

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 10, 2007, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Albert Szabo was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

ALBERT SZABO

BORN: November 7, 1925

DIED: December 17, 2003

Albert Szabo was born in 1925 in New York City and grew up in a household where design mattered, his father being a pattern maker for the renowned dress designer Claire McCardell. Albert studied science, then fine arts at Brooklyn College between 1942 and 1947, with an interruption for military service as an aviation cadet. The arts won out in his future course of studies, but he remained convinced about the importance of maintaining a close relationship to science.

After Brooklyn College, Albert secured a summer apprenticeship in Marcel Breuer's studio and in Chicago enrolled at the Institute of Design headed by Serge Chermayeff. The Institute was generally considered the best U.S. school to learn the new design methods developed at the Bauhaus in Germany under Walter Gropius, and it was in the Gropius Masterclass at Harvard's Graduate School of Design (GSD) in 1952 that Albert Szabo finished his studies with a Master in Architecture degree. At the same time, he began an architectural practice in partnership with his wife, Brenda Dyer Szabo, whom he had met at the GSD. Having first worked in various firms, he then independently did numerous fine interiors, a house in New Hampshire and Salem High School (with Jerzy Soltan).

It attests to Albert's talent as a teacher and designer that immediately after his graduation he was invited to return to the Institute of Design in Chicago as a faculty member. For two years he taught basic design, product design and shelter design in a program committed to the idea that design must play a role in improving the social conditions of human life. Two drawings done by Albert Szabo during this period were acquired by the Busch-Reisinger Museum.

In 1954 another invitation brought Albert back to the GSD as an instructor to assist among others Josep Lluís Sert, who had become the school's dean, and Serge Chermayeff, his former teacher. Albert soon was also asked to teach undergraduates from Harvard College's Department of Architectural Science. He eventually chaired this department until 1968 at which time he and Eduard Sekler united Architectural Science with the Visual Studies program of the College to form the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies, housed in the

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. In the new department, he continued to teach courses on the fundamentals of environmental design—the interrelationship between people, purpose and place, as he described it. The interaction of science and art in the process of design remained one of his concerns and at times he had recourse to assistance from science departments. When, for example, an assigned design project dealt with accommodation for a young family with two small children, a child psychologist was consulted.

Albert's closest collaboration was with a social scientist, the anthropologist Dr. Thomas J. Barfield. It was the result of Albert's interest in Afghan vernacular architecture, an interest born 1974 when he taught architecture for two years as Senior Fulbright-Hays Lecturer at Kabul University. With his students he went on fieldtrips to document and analyze vernacular building types such as tents, yurts, huts and houses, and their construction and arrangement in settlements. The resulting book, *Afghanistan: An Atlas of Indigenous Domestic Architecture*, published in 1991 by Szabo and Barfield after years of strenuous work, is a carefully researched record and discussion of structures—many of which may not have survived the intervening years of unrest and warfare. The volume, illustrated by meticulous drawings and Albert's splendid color photographs, won a citation of the American Library Association as "Outstanding Academic Book in Art and Architecture."

Subsequently, Albert enriched his course offerings with a seminar on indigenous Architecture—a topic that since has become extremely popular. He encouraged his students to recognize and analyze the forces that shaped indigenous buildings in order to understand what basic principles are applicable to processes of design. Many of his former students have acknowledged how helpful the clear direction of his teaching was and how much they also enjoyed his humor that could be both whimsical and critical.

As an outstanding teacher of design, named the Osgood Hooker Professor of Visual Arts in 1991, and as experienced expert on indigenous architecture, Albert was also in demand as a consultant, advising the U.S. Agency for International Development, the government of Afghanistan, the municipality of Teheran, and the King Faisal University in Saudi Arabia.

After his retirement in 1996—forty-two years after he began teaching at Harvard University—Albert started preparations for a second book and turned his attention once more to personal artistic creation. Though beginning to be affected by Parkinson's disease, he still managed to assemble enough new works to mount a profoundly impressive exhibition, "Inventions and Interventions," shown in February 2001 at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. The exhibition consisted of two parts:

- I. "Flotsam and Jetsam" included discarded, often damaged, objects such as tool handles, balusters, hooks and barrel staves. Recognized by Albert's eye for their aesthetic potential, these were transformed into a world of captivating works of art by means of arrangement and painting.

II. “Mechanism and Meaning” was inspired by the demise of the typewriter when the computer-cum-printer displaced it. Albert dissected a number of discarded typewriters and designed sixteen white boxes in which compositions from typewriter remnants were paired with various icons and captioned. It was uncanny how clearly the mood conveyed by typewriter fragment and icon expressed the meaning expounded in the caption.

The meaning of the entire display was perhaps best expressed in the box with the ancient quotation “*Dixi et salvavi animam meam*”(I have spoken and saved my soul). This statement in a way also summed up Albert’s life, because design for him was a continuous message, a message about the joy and beauty that can be brought into human existence even under adverse circumstances. In the last rooms he and Brenda inhabited in a senior residence, the two still managed to create the same life-enhancing atmosphere that had been characteristic for all places where they and their children had dwelled.

Albert Szabo died December 17, 2003. He is survived by his wife Brenda Dyer Szabo, three daughters: Ellen, Rebecca, and Jeannette; a son, Stephen; and four grandchildren.

Respectfully submitted,

Alfred F. Guzzetti
Toshihiro Katayama
Christopher Killip
John R. Stilgoe
Eduard F. Sekler, Chair