

THE PENULTIMATE STRAW

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For a few years I had wanted to attend Syracuse University's School of Architecture, as it was the only school in the country then that had a combined Architecture-Liberal Arts program, getting a B.A. degree after 5 years and a B.Arch. after 6 years. In fall 1966, I interviewed with the dean of the school on the 17th floor of the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan. I recall his attempt to de-romanticize architecture, telling how, as an architect in the near future, I might be in a large firm and relegated to work out the plumbing design of a basement in a high-rise apartment building. He sagely noted that an architect blends three components: artist, engineer, and businessman. At that time, as my high school senior year progressed, my drawings, previously attempts to depict reality, became surrealistic. I began writing poetry, reading philosophy, questioning meaningfulness and meaninglessness in life. So, it was not altogether surprising that after six years of wanting to be an architect, and getting into the school I so much wanted to attend, that I would decide to forego it altogether. The "final straw" occurred after only about one month into my freshman year (October 1967). I had but one architecture class, Introductory Design. One day, the in-class assignment was to make a drawing using only vertical and horizontal lines using a straight edge. My design was, you should forgive the expression, along the lines of this work you are viewing.

The instructor began walking around the classroom, between tables, looking at each student's design silently. When he came to mine, he stopped. "What is this!?" he demanded. "A drawing using just vertical and horizontal lines," I offered. "But there are curves!" he insisted. "I see curves here, and here," tracing over what were simply the white spaces between the vertical and horizontal lines, the points where they almost, but do not, touch, giving the illusion of curves. "But, sir, if you look carefully, there are only vertical and horizontal lines." Oblivious to what I thought was obvious, indeed what I thought was a clever irony in using straight to convey curved lines, he announced, "You didn't follow the instructions!" That was it. The next day, I walked into the Dean's office, and noted I wished to withdraw from the School of Architecture. At first he thought I was kidding, as they had used a very thorough process screening the 22 admitted students from around the world. It was not the one Design class assignment. No, it was a year-in-the-making, and the realization that while I was indeed interested in the artist component of the architect, I had no interest in the engineer nor businessman parts. I retained my liberal arts classes, ultimately majored in Psychology and minored in Creative Writing. After graduating from cloudy Syracuse, I decided, second to having a PhD program in Psychology, the graduate school I was seeking had to have sunshine and good weather. Off to New Mexico I went in 1972, having never previously been west of Pennsylvania. (July 2021)

Why not "The Last Straw?" Why "Penultimate?" I'm thinking there'll be more coming. ☺