Allegorical Significance Absent In Junior Architect’s Project

BY DOUGLAS JOHNSTONE

“Light-colored and up-looming over the sea-green grass, it is obviously Moby Dick.”

So a senior English major interpreted the discontinuous compression structure squared in the angle between the cloister from Anderson Hall toward the Memorial Center and the walk from the library toward the Chemistry Lecture Hall.

Mr. Charles Thomsen of the Architecture Department, speaking less symbolically, said that the structure was a project executed by the junior architects.

THOMSEN, who assigned the project, said that each of the twelve junior architects built a model of a discontinuous compression structure and that the design by Hank Winkelman was selected to be built epic-scale for posterity, or at least for however long it would last.

A discontinuous compression structure is a form composed solely of members in either pure compression or pure tension so assembled that some compression members are supported only by tension members. Usually there is a basic unit which is repeated throughout the structure.

THEORETICALLY each part of the structure should maintain its position relative to each other part regardless of the direction from which forces unrelated to the structure are applied. Of course, something can stretch, bend, or break, but that doesn’t count.

Somewhat similar designs have been studied previously, Thomsen said, notably by Buckminster Fuller in the 1930’s. Fuller was trying to achieve a maximum strength through an area with a minimum of material. A discontinuous compression structure was exhibited at the Brussels World Fair.

Thomsen noted, however, that he knew of no example, except Winkelman’s here at Rice, which was not symmetrical on at least one axis.

Thomsen stated that the department elected to display Winkelman’s design for its originality, its variability, and its sculptural quality. Using Winkelman’s basic unit, an equilateral triangle with a side of another such triangle guyed through its middle, the over-all form can be developed unpredictably.

WINKELMAN, a transfer from Tulane, said that he had considered a vertical tower shape, until he noticed the freedom that his basic unit gave him.

Effacing his inspiration, he said, “A good bit of luck was involved in the shape of the thing. I just added a unit here and a unit there. Of course, I had to consider the space where the thing had to go.”

Asked if his structure had any allegorical significance, Winkelman said, “No.”