for the grave site, Warnecke spent much time especially with Jacqueline Kennedy, and they gradually became emotionally close. Warnecke was single, having been divorced from his wife in 1960, and he and "Jackie" began a romantic relationship which, over the next couple of years, grew in intensity, as they saw each other frequently, Warnecke visiting her at the Kennedy compound in Hyannis Port and elsewhere, and she visiting him at his house in Hawaii; and both of them were intent on marriage.³⁵ But some of Jackie's friends and relatives were opposed, and the relationship was causing Warnecke to neglect his architectural practice to some extent. This, and other factors, led to financial problems for Warnecke, and he realized he had to devote his full attention to the business. As he later wrote:

What I realized was that . . . I had spent an inordinate amount of time over the past few years on the design of Lafayette Square, the design of JFK's Memorial Grave, and now as a result, found myself without enough new work. Plus my fees for the exceptionally low bids of the new Executive Office Building and the new Court of Claims Building for Lafayette Square . . . had been cut back by a full 25 percent or more. . . . I had spent the fall of 1964 and all of 1965 pursuing Jackie in New York, Hyannis Port,

³⁴ "The President John F. Kennedy Grave," *Architectural Record*, Dec. 1967.

³⁵ Warnecke's memoir, pp. 279-80, 284-89, 312-33, 341-55.

Newport, and New Jersey. I had opened a new office in New York, and finally in the summer of 1966 spent two extravagant months island-hopping sometimes via helicopter while courting Jackie in Hawaii. All this and the economic situation of the time were financially catching up with me.

I had no other choice but to return to my main San Francisco base in the fall of 1966 and deal with this sudden crisis. If I didn't get the firm back on its feet quickly, the bind we were in could have a tremendous long-term effect on my family, staff, and practice.³⁶

By the summer of 1967, Warnecke was "pulling the firm together again." He still traveled occasionally to see Jackie, but "Life was moving us in different directions."³⁷ Following Jackie's marriage to Aristotle Onassis, and Warnecke's remarriage, to Grace Kennan McClatchy, he and Jackie kept in touch and occasionally visited with each other. They remained close friends until Jackie's death in 1994.

By 1970, Warnecke's firm had completely recovered, was receiving many important commissions, and would soon be the most successful architectural business in the country, according to a rating by the journal *Building Design & Construction* in 1977, as noted earlier. The firm's work was extremely diverse, representing nearly all building and planning types, including the following: Educational (libraries, student housing, and other buildings at over a dozen universities and colleges, as well as master plans for many other institutions). Civic and governmental (the Philip Hart Office Building and other structures in Washington, DC; government buildings in many other cities, as well as state-capitol master plans for Colorado, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Maine). Medical (the American Hospital in Paris, and medical facilities in Boston, New York, Honolulu, several cities in California, and Jeddah in Saudi Arabia). Commercial (stores and office buildings in dozens of cities in the United States, Canada, and

³⁶ Ibid., p. 259.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 372.

elsewhere). Hotels (in many American cities, as well as in Belgium, Italy, China and elsewhere). Public utilities (structures in New York, Boston, Cincinnati, and cities in California). Banks (in American cities and in Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, England, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Iran). Airport structures (San Francisco International Airport, Logan Airport in Boston; Kansas City Airport). Urban master plans for many cities. And other building types, such as public housing and apartment buildings; elementary and high schools; industrial and research buildings; religious structures; cultural centers and arts buildings; and a few single-family houses.

Many of these buildings of the late 1960s and the 1970s were featured in the architectural press for their quality, originality, and the "humanist" traits that Allan Temko had found in Warnecke's work. For example, his designs for two telephone-equipment buildings, in Oakland and New York City, were described in *Architectural Record* in 1969, in an article titled "Designed for machines but mindful of people":

Equipment and machines, not people, will fill these two telephone buildings. . . . One is windowless, the other nearly so. How to relate such buildings, essentially for non-human use, to human-scaled streets and the people on the streets, is a design problem of increasing frequency as mechanization and automation take over major roles in business and industry. Designed with imagination and skill, and some new thought on handling the massing of tall buildings, these two buildings by John Carl Warnecke and Associates suggest a laudable concern by business for the visual impact of its buildings on the city scene.³⁸

When the building in New York was completed, in the mid-1970s, the architecture critic of *The New York Times*, Paul Goldberger, wrote an article on the New York Telephone Company's great number of buildings in the city, and said, "In New York City it has built one

³⁸ *Architectural Record*, July 1969, pp. 123-30.

building of distinction — a granite-sheathed equipment building at Broadway and Worth Streets by John Carl Warnecke."³⁹

At about the same time, Warnecke's Hennepin County Government Center in Minneapolis — a tall, two-part structure adjacent to the historic Romanesque-style Municipal Building — was praised in *Architectural Record* for the way its design related to the older building and how its interior "atrium" space was a successful response to the Minnesota climate:

The outstanding feature of the building is a 350-foot-high atrium created between the towers . . . a great indoor space, enjoyed by the public and the employees — fully appreciated as a controlled, year-round environment. . . . By siting the structure so the inner court aligns with the old Municipal Building across the street . . . views from the atrium are opened up and primarily focused on the old building, signifying the relationship and continued coordination of services between the two structures.⁴⁰

Typical of Warnecke's contextual philosophy, the design of each of his buildings was developed in response to its own functional and environmental parameters, rather than imposing an architect's personal style on it. As a result, the great volume of work produced by the Warnecke firm during this period had few or no common visual characteristics. There was no easily-recognizable "Warnecke syle," and this is probably why his overall work and career eventually received less attention from architectural historians and critics than deserved.

Warnecke was also, during the 1960s and 1970s, continuing to develop his ideas about historic preservation and restoration. The first major project in this field was the saving and

³⁹ Paul Goldberger, "When Building for Future Means a Step Backward," *The New York Times*, 26 Dec. 1975; quoted in Warnecke's memoir, pp. 422-23.

⁴⁰ "Impressive new government center around a grand atrium space," *Architectural Record*, March 1977, pp. 101-06.

restoration of the old Corcoran Gallery of Art (designed by James Renwick about 1860), on Lafayette Square in Washington. When President Kennedy had accepted Warnecke's proposal for restoring the 19th-century character of the square and placing the required new office buildings behind the restored buildings, and hired Warnecke to be in charge of the project, it seemed that the old buildings were to be saved. But the GSA and much of the architectural profession were opposed, and no money was appropriated for the restoration of the Corcoran Gallery. During the many years that Warnecke worked on the design and construction of the new office and court buildings, he made great efforts to find resources for the restoration, and when the new construction turned out to be less expensive than anticipated, he managed to have some of the budget savings diverted for the purpose of restoration. He later wrote, "What pleased me most was that these savings would save the architectural history surrounding Lafayette Square."⁴¹

When the restored and newly-named Renwick Gallery was opened in 1974, it was hailed as a triumph in the emerging historic-preservation movement. The A.I.A. gave Warnecke one of its Honor Awards for the work, and the public announcement of the award stated: "The jury praised the restoration as 'a masterpiece of creative preservation, a lesson which should be applied in every town and city in the country that has older buildings which should be kept and used,' and found in the building a 'sense of newness even as it celebrates its historic values.'"⁴²

While working on the Lafayette Square project, Warnecke was also active, behind the scenes, in attempts to save other historic buildings in Washington — most importantly the

⁴¹ Warnecke's memoir, p. 291.

⁴² "Renwick Gallery Restoration," *AIA Journal*, May 1974.

gigantic Second-Empire-style Old Executive Office Building, adjacent to the White House. In deplorable condition and nearly black with soot, it was generally considered a monstrosity and was slated for demolition, but Warnecke proposed to the Commission of Fine Arts that if part of the structure were simply cleaned, people might start appreciating it — and this was the beginning of the process that led to the building's successful restoration.⁴³

Similarly, Warnecke played a role in the saving of Washington's Romanesque-style Old Post Office, which in 1971 was given a permit for demolition. Asked for his advice by the preservation-advocate Nancy Hanks, Warnecke again proposed cleaning as a first step ("If you wash and steam-clean it, you might like it") and continued to be involved in the process that eventually produced a complete restoration of the structure.⁴⁴ Like the Renwick and the Old Executive Office Building, it is now considered one of the architectural treasures of Washington. Warnecke was no doubt unique, among the successful architects of his period, in his advocacy of historic preservation and his involvement in its projects.

In the 1980s Warnecke's firm experienced some setbacks. As he later described the situation, the problems were due partly to transformations occurring in the architectural profession, such as the new practice of "design-build," in which an architectural firm assumed the roles of both designing and constructing a building for a contracted price — a practice that Warnecke's firm experimented with, but not successfully, and it "nearly bankrupted the firm," as Warnecke admitted.⁴⁵ He had to start down-sizing the business. In 1986 he closed the Boston office; three years later he sold the Washington office to another firm; and then he

⁴³ Warnecke's memoir, pp. 237-39.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 310-11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 460.

closed the Los Angeles office.⁴⁶ Increasingly, Warnecke devoted his attention to other matters and activities: supporting and collaborating with younger architects; creating the Warnecke Institute of Design, Art, and Architecture; writing his memoirs; and developing his extensive Sonoma County ranch. He died in 2010. His obituary in *The New York Times* spoke of his "commitment to contextualism — a respect for local surroundings when designing a building." And regarding his work in the District of Columbia it quoted the architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable as calling Warnecke "the architect who has done the most to bring a new design frontier to Washington."⁴⁷

John Carl Warnecke's architectural career was unique in several respects. His apprenticeship with his father, and then his collaboration with him in the early years of his career, created a continuity of architectural practice that spanned nearly a century. The senior Warnecke's Beaux-Arts training influenced his son's views of architecture and shaped his works in certain ways — for example in his openness to diverse modes of design and his reaction against the rigid adherence to modernism that dominated the architectural profession of the period. This openness to alternative thinking also contributed to Warnecke's pioneering views on contextualism in architecture and on historic preservation.

Another remarkable aspect of Warnecke's career was his close relationship with John F. Kennedy and his family — probably unprecedented for an architect and a U. S. president — a relationship that produced significant and innovative works, in particular the Lafayette Square project in Washington.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 486. (Q: when did he close the NYC and Honolulu offices? The memoir doesn't specify.)

⁴⁷ William Grimes, "John Carl Warnecke, Architect to Kennedy, Dies at 91," *The New York Times*, 23 April 2010, p. A21.

All of these parts of the Warnecke story, and many others, are documented in the Warnecke archive, which goes back to the earliest years of Carl I. Warnecke's career, and records every aspect of Carl's and John Carl's architectural practices (drawings, blue-prints, photographs, correspondence, financial records, off-prints of articles in architectural journals), as well as personal information about Warnecke and his family, including his remarkable "memoir" and other unpublished writings. There is surely no other architectural archive in private possession that provides as rich a documentation of an internationally significant architectural career.