

TO: COLLEGE COMMUNITY

APRIL 1975

FROM: ART DIVISION

STATEMENT OF THE HISTORY OF PLANNING AND BUILDING OF THE PAUL TERENCE FEELEY VISUAL ARTS CENTER.

The Art Division thinks that it is an appropriate time to retrace the history of the planning and construction of the Visual Arts Building for several reasons: first, now that we have begun to function in the building, this reminds all (ourselves included) how the building came to exist in the manner and form it does; second, this is written not only as interesting historical and background knowledge, but also to clarify as best we can any misunderstandings or uncertainties that community members not involved directly in the long history of planning and construction might have. Many, if not most, members of the community were not present during the whole period that led to the building of the structure and it is to them that this may be of special interest.

The initial plans for a visual arts building grew out of meetings of a committee of faculty and trustees headed by Lydia Winston Malbin and Paul Feeley back in 1964 where the whole future of visual arts at Bennington was discussed and a studio art building and teaching-gallery was called for and space requirements given. The original recommendation asked for a facility of 93,000 gross square feet and talked extensively about the importance of the exhibition program in Bennington's history and of the necessity of continuing and expanding such a program both for students and the larger community.

Under President Bloustein, after the untimely death of Paul Feeley in 1966, plans were again gone over and the initial design was considerably scaled down from the original list of requirements. The reduction in size was about 35%, largely in gallery space and student studios, and a building was projected for the then ambitious sum of about \$1,200,000. The first design was presented by Edward Larrabee Barnes. It followed the concept of the 1964 guideline proposal of a rambling, horizontal structure "barn like" in nature.

In 1967 Mr. Barne's services were curtailed and Robertson Ward was retained as architect and he, as we know, completed the project. In the introduction to the fund raising prospectus of 1969, President Bloustein described the design as fitting the school's call for simple and modest design over monumental structure, formality or highly personal statements. Cost estimates at that time for the whole VAPA complex were roughly \$3,800,000. Our present VA structure is essentially that structure with some modifications in the Gallery and the ceramics areas. The main feature of the building was to be the Galleria designed as a multi-functional group area surrounded by work spaces of the various disciplines on two levels, and that it is. The plan called for generous entrances and exits to outdoor workspaces as well as much natural light. Both exist in abundance. Finally it called for a semi-attached and semi-separate teaching-gallery on two levels, which Usdan is.

In total the VA section of the building is 58,917 gross square feet of a total 125,000 gross square foot complex and according to the architect has a very high net to gross square footage of usable teaching space as designed. Seventy percent or 40,000 square feet is usable in the VA section. The volume is also very high 1,086,000 cubic feet in the VA versus 1,200,000 in the PA. An interesting side statistic is that the total VAPA with 331,000 board feet of structural timber makes it the third largest in use of structural timber in the country. This generally summarizes how the building got here and what it is in factual terms.

When the art division met extensively with the architect in 1968 and 1969 for the initial designing of the building (anyone who participated can never forget those experiences) we continuously emphasized our desire for simple raw space, a constant and endless need of artists as well as flexibility because of the changing needs in the program. The Galleria was presented by the architect as, in large part, an answer to these desires. It provided raw open space that could be altered and expanded within according to our needs. Considerations such as an energy crisis or even the rapidity of spiraling inflation were not discussed then as it was not a paramount consideration of most of us at that time. We did get the generous raw space we wanted for a cost (at that time) considered very reasonable in the design and construction world. There are many bugs in the building that need working out, and it will take some time to adjust the building to our real needs at the moment, but, we see the visual arts building as a functional answer to our visual arts needs with the exciting potential as a unified nerve center for art activity. The problems of cost, heat, and maintenance have arisen faster and in larger magnitude than any of us could have predicted over the long planning and construction phases and we will have to work diligently to stress economy wherever possible in our use of the structure. For instance, we see the possibility of maintaining a very low heat in the Galleria in cold months which is feasible, of a stricter policy of light control, etc. But, in the main, we have a building that works, one that, in spite of flaws, is not a monument as much as a result of a long history of collaboration, labor and argument among faculty, trustees, administration and architect.