

# Visualizing the Social Underpinnings of a Building Type & Widespread Adoption of Student Unions

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**ABSTRACT:** Using both found and created visual evidence, this paper will chart the origin and widespread adoption of Student Union buildings on college campuses in the United States from the 1920s through World War II. Original photographs, plans, and drawings of buildings – published or buried in archives – mount a story about the emerging building type that Student Union proponents and architects sought to establish on university campuses. Existing visual evidence provides important clues about the character and intent of the social spaces for college students, but this evidence does not explain the rapid adoption or the similarities among contemporaneous buildings, which were built by different architects under various campus administrations. New maps, however, are able to depict how ideas about the building type coalesced geographically through social connections, and why construction spread across the country as membership to the Association of College Unions grew. Although the history of Student Union buildings entails a range of topics that span how architecture supported social education and citizenship, conjured “home,” and served to establish a broad middle-class culture after World War II, this paper focuses on how social processes and individuals, on behalf of an institution, established the building type through a social network. Specific historic factors visualized include directed travel for Student Union research, conventions, and membership to the Association of College Unions, as well as travel by Student Union professionals. The significance of this research is that it harnesses maps and visual media to explore when and how social connections – much like social media today – circulated ideological approaches to social education, and shaped the form and meaning of Student Union buildings themselves. Thus, this paper contributes to discourse on building typologies as it examines the potential of maps and visual evidence in architectural history.

**KEYWORDS:** college union, history, social network

## INTRODUCTION

Establishing Student Unions on North American campuses during the first half of the twentieth-century was a task undertaken by numerous individuals who harnessed the social structure provided by the Association of College Unions, an institution that complemented efforts of university administrators to provide activities and spaces for student leisure. To convey the importance of the social structure and subsequent social networks which grew under the auspices of the Association, this paper combines existing texts and visual evidence with the geographical analysis of the institutions and individuals involved in establishing Student Unions as a building type. The approach illuminates where the building type originated, what the building became, and how ideas about Student Unions were transmitted during a period of United States history rich with social change and upheaval; when college age women increasingly attended coed institutions, business culture popularized going to college among young men, and when the imagination of college proponents saw organized leisure activities as an important part of the university experience.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the geographical impact of the first Union buildings, alongside its social import and early architectural development, illustrates how both official and unofficial social connections across geographical distances were crucial to the development and adoption of Student Union buildings.

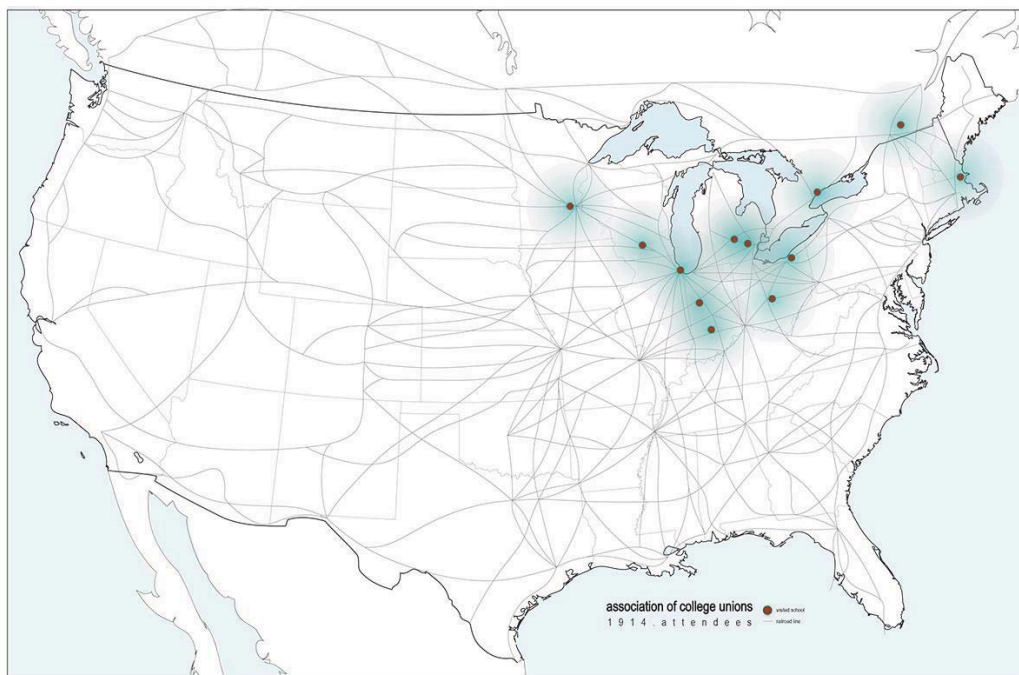
### 1.0. The origin of student unions in North America

As an institution, Student Unions emerged out of the debating societies at Oxford and Cambridge University. But an association of students, where students and university administrators planned leisure activities, constructed dedicated Union buildings, and maintained intercollegiate exchange, is a relatively young, American, and twentieth-century phenomenon. The movement officially began in 1914, when members of the Student Union at Ohio State University invited a handful of administrators and student leaders to gather and discuss the possibility of forming an Association of College Unions (*Convention Proceedings of the Association of College Unions 1915*).<sup>2</sup> Because few schools at that time had dedicated Union buildings,

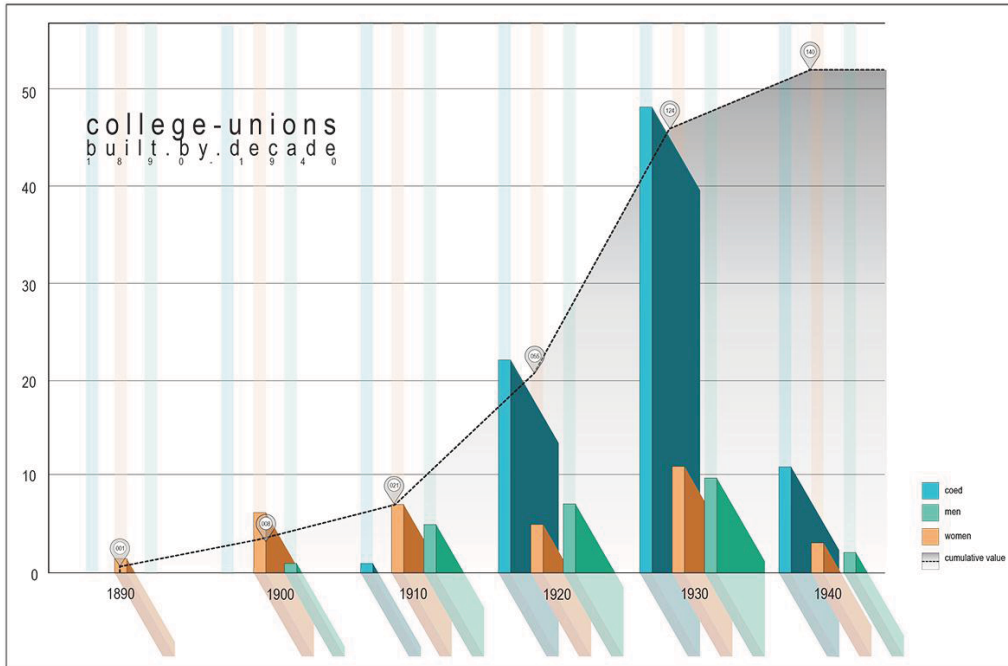
school delegates turned their attention toward envisioning Student Union buildings and the mechanisms through which they could collect and exchange information about them. Buildings would be the topic and vehicle for the development of the Student Union idea.

The early meetings before and immediately following World War I proved to be a practical solution for far-flung student organizations in the Midwest and Northeast. The meetings gave leaders an opportunity to forge personal contacts, share ideas about student government and leisure activities, and visit College Unions (*The Bulletin of Association of College Unions* March 1933). Administrators, Union directors, and students, by way of the Association, thus cast chance correspondence aside by structuring how student leaders and a growing group of young Student Union professionals would air concerns, exchange solutions, and develop the Student Union idea. With a cooperative and collegial spirit, the Association became a celebrated organization through which students could practice self-governance, learn professional skills and leisure habits deemed important for society at large.

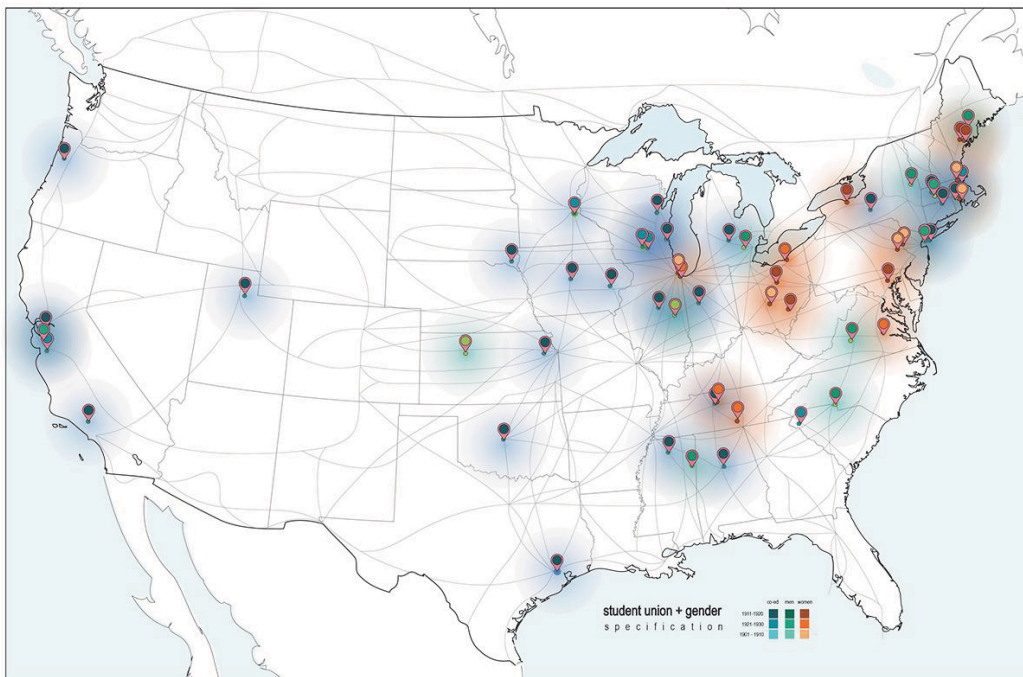
In the early years of the Association, the geographical reach of the young organization was largely defined by regional proximity and railroad interconnectivity among Midwestern and northeastern cities (Figure 1). These schools, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Michigan among them, mark a concentration of interest and the regional origin of the North American building type. But the initial social connections among Association members does not and cannot explain the eventual rapid and wide-spread adoption of dedicated Student Union buildings on university and college campuses, which occurred during the 1930s and 1940s (Table 1). Instead, underlying the wide-spread adoption was a concentrated effort to define the building type, which developed through both official and unofficial social networks put in place by the Association of College Unions and its members (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1.** Schools represented at the first Association of College Union meeting in Ohio in 1914 shows a cluster of Midwestern interest in Student Union buildings and their railroad connectivity. Source: (Author, 2013)



**Table 1.** The number of College Unions constructed by decade shows the significant increase in Student Unions built during the 1930s and 1940s as well as growing the popularity of coed buildings. Source: (Author, 2012)



**Figure 2.** The completion of Student Unions in North America illustrated geographically shows a concentration of buildings in the Midwest and northeast and their adoption throughout the continent by the end of the 1930s. The distance between Student Union buildings posed a geographic hurdle for the social connections afforded by the Association of College Unions, especially for many of the new buildings constructed in the west and south. Source: (Author, 2013)

## 2.0. Early architectural precedents offer a benchmark for Association members

Accounts of the origin of Student Union buildings came from a myriad of professionals who built Student Unions from the ground up. These men and women were active members of the Association of College Unions; they often served as conference speakers and authored publications about the benefits and the architecture of Unions. Their notions about Student Unions stemmed from a synthesis of various examples in the United Kingdom that Union proponents studied, if not visited, in Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>4</sup> But during the 1920s, founders of the Association of College Unions more often looked to North American examples. In particular, the Association recognized Houston Hall at the University of Pennsylvania as the first Student Union in North America. It had a store, a soda fountain, a barbershop, a post office, a billiards room, and several small reading and lounging rooms.<sup>5</sup> The Ohio Union, another early building, had a basement cafeteria, a small private dining room, a soda grill, and a kitchen as well as a large lounge, a billiards room, a game room, a reception room, offices, and a theater. Most Unions built just after the First World War contained lounges, cafeterias, game rooms, and offices but none were as comprehensive as the celebrated Hart House at the University of Toronto.<sup>6</sup>

The Hart House, unlike other North American Unions, provided students and faculty with a broad spectrum of activities that ranged from bible study, dining, and athletics. Completed in 1919, its rooms and activities had the purpose of serving “the highest interests of [the] university by drawing into a common fellowship the members of the several colleges and faculties” and to gather “into a true society the teacher and the student, the graduate and the undergraduate” (*Architectural Forum* January 1924, 12).<sup>7</sup> The unity of fellowship, against the backdrop of debate, music, play, casual reading, sports, and games, promised to mold the whole student and arm him with clarity of mind, depth of understanding, and moral objectives. The building’s exterior resembled a monumental monastic cloister, but students inside partook of activities considered essential for the development of the modern man: physical fitness, entertainment, and casual socialization. For such a broad range of activities, the architecture firm Spratt and Ralph artfully designed different spaces, placing ornamentation in the rooms that demanded more refined student behavior and leaving the knock-about spaces relatively plain.<sup>8</sup> The overall grandeur of the building, made of rusticated stone, not only impressed administrators elsewhere but also gave physical form to a multipurpose Student Union. Discussion about the Hart House and many of the other North American buildings gave Union proponents a tangible project that stirred planning, if not building campaigns, for Student Unions on college campuses that would uphold the social and educational aspirations of Association.

The early precedents were instrumental but only the beginning of the movement. By 1925, the Association of College Unions published the *complete* Union program (*Convention Proceedings of the Association of College Unions 1925*).<sup>9</sup> Compiled from lists of all activities that any member Union had or deemed advisable, the Association crafted an *ideal*, although fictional, program for a Union. Desirable rooms ranged in size, number, and purpose, from alumni offices to barber shops, candy counters, dance halls, locker rooms, music rooms, post offices, radio broadcasting rooms, smoking rooms, and trophy rooms.<sup>10</sup> With art rooms and bowling alleys on the list, the scale and scope of Unions had far surpassed Unions in England, which at most, by 1925, had only seven types of spaces.<sup>11</sup>

The building type continued to change as college campuses constructed double and quadruple-sized buildings. Gone were buildings which merely provided lounges where students would gather to read, debate, and play cards. In their place came a variety of spaces with more specific programmatic purposes. Smaller rooms were for reading, games, and recitals. Larger rooms were for dances, lectures, and staged performances. Student Union buildings, dubbed “social unions” by Jens Fredrick Larson in his 1933 publication, *Architectural Planning of the American College Campus*, had become indispensable for extracurricular campus activities and a complex building proposition. *How did these changes transpire?*

## 3.0. Official sources for union buildings

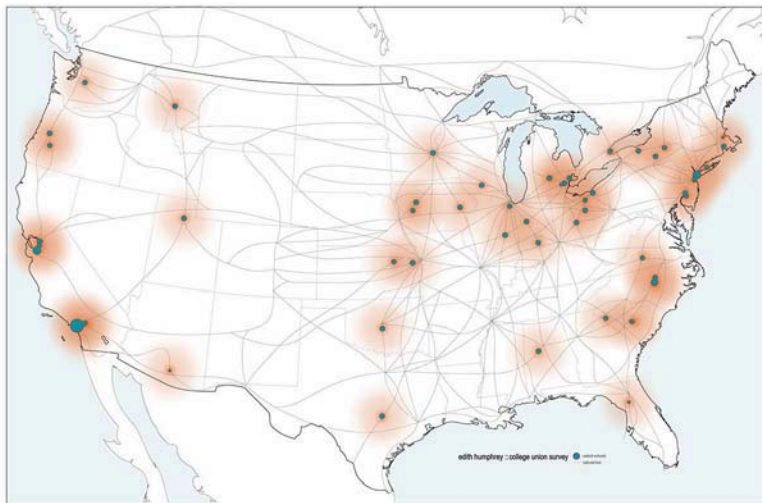
An early, authoritative voice on Union buildings was Irving Pond, who designed the Union at Purdue and the Women’s League at the University of Michigan and published the first professional article on Union design in *Architectural Forum* in 1931. His opinions about the importance of social education matched those of the Association of College Unions but he specified how architecture could express the ideological underpinnings of the organization. As an architect, he was primarily concerned with program and how to reconcile conflicting interests concerning the allocation of rooms and spaces. In his essay “The College Union,” Pond argued the use and potential of lobbies, offices, check and toilet rooms, lounges, cafeterias, dining rooms, committee rooms, assembly rooms, kitchens, libraries, game rooms, barber shops and beauty parlors, quiet rooms, storage rooms, and theater facilities (Pond 1931). Through these environments, he painted a backdrop for the everyday and special celebrations that would reinforce social norms. Upholstery and wood paneling, much like the formal spaces of the Hart House, covered the furniture and walls of the lounges and

large gathering spaces. These rooms, often with double-height ceilings, hosted formal occasions. Cafeterias and game rooms were stripped of expensive materials but not their power to foster collegial socialization. Informal spaces only reinforced social expectations harbored in more opulent settings. Thus, for Pond, it was the suite of spaces, not a single room, that bore the burden of social education. And it was from this that a particular combination of rooms became the signature of early Student Union buildings: lounges, game rooms, cafeterias or lunch stands, and sometimes a ballroom.

Although Pond put architectural ideas into circulation, two other factors defined and subsequently spread ideas about buildings: official publications and the travel of early Student Union professionals who sought to chronicle, understand, and disseminate ideas about the purpose and form of Student Unions. Porter Butts, who served as the Union Director at the University of Wisconsin and longtime Editor of Publications for the Association of College Unions, printed and mailed quarterly updates to Association members. The circulation of *The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions*, usually mailed quarterly, gave members periodic updates on issues and building campaigns. Through Butts, *The Bulletin* became a crucial communication device that welded a coherent ideological vision for the Association.

While *The Bulletin* circulated, so did Edith Humphreys, a young Student Union professional who undertook a study of Student Union buildings in North America in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>12</sup> Because of her effort to travel among and chronicle the history and the state of College Unions on the eve of World War II, her widely publicized first-of-a-kind book *College Unions: A Handbook on Campus Community Center* (1946), codified many aspects of Union design for the larger community. Her study entailed the production, distribution, and analysis of questionnaires as well as personal visits to fifty-five institutions in the United States. Traveling by train and with sustained correspondence between Union leaders, she stitched the otherwise disparate locations of Student Union buildings together tightly (Figure 3).

The principal purpose of Humphreys' handbook was to suggest procedures for fulfilling the university's educational goals after the war. Instead of relying on lists, costs, salaries, and annual expenditures, Humphreys believed these facts and figures, sometimes quite specific to different institutional contexts, should not appear to be more important than the people for whom Student Union buildings were created. The social particulars of any given campus were therefore most important. The common belief among Humphreys' colleagues was that informal education enhanced the value of the Union as an educational medium in an academic setting. In this way, imagining the building as merely a place to meet, dance, have tea, or eat missed the potential of the Union building as an environment for life-changing experiences. Instead of viewing the Union as an unnecessary place for loafing or "bull," she argued that faculty and other members of the university community appreciated how the Unions of the 1940s could enable personal development and connections among fellow students. She also observed how Union staff no longer boasted about the beauty and grandeur of their building but instead prided themselves on how well the building served the recreational needs of its members. In this way, the buildings helped put in place a vibrant, local social structure for the Association.



**Figure 3.** Edith Outzs Humphreys completed her study of Student Union buildings in two phases, visiting a total of fifty-five College Unions in the United States and Canada. Source: (Author 2013).

Through her book, Humphreys conveyed that recreation had broad social and cultural consequences and underscored the grown importance of the building type. She also specified how within the recreation center, activities and experiences were best if they were planned around the interests and needs of community members. Therefore, programs must be flexible, adapt to students, and offer choice in leisure activities. The varied activities, ranging from casual cokes at the soda fountain, to lunch and dinner in the cafeteria, to lectures in the lounge, needed not only the space but also institutional support – from the college and Association – to promote the desired values of the university.

Humphreys' book did not portray *how* unions spread but rather *what* union became, and emphasized the commonalties among Union buildings in North America. Thus, her journey to visit fifty-five Student Unions, and the survey many others, clarified a building type that had spread and the most prevalent features of them. She helped spread information by using the social structure afforded by the Association. Moreover, she physically inscribed a social network crucial to the Association and future member schools. Despite the book's attention to individual campuses and need, *College Unions*, reprinted in 1951 and again in 1960, was the official, most complete source for Union proponents throughout the postwar period. Official expertise, however, was not the only source of ideas. Unofficial social networks played an important role as well.

#### **4.0. Unofficial social networks shape the building type**

Unofficial social networks afforded by membership to the Association had a role in shaping the building type and its adoption across North America. Intercollegiate billiard and bowling tournaments are evidence of social exchange.<sup>13</sup> But ideas about Student Union buildings spread informally more often, and more specifically, in one of two ways: photographic exhibitions and the publication of Student Union buildings in school newspapers.

The Association maintained a collection of photographs which interested schools could borrow to publicize and spread ideas about Student union buildings. Members of the Association and Union proponents thus, on a rotating basis, could display the collection for an entire student body. More important, the exhibition on Student Union architecture brought the Union idea directly to students. Student leaders at Antioch, for example, pinned a collection of thirty Association photographs to a temporary colorful wall near their student executive offices (*The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions* December 1949). Comprised of both interior and exterior views, the collection not only showed students at Antioch and images of celebrated Unions but also incited a bit of competition. Students were first enticed to take a look at what other colleges were doing and then provoked to plan their own Unions.

In a similar spirit, it was also common for student government associations, who were interested in building or renovating Student Union facilities, to publish photographs of Unions elsewhere. The effect of this practice was to introduce college students in one area of the country to facilities in another area of the country. The photographs often depreciated older union facilities in favor of modern ones, with amenities such as bowling alleys and large cafeterias. Writers for the student newspaper at the University of California in Berkeley, for example, compared the old Union at Berkeley to newer Unions that were equipped with beauty parlors, barbershops, listening rooms, and lounges complete with modern furniture and stone fireplaces. Thus, as Berkeley was hosting the national Association of College Unions convention in 1953, students could view interior images of far-flung Unions at Ohio State, Oregon State, and Texas A&M and imagine a similar one of their own (*Daily Californian* May 1953). As Berkeley advanced Union plans, the schools newspaper attempted to further pique student interest by publishing contests. Prizes were awarded to the reader who could identify the Student Union pictured. Students with the correct answer won a cash prize that exceeded the proposed Student Union fee! (*Daily Californian* January 1955). Circulating images of Union architecture built knowledge and opinions about the type. In this way, school papers and the Association's traveling exhibition were a vehicle for college communities to share ideas about Student Union buildings.

#### **CONCLUSION**

By the 1940s, Union buildings had become the symbol and physical instrument for attaining the goals of a good community life. Historical texts and supporting visual evidence can depict a vivid story about the construction of Student Union buildings in North America. Geographic evidence – of meetings and member connections forged through official travel and informal collegiate connections – maps the origin, rapid adoption, and the spatial channels through which information about the building type flowed. Combining traditional modes of historical research with geographic analysis more fully illuminates the regional origin of the building type and social framework necessary for its architectural development. Understanding the social underpinnings of the building type – and how discussions about Student Unions channeled common

concerns – may be inferred without geographical analysis, but the flexible and adaptive social structure established across space and over time was crucial to the refinement and the pattern of wide-spread adoption of the building type.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the popularization of college, see Daniel Clark, *Creating the College Man: American Mass Magazines and Middle-Class Manhood* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), especially his introduction and Chap. 5, "From Campus Hero to Corporate Professional." For the interest in organized leisure, see Eugene T. Lies, *The New Leisure Challenges the Schools: Shall Recreation Enrich or Impoverish Life?* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1933); Paul P. Boyd, "Extra Curricular Activities and Scholarship," *School and Society* XIII (February 5, 1921); Donald S. Bridgeman, "Success in College and Business," *Personnel Journal* IX (June 1930); Delisle C Burns, *Leisure in the Modern World* (New York: The Century Co., 1932); Stuart F Chapin, "Extra-Curricular Activities of College Students: A Study in College Leadership," *School and Society* XXIII (February 13, 1926); Alzada Comstock, "Time and the College Girl," *School and Society* XXI (March 14, 1925); W. H. Cowley, "Explaining the Rah Rah Boy," *New Republic* XLVI (April 14, 1926); Irwin Edman, "On American Leisure," *Harper's Magazine* (January 1926); Christian Gauss, *Life in College* (New York: Scribner's, 1930); L. P. Jacks, *Education for the Whole Man* (New York: Harper's, 1931) and *Education Through Recreation* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1932); and Woodrow Wilson, "What is College For?" *Scribner's Magazine* Vol XLVI (November 1909).

<sup>2</sup> The Association was first founded at Ohio State University in 1914 but had several incarnations until the close of World War I, when members decided to name their organization the Association of College Unions. At the first meeting, Ohio was the only school represented with both a Student Union and a dedicated building (*Convention Proceedings of the Association of College Unions* (1915) National Student Affairs Archives, Bowling Green State University: 7).

<sup>3</sup> The dissemination of information and adoption of the building type on college campuses is not unlike YMCA buildings a generation earlier. See Paula Lupkin's book *Manhood Factories: YMCA Architecture and the Making of Modern Urban Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Edith Ouzts Humphreys, *College Unions: A Handbook on Campus Community Centers* (Ithaca, NY: Association of College Unions, 1946) and *College Unions ... Year Fifty*, Chester Berry, ed. (Association of College Unions, 1964), and numerous publications by Porter Butts, such as *The College Union Idea* (Association of College Unions, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> Houston Hall at the University of Pennsylvania was founded in 1896. For information about its financing and facilities, see the *Convention Proceedings of the Association of College Unions* (1925) National Student Affairs Archives, Bowling Green State University: 14-15).

<sup>6</sup> See descriptions of Purdue, Minnesota, Iowa, and Iowa State University Unions in the *Convention Proceedings of the Association of College Unions* (1925) National Student Affairs Archives, Bowling Green State University: 21-27.

<sup>7</sup> Also see Porter Butts, *State of the College Union Around the World* (Ithaca, NY: Association of College Unions International, 1967) for a description of the building and its influence (38-45).

<sup>8</sup> See *Architectural Forum* Vol XL No 1 (January 1924) p12; *American Architect* Vol 117 pt 2 No 3213, 506b (April 12, 1920); *Builders* Vol 119 (July 2, 1920): 4-5 and Vol 130 (February 5, 1926): 246.

<sup>9</sup> See *The Association of College Unions Convention Proceedings* (1925) National Student Affairs Archives, Bowling Green State University: 30.

<sup>10</sup> The complete list included alumni offices, art room, union administrative offices, banquet rooms, bowling alleys, barbershop and tailor shop, cafeteria, committee and conference rooms, cigar, candy and news counters, co-operative student store, chapel and meditation room, dining hall, dance hall, debating hall, faculty rooms, game room for cards, chess, checkers, hotel rooms, information and employment bureau, library, locker room and check room, general lounge room, men's lounge room, women's lounge room, magazine and newspaper room, music room, organization offices for activities headquarters, pool and billiards room, branch post office, reading room, reception rooms, restrooms, radio broadcasting room, soda fountain, shoe shining stand, smoking room, show and bath rooms, theater, toilets, writing room, YMCA rooms, and athletics not otherwise provided for.

<sup>11</sup> British Unions surveyed included the Cambridge Union Society, Glasgow Union, Belfast Union, The Dublin Historical Society, and the Oxford Union (*Convention Proceedings of the Association of College Unions* (1925) National Student Affairs Archives, Bowling Green State University).

<sup>12</sup> Humphreys came from a young group of student affairs professionals who were trained on the job to attend to the personal development of students, both in and outside the classroom. As a classroom teacher, student counselor, and personnel officer, Humphreys approached her project with educational concepts and techniques learned in the 1920s. Humphreys had worked as Student Union staff in Willard Straight Hall at Cornell University for ten years and believed that she, like her fellow workers, recognized the College Union as a unique social laboratory. Thus, she claimed, the impetus for her study was to understand the Union movement in its entirety and to lay ground for its future.

<sup>13</sup> *The Bulletin of the Association of College Unions* regularly reported billiard and bowling scores from competing schools. If tournaments were not held fact-to-face, they were held by telephone. In addition to these tournaments, regular instructors circulated among the Unions, teaching the game and social etiquette.