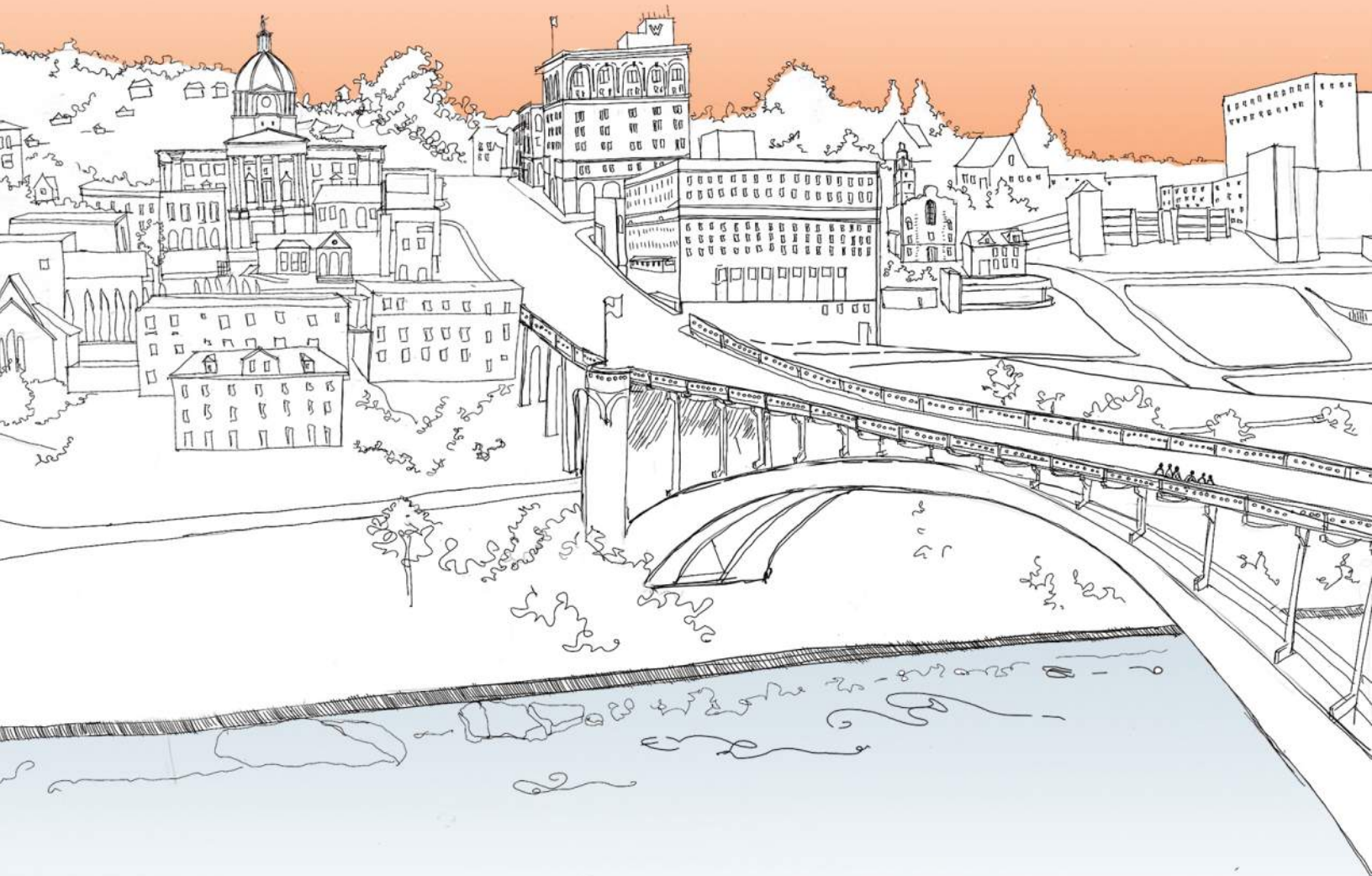


Vernacular

FAIRMONT ARCHITECTURE STUDENT PUBLICATION

In This Issue
An Interview with Shae Strait
Dr. Bob Kelly's Journey to Architecture
What to Expect as an Undergraduate
150 years of Woodburn Hall
AI is the Cotton Gin

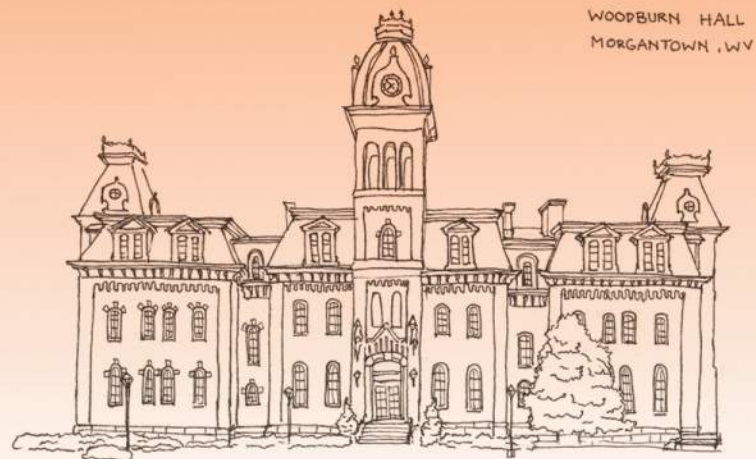


Vernacular, whether it be sharing colloquial language or the architectural detailing of place, the decision to launch the architecture publication *Vernacular* is a unified voice among students and faculty, telling the world that **Fairmont State has an Architecture Program!** The value of learning architecture within a small community and creating the things you want to happen is echoed in interviews and described through the lens of faculty, students, and alumni. Welcome to our pages. Enjoy the Vernacular of West Virginia.

Woodburn Hall: A Powerful Symbol of West Virginia University

Sited prominently on WVU's campus in Morgantown for one-hundred-and-fifty-years, Woodburn's dominating tower, topped by a square-to-circular dome, the clock, and arched windows create a distinctive façade recognized by many. The architecture expresses position, expertise, and a forward-facing governance for the university. Completed in 1876, eleven years after Fairmont State's founding, Woodburn Hall represents elements of architect Charles C. Kemble's use of the Second Empire style. Kemble was practicing in Philadelphia for four years before Woodburn Hall began construction, and the elements of Woodburn Hall deeply mimic those found in Philadelphia City Hall, albeit at a smaller scale to fit the rolling campus hillside of WVU's campus. Kemble lived in Wheeling, WV, as Woodburn construction began, but his work eventually led him to Charleston, where he designed the state capitol building (1880) and the U.S. Postal Office (1883). West Virginia's Capitol building, which burned down in 1921, had a few elements like Woodburn Hall, including a stone base, notable brick detailing, and a clock tower.

Woodburn Hall has grounded WVU with a sense of place through its architecture, providing the backdrop for many graduation and ceremonial pictures. As *Vernacular* gathers a collection of historically significant and contemporary architecture pushing the boundaries of architecture, we will prove that architecture contributes to how West Virginia is a great place.



Of High Interest

AI is the Cotton Gin

Some people are shouting that AI is the end of the world, as prophesied in some of the great tales of science fiction. Others shout that it's the beginning of the 15-hour work week; the leap to an actual utopia. The true answer lies somewhere in the middle, for AI is the modern-day cotton gin, a machine developed to transform the way in which work is done. *AI is a series of computer algorithms that can complete complex tasks that require learning and reasoning.* These algorithms are being developed by big tech companies and relentlessly pushed as the solution that turns a tedious chore into a large-volume, streamlined process. That's what makes AI inevitable in the future; it's what billionaires have invested in: a product that is designed to appeal to the biggest market. It is hard to avoid it when it's embedded in things such as the grammar program monitoring this article as it's being typed. AI generated the definition of artificial intelligence that was used a few sentences back. It's now the first response to any search.

Since it is inevitable, it's time to have a conversation about what it should look like in the architecture industry. There are many concerns, including authorship, job replacement, and environmental impacts. Studies show that architecture has taken its time to enlist AI services. Firms that are experimenting with AI in their daily workflow (uses include generating images, doctoring existing images, etc.) report being overall satisfied with the features, with some reporting significant time savings each week and a competitive advantage in some cases.

This article is the start to an ongoing investigative conversation that will develop as the industry adapts to working alongside this technology. Etiquette is being defined now. We will dive deeper into the concerns in future publications. We will report on what uses local firms have found for AI and reflect on the impacts of these practices. Stay tuned.

You Can Shape Your Community

Getting to Know Shae Strait the Director of Planning & Development for Fairmont, West Virginia

Shae Strait graduated from Fairmont State University's architecture program with a Bachelor's in 2014 and a Master's degree in architecture in 2015. We met up with Shae twice to hear all about what it's like to be the Director of Planning and Development for Fairmont. Here are a few highlights from our conversation!

What kinds of projects do you typically see in your office as the city planner? A broad number. From small community parks to large subdivisions for homes and new businesses.

What are you most focused on? Universal Design, it matters! Can you give us an example? The 1-acre Norwood Universal Accessibility park features equipment for all ages and abilities. It is so well visited that there are now parking issues to address.

What is your collaboration process like? In this position, outreach to the community to ask what features they want. Integrating public engagement in the schematic design phase and collaborating with investors is also important.

Have you worked on a project that particularly feels "West Virginian"? You must show stakeholders and the public that their voice matters. Then, show them results. The department is working to build the community's trust. A project about to begin construction is the Momentum Adventure Park and the West Fork River trail extension. The former industrial site is being preserved by the removal of buildings and placing value back in that area with a park that recognizes the legacy of the historic Monongah glass company. The park celebrates those who have worked in these glass factories by teaching the area's communal history with interpretive panels. What's more Appalachian than putting something on a hill to overlook our beautiful river and valley?

What keeps you working in West Virginia and Appalachia? As a native of Appalachia who witnessed first-hand the small-town decline, combined with a desire to help other people, I chose to stay and take on the role of a professional planner. Do you feel there are design opportunities here that you would not get in a bigger city? Yes. Lower property values and a lack of outside investment provide unique opportunities.

What kind of architectural growth would you like to see in West Virginia? Quality public spaces. As we move forward from a state of economic devastation, we need to create spaces that are loved by those who occupy them.

You have an interesting take on selective demolition. How would you summarize it? Within the structure of the bad buildings, there are targeted demolitions. The key criteria are the redevelopment of existing buildings. I wrote twelve plans. Come to a future conference!

Our publication is addressing AI in architecture. How is AI entering your professional world? How should architects and planners use it appropriately? The human experience should be valued. AI has crept in and is a tool, and should be used cautiously. Planning comes down to lived experience, which a computer doesn't understand. A computer can't express empathy.

What has been most rewarding about your job? Helping strangers have a better life. From sidewalks to transportation issues to the repair of existing buildings.

What is your biggest roadblock? Politics, money, and time.

What is your relationship with the local city council and other departments like? In a city of our size, roughly eighteen thousand people, I often see my collaborators on the sidewalk of downtown Fairmont! Many will often come to the office at any step of their architectural process.





What is your coffee order during deadlines? Blackbear lattes from Stone Tower Coffee, The Joe!

What is one item you use a lot in the office? For example, my item is a sticky note! There is a map of all the proposed parks, trails, and Fairmont's key services and assets, such as banks and schools, that we reference all the time to ensure we're planning quality spaces in the right places.

What project are you proud of outside of Fairmont? I worked in Huntington, WV, as a city planner on a team to develop the Hal Greer Boulevard renovation. The gateway project included transportation evaluations, curb placement, bike lanes, lighting, and aligned intersection implementation. I hand-drew roadways to understand adjacent properties to the project.

To close our interview, what would make your job easier? More people should become involved. Write letters, come to meetings, or just get a shovel and a wheelbarrow and get together with your neighbors to clean up a sidewalk. Every person matters. As a government regulatory entity, the planning department can help residents understand the value of great spaces. Instead of putting Band-Aids on existing places, we can develop the places we want to live better in.

Thank you, Shae, you've truly inspired us!

Student Highlights



Chase Klepfel, a fourth-year student from Grafton, WV, was recently awarded first place in the Mayfield Competition for his Design V submission. His path to architecture at Fairmont State University is anything but conventional. Chase discovered his passion by building immersive environments in the video game Minecraft and by exploring the thoughtfully crafted worlds of theme parks. He found architecture to be the perfect intersection of creativity and technical skills—offering a way to bring the kinds of environments he once imagined into the real world.

The DV project tasked students with designing a disaster relief hub for Welch, West Virginia—a flood-prone town in the state’s southernmost region. The basis was to develop a rapidly deployable modular structure to provide immediate support, which later evolves into a permanent community center through minimal modifications. Grounded in the rectilinear forms and stone materiality of Welch’s existing architecture, the project balances efficiency, adaptability, and a strong sense of place. While a strict program and modular constraints initially felt limiting, they ultimately pushed Chase toward a more creative and refined solution.

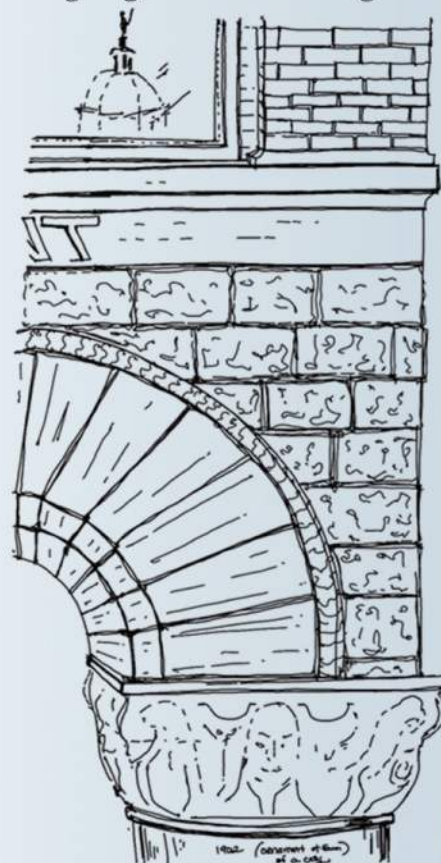
Chase believes that more time does not always equate to a better project. Learning to maintain a healthier balance between work and life ultimately contributed to his success. His advice is simple: put in effort, but don’t let the work consume you. In a field where outcomes can be subjective and judging unpredictable, maintaining perspective is just as important as the design itself.



Cole Weller is a third-year student from Martinsburg, WV, and recently won the AIAWV scholarship by designing a farm to table restaurant for the area of Clarksburg. He wanted to add his own flair to it. Cole’s material choice for the farm to table was brick and limestone because they were both heavily used in the Clarksburg area. He was really stumped with the design at one point, and while out to breakfast, he enjoyed a coffee and “a really good Danish.” The winning idea hit him, and he says that idea, “was the factor that changed it all and helped me win.” Other than the really good Danish and coffee, Cole also got inspiration from something a previous professor, Dr. Kelly, had told him. The professor said that, as students, they should test the limits of their designs because later in practice, they may not have the opportunity to do so.

The Sophomore Class is working on a six-week-long project that will be their final. They start off building a landscape that matches a passage description. In the next few weeks, the students will receive the next three parts of the project: an observatory, a dwelling, and a gallery. Each part comes with another descriptive passage, important information, and guidelines, like size constraints and what you should consider when designing and constructing each model. Near the end,

students will decide where to place each of their designs in the landscape and add the final details.



Freshmen Design Fundamentals I is a drawing class that dives into concepts of bringing what the eyes see onto paper. D. Fundamentals II is a digital drafting course introducing ordering systems and concepts, tools such as SketchUp, and then continues in Revit.

A Faculty Interview next page

A Faculty Interview

Dr. Robert Kelly, “Dr. Bob,” has been a part of the architecture staff at Fairmont State University for the last 11 years. He was recruited to be the director of the up-and-coming graduate program in 2014 and started in January 2015. His architecture journey began at the University of Kentucky, where he received a 5-year professional bachelor's degree in architecture. He did not know much about architecture prior to starting his bachelor's degree. He liked to make things, like building clubhouses, and saw a brochure for architecture in the lobby of his high school guidance office, and decided to try it out. While at Kentucky, he enjoyed five semesters of history, which is where you'll find him at Fairmont State—in the library lecturing on architectural history, from the beginning of time to the present.

After receiving his bachelor's degree, Dr. Kelly worked for an architect doing residential additions and renovations. He had the opportunity to work on construction sites, too. He then switched to another architecture firm, continued the registration process, and became a licensed architect. He worked on a few historic preservation projects and renovated a high school with his former undergraduate classmates.

Dr. Kelly thought he might want to teach, which requires a master's degree. After looking at several programs across the country, he decided on a one-year post-professional master's program at Syracuse University in Florence, Italy. He and his wife packed up and moved to Florence. After receiving his master's degree, he began teaching at his alma mater. He worked on his own after teaching, then returned to school to get his PhD. At this time, his daughters were one and five years old. He chose to get his PhD from McGill University in Montreal, Canada. After the one-year program in Montreal, he went back to Kentucky to write his dissertation, while also being superdad. His daughters were committed to ballet during this time, so he spent some time crafting props for The Kentucky Ballet Theater where they danced. Robert Kelly became Dr. Kelly when he finished his PhD in 2002.

Dr. Kelly says, “I feel like I've been fortunate to explore architecture in a lot of different ways, from hands-on construction to make things, and so I started doing props, and set pieces, and stuff for my daughter's plays who danced. There are a lot of different things you can do with this degree.”

When asked who his favorite architect is, Dr. Kelly has a hard time deciding. During his time at the University of Kentucky, Le Corbusier was a hot topic—some of the visiting professors were among the last associates of Le Corbusier. Dr. Kelly also appreciates the work of Stephen Holl. He enjoys the detailing and material work of Todd Williams and Billie Tsien. When asked about his favorite architectural style, he says,

“I think good architecture can be in any style; it's not a question of style. It's a question of materiality, scale, and proportion. It's what you do with it.”

What better way to teach? Each of his students feels unique in Dr. Kelly's studio—as he promotes not a single style but the work and inspiration each person brings to the studio desk.



Garrett Clayton, a non-traditional first-year architecture student, is a natural interviewer and shares in Shae Strait's visions for Fairmont.



Kellie Cole's goal to bring publishing and architecture together has finally come to fruition with this spring 2026 team of students.



Reese Cunningham brings his love of craft and technicality to his sophomore studio and this publication.



Annie Pierson wanted to be an architect long before her older sister applied to Fairmont State's architecture program. She plans to start a firm upon graduation.



Claire Schenkel, a soccer athlete at Fairmont State, juggles a demanding course load while playing to date over 500 minutes on the field.



Jessica Valentine brings her many experiences to Fairmont State as she begins her architecture studies. She works by night to put herself through school.

Editorial Team

To Our Alumni: Want to contribute to the next issue? Reach out to Kellie.Cole@fairmontstate.edu with the subject line Vernacular Interest, and we'll be in touch.

To Our Readers: Consider joining our Fairmont State Architecture Alumni network on LinkedIn. (FSU Architecture Alumni, Students + Faculty) Want to receive Vernacular in your inbox? Email Kellie.Cole@fairmontstate.edu



Scan for Vernacular Website