PUTTING COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TO THE TEST: PRESERVING POSTWAR DORMITORIES IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

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Abstract

Thesis Question
Can private colleges and universities bring their modernist dormitories up to contemporary living standards without compromising their historic and architectural integrity?

The purpose of this thesis is to prove the importance of modern architecture to the evolution of the American college and university campus, and to suggest a course of action with respect to its increased protection through the presentation of case studies that will examine the architectural intention, building performance, public reception and preservation of three mid-century modernist dormitories. The primary case study presents the history and significance of Harvard Law School’s Graduate Center (Walter Gropius and TAC, 1950), and then shows how perceptions of the Graduate Center’s aesthetic and technical failure currently threaten its architectural integrity and future viability. The following section summarizes current discourse in the historic preservation field on the appropriate treatment of modern architecture, both philosophically and physically. The final case studies offer an analysis of recent preservation work done on two modernist dormitories. In the case of MIT’s Baker House, designed in 1949 by Alvar Aalto and renovated by Perry Dean Rogers from 1998 to 1999, MIT’s institutional agenda combined with a consideration for the building’s status as an international icon of modernism produced results both positive and negative for the vitality and integrity of the dormitory. In the case of Ferry Cooperative House at Vassar College, designed in 1951 by Marcel Breuer and renovated from 1999 to 2000 by Herb Beckhard Frank Richlan & Associates, aesthetic intervention was guided by the judgment of Herb Beckhard, former associate of Breuer, and results demonstrated the integral role of the modernist interior. The concluding section highlights important differences in the architecture and status of the three dormitories examined, and summarizes the challenges specific to preserving modernist dormitories.
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**Introduction**

Just last summer Harvard University, despite being the premier university in America and perhaps even the world, demonstrated quite blatantly that its institutional priorities do not include any consideration for its 20th century heritage. The locus of this demonstration was the Woodberry Poetry Room, a small and delicate interior from 1949 designed by world-renown Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, hidden away on the fourth floor of Lamont Library. In May of 2006, Harvard proceeded to upgrade the space to accommodate higher lighting levels, laptops and the internet; it hired an architect experienced in historic preservation, but the end result of the rushed project still stirred outrage among the Harvard community and the international architectural community.\(^1\) Critics accused Harvard of eviscerating a masterpiece of modern design, calling the renovation protocol a classic example of Harvard’s reputation as an institutional agglomeration of independently acting, headstrong departments. Where were Harvard’s many and talented architecture professors and historians in all this? Had they even been consulted? What, if any, is Harvard’s architectural agenda today?

The purpose of this thesis is to prove the importance of modern architecture to the evolution of the American college and university campus, and to suggest a course of action with respect to its increased protection through the presentation of case studies that will examine the architectural intention, building performance, public reception and preservation of three mid-century dormitories.

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History of American Campus Architecture

There was a time in American history when colleges and universities cared deeply about architecture as a statement of institutional mission. In fact, the entire history of academia in America is very much a history of public architectural expression, from Jefferson’s thoughtful laying out of his “Academical Village” at the University of Virginia, to the construction of the University of Miami, the first campus designed entirely in a modernist style. Sadly, it seems that colleges and universities today have lost touch with what constitutes a true “campus,” a place of fine public architecture, of public spaces mingled with private spaces, all set within a cohesive rural or urban landscape. There are several factors contributing to the demise of the American campus, including rapid technological changes that shorten the useful life of buildings, dispersal of the academic community through virtual learning, and, simultaneously, crowding of the physical plant through increased building, and a growing marketing mentality towards the university experience that pits economic competition against long-standing traditions of institutional symbolism. In an impassioned plea appearing in the most recent issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, architect Allan Greenberg writes:

…many colleges no longer seem to care that their campuses suggest a negative institutional image, that they reflect badly on the institution’s ability to solve problems of physical planning, or that they demonstrate little regard for celebrating their students’ and faculty members’ aspirations. Such issues can be dealt with only by the concerted effort of the institution’s president and provost, the sole people able to mobilize a new, more ambitious, and more challenging pathway to a better campus… why that appears to be such a formidable challenge today should be cause for great concern.

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On-campus housing was a relatively late phenomenon in the history of American campuses, many of which began as rather isolated rural developments. The British model, exemplified by Oxford and Cambridge, was comparatively more urban in its provision of on-campus, cloister-like residences, and this eventually became the norm for American colleges and universities founded during and after the Civil War period.\(^5\) The vocabulary of campus architecture also took its cue from Europe, and the popularity of the Gothic style found expression in what has come to be known informally as “collegiate gothic.”

In 1920, a Supreme Court case upheld the constitutionality of state funding for the construction of dormitories and student centers on public campuses. By the 1930s, a general notion of what constituted acceptable student housing had emerged. In a 1938 publication of Columbia University’s Teachers College, education experts wrote that “because of the prevalent belief that student life in well equipped and efficiently managed dormitories makes a very important contribution to the health habits and to the educational and social development of students, there is rapidly growing tendency to provide more and better dormitories in colleges and universities.”\(^6\) These sentiments about proper student housing were far from being codified, and accommodations varied depending on institutional resources. Wealthier colleges, like Harvard University, could afford to build gentlemanly suites that featured more than one room per student, wide corridors, fireplaces, and even maids’ quarters. Both wealthy and modest institutions felt the blow of the Great Depression and the effects of a war-time economy, and this

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\(^5\) Dober, 143.
\(^6\) Dober, 138.
combination of events contributed to a virtual cessation of academic building campaigns until after World War II.

The postwar period in America saw a dramatic change in the academic landscape, as institutions of higher learning adopted new pedagogical models and prepared for institutional expansion on the strength of the postwar economic upsurge. The G.I. Bill, among other factors, swelled college and university enrollment, and building campaigns focused on providing specialized facilities tailored to specific disciplines and, more importantly, campus housing. The general postwar housing shortage, coupled with rising rents, spurred university administrators to initiate major housing campaigns to provide students with an attractive alternative to off-campus living, which increasingly meant long commutes and a higher cost of living. But with the economic changes brought about by World War II, institutions invariably sought cheaper solutions to housing their exploding student populations. In (late) response to the postwar surge in enrollment, the federal government passed the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963 to enable state funding for dormitory construction. These federally-aided dormitories were inevitably constrained by cost-per-square-foot, and their architectural legacy is one of grim, prison-like high-rises. The rise of student activism in the 1970s corresponded to a steep drop in the popularity of on-campus living; colleges and universities did not fully recover from this disruption until the 1990s.

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7 Dober, 142.
9 Dober, 144.
Today, student housing represents a major industry. Harvard University spends over 75 million dollars annually on maintaining its student housing stock.\textsuperscript{10} Beyond economic value, a figure like that reflects the important role that housing plays in university life- it is almost always the first thing to attract or repel prospective students. If dormitories are the calling card for academic institutions, then what did it say about a college or university of the late 1940s and early 1950s whose President or Dean chose modern architecture?

**Modernism Matriculates**

There were several forces leading to the advent of modern architecture on the American campus. Following its appearance on the public elementary and secondary school scene, where it was credited with cutting building costs and fostering pedagogical reform through its neutralization of spatial hierarchy (disposing with corridors, fixed seating and stairs in a one-story open plan),\textsuperscript{11} institutions of higher education experimented, rather timidly at first, with modern architecture as a practical and economical approach to the challenge of intensive building campaigns. Eventually, they embraced it as a fitting symbol of their commitment to contemporary educational values. Some early examples of how architecture was deployed to symbolize progressive institutional mission include the dormitories and master plan designed by The Architects’ Collaborative for Black Mountain College, in North Carolina (which embraced former Bauhaus artists); the campus and buildings designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for the Illinois Institute of Technology; Indiana University’s Rogers II Dormitory and Dining

\textsuperscript{10} Dober, 145.
\textsuperscript{11} Richard Neutra’s Experimental Public School for the Los Angeles School Board was controversial for the way its spatial order challenged the traditional teacher-student dynamic (Dober, 2).
Hall (Burns & James, 1946); and the Fine Arts Building (Schweiker & Elting, 1950) at Maryville College in Knoxville, TN.

Harold Hauf, former Editor-in-chief of Architectural Record, published an essay in 1950 titled “Towards Modern Architecture on the Campus.” His essay reflects several points of the current discourse on the appropriateness (or inappropriateness, according to some) of the modernist aesthetic applied to the image of higher education: contextualism, in the sense of harmonizing with older campus buildings, pedagogical style, conservatism on the part of trustees and alumni, and academic institutions as leaders of the cultural vanguard (Figure 1). Hauf wrote:

The current boom in college building programs has brought the question of ‘architectural character’ squarely before Boards of Trustees and Regents throughout the country. It is a matter of prime significance, transcending the mere selection of a style to conform with or complement existing buildings. It must be resolved primarily on the issue of whether a college building is a background for educational activity or an instrument of education. This is not a question of glorifying the functional aspects and creating a machine for education; rather it is an underlining of the colleges’ responsibility for educating the whole man.12

Whether or not they ultimately contributed to formation of the “whole man” envisioned by Hauf, modernist dormitories reveal an American adaptation of the Modern Movement’s social and architectural agenda. One can trace their lineage to Europe between the world wars, when student housing, and mass housing in general, became a major concern of the German and Soviet avant-garde movements.13 Le Corbusier’s Pavillon Suisse, designed for the University of Paris and opened for the 1932 academic year, crystallized the new expression of this communitarian ideal (Figure 2). The dormitory room function was articulated as a massive beehive-like block of cells, modern

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in form and detail yet inspired by the medieval monastic ideal. Attached to this block was a communal space (lounge and dining facility), differentiated by a freer formal vocabulary. Rooms were kept small to encourage development of a communal life in the large spaces provided for this purpose. Historian Michael Trencher describes the architectural intention that informed the Pavillon Suisse: “it seems clear that for Le Corbusier, the individual intellect could best concentrate under Euclidian conditions, while the group of several hundred individuals could best interact while sharing the subtle artistry and sensual joys of architecture.” In many instances, modernist dormitories introduced a distinctly communitarian ordering of space into the otherwise hierarchical framework of the American college and university campus.

Many have argued that the Modern Movement lost its essence once transplanted to American soil in the interwar period. It is certainly true that proponents of European modernism, from artists and writers to architects and teachers, encountered a drastically different set of social, economic and political circumstances upon immigrating to America in the 1930s and 40s. While America was less receptive to the politics of the Modern Movement, popularly associated with socialism and communism, it was perhaps more prepared for the movement’s message about the role of technology in shaping a modern and increasingly materialistic society. Ultimately, the Modern Movement’s political agenda found less expression than its technical and aesthetic principles, as attempts to reconstitute ideological engines like the Bauhaus failed, or were misinterpreted within the American capitalist context. Interestingly, postwar America

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14 Trencher, 248.
16 Jordy, 507.
eventually began to assimilate the stylistic vocabulary of modernism as an expression of corporate prestige: Lever House (Gordon Bunshaft for SOM, 1951) and the Seagram building (Mies van der Rohe, 1952) are the stellar examples of this.

The Plight of Postwar Dormitories

Considering the circumstances of modernism’s advent in America, it is arguable that modern architecture again found social meaning on the college and university campus as the expression of a seminal shift in pedagogical thinking and practice. During the interwar period, just as the Modern Movement was reseeding itself in America to become “modernism,” academic institutions began to place a new emphasis on what happened outside of the classroom and lecture hall, recognizing the value of a less formal intellectual discourse and opportunities for the practical application of knowledge.\textsuperscript{17} Colleges and universities, especially after World War II, began to take advantage of modernism’s innovative building typologies to provide spaces fine-tuned for interactive learning, technical practice, and healthy living. A survey conducted in 1992 by the National Center for Educational Statistics identified over sixty discreet functional spaces associated with higher education, compared to a mere sixteen identified in a sample of 19th-century college and university buildings.\textsuperscript{18} Just as campus architecture diversified functionally, so did its symbolic capacity. Within the context of the postwar democratization of higher education—the GI bill made the college experience available to a greater swath of the American demographic—modern architecture was deemed appropriate for its egalitarian connotations. In effect, modern building construction


\textsuperscript{18} Dober, 60.
answered the challenge of institutional growth at the same time that it opened up possibilities for a deeper expression of educational mission that transcended the traditional symbolism of historic architectural styles.

The dormitory, the most ubiquitous of academic building typologies, projects a college or university’s characteristic or idealized academic culture more than other typologies. In plan, program, detail and setting, the dormitory demonstrates the social values promoted by the leaders of a college or university, the presidents and deans responsible for shaping the student body both physically and philosophically. The morphology of student housing in America reflects a polarity of social values, with the individual at one end and the collective at the other. Although both “poles” of student housing share two basic ingredients, personal space and common space, it is the relative proportions of each and their spatial relationship that differentiate traditional dormitories from modernist dormitories.

The traditional dormitory model placed the individual at the center of his own collegiate universe, the bedroom, with secondary spaces of semi-private or shared nature radiating outward, these being the study, parlor, kitchen, bathroom and corridors. Generally, bedrooms and studies were of comparable size, and the dispersal of rooms was not unlike a typical 19th-century boarding house. Harvard’s Georgian Revival Houses of the early 1930s are the epitome of this rather humanist model: the gentleman student (before the 1950s, of course, most dormitories were designed with men in mind, not women) enjoyed a large personal suite of rooms, including a study, fireplace, bathroom and maid’s quarters! Traditional dormitories at other Ivy League universities displayed a similar standard of personal comfort in their spatial hierarchy, with individual rooms
serving as points of reference for tightly clustered subsidiary spaces (Figure 3).\textsuperscript{19}

Students had the choice of studying within their own rooms, or with their next-door neighbors in adjoining studies; they did not have to travel far to use the bathroom, the kitchen or stairs, and they never shared facilities with more than two or three other students.

In contrast to the Ivy League ideal, modernist dormitories demonstrated a collective social ideology. The smaller size of student rooms resulted in part from the economic exigencies of the postwar era, but in certain instances, modest size and minimal comforts were a purposeful part of design that encouraged socializing in centralized common spaces. There was a greater degree of space-sharing in the modernist dormitory, for example in double or triple rooms and communal bathrooms and lounges. There was also a clearer differentiation between individual and shared space. This differentiation was made overt at the Pavillon Suisse, as it was in the many American dormitories inspired by it;\textsuperscript{20} in contrast, the casual observer of any one of Harvard’s seven Georgian Revival Houses would be hard put to identify a specific programmatic pattern behind the stately facade. Ultimately, spatial order in the modernist dormitory reflected a belief in the importance of the collective intellectual life for the development of the individual’s creative and social consciousness.

It appears that modernist dormitories were an aberration in the grand scheme of American student housing, because in the last two decades colleges and universities have been constructing or altering dormitories along the traditional model.\textsuperscript{21} Today’s “suite” standard reflects the same individualized space present in older dorms, as students have

\textsuperscript{19} Dober, 144.
\textsuperscript{20} Dober, 21.
\textsuperscript{21} Dober, 153.
come to expect the luxury of semi-private, if not entirely private, bathrooms, kitchens, and bedrooms. Common areas continue to be used by students, but less intensively, as the suite program effectively lowers occupancy per floor. Also, fewer students feel the need to leave their rooms (equipped with minifridges, TVs, and practically all the comforts of home) to congregate in common areas.

Apart from the fact that few graduates will remember their dorms fondly, there is a distinct prejudice towards modernist dormitories of the postwar period. Princeton University architect Jon D. Hlafter explains that “architects have tended to like [modernist dormitories] more than non-architects.”

There are numerous and ever more frequent examples of this prevailing attitude and its consequences. One recent example comes to mind: this summer Princeton University will demolish Hugh Stubbins’ 1964 Butler College dormitories because housing administrators are too well aware of parents and students’ resounding disappointment upon arriving to campus for the first time, expecting Gothic grandeur and picturesque turrets, and meeting instead with Stubbins’ dark-brick and concrete dormitories.

The following case study will explore the reasons for this prejudice and the potential for modern architecture’s re-assimilation into higher education’s contemporary identity. Two subsequent case studies will evaluate examples of preserved modernist dormitories within the context of current disciplinary discourse on the relationship between historic preservation and modern architecture.

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23 Wasley, B9.
Figure 1  This cover captures the discourse of the period on the appropriateness of modern architecture for the image of higher education. (Courtesy of Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design)
Figure 2  The Pavillon Suisse, City University of Paris (Le Corbusier & Jeanneret, 1932). (http://www.galinsky.com/buildings/swiss/index.htm) The cell block of student rooms is perched above a free-form communal center.
Figure 3  Diagram featured in *Architectural Forum*, June 1931. (Dober, 144)
1. Case Study 1: The Graduate Center, Harvard Law School

Modernism Takes Root at Harvard

In the spring of 1948, Harvard University commissioned Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius and his Cambridge firm, The Architects Collaborative, to design a dormitory complex for graduate students in the Law School and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. The Graduate Center, comprising seven dormitory buildings and a student center arranged in an interlocking pattern around two courtyards, opened for the start of the academic year in 1950 and was hailed as the first major example of modern architecture on any American university campus (Figure 1). While stripped-down functionalism and economy of space defined the character of the Graduate Center, the integral nature of the design nevertheless demonstrated a new consideration of the university’s responsibilities with respect to forging a comprehensive environment for learning and creative, collaborative thinking. As an article in *Architectural Forum* put it, “Harvard is modern architecture’s most influential academic conquest to date. More timid schools may now find it easier to build the kind of buildings they need.” Indeed, the story of the Graduate Center is the story of higher education’s acceptance of modern architecture in the postwar period. Moreover, the Graduate Center is significant as the embodiment of an important epoch in Harvard’s history that saw the transformation of its architecture.

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department into a modern design school, an event that did much to determine the course of modern architecture in America.\(^\text{26}\)

The genesis of the Graduate Center can be traced to the progressive values of Harvard president Joseph Conant, a chemist and educator, and Joseph Hudnut, dean of Harvard’s Faculty of Architecture. Conant did not fit the mold of past Harvard presidents; he was young and lacking the typical “Brahmin”\(^\text{27}\) pedigree, and used his position to shape a new pedagogical course for the university by hiring progressive professors and fostering interdepartmental collaboration. In his own words, Conant’s aim was to transform Harvard from “a fast-ossifying gentlemen’s club to a meritocratic, high-intensity [institution].”\(^\text{28}\) In 1935, Conant hired Joseph Hudnut to lead the Faculty of Architecture. Hudnut was an educator and architect-planner whose pedagogical philosophy was influenced by the educational theories of John Dewey and by German theories of city planning and social organization.\(^\text{29}\) Hudnut’s goal in assuming leadership of Harvard’s architecture department was no less than to redeem the stuffy Beaux-Arts institution’s “archaeological” approach to architecture and bring the curriculum full-scale into the modern era. Hudnut stirred considerable controversy among the old guard of architecture professors when he purged Robinson Hall, the architecture school’s home, of its museum-like atmosphere by throwing out the traditional historical building fragments. He lobbied successfully to cancel all history courses, believing that architectural training should not rely so slavishly on historical precedent. Collaborative studio projects

replaced the jury system, and students were encouraged to engage in the *process* of design, rather than focusing solely on its product. Hudnut’s unification of the existing divisions within the Faculty of Architecture—landscape architecture, architecture, and city planning—demonstrated his holistic attitude toward the discipline, and paved the way for his hiring of a modernist architect to the faculty.

This was no small task in 1935, when European modernism was still regarded with considerable suspicion, even disdain, in American intellectual circles. Fortunately, Hudnut had the support of President Conant, who persuaded reluctant faculty and trustees of the merits of such a move. Hudnut was in correspondence with one of his modernist candidates for professorship, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and in a 1936 letter to Mies admitted that “it would be foolish to pretend that there will not be opposition to the appointment of a modernist architect as Professor of Design. In Berlin, I tried to make clear to you the cause of this opposition—which is based in part on ignorance and in part on difference in principles—and since my visit in Berlin, I have received letters which promise an opposition even more serious that I expected.” Hudnut was also considering Walter Gropius, the famous German architect and pedagogue who in 1919 founded the Bauhaus “pilot school” in Weimar, Germany. In the end, Hudnut offered the position to Gropius, whom he considered the safer choice and an “excellent propagandist.”

Gropius accepted enthusiastically. Having been pushed out of Germany by the Nazis, who were hostile to the Bauhaus’ mission to unite the arts and industrial

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32 Pearlman, 464.
production towards the greater democratic good. Gropius recognized in America the opportunity to put his revolutionary philosophies into practice. At the new Graduate School of Design, as Harvard’s architecture department became known after its consolidation, Gropius and Hudnut created a curriculum that would soon be emulated by architecture programs across America. Students were given design problems that mirrored “real-world” situations, and were thus encouraged to think about the social and economic dimensions of architecture with equal creativity. A pillar of the new curriculum was the Design Fundamentals course, modeled closely on the core Bauhaus Vorkurs, whose object was to inculcate formal and graphic theories through experimentation with materials and abstract visual effects (Figure 2).

Controversy over the institution of Basic Design as a core course revealed a fundamental difference in Gropius’ and Hudnut’s professional philosophies. Regarding the role of history in contemporary architecture practice, Hudnut argued for the more subjective, “emotional” lessons of history, while Gropius felt strongly that a modern architecture school should provide an absolutely neutral ground for artistic and professional development. Gropius made plain his attitude on the subject, posing the question “How can we expect our students to become bold and fearless in thought and action if we encase them in sentimental shrines feigning a culture which has long since disappeared?” Gropius was known for his strong convictions and his charisma, and in the course of his tenure at the GSD, from 1936 until his resignation in 1952, he all but

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33 Kentgens-Craig, 158.
35 Pearlman, 465.
overpowered Hudnut’s more conservative design philosophy and teaching style. As a consequence of this, Gropius is widely remembered as the principle founder of the GSD, while few appreciate that Hudnut, who retired a year after Gropius left, was its true spiritual founder. Joseph Hudnut has recently been the subject of scholarship that attempts to restore an accurate portrayal of his pedagogic contributions. Scholars like Jill Pearlman and Anthony Alofsin point out that Gropius would never had arrived at the GSD were it not for Hudnut’s lifelong dedication to reforming and improving the school; they even suggest that had it not been for the success of Gropius’ propaganda, a more “American” form of modernism might have emerged from the GSD under Hudnut during the 1930s and 40s.

Despite considerable debate among historians as to the extent and nature of each man’s contributions, the collective legacy of Gropius and Hudnut remains in the form of contemporary architectural pedagogy. In creating the GSD, they revolutionized the discipline and provided a forceful, highly visible model that was quickly imitated in architecture programs across the nation. They trained several generations of young architects, many of whom went on to found academic programs and architectural practices in the GSD mold. Their achievement amounted to nothing less than an “intervention” (in the words of architect Henry Ives Cobb, an early GSD graduate) in conventional architecture culture, the ramifications of which are still valid today.

37 Alofsin, 12.
38 Fitch, 130.
The Gropius Legacy

Gropius was in many ways the face of modern architecture in America, an ambiguous honor depending on the audience. Americans became familiar with Gropius in the decade of the Depression, as a select circle of influential Americans vigorously promoted an image of the European avant-garde movement through publications and exhibitions. Articles on Gropius’ early works, the Fagus Shoe Factory in Alfeld (1911) and the Cologne Werkbund exhibition factory-office building (1914), introduced America to the new architectural vocabulary of glass and steel, and his Dessau Bauhaus building and director’s house (1925-6) quickly became icons of the neues bauen (Figure 3). As World War II approached and the tide of political refugees grew, the American intellectual community rallied to the cause of the artists, architects, writers and visionaries who immigrated to America seeking freedom. Prominent among these refugees was a contingent of former Bauhaus professors and students, including Josef and Anni Albers, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Lazslo Moholy-Nagy, Marcel Breuer, Herbert Bayer, Ludwig Hilberseimer and Gropius himself.

While those like the Albers attempted to revitalize the Bauhaus legacy in American terms, others like van der Rohe and Breuer felt the need to dissociate completely from the Bauhaus in order to establish legitimate careers for themselves in their new country. When Gropius arrived in the United States in 1936, he took it upon himself to portray the Bauhaus to Americans, considering himself its ideological guardian. Gropius did not confine his message to the GSD; he lectured widely and wrote prolifically on themes he had developed while director of the Bauhaus from 1919 until

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40 Kentgens-Craig, 184.
41 Kentgens-Craig, 130.
42 Kentgens-Craig, 109.
1928. Broadly stated, these themes were the integration of art, technology, and mass production, the social role of modern architecture, especially with respect to urban decay and the housing crisis (both in Europe and later in America), and the urgent need to formulate a truly modern global cultural expression. As early as 1937, Gropius found it necessary to clarify and defend his ideological position in the face of growing skepticism that fixated on modern architecture’s apparent inflexibility and its cold, alien spirit. In an essay appearing in the May 1937 issue of Architectural Record, Gropius wrote that “I have always emphasized that the other aspect, the satisfaction of the human soul, is just as important as the material, and that the intellectual achievement of a new spatial vision means more than structural economy and functional perfection.”

If Gropius’ reputation during life suffered from misunderstanding, his posthumous image fared no better. Since his death in 1969, popular history has portrayed Walter Gropius as a representative of modernism’s more notorious aesthetic failures. But a subtler appreciation of his legacy is possible through the study of his built works, though few, which reveal an architect’s visionary talent and a reformer’s commitment to social change.

Gropius House in Lincoln, Massachusetts, the home Gropius designed for himself, his wife Ise and daughter Ati in 1938, was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 2000 and is currently in its 20th year as a house museum (Figure 4). Writing in the introduction to an anthology of Walter Gropius’ works, James Marston Fitch called the Gropius House a “wonderfully perceptive abstraction of a seventeenth-

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43 Kentgens-Craig, 118.
45 Alofsin, 12.
century wood-framed New England house."\(^{46}\) The Gropius House is a meticulous demonstration of the workability and artfulness of the architect’s design philosophy in its modest scale, its use of industrial materials to sumptuous effect, and its responsiveness to site conditions. Gropius House is presented to visitors as it existed in 1969, and the visitor is made aware of the overwhelming presence of the Gropius family. The house feels lived in: the furniture is worn but still elegant, and some of the less durable finishes are chipped or cracked.

The house is a two story box with ribbon windows facing the front property line, and large plate glass windows facing the wooded, more private lot lines. The exterior is clad vertically in white clapboards of a slightly thinner profile than those of the neighboring 19th-century houses. The front entryway is concealed by a canted glass-block wall and protected by a long thin canopy resting atop tall steel pilotis. A delicate spiral stair of tubular steel leading to the second-story roof terrace stands out against the white plane of the façade, as does an abstract steel lawn sculpture. Inside, finishes include cork flooring, beige stucco for the ceiling, chrome and black paint on the stair hall banister, plastic, glass and glass-block partitions, and again the vertical wood clapboarding, this time with an even finer profile than on the exterior. Gropius treated his house as a prototype for the application of new industrial materials and production techniques: for example, his use of tubular steel piping, modular construction units like glass block, and ready-made fixtures and accessories. Gropius explained this motivation in a design problem presented to students at the GSD in 1942:

\[\text{The more standardization and prefabrication is used—and for good social and economic reasons—the more will be needed the vision of the designer to secure individual variety,}\]

in spite of the increasingly limited number of types to be used. Only by creative understanding of the various relations between outer and inner living space will our architects be able to invent those elements which can relieve the starkness of machine work.  

The plan and program of the house display a careful functionalism, which Gropius codified in an article for *Architectural Record* titled “The Small House of Today” (included in the National Register nomination for Gropius House):

The ground plan of a dwelling house is a geometrical projection of its spatial idea—the organizing plan for moving within the house. The elevation, facade, is the result of that plan and not the starting point of the house design. Hence no artificial symmetry, but a free functional arrangement of the succession of rooms, short, time-saving passages of communication, moving space for the children, clear separation between the living, sleeping, and the housekeeping parts of the house, and finally proper utilization of the ground and especially the sunny aspect. The bedrooms need morning-sun (facing east), the living rooms should have southern or western light, and the north side is left to storerooms, kitchens staircases and bathrooms (Figure 5).  

For furnishing his house, Gropius relied on the formidable design talent of his former student and colleague Marcel Breuer, who headed the Bauhaus furniture workshop from 1925 to 1928. Between 1938 and 1941, the years that they shared a practice, Gropius and Breuer collaborated on the design of several private houses all over New England, adapting the wood-and-fieldstone vernacular to modern effect. These private houses, of which Gropius’ was the first, demonstrate both architects’ genuine interest in applying modernist objectivity to site-and-region-specific design problems. Although present-day neighbors of Gropius House have not quite come around to this idea, Gropius’ stylistic influence is seen in at least two adjacent houses.

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47 Wagner and Gropius, “Housing as a Townbuilding Problem.” (Harvard Graduate School of Design, 1942) 44.
49 Kentgens-Craig, 143.
50 Jordy, 499.
51 Author’s visit to Gropius House (January 8, 2007).
The Architects Collaborative

A frequent assertion in histories of Walter Gropius is that his influence on architecture owed less to his actual built works than to his role as educator and propagandist. As he had shown at the GSD, Gropius was a strong believer in the collaborative design ethic, and he put this philosophy into practice in the fall of 1945 by helping to establish The Architects Collaborative (TAC). The founding members of TAC included John Harkness (GSD ’41), Norman and Jean Bodman Fletcher (GSD ’44), Peggy and Louis McMillen, and Benjamin Thompson (Figure 6). Gropius described his idea of the collaborative ethic in his book, *Scope of Total Architecture*: “I felt that the art of building is contingent upon the co-ordinated teamwork of a band of active collaborators whose co-operation symbolizes the co-operative organism of what we call society.” At TAC, this philosophy translated into a horizontal integration of office responsibilities, with each member expected to perform in generalist capacities rather than acting as specialists. Profit-sharing and multilateral design decisions fostered a democratic atmosphere.

Among TAC’s first projects were private houses, and master plans for Black Mountain College in North Carolina and Hua Tung Christian University of Shanghai. The firm’s breakthrough commission came as the result of a design competition for the public middle school in Attleboro, Massachusetts. TAC members continued to be active in the GSD as professors, and by 1948 were involved in several projects for Harvard

52 Alofsin, 12.
University itself. These included a classroom and student union for the business school, a graduate library for Arts and Sciences, and a new building for the GSD. Other projects focused on the landscaping of Harvard Yard, and planning for campus expansion and the surrounding communities.

The Graduate Center

TAC soon became involved in a project that grew out of a third-year studio assignment led by Gropius, in which students were challenged to plan and design student housing within Harvard’s strict building budget. In June of 1948, Harvard commissioned TAC to design seven dormitories and a student center that would form a new heart for the law school campus, located north of Harvard Yard (Figure 7). The commissioning of TAC represented somewhat of a leap of faith for Harvard administrators, who had to overcome the objections of traditionalist trustees and alumni and put aside Harvard’s longstanding relationships with established Boston architects. However, President Conant felt that choosing TAC would be a concrete demonstration of Harvard’s progressive values, and he had the support of Dean Paul Buck, an admirer of modern architecture.55 Harvard received attention for this unprecedented move, and for the unusual fact that its own students had been involved in such a major undertaking. As a November 1948 article in Architectural Record stated, “not only is this a rare example of a university in America turning to its own teaching staff for its own development, but

55 Isaacs, 264.
there was also participation in the making of preliminary studies by third-year graduate students.”  

The project, which was to be called the Graduate Center, was promoted as a low-cost solution to Harvard’s desperate need for graduate student housing, an area that had been all but neglected during the interwar undergraduate housing campaign. A 1948 report by the Harvard Foundation, titled “Tradition and Tomorrow: Harvard Graduate Student Center,” articulated the university’s goal with respect to the Graduate Center, proclaiming that “Harvard’s tradition of the well-rounded man applies to the scholar pursuing advanced studies quite as much as to the undergraduate. Now Harvard can offer an environment for advanced study that will add the requisite physical comforts and social stimulation to the intellectual process of building the well-rounded man.”

Jarvis Field was the site chosen for the new campus. Located north of Holmes Field and adjacent to the law school’s first home at Langdell Hall (Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge, 1907) (Figure 8), Jarvis Field was the home of Harvard’s football team and, after WWII, the site of federally-funded temporary housing for students veterans (demolished in the summer of 1949 to make way for the Graduate Center). The budget for the Graduate Center was projected at three million dollars, with the Harvard Corporation donating the land and providing funding for the student center and maintenance. Funds for the seven dormitories were solicited in small amounts from alumni; apparently, this was part of President Conant’s strategy to minimize donor

constraints on such an unconventional project.\textsuperscript{59} Students themselves demonstrated their support through a fundraising drive in the spring of 1950.\textsuperscript{60} 

Dean Hudnut argued eloquently for the appropriateness of the Graduate Center’s modernist aesthetic for Harvard, writing:

…the notion that Harvard’s tradition is in some way integral to the eighteenth century and can be expressed in Georgian terms [is an] illusion… the great periods of Harvard surely lie in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries… the three buildings, Massachusetts [1720], University [Charles Bulfinch, 1815], and Sever [H.H. Richardson, 1880], representing respectively the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century, have an unmistakable harmony which arises, not from materials, proportion, and decorative trim, but from a unity of intention and method. In each, the pattern is developed from the thing to be done and from the idea to be expressed. That is the satisfying tradition of the Harvard Yard (Figure 9).\textsuperscript{61}

Under Gropius’ guidance, Norman Fletcher was responsible for the design of the student center, Robert McMillan for the design of the seven dormitories, Louis McMillen for landscaping, and Benjamin Thompson for furnishing and interiors. Although designed for graduate students, from a programmatic standpoint the Graduate Center did not diverge from the basic layout and proportions deemed appropriate for modern undergraduate dormitories. The completed Graduate Center was a remarkable exposition of Bauhaus design principles adapted to the liberal institutional culture of an American university.

The Graduate Center comprises eight simple rectangular, flat-roofed buildings dispersed around two courtyards. The long three-and-four story concrete-frame dormitory buildings—Story, Shaw, Holmes, Ames, Dane, Richards and Child Halls—are

\textsuperscript{59} Isaacs, 265.


clad in buff brick, set off by the darker maroon-colored brick of the foundations. The steel-frame student center, Harkness Commons, is clad in limestone and blue-glazed brick and encloses the main quadrangle with its gentle arc. Circulation patterns follow the long axis of the buildings, with entry and exit points located at both ends. In the seven dormitories, rooms are laid out along double-loaded corridors (Figure 10). A limestone-panel curtain wall encloses the communal bathroom wings, which are treated as angled extrusions from the main rectangular volume of the dormitory slab. Steel casement windows (opening vertically) extend almost the full width of the eighteen-foot structural bay. Stair stacks located at each end of the dormitory slab are illuminated by simple curtain walls of wire-glass set in a geometrically patterned steel frame; these curtain walls extend the full building height (30’8” for three-story dorms). In two instances, two dormitory slabs are set perpendicular to each other and connected by a common stair stack enclosed in a glass and limestone-panel curtain wall (Figure 11); the result is really one L-shaped dormitory building, making it possible to read the Graduate Center as a complex of five dormitories and one student center. The theme of transparency continues where entry bays are recessed into the dormitory slab, resulting in a second-story square volume projecting out over the ground plane and supported on concrete pilotis. Covered walkways floating on thin pilotis link the dormitories and student center and provide spatial definition within the quadrangle landscape. Three dormitories feature cantilevered balconies executed in sculptural concrete (Figure 12).

One of the driving concepts behind the Graduate Center’s design was to respond to the tradition of Harvard Yard by arranging the eight buildings in an irregular interlocking pattern around two quadrangles, conceived as smaller versions of the old
Harvard Yard. In siting the dormitories and student center in pin-wheel fashion around the two quads, and in sinking the principal quad four feet below grade, TAC aimed for what Gropius termed “a sequence of surprise effects in space”\(^{62}\) (Figure 13). TAC treated the outdoor space with equal consideration as the indoor space, and the way the low-scale buildings sit casually around the quadrangles creates a gentle enclosure that leaves the quadrangles—“outdoor rooms,” in TAC’s conception\(^{63}\)—with plenty of breathing room that encourages communication with the rest of the Harvard campus and the surrounding community. Extensive use of plate-glass windows, window-walls at entry bays, and continuation of paving stones from inside to outside all contribute to spatial flow (Figure 14).

In a subtle nod to contextualism, the Graduate Center’s buff brick was intended to recall the limestone of Langdell Hall, but also to alleviate the Graduate Center’s rigid horizontal massing (Figure 15). A touch of Bauhaus flair was added through the use of brilliant color in two places: first, the curved façade of Harkness Commons was accentuated by thick bands of blue glazed brick, and second, the projecting metal-clad bays on Holmes and Child were painted red and green (Figure 16). Window frames and mullions throughout the complex were painted a dark grey, perhaps in imitation of aluminum, a more expensive building material at the time. Attention to color is just one indication of TAC’s environmental approach to design, a direct descendent of the Bauhaus aesthetic of total art (the Bauhaus was itself the inheritor of the 19th-century

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German artistic conceit of total atmospheric effect, or *gesamtkunstwerk*). TAC designed every aspect of the Graduate Center, from the center-roof drainage system, to the dormitory beds, desks, and closets, to the cafeteria trays in Harkness Commons (Figure 17). In his book *The Struggle for Modernism: Architecture, Landscape Architecture and City Planning at Harvard*, scholar Anthony Alofsin writes that “the modernist position increasingly became one in which the architect dominated all other design fields.”

Art was an important component of the design concept for the Graduate Center, and Gropius planned to commission his former Bauhaus colleagues to create original works to install inside Harkness Commons and outside in the quadrangles. The art became a sticking point for university administrators, who felt that it did not merit the extra expense. They might also have been wary of modern abstract art’s political connotations. Gropius’ persuasive rhetoric finally prevailed, and Harvard commissioned six artists to create art for the Graduate Center. Josef Albers designed a brick fireplace-cum-mural for Harkness Commons; Jean Arp created three-dimensional murals in cut plywood for the dining room; Herbert Bayer designed a polychrome tile mural as a backdrop for the sculptural concrete ramp in Harkness, as well as a plastic-and-aluminum space divider; Gyorgy Kepes created fourteen abstract world maps for the sunken quad-level lounge; Joan Miró created a tile replica of one of his abstract murals to grace the dining room wall; and sculptor Richard Lippold designed a twenty-foot

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65 Alofsin, 13.
stainless steel sculpture, titled “Pylon,” for the quadrangle in front of Harkness (Figure 18).

**A Community of Scholars**

The Graduate Center was envisioned as a “genuine social and recreation center” for the dispersed community of graduate students, only one fourth of whom lived on campus in 1948. The total residential capacity of the Center was 575 students, 386 of these law students and 189 arts and sciences students. The students were distributed throughout the seven dormitory buildings in 223 single rooms and 176 double rooms, which were designed with a movable partition for flexibility and privacy (Figure 19). The room dimensions were small (single rooms measured 8’9” by 12’6” and double rooms measured 17’11” by 12’6”), again to encourage students to use the floor lounges, balconies and student center, but also due to budget constraints (Figure 20). In fact, the Graduate Center represented one-quarter of the cost-per-student typical of the older Harvard dorms, approximately $5,000 per student. Each dorm had one communal bathroom per floor. Harkness Commons offered lounges and student mailboxes, and a second-floor dining hall for 1,200 people eating in two shifts (Figure 21).

Conant expressed the university’s hopes for the Graduate Center in the 1950 report, “Tradition and Tomorrow,” proclaiming “future scientists, architects, lawyers, engineers and teachers should all be mixed up together. There should be ample opportunity for professional groups to talk shop but there should also be occasions when

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such groups would fuse and a different type of informal education take place.”\textsuperscript{69} The Graduate Center was an initial success; the university community and the general public reacted well, if not enthusiastically, to its clean lines and modest character. The Center’s economy of construction was the subject of admiration (the total project cost came in under the three million dollar budget), and critics made much of its state-of-the-art appearance and how it embodied the new concept of "breakfast table education."\textsuperscript{70} One student had a direct run-in with the Center’s modernity, as he unknowingly walked into a glass partition in Harkness.\textsuperscript{71} Although students complained about the small room size, they blamed the war before they blamed TAC. In contrast, veteran students may have welcomed the Graduate Center rooms as a step up from military accommodations. The austerity of the complex certainly reflected the economic conditions of the period (in particular, the high cost of materials and shortage of skilled labor), but it was also appropriate to Harvard’s postwar policy of democratized enrollment and its new emphasis on the substance over the form of education. At the Center’s dedication ceremony on October 6, 1950, President Conant observed that “…these buildings can be dedicated in confidence that they will be used for many decades.”\textsuperscript{72}


\textsuperscript{72} Harvard Alumni Bulletin (vol. 53, no. 2, October 14, 1950) 59.
The Graduate Center in Context

In the October 25, 1948 issue of the New York Times, columnist Nancy MacLennan wrote that the design of the Graduate Center “is sensitive and as modern as atomic energy, yet, recognized withal, as being replete with the ‘quality of Harvard.’”\textsuperscript{73} Although it was not the first modernist building on campus (this title went to Henry Shepley’s Lamont Library of 1949), its prestigious design pedigree and high visibility as a complex of eight buildings amounted to a statement of Harvard’s positive acceptance of the modernist aesthetic. Positioned by Hudnut as a faithful expression of the logical progression of Harvard’s architectural character, the design of the Graduate Center attempted to knit together spatial and material aspects of the surrounding buildings and landscape, but to ultimately transform them through an abstract vocabulary and objective statements of form, space, and use.

The Bauhaus-inflected aesthetic of the Graduate Center was on its face a radical departure from the historical and historicizing styles to be found on Harvard’s campus; apart from MacLennan’s optimistic appraisal, however, the Graduate Center has never been recognized as a successful modernist expression of Harvard’s architectural identity. Scholars and the public debate the aesthetic merit of the Graduate Center, comparing it unfavorably to Gropius’ other works and to more widely appreciated modernist buildings of the period. Many argue that its visual connections to the spirit of Harvard Yard are too subtle to be appreciated, or that they are entirely lacking. Finally, there is a consensus (even among personal fans of the Graduate Center) that the Graduate Center’s candid economy of materials and execution prevented it from stirring hearts and responding adequately to the grand symbolic statements made by campus landmarks of the 18\textsuperscript{th} and

\textsuperscript{73} MacLennan, Nancy, “Harvard Decides to ‘Build Modern’.” (New York Times, October 25, 1948) 25.
19th centuries. Perhaps the Graduate Center did not go far enough in its articulation of modernist principles to distinguish itself within the campus setting; ultimately, the cool, industrial sensibility associated with the early architecture of Gropius and the Bauhaus has never enjoyed broad appeal in America, especially when compared to the works of modernists like Alvar Aalto and Eero Saarinen, whose fluid formal vocabulary has been regarded as humane and accessible.

The question of appropriateness is implicit in Hudnut’s argument for the Graduate Center’s architectural merits, and if the Harvard community generally was not convinced of the Graduate Center’s beauty, they more readily accepted its new role within the institution. In this way, the appearance of the Graduate Center was appropriate to the extent that people felt it served Harvard’s modern pedagogical values. Finally, the fundamental significance of the Graduate Center’s architecture lies in the fact that it grew quite literally out of the fertile soil of Harvard’s own intellectual resources, the students and professors of the newly modernized GSD.

The Graduate Center in the 21st Century

Almost six decades later, the Graduate Center is showing its age and it seems the Harvard community has all but forgotten its rich history. Until just three years ago, the eight-building complex was still largely intact, except for minor conversion of space for kitchens in the dormitory buildings and a computer lab in Harkness. The original dormitory furniture and bathroom hardware were mostly present (Figure 22), the steel sash windows on “the Hark” (as it is known among students) were all original, and the
interior still had many of the original art pieces. Sadly, though, maintenance has not kept up with pace of the Graduate Center’s general deterioration.

In the summer of 2006, law school administrators hired architectural conservators to perform an exterior conditions survey on the dormitory buildings. The most serious conditions the survey revealed were considerable displacement at the corners of the brick parapet walls along the dormitory rooflines, concrete spalling, and separation of the building joint between limestone connectors and brick dormitories (Figure 23). Dormitory windows were in good condition, although not original; the original windows were replaced in 1996 with thermally insulated windows that replicated the casement style, but not the thin profile, of the originals. The new metal windows are a brownish-red color similar to that of the foundation brick. Apparently, this choice of color was based on a 1989 paint analysis that identified a “deep brownish brick red” as the original paint color for the steel sash. However, the recent paint analysis of the dormitories’ basement windows, still original, revealed that the intended paint color for the steel sash was actually a dark grey. As posited earlier, the choice of grey might have reflected a preference for the appearance of aluminum.

New Standards of Performance

The Graduate Center still serves as the center of the Law School campus, but administrators and students are losing patience with its shortcomings. Most serious of

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74 The author was a summer intern for the conservation firm and participated in the conditions survey, whereupon she got the bright idea for a thesis.
76 Cite 1986 report here (see Xerox).
77 Author’s interview with Charles Sullivan, Cambridge Historical Commissioner: October 29, 2006.
all is the widespread perception of the complex’s run-down physical appearance and dated style; indeed, this is a common threat to the contemporary viability of modern architecture, a theme that is discussed at length in the next chapter. This negative perception flows partly from the undeniable evidence of the Graduate Center’s deterioration, and partly from institutional culture. Harvard Law School proclaims itself to be the best law school in the country, and, naturally, is concerned with projecting a competitive image. Institutional facilities have become an important component of this competitive image for practically all American colleges and universities in recent years, but more for their promise of providing interior and non-architectural amenities (like 24-hour computer labs, and patio tables and chairs from which to enjoy lattés) than for their promise of good architecture. Harvard Law School Dean Elena Kagan puts it this way: “Harvard Law School offers its students the best faculty, the most varied courses, and the most extensive library in the world. It is vital that we also provide the best facilities.”

Practically speaking, Harvard Law School is in need of more and better facilities, but its actions to date demonstrate that this driven, future-oriented agenda leaves little room for consideration of institutional heritage (i.e., the historical significance and integrity of the Graduate Center). In 1994, HLS received a $13 million gift to begin a campus expansion program. The campaign was launched with the construction of a new facility. This new facility, Hauser Hall (Kallmann, McKinnell & Wood), was designed as a large rectangle, and was to be plopped down like a plug between the Graduate Center and Holmes Field, to which it opens southward. Fortunately, as a result of informal negotiations with the Cambridge Historical Commission (which has unofficial

jurisdiction over Harvard’s historic resources), HLS was persuaded to modify the scale and footprint of Hauser. The compromise resulted in a smaller building with a semi-circular footprint, thus alleviating the wall effect and lightly acknowledging the Graduate Center.

A Critical Case for Preservation

In 2004, HLS launched a full renovation of Harkness Commons, the gently curving two-story student center building long regarded by the HLS community as a small, dark, and depressing space. In a gesture to Harvard’s informal agreement with the Cambridge Historical Commission, HLS hired a preservation architect as consultant during the planning phase. The architect submitted a comprehensive list of recommendations for interior alterations that would respect the quality of space, its colors, textures and light. Unfortunately, HLS was not bound in any way by these recommendations, as Harvard’s agreement with the CHC does not extend beyond a building’s façade. The goals of the renovation were to improve lighting and circulation, provide new, more comfortable furniture, and update the wall treatments. Tsoi/Kobus & Associates, the architects responsible for the renovation, achieved the stated goals by transforming the Hark’s interior into a slightly more sophisticated version of a Starbucks. To be fair, however, the details of the renovation were largely predetermined by Dean Kagan, who regards the old Hark as “an above-ground tunnel for light-allergic people.”

79 Author’s interview with Charles Sullivan.
80 Gewertz, Ken, “At the Law School, A Building in a Field of its Own.” (Harvard University Gazette, March 25, 1994).
Some details of the Harkness renovation show just how far the Gropius aesthetic has fallen out of favor with its present-day audience. The original granite “crazy pavers” (called so for their irregular shapes and eccentric pattern) were removed from the ground floor level, where they had extended the length of the curved main concourse and continued outside to serve as patios. They were replaced with a cream-colored floor of limestone pavers, laid in a pattern that totally negates the Hark’s graceful curve. Lighting levels were raised to obtrusive levels, considering the Hark’s low ceiling height and ample glazing. All but three of the original artworks were removed: of the pieces removed, two were donated to the Fogg Museum and the rest were either sold or put in storage. The remaining pieces include Josef Albers’ fireplace-cum-mural (which was actually restored from a state of obscurity within a makeshift computer lab), Joan Miró’s tile mural, and Herbert Bayer’s tile mural behind the concrete ramp. Bayer’s mural of blue and black tiles was concealed with removable upholstered tiles reminiscent of an airplane interior, but only after CHC’s strong objections to the mural’s slated demolition. “Contemporary” art was hung in the lounges and dining room, and it is the author’s opinion that this art will stand the test of time even more feebly than mid-century abstraction (Figure 24).

To its credit, however, HLS did provide for the restoration of certain interior details, like the concrete ramp and its carved wooden handrail with nickel-plated supports. Exterior rehabilitation was also carried out; the limestone facing panels were repaired or replaced, concrete was patched, and the original windows were replaced with thermally insulated windows of grey metal. The replacement windows resulted in a thicker mullion profile, similar to the replacement windows for the dormitories. HLS
decided to replace three existing plate glass windows along the Hark’s quadrangle façade with doors, a change approved by the CHC as a means of improving circulation and user appeal (Figure 25).  

The Harkness renovation project crystallizes the difficulties inherent in unifying the increasingly polar concerns of preservation and prestige on the college or university campus. Tsoi/Kobus & Associates called the Harkness project a “revitalization,” and it seems that HLS students are unanimous about the project’s success in transforming the student center into a more inviting, user-friendly space. Tsoi/Kobus nominated the project for the 2006 Cambridge Preservation Awards, and Harvard Law School takes credit for a preservation-sensitive job. While major changes to Harkness’ exterior appearance were appropriately mitigated, the new interior aesthetic is an inadequate replacement for the quality of art and design that existed previously. It is arguable that Harkness Commons has lost its integrity to these changes.

### Protecting the Graduate Center’s Integrity

Harvard Law School is poised to begin a second phase of the Graduate Center’s comprehensive update, and the values driving this proposal get at the heart of the Graduate Center’s meaning as a work of architecture. Specifically, HLS wants to renovate the dormitories to accommodate suite-style living by combining multiple single rooms into large double rooms, thereby decreasing the total occupancy per floor and reconfiguring the straightforward circulation (i.e., socialization) pattern. This change would entail eliminating the communal bathrooms, which contain some of the Center’s

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82 Author’s interview with Charles Sullivan.
finest architectural detail (Figure 26). While the proposal is still in the planning phases, drawings exist for a mock-up of the proposed changes; apparently, the mock-up construction has not taken place yet (Figure 27). According to HLS’s vice dean for physical planning, the school has trouble filling the dorms to capacity because of a “soft housing market” and students’ negative reactions to the small rooms and run-down appearance, inside and out.84

Indeed, the Graduate Center dorms have suffered from a very poor reputation among students for at least several academic generations.85 Students complain that the dorms look and feel like barracks (ironically, since that is exactly what the dorms replaced in 1949), and that the interiors are stark, dark and shabby. Few students appreciate the windows that stretch the full width of their rooms, letting in perhaps more light than the average traditional window in a comparably sized older dorm room. The dorms are not air-conditioned, and window units are impossible to install due to the vertically-opening casement windows. Most grievous to students is the inconvenience of the communal bathrooms. This became a serious logistical problem after Harvard Law School went co-ed in 1953.86 As floors became co-ed, bathrooms did not, and this means that students have to go upstairs or downstairs to use the appropriate bathroom depending on the semester. So much for functionalism.

And how has the Graduate Center fared as the “community of scholars” envisioned by its creators and supporters? In practice, it did not amount to a truly mixed, interdisciplinary community of students, and this is because law school students have

84 Author’s e-mail interview with Daniel Meltzer, HLS vice dean for physical planning.
85 Author’s interviews with past residents of the Graduate Center, summer and fall 2006.
always been relegated to five of the seven dorms (Story, Shaw, Holmes, Ames, and Dane), and arts and sciences students to the two remaining dorms (Richards and Child). Originally, three of the seven dorms were intended to house arts and sciences students, but due to the fact that major funding came from HLS alumni, it was decided to give over only two dorms for the other disciplines. A 1950 editorial in the Harvard Crimson lamented this change:

The men who direct the Graduate Center plead accounting complications as the reason for the almost complete segregation of lawyers and arts and sciences students into separate dormitories. Perhaps a greater effort could have cleared up these complications before the opening of the Center, but they can certainly be straightened out in time for next year’s redistribution of rooms. Though there is already an opportunity for interschool contact over the plastic food trays and modernistic armchairs of Harkness Commons, dining halls are notoriously cliquish places. It is in the corridors and the communal washrooms that minds are most likely to rub, or bump together, and it is there that they should be mixed.

If the law school students ultimately missed out in the homogenous distribution of disciplines, the arts and sciences students did not: it is within the two arts and sciences dorms, Richards and Child, that the community vision has been most nearly approached. This is because students come from all disciplines within the arts and sciences; on any given floor, a paleobotanist will be neighbors with an architect, a historian, a government major, and a psychologist. Residents of Richards who share the typical complaints about the Graduate Center’s failings agree on one point: that their dorm provides a congenial atmosphere in which it is easy to make friends and socialize, and, being Harvard students, to “talk shop.” In other words, the communitarian, “barracks” style of

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89 This is a sample of the actual makeup of the 2nd floor of Richards Hall during the 2004-2005 academic year; the author’s friends were among the residents.
rooms lined up along a long narrow corridor actually has distinct advantages over more private living styles.

HLS’s proposal to update the living style in five of the seven dorms threatens to further splinter the Graduate Center’s integrity. Admittedly, the changes would not alter the exterior of the dormitories, but the historical record clearly demonstrates the equal significance of the interiors and their inextricability from the exteriors. First of all, the integrity of the complex as a group of eight buildings would be compromised by the proposed changes because of the unfortunate fact of Richards and Child’s separate administration under the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Presumably, the changes proposed by HLS extend only to the five dormitories under their control. However, the fact that the changes would affect only the five dorms in which the community ideal expressed in the plan has never been fully realized amounts to a less serious threat to the conceptual integrity of those five dorms. If similar changes were ever proposed for Richards or Child, one could make a stronger argument for the integrity of the plan as an expression of realized architectural intention and historical significance.

Who among the Harvard community is advocating for the Graduate Center? Apparently nobody. Residents are often surprised to find out that their dorm was built by a famous architect, and of those who do know the history, the consensus is that the Graduate Center represents the worst of Gropius’ oeuvre. As the Woodberry Poetry Room debacle suggests, Harvard only mobilizes on behalf of its iconic modern architecture (foremost in this category is Le Corbusier’s 1963 Carpenter Center, which is maintained to museum standards). Even the GSD seems to have forgotten that period of its history embodied by the Graduate Center. When asked if the Graduate Center ever
made its way into the GSD’s curriculum, a recent GSD graduate described how he had participated in a studio project experimenting with the incorporation of digital technology into the Graduate Center. According to the student, the studio project treated the Graduate Center more as a template for new design ideas than as a historical artifact, although discussions of the complex’s architectural and conceptual value informed the studio’s work to a certain degree.  

The major obstacle to a constituency for the Graduate Center is Harvard’s institutional dynamic, alluded to in the very beginning of this paper. Harvard operates in a highly decentralized way, with each school acting and making decisions with a substantial assumption of autonomy. In rare instances will the President or deans weigh in on affairs not affecting the entire university. This style of operating has serious consequences for physical planning and campus growth, and it is often the case that major construction or alteration projects (or minor, as in the case of the Woodberry Poetry room) are kept under wraps until the last possible moment. Of course, Harvard has the right to protect itself from public scrutiny, but this covert attitude allows misguided projects to go forward-- projects that could be improved by the commentary and participation of Harvard’s own experts. It is unfortunate that the Graduate Center was conceived and executed in an era of collaboration between university administrators and university talent, and is now effectively being dismantled by a total absence of this cooperative spirit.

When will Harvard begin to think in terms of a university-wide architectural identity that goes beyond images of ivy-covered red brick and the Gothic spires of

90 Author’s interview with architect Daniel DeSousa, GSD ’05.  
91 Author’s interview with David Fixler.
Memorial Hall? As its mid-century architecture ages, will it be accepted into the symbolic canon? Will preservation become an acceptable form of university “expansion,” fitting within the rubric of a sustainable campus?
Figure 1  Model of the proposed Graduate Center, 1948. (Courtesy of Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design)
Figure 2  Design Fundamentals student projects, 1951. (Pearlman, “Hudnut’s Other Modernism”: 473)
Figure 3  View of Dessau Bauhaus (Gropius, 1925-6) showing, from left to right, workshop block, classrooms and community facilities, and dormitory block. (Jordy, “The Aftermath of the Bauhaus in America”)
Figure 4  The Gropius House on Baker Bridge Road, Lincoln, MA; spiral stair to roof deck. (Photos by author)
Figure 5  First floor plan of the Gropius house, 1939. (Courtesy of Gropius House museum, Historic New England)
Figure 6  Founding members of TAC, from left: Sarah Harkness, Jean Bodman Fletcher, Robert McMillan, Norman Fletcher, Walter Gropius, John Harkness, Benjamin Thompson, and Louis McMillen. (Nerdinger, Winfried, ed. *The Walter Gropius Archive*)
Figure 7  Top: Map of Harvard Law School campus; the Graduate Center is the complex at the top of the map, and Harvard Yard (not pictured) is south of the Science Center (bottom right).  
(http://www.law.harvard.edu/about/map_hls.php) Bottom: 3-D site model showing relation to Langdell Hall and Holmes Field. (Architectural Forum, December 1950: pp. 61-71)
Figure 8  Langdell Hall (Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge, 1907).
(http://www.law.harvard.edu/about/tour/langdell.php)
Figure 9  From top: Massachusetts Hall (1720), University Hall (Bulfinch, 1815), Sever Hall (H.H. Richardson, 1880). (http://www.coneill.com/library/newsletter/viii_2/viii-2f1.jpg; http://modular.math.washington.edu/pics/ascent4_pics/February01/18Feb01/dscf1853.jpg; Library of Congress online database)
Figure 10 From top: Aerial view of the recently completed Graduate Center; rendering showing Harkness as a box with no curve (*L’architecture d’aujourd hui*, December 1951: pp. 41-48); site plan showing plan and program (*Architectural Forum*, November 1948: pp. 15).
Figure 11  Wire-glass window wall with concrete floor slab visible behind; Glass and limestone connector between Holmes and Ames Halls. (Photos by author)
Figure 12  Clockwise from top left: covered walkway between Story and Holmes Halls (photo by author); historic view of Harkness-Child walkway (photo by Fred Stone, courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Commission); concrete cantilevered balconies on west façade of Ames Hall (photo by author); construction photo showing Richards balconies, ca. 1940 (courtesy of Loeb Library).
Figure 13  Top: Gropius explaining his design for the Graduate Center (Courtesy of Loeb Library). Bottom: model of the proposed Graduate Center, view from northeast. Four of the seven dormitories were only built to three stories. (Photo by Walter R. Felischer, courtesy of the Cambridge Historical Commission)
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Figure 15 Another subtle contextual element is this brick sill detail, which is to be found in Cambridge’s historic architecture. (Photo by author)
Figure 16  From top: blue-glazed brick bands on Harkness; dark-green metal panels on Holmes; red metal panels on Child (dates unknown). (Courtesy of Loeb Library)
Figure 17  From top: cafeteria tray designed for the Harkness Commons dining room; concrete cantilevered ramp leading to the second-floor dining room. (Nerdinger, Winfried, ed. *The Walter Gropius Archive*)
Figure 18  Top: Juan Miró’s mural in canvas, before a tile replica replaced it; students dining in Harkness (courtesy of Loeb Library). Bottom: Richard Lippold’s “Pylon” in its original location in front of Harkness (*L’architecture d’aujourd'hui*, December 1951: 41-48).
Figure 19  Top left: typical single room, divided by curtain; top right: 3-D axonometric model of flexible single-double; bottom: single room with solid walls, showing furniture arrangement. (Courtesy of Loeb Library)
Figure 20  Floor lounges giving out onto balconies. TAC designed all fabric treatments, including curtains. (Courtesy of Loeb Library)
Figure 21  Interiors of Harkness Commons, from top: the main lobby with “crazy pavers” and ramp leading to the dining hall; wood-paneled fireplace lounge; lounge looking out over main quad. (Courtesy of Loeb Library)
Figure 22  Original hardware in the sturdy communal bathrooms. (Photo by author)
Figure 23  Clockwise from top: rust jacking causing brick displacement at parapet walls; sealant failure and separation of building joint; concrete spalling at coping above pilotis. (Photos by author)
Figure 24  The results of Harkness’ interior renovation. Latte, anyone? (Courtesy of Tsoi/Kobus Associates)
Figure 25  Top: historic views of Harkness’ main façade with original mullion profiles; bottom: the renovated Hark has new windows with slightly thicker mullion profiles, and, on the quad level, doors where there used to be windows. (Courtesy of Loeb Library; photo by author)
Figure 26  Window-walls of striated glass provide a light edge to monolithic limestone facades on the bathroom blocks. (Photos by author)
HLS’ proposed changes would combine five single rooms to make two spatiuous doubles; window openings would not be altered. See following page for original floor plan.
2. Historic Preservation and the Modern Movement: a philosophical reconciliation?

In the course of her studies and training, every historic preservation professional comes to know the field’s myth of origin, which is that HP was born in the 1960s in the path of a rapacious modernist bulldozer. This myth is useful in recalling the passion and urgency that characterized the nascent movement in cities like New York, but the dust has long since settled and what remains is the built legacy of those bulldozers. With the revelation of modern architecture’s eligibility to be counted among America’s enduring historic monuments, historic preservation is faced with reconciling its fundamental values system, which embraces tradition and historical continuity, with the values embodied in modern architecture, including radical departure from historical models, material and social experimentalism, and audacious future-oriented optimism.92

In his 1902 book, titled *The Modern Cult of Monuments*, Austrian historian and cultural minister Alois Riegl evoked Franz Kafka’s parable of the man on the road—simultaneously pushed forward by the force of history and pushed backward by the force of the future—in his consideration of the role of historical and artistic monuments in modern society. Riegl identified the temporal contradictions implied by any exercise of historical consciousness, suggesting that by the turn of the 20th century this had become a condition of modern life. A century later, historians and scholars writing about the peculiar relationship between historic preservation and the architecture of the Modern Movement revisit Kafka’s parable, suggesting that it “may be applied to the shifting ground of architectural history and conservation, upon which modernism is currently

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crossing backwards across the front line of newness, progress and anticipation towards the realm of historicism and memory."\textsuperscript{93}

There is a consensus in professional fields concerned with history, cultural heritage, art and design that the Modern Movement, as it became constituted in art, architecture and material culture between and after the two world wars in America, continues to exert ideological and formal influence into the present day.\textsuperscript{94} In the late 1950s and 1960s, modernism (I shall use this term in association with “modern architecture,” i.e. architecture in the spirit of the Modern Movement) moved into the mainstream in a highly visible way with major urban renewal projects that demonstrated in built form modernist principles of urban planning and design: mechanized technology in the service of public health and welfare, efficiency of systems and materials, and rational distribution of services and served populations.\textsuperscript{95} The conflation of the urban renewal initiative, which was conceived of as a tool to “fix” the problem of substandard urban living conditions and economic stagnation, with the entirety of the goals and methods of the Modern Movement, is an important historical footnote that bears on the complex relationship between historic preservation and the moving target of the more recent historic resources it attempts to protect. Whole populations harbor bitter memories of urban renewal, and regard the impersonal towers of the “projects” and the barren civic and commercial plazas as a symbol of the Modern Movement’s anti-city, misanthropic agenda.

As early as the close of the 1980s, when its architectural products were reaching maturity, European and American scholars and professionals began to revisit the Modern Movement in terms of its history, significance, and relevant lessons for architectural culture today. Their efforts represented a considerable step forward given the climate of post-modern cynicism, which delighted in calling out the movement’s innumerable failures. This scholarly reexamination succeeded in rectifying the Modern Movement’s image by focusing on the insuperable problems of the 20th-century condition—inadequate housing, rampant industrialization, and urban disintegration—and by concluding that it alone stood out as the serious intellectual and cultural movement that actively attempted to solve these problems (whether or not it succeeded). Christian Norberg Schulz wrote in his groundbreaking theoretical text, *Genius Loci*, that “… the point of departure of the modern movement was profoundly meaningful, and…its development showed an ever more complete understanding of the environmental problem.”

If this scholarship constituted somewhat of a rediscovery of the Modern Movement’s virtue, it also uncovered the acute challenge of addressing in today’s terms an architecture so charged with social meaning. Preservation professionals recognized a parallel challenge in mounting evidence that modern architecture behaved differently over time than traditional buildings; it appeared to “show its age” in unexpected,

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sometimes aesthetically unacceptable ways. Thus, the distinction between what modern architecture sought to accomplish and what it actually accomplished --its promises were as much social as technical-- became the dilemma of the preservationist’s approach to this newest of historic resources.

Modern architecture’s material nature continues to be the crux of practical philosophies aimed at its preservation, and, despite arguments for its fundamental similarity to traditional building, professional practice has tended to treat it differently by privileging the intangible over the tangible. The logic of this attitude is informed by the conditions of modern architecture’s advent, which include the “institutionalization of modern construction,” a result of the distancing of design conception from actual production, the increasing specificity of building programs in response to rising expectations for specialized performance, and, finally, the transformation of the art object (and the architectural object) through visual and physical duplication ad infinitum. Additionally, building construction technology literally exploded in the postwar years, resulting in a higher rate and volume of construction than in all other eras of human history combined. The sheer ubiquity of modern architecture thus challenges the notion of value predicated on rarity, or “one-of-a-kindness.” Complementary to this notion of the dilute physical value of the modernist building is the valuation of artistic intention, or authorship, an attribute more accessible in the modernist building because of its relative youth and the high volume of documentary materials made possible by 20th-

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100 Ibid.
century communications technology. Contrary to the Ruskinian concept of historic
building fabric as near-sacred, considerations of a modernist building’s authenticity are
weighted towards the idea behind the architecture, and away from the architecture’s
physical quality of being.

What are the challenges unique to the physical conservation of a modernist
building? On the most basic level, material and functional obsolescence: the synthetic
and man-made building materials that characterized modern architecture proved to have a
shorter functional lifespan than traditional building materials, while some, especially
plastics, failed entirely. In the case of innovative applications of traditional materials,
design flaws often proved responsible for premature deterioration. Many “modern”
materials and systems went off the market quite quickly because of malfunction and rapid
deterioration, and are unavailable today; even if available, they would not be the
ethical choice in conscientious restoration work.

Understanding the attitude in which these materials and systems were applied is
crucial to a determination of the most appropriate conservation strategy. The
experimental application of technology was a powerful expression of the Modern
Movement’s desire to steer technology on a stricter course towards universal human
betterment. In many cases, modern materials and technology were heralded as
breakthrough solutions to problems ranging from efficient building construction on a
mass scale, to the execution of everyday domestic tasks. The most “modern” of materials
and systems promised low maintenance, or even no maintenance at all; as a result, many

102 McDonald, Susan, “Reconciling Authenticity and Repair in the Conservation of Modern Architecture.”
103 Henket, Hubert-Jan, “The Icon and the Ordinary.” Modern Movement Heritage. Alan Cunningham, ed.
modern buildings have not been properly maintained, a phenomenon that feeds into contemporary perceptions of modern architecture’s dated shabbiness.  

On a less technical level, modern architecture’s overhaul of conventional spatial conceptions accomplished nothing less than a new unity between interior and exterior (and between building and landscape). The details of building performance, most importantly program and service systems, were transformed from an afterthought into the forethought of architecture. Lighting, ventilation, storage, heating and cooling, etc., were conceived of as integral to the design of a building, and careful analysis of projected functions generated specific floor plans and programs. Modern architecture’s “total aesthetic” complicates the question of performance upgrades and adaptive reuse, and, more profoundly, challenges the exterior-oriented practice of preservation in America.  

Authenticity is easily compromised by changes to aspects of design like interior finishes, lighting levels, and floor plan, some of which will undoubtedly affect the exterior appearance of a modernist building.

Modern architecture’s supreme functionalism was rooted in much more than an objective faith in technology. “Function,” a broad concept to modernist architects, was ultimately cast as a sign of architecture’s ability to catalyze an improved material-social condition. Modern architecture’s avant-garde appearance was to a certain extent an honest byproduct of explicit social theories applied in architectonic form: economy of material and construction responded to the dual crisis of substandard and insufficient

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105 Prudon, Theodore, “Preserving MoMo-interiors in the USA: to be or not to be that is the question.” *DOCOMOMO Journal*, vol. 22. May 2000): 45.

housing for the majority of people, the open plan symbolized a democratic ordering of space and use, and the aestheticizing of the industrial heralded spiritual redemption for the industrial-capitalist regime. This was a tall order for any architecture, and in the end, modern architecture failed to deliver on its utopian vision. Thus, the overarching challenge in preserving modern architecture is to overcome the entrenched image of its social and technical obsolescence.

The international preservation community has addressed this issue with increasing sincerity, treating it as an opportunity to reevaluate some long-held principles. Beginning in the late 1980s, members of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) began to identify a need for more flexible criteria in defining cultural and heritage resources. Their efforts to reformulate the traditional criteria to reflect greater conceptual diversity resulted in the *Nara Document on Authenticity*,107 sponsored by the World Heritage Organization and presented in Nara, Japan in November of 1994. The *Nara Document* states that “all judgments about values attributed to cultural properties as well as the credibility of related information sources may differ from culture to culture, and even within the same culture [author’s italics]. It is thus not possible to base judgments of values and authenticity within fixed criteria.” The *Nara Document* builds on the definition of “authenticity” found in the Venice Charter (1964), but deliberately expands it:

…authenticity judgments may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information. Aspects of the sources may include form and design [author’s italics], materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors.

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Thus, criteria for authenticity are shifted to accommodate types of heritage that do not conform to the Western paradigm of linear history and cultural evolution. Embedded in the Nara language is an important implication for modernist heritage: that conceptual authenticity can come before material authenticity in ascribing value to a historic resource. Beyond its implications for ascribing value, the Nara Document opens up broader avenues for pursuing technical conservation strategies. For example, the clause in the Venice Charter stating that maintenance must take precedence over renovation is now understood to be more loosely interpreted in the case of modern architecture, where faulty building materials and patterns of improper or infrequent maintenance present serious monetary and performance-related limitations for restoration work. Some professionals feel strongly that the expanded criteria can reasonably be applied to modernist heritage in reflection of the fact that the modernist aesthetic was universally more successful than its physical execution. Others, notably professionals in Britain, still question the implied demotion of material authenticity.

In the U.S., preservationists have turned their attention more explicitly to the inadequacies of current preservation regulation in addressing our considerable depth of modern architecture. Docomomo-US (the U.S. arm of the International Working Party for the Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement, founded in 1988 in the Netherlands), and the General Services Administration of the federal government have taken the lead in advocacy, bringing the issue of modern architecture to the forefront of preservation discourse through

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publications, conferences and lecture series. In 2000, the GSA published a volume titled “Growth, Efficiency, and Modernism: GSA Buildings of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.” The purpose of the volume was to raise awareness about GSA’s own modern buildings—over one third of their entire building stock dates to between 1945 and 1975—and to provide a policy framework for ensuring appropriate planning for their care, restoration and/or adaptive reuse. The GSA is currently drafting a set of detailed guidelines for the evaluation and care of its modernist heritage, and these guidelines could be easily transferred to different institutional contexts.

In 2002, the Getty Foundation of Los Angeles launched its “Campus Heritage” grant program to encourage colleges and universities to survey, preserve and celebrate their architectural heritage as a means of engaging in sensitive, long-range campus planning. Modern architecture has figured prominently in several individual grant programs, notably the program at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, NY, which will be the focus of the last case study in this paper. In 2006, the Association for Preservation Technology chose to focus its annual conference on the issue of preserving modernist heritage. The conference, titled “Crossroads: where modern meets historic,” featured lectures and workshops examining issues ranging from the most technical (the installation of a new HVAC system in Philip Johnson’s Glass House), to the broadest (the challenge of replacing wood-veneer finishes at the United Nations complex when many of the original woods used are now listed as endangered species). Sadly, the National

Trust for Historic Preservation seems absent from the dialogue initiated by these other organizations. 112

Despite these efforts, the major obstacle to preserving modern architecture continues to be the 50-year legal threshold for conferring landmark status on buildings and sites. Only in the instance of exceptional significance may a building or site under 50 years of age be designated a landmark. Many people, not confined to advocates of modern architecture, feel that this threshold is arbitrary and leads to artificial designation or its opposite, the withholding of designation. In the absence of formalized criteria, and realizing that it may be a long time before national preservation legislation catches up to the temporal paradox, at present it seems that advocacy and technical conservation knowledge are the most effective preservation tools for modern architecture.

So the question of preserving modern architecture remains, indeed, a question, but scholars and practitioners have identified certain concepts useful in structuring strategic approaches. Among these concepts are number (i.e., how many of \( x \) are there?), technique, intention, performance, viability, and appeal. Intention in design and performance emerges as the strongest conceptual framework (as discussed above in relation to the Nara Document) and one that must be weighed against three factors: physical execution, performance over time, and contemporary perceptions of the building’s functional and cultural worth. 113

Importantly, intention in modern architecture does not always support the preservation paradigm. Hubert-Jan Henket, the founder of Docomomo, writes that


because “Modern Movement buildings of the 20th century are more vulnerable to the
influences of time,” they have the potential to reveal the central paradox of
preservation.\textsuperscript{114} In other words, architectural ephemerality in idea and execution does not
lend itself well to posterity. Numerous examples of “disposable”\textsuperscript{115} modern architecture
illustrate this paradox, for example Northern European sanatoria that were built for
sufferers of a specific disease, with the expectation that the disease would be eradicated
within a generation. Or, another example is the Lustron House, whose modular
enameled-steel panels were designed for easy replacement (the concept of “original
fabric” goes out the window here). The light-weight materials and flexibility built into
many modernist buildings, both high and low, contribute to an overall sense of
impermanence, and this characteristic becomes especially problematic in the myriad
examples of threatened “vernacular” modern architecture, where authorship is not a
factor in consideration.\textsuperscript{116}

Another facet of the intention argument, yet more problematic, is the belief that
the modern building, beyond resisting the idea of physical embalmment, must in its
intrinsic modernity resist becoming part of the larger historical narrative that any act of
preservation necessarily makes it a part of. This resistance is central to the argument
made by preservationist Wessel Reinink, who advocated for allowing the Zonnestraal
Sanatorium (Duiker & Bijvoet, 1928-30) in the Netherlands to fall into ruins, on the
premise that the building's original architect believed in the “most straightforward and

\textsuperscript{114} Henket, Hubert-Jan, Introduction. \textit{Modern Movement Heritage}. Alan Cunningham, ed. (DoCoMoMo.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Rappaport, Nina, “Preserving Modern Architecture in the US.” \textit{Modern Movement Heritage}. Alan
solution to a building problem, and that a building which has lost its use has lost its purpose. Moderate preservationists offer that, under certain circumstances, thorough documentation of a modernist building is the most appropriate kind of preservation—particularly if a building has never been well-liked, as in the case of Boston’s City Hall (Kallman, McKinnell & Knowles, 1963-68). This Brutalist behemoth, sitting in the midst of a sweeping plaza whose real estate value exerts increasing pressure on the site, will likely be demolished if city government follows through on its plan to move to a new waterfront location. The architecture of City Hall has only a handful of supporters: at best, most of the building’s users, and Bostonians in general, express indifference to its fate; at worst, they express a true abhorrence to its appearance, both exterior and interior. Docomomo has articulated the need to seriously consider the opinions and sensibilities of a building’s contemporary users as part of a realistic preservation strategy; in this attitude one can discern a bit of a defensive stance towards modern architecture’s fiercest detractors.

Adaptive reuse presents an acceptable solution for modernist buildings less often than for traditional buildings because of the delicate equilibrium of form, function, and meaning hinted at in the above case of the Zonnestraal Sanitorium. Adaptive reuse can be physically problematic because of the specificity of modernist building plans, and, conversely, because of what scholar Nina Rappaport dubs the “hypothetical flexibility of the free plan.” Both situations place constraints on the reordering of space, but it is the implication of such changes for the structure’s meaning that prove most problematic. To

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118 Walker, Adrian, “City Hall Takes the Fall” (*The Boston Globe*, December 14, 2006).
119 Rappaport, 61.
illustrate, a concrete factory building with a glass curtain wall and open floor plan will not absorb the changes necessary for conversion to office use without significant impairment of the architectural expression issuing from its original purpose.

Another constraint already discussed is the problem of obsolete materials; exact replicas, in materials and proportion, are often impossible or too costly to create within the confines of today’s building performance standards.\(^{120}\) British preservationist Andrew Saint put the matter quite bluntly when he wrote that preservationists “must be prepared to spend more to prop up [the modernist building] in its natural obsolescence.”\(^{121}\) In response to this challenge, many preservationists, particularly those who are also architects, feel that the preservation of modernist buildings can involve a higher degree of new materials and design. British preservationist Susan McDonald astutely draws the parallel between the traditional notion of “patina” and the modernist notion of “newness,” suggesting an inverted approach that “restores” a modernist patina, i.e. the pristine image of machined architecture, through replacement with newly minted materials and systems.\(^{122}\)

The issue of incorporating new materials and design springs directly from the heart of the argument that the Modern Movement is still alive and active in architectural culture today. If there exists a common spirit, as some believe, then in some sense any architect acting on a modernist building today will be merely extrapolating from the intentions of the original architect. If modernity is a timeless concept, which the Modern Movement argued it was, then present-day attempts to render modern architecture

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\(^{120}\) Rappaport, 62.

\(^{121}\) Saint, 22.

supremely functional once again (or, for the first time!) are merely a realization of original intention. In this sense, preservation should operate to push modern architecture back across that “front line of newness,” rather than to push it further back into the past in which we now perceive it to dwell. This is a difficult proposition that seems to leave little room for operating on traditional expectations of what preservation does for a building. The preservationist’s dilemma is to find a position somewhere between modern architecture’s soured reputation and those who make arguments for its fundamental “difference,” and there make the case for a building’s future. Obviously, if preservation is to deal at all with modernist heritage, it must be prepared to make the argument for its cultural value as an artifact that contains a very specific message, no matter how contrary to, or transcendent of, normative preservation practice.
3. Case Study 2: Baker House Dormitory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

In the mid-1990s, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found itself in a situation similar to Harvard’s (with the Woodberry Poetry Room) when it was faced with the renovation of another Aalto work, the Baker House Senior Dormitory (there are only four built Aalto designs in the entire country, and two of these are interiors). The difference between the universities’ attitudes towards their respective Aalto works could not be more striking. Whereas Harvard acted on expediency, excluding those voices within the institution that might have shed light on a proper course of action, MIT accomplished a preservation-sensitive renovation job by engaging architectural historians, conservators, preservation architects, students, alumni and Aalto experts in a dialogue about the building from the very beginning of the project. Indeed, MIT regarded this dialogue-cum-planning phase as the most important part of the entire project. The renovation of Baker House presents a model for the preservation of modern architecture, highlighting two important strategies in particular: the encouragement of a planning process generated by realistic, consensus-based decisions, and the application of theoretically-informed technical solutions to overcome functional and technological obsolescence.

MIT published a report in 1949 on its own institutional expansion, the first physical manifestation of which was Baker House (Baker House has been cited as the very first building erected in response to the postwar surge in American college and

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university enrollment\textsuperscript{125}). Scholar Michael Trencher has recognized a specific resonance of form and meaning in Baker House, using the following passage from the 1949 Lewis Report to support his interpretation that MIT’s physical expansion placed a new emphasis on the student’s individual experience of the university:

We believe that the mission of the Institute should be to encourage initiative, to promote the spirit of free and objective inquiry, to recognize and provide opportunities for unusual interests and aptitudes; in short, to develop men as individuals who will contribute creatively to our society in this day when strong forces oppose all deviations from set patterns.\textsuperscript{126}

Baker House was named for MIT Dean Everett Moore Baker, who championed the role of the total academic environment in shaping democratic values in students, and whose philosophy no doubt informed the spirit of the campaign to build Baker House. Dean Baker wrote:

The great purpose of education is to help young men and women to become self reliant, responsible citizens in a cooperative community. I am not at all sure that self-reliance and responsibility can be taught in the same sense that physics and history can be taught. Initiative, imagination, cooperation and responsibility can, however, be learned, given the environment of the academic community.\textsuperscript{127}

MIT symbolized its new commitment to institutional modernity by hiring Alvar Aalto, at that time a professor in the architecture department, to design a dormitory building for 353 young men of the senior class that would offer them this ideal academic environment. The result was Baker House, a building that gained icon status almost immediately upon its completion in the fall of 1949; its exuberant yet elegant wave-form and staid brick facade belied the complexity of interior spaces, designed to encourage a multiplicity of social and intellectual interaction among its residents (Figure 1). Aalto

\textsuperscript{125} Fixler, 3.
envisioned the form of MIT’s ideal community of resident scholars, and felt that this could be achieved following a variegated spatial scheme offering multiple combinations of use and users, and multiple ways to experience volumetric space, quality of light, and orientation (Figure 2).

“Baker House sends a message that beauty matters, quality matters, excellence matters in all human endeavors.” The preceding quotation, spoken by a former MIT dean and printed in the commemorative booklet published on the occasion of Baker House’s 50th anniversary and rededication, reflects how MIT has continuously valued Baker House as its own modernist masterpiece, but one belonging in a larger sense to an international cultural community. As one of only two Aalto buildings in America and appearing midway through Aalto’s career, Baker House was a highly visible project from its inception, and its influence in the architecture world grew almost exponentially on the strength of the building’s formal impact and the literature that examined it. One book in particular, Sigfried Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture* (1949), positioned Baker House at the forefront of modern architecture’s new direction, which, still rooted in the first modernist masters (Le Corbusier, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, etc.), aspired to a finer-grained unity of program and expression and a more overtly humane spirit.

Aalto has also been associated in the literature with the advent of a more context-specific modernism, and this is certainly evident in his decision to sheathe Baker House’s concrete frame in textural “waterstruck” brick (Figure 3), a material that echoes the rustic red-brick Georgian architecture characteristic of Cambridge and Boston. Details like this receded into the background, however, upon Baker’s reception by the public as a

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128 Quotation of Rosalind Williams, former Dean of Students and Undergraduate Education, MIT.
130 Fixler, 4.
staunchly modernist building. A contemporary review in *Architectural Forum* exclaimed, somewhat naively, that “the startling way in which Aalto’s building plays sharp wall angles against curved walls has had the same disturbing and upsetting effect on critics as the dissonant passages in modern music. The force of the impact cannot be denied.”

Baker House’s “sinuous slab” had quite obviously broken out of the mold of early modernism, but this formal liberation came about almost accidentally as a consequence of the site. The site chosen for the dormitory was a long narrow rectangle abutting Memorial Drive along the Charles River, severed from the core of the Beaux Arts campus by a large open field and a range of industrial buildings (Figure 4). Aalto went through numerous schemes—no less than twelve, including some very rectilinear ones—to arrive at an economical balance of dormitory capacity and provision for amenities like lounges and outdoor landscaped space. The total cost of Baker House was $2.5 million, or approximately $7,000 dollars per student. Aalto’s final plan achieved maximum square footage through an ingenious compaction of the conventional slab to fit within the narrow site. The M-shaped footprint generates a whip-like action that transforms the building’s relationship to the site; what would otherwise be an entirely flat, uneventful slab facing a stretch of highway and river in perfect parallel, Baker’s undulating slab makes possible a dynamic, faceted orientation to the Charles River and

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131 Unattributed, “MIT Senior Dormitory.” (*Arch Forum*, vol. 91, no (8?), August 1949) 68.
Boston skyline. Baker’s program internalizes this dynamic movement, translating it into a play of diagonal axes and progressive vertical circulation (Figure 5). Single, double, and triple rooms come in many different shapes (singles were approximately 9’ x 16’ and doubles were approximately 14’ x 15’), all with different views of the Charles, and corridors pool and eddy unpredictably into lounge spaces (Figures 6 and 7). Despite the challenge of the curve form, Baker has no awkward interior spaces or unused spatial voids.

Stairways are integral to Aalto’s conception of fluid space, clearly evident in the constructivist cantilevered north stair (perhaps Baker’s best kept architectural secret), which falls away as it ascends, relinquishing valuable wall space for windows (Figure 8). In Baker’s interior, Aalto also used stairways to ceremonial effect, demonstrating his desire to activate classical elements within an overall modernist aesthetic. For example, the main lobby features a wide flight of stairs that divides after reaching a landing at mid-floor, leading off in opposite directions towards different wings (Figure 9). Aalto’s dining room, the dormitory’s crowning space and the one to which Aalto devoted his most intense design energies, features an elegant stairway suspended between the main-level dining area and a mezzanine dining area (Figure 10). Scholar Michael Trencher presents a sensitive analysis of this dynamic quality of space, writing that “these complex dislocations [i.e., patterns of axis, orientation and circulation] dramatically enhance the quality of movement through space, especially since inhabitants

135 The story goes that Aalto, who taught architecture at MIT in the 1940s, stood on the banks of the Charles and asked one of his students, “When you stand by a river and look, which way do you stand? Do you stand square in front?” “No,” replied the student, “we look upstream or down. ‘So,’ said Aalto, “we shall do that in our building. The rooms will look upstream or down.” (Unattributed, “A Dormitory that Explores New Ideas of Student Life,” Architectural Record, vol. 102, no. 12. December 1947: 99).

136 Trencher, 255.

experience so much of the visual environment on each floor in a non-orthogonal manner, through rotation, diagonal penetration, and non-parallelism” (Figure 11).  

Aalto regarded the dining room as the heart of the dormitory, both architecturally and functionally. Nestled in one crook of Baker’s “M,” it served as a node, or center of gravity, between the wings radiating out in either direction. It was to serve as the chief gathering place for the dormitory, with subsidiary communal spaces interspersed throughout all six floors of student rooms. The idea of communal space was central to Baker’s conception as a social and intellectual incubator. Aalto’s modern dormitory was to be much more than a collection of monastic cells attached to an eating facility; it was to become a venue for the casual and frequent exchange of ideas, where the task of studying could be a shared one, as in a double or triple room, and could even spill out of the dorm rooms into the hallway lounges, the dining room, or the rooftop terrace. 

Baker’s dining room remained open for use in the evening, after the dinner hour, giving students a choice in ambiance. The lobby featured a fireplace, symbol of an assimilated domestic realm but also intended here as a kind of intellectual hearth (Figure 12). Floor lounges invited informal gatherings at all hours, and access to the north stair generally coincided with these pocket-like lounges. Extracurricular activities were encouraged in spaces such as the music room and the basement, where students could play ping pong. 

Despite its monolithic outward appearance, Baker’s complex plan fostered a porosity of space (it could be this quality that Stephen Holl took to heart in his execution of MIT’s newest dormitory, Simmons Hall, which looms like a giant perforated motherboard across the field from Baker) (Figure 13).  

138 Trencher, 254.
It seems that Aalto’s intention did come to fruition in Baker House: students have always liked living there. In articles both past and present and in personal interviews, a constant theme is Baker’s congenial atmosphere; it has a reputation on campus as the only dorm that offers a true sense of community. One article written in the 1980s describes a “Baker House culture,” identifying things like the student-led room assignment system, the tradition of quirky student “modifications” to dorm rooms, and a furniture restoration program initiated by a housemaster. Perhaps this kind of interaction with the building fabric is more likely to occur at an engineering school, but Aalto’s design seems to encourage this interaction. Each student room has both built-in and modular furniture (designed by Aalto and his wife Aino) to accommodate being moved around and reconfigured depending on the level of privacy desired, and the sturdy interior finishes of exposed brick and birch or pine veneer suggest the rawness of basic building materials. The main lobby is staffed by a student resident at all times, and two students are on call to give tours of Baker House to visitors. There is even an informal Baker House alumni association.

Given Baker House’s resounding architectural and institutional success, it is no surprise that there existed a solid constituency for its preservation when, by the early 1990s, it became apparent that the dorm was in urgent need of repairs and updating. MIT administration took the lead in 1995 by forming a planning committee whose members included MIT students and Baker House residents, architectural conservators, National

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139 Author’s interview with residents of Baker during site visit.
140 Ozonoff, Victoria and Deborah Poodry, “Coffins, Pies and Couches: Aalto at MIT.” (Spazio e Societa, vol. 5 no. 18, June 1982) 123.
141 Ozonoff and Poodry, 119.
Park Service personnel and the head of MIT’s architecture department.\textsuperscript{142} A year later, MIT enlisted Perry Dean Rogers & Partners to direct the renovation project. PDR was the natural choice, since their predecessor firm, Perry Shaw Hepburn, had served as the local project partners for the original Baker House project.\textsuperscript{143}

MIT’s attitude towards the renovation was clear in the objective they identified at the outset of the project: the purpose of the renovation was to imbue Baker House with another half-century of life as an active dormitory, not to create a museum piece out of the building by returning it to its 1949 state.\textsuperscript{144} Nevertheless, MIT insisted on a primary phase of thorough research and consultation to establish the extent to which Aalto’s design had been executed (it is well-known that Aalto’s direct involvement in the construction was seriously disrupted during the last year due to his wife’s sudden illness). This research phase was to inform the methodology of intervention in all possible instances. The general philosophical approach to intervention was one of rehabilitation, although restoration was followed in the removal of inappropriate additions and alterations dating to the 1970s.\textsuperscript{145} Following the research and planning phase, the team undertook a feasibility report based on program information, cost analyses, an exterior conditions survey and determination of construction phasing. Renovation was carried out over two summers in a 13-week “blitz”\textsuperscript{146} fashion, and Baker House was rededicated on its 50th anniversary in October, 1999 (Figure 14).

\textsuperscript{142} Author’s interview with David Fixler, Preservation Director at PDR and Project Manager on Baker House renovation, 1996-2000 (October 30, 2006).
\textsuperscript{143} Speck, 108.
\textsuperscript{144} Fixler, 4.
\textsuperscript{145} Restoration included the removal of extra rooms built into original lounge space, and the removal of aluminum replacement windows and their replacement with teak windows replicating the original oak sash.
\textsuperscript{146} Author’s interview with David Fixler.
Upon completion, the renovation of Baker House was considered by many preservationists to be a success, and was looked to as a model for strategies appropriate to the conservation of Modern Movement heritage. At the time, critics of the renovation seemed to be confined to Aalto experts, like the curator of the Finnish Aalto Foundation, who found the level and manner of design intervention to be totally inappropriate. As a functioning dormitory, the renovated Baker House is undoubtedly a success, and this fact should provide the backdrop for exploring the merits of the renovation team’s strategy.

Two issues in particular highlight the strategic process that the renovation team engaged in, and each reflects a discreet philosophical challenge involved in preserving modern architecture. The first issue the renovation team faced was the question of realizing certain design elements that were never executed for reasons of cost, engineering, and/or lack of oversight in Aalto’s absence during the last phase of construction. Architects and Aalto experts argued for realizing these elements as a way to enhance the understanding of Aalto’s small but treasured American oeuvre. Ultimately, they argued that fuller realization of the original design intent would augment Baker House’s authenticity as an architectural work. This argument was tempered by considerations of cost and maintenance, as in the case of Aalto’s design for aluminum vine trellises to be erected along parts of Baker’s river façade, and also by considerations of the building as an autonomous physical artifact.

The debate over authenticity crystallized in the case of the north stair cladding. Originally, Aalto had wanted to enclose the north stair in an aluminum or copper alloy

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148 Fixler, 6.
curtain wall, but he ultimately chose a system of vertically striated unglazed terra cotta tiles supported on a steel framework. When the contractor announced that the tiling system would delay project completion considerably, MIT administrators accepted the contractor’s suggestion for a substitute system of three-coat stucco, much to the dismay of MIT Architecture Dean William Wurster. In the course of research, the renovation team learned that MIT had also based their decision on the fact that the contractor would not guarantee the structural integrity of the tiling system. Since the tiling system was thus ruled out as a solution, the team made the case for realizing the original metal cladding, which they demonstrated through computer renderings would greatly enhance the architectural and material expressiveness of the building as Aalto had intended. Yet another factor to consider was the surprisingly good condition of the original stucco wall, which the conservators involved in the project argued to preserve, following traditional conservation principles. After much debate, a decision was reached to conserve the original stucco (Figure 15). Project manager David Fixler explained this decision in his article about the renovation, writing that

…the value of the stucco to the MIT community, as a familiar component of a building valued as the repository of the collective memory of fifty years of users, tipped the scales in favor of the conservationist argument; the stucco had been ruled the authentic material by virtue of tradition, rather than the tile by virtue of intent.

The rooftop terrace presents an instance where it was deemed appropriate to implement an original Aalto design. Sometime during the design process, Aalto’s plan for an architectural “roofscape,” integral to the trellises climbing the south façade, was dropped. During the renovation planning process the terrace was identified as a desired

149 Fixler, 6.
150 Fixler, 7.
151 Fixler, 6.
program element, one that would meet a clear demand for rooftop recreation. Furthermore, the team felt that a terrace would reflect the ample historical record demonstrating the importance of this particular architectural element to Aalto’s design philosophy. The new terrace design was based on Aalto’s own studies for Baker and examples of terraces from his other built works, and PDR argued for it as an “extension” of the original architecture, an element that would more fully communicate the dormitory’s purpose. PDR’s design features an ensemble of benches, vegetation and a pergola oriented towards a spectacular view southwards (Figure 16). No doubt students enjoy this new amenity, and continuity of dormitory life—the stories and legends passed down through successive classes—would presumably ensure that this aspect of the renovation will never be mistaken for part of the original construction. However, the new roof terrace blurs the line between restoration and reconstruction.

The second issue the renovation team confronted was the integration of new design elements as a means of inserting necessary systems upgrades, enhancing the dormitory’s usable space for new extracurricular activities, and, finally, bringing the building up to code. A major example of new design was the wood-slat ceiling designed to conceal upgraded systems in the dining room. The original plaster ceiling featured circular light fixtures flush with the ceiling plane, with the intended ambiance of low artificial lighting levels supplemented by natural light from the expansive plate glass windows (Figure 17). An important element of the ceiling’s design, a stroke of Aalto’s genius, were the twenty-four cylindrical skylights designed to illuminate the dining room during the evening as well as during the day: positioned on the roof above the skylights were 24 incandescent spotlights to create at night what Aalto called a “Moon Garden”
effect (Figure 18). Like many mid-century modernist buildings, Baker House was designed with lower lighting levels than are deemed desirable today.

The object of the new ceiling design was to introduce higher lighting levels, better acoustical control, a sprinkler system, and a new heating and cooling system (Baker House was never air-conditioned). One option was to conserve the ceiling’s characteristic expanse of plaster, but the inevitable cutting of holes and installation of access panels for the new systems would have created a considerable amount of visual distraction and disruption of the ceiling plane. The renovation team turned to the archives for a more creative solution, and uncovered drawings that Aalto had done for a wood-slat acoustical ceiling in the dining room. The team installed a new wood-slat ceiling based on these drawings, artfully concealing the new systems but introducing an overpowering element of wood that changes the quality of light and surface texture in the dining room (Figure 19). Although the new ceiling had considerable impact on the appearance of the dining room, it represented a mode of reconstruction more defensible in light of code compliance and the dining room’s enhanced technical performance.

The insertion of upgraded systems (sprinklers, telecommunications wiring, lighting, heating and cooling) was accomplished in the majority of Baker’s public spaces by simply extending the original wood-slat soffits designed to accommodate the original wiring and heating system. However, the team decided against running new systems through the corridors, feeling that it was more important to retain their original proportions and profile (Figure 20). Instead, the new systems were run through each student room, a procedure more costly and time-consuming, and one that required the

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152 Bowen, 108.
153 Author’s interview with David Fixler.
introduction of discreet new design elements. Specifically, the team designed natural-finish birchwood soffits to “box out” existing beams over the doorways and windows and provide access to the new wiring.\footnote{154}

Lighting levels were raised in the public areas by increasing the number of light fixtures; the new fixtures include recessed pocket lights and two kinds of hanging fixture designed by PDR but based on Aalto’s lighting designs for Artek, his and his wife’s Swedish design-manufacturing firm (Figure 20). The new lighting design raises the philosophical question of intention, in particular because of a paucity of evidence showing that Alvar or Aino were involved in the lighting design for Baker (with the exception of the Moon Garden lights).\footnote{155} The new lighting design changes Baker’s interior ambiance in two important ways; while it obviously provides higher lighting levels under which to appreciate the interior detailing, it also introduces hanging fixtures where no fixtures existed before, drastically altering the low ceiling plane. Some preservationists might argue that the latter effect is warranted on the strong indication that the original lighting design as executed revealed little, if any, of Aalto’s intention. Seen in this way, the introduction of these lights serves the preservation purpose of extending the useful life of the work of architecture. Similarly, one could posit that Aalto himself would have sanctioned such changes, were he alive to see them, precisely because they improved upon the functionalism of his original design.

However, Aalto is \textit{not} here to consult, and considering that the new hanging fixtures are closely based on his original designs for \textit{other buildings}, one has to ask if such a subtle change does not indeed blur the line between old and new, at once

\footnote{154} Fixler, 9.\footnote{155} Ibid.
complicating an understanding of the space’s history and of Aalto’s work as an industrial
designer. PDR clearly intended to enhance the interior ambiance with new, sympathetic
designs, but it seems the new light fixtures, in their protruding prominence, have actually
failed to sympathize with the clean lines and uninterrupted planes characteristic of
Baker’s exterior and interior architecture. The curator of the Alvar Aalto Foundation,
Kristian Gullischen, raised concerns about the merit of introducing new design based
only on “speculative” notions of original intent, declaring that “it is simply not correct to
introduce ‘neo-Aalto’ light fittings or ‘Aaltoesque’ wooden details that the public will
take for originals. A trained eye will of course immediately identify them for clumsy
imitations.” Most Baker denizens lack this “trained eye,” so the new lighting design
does, in effect, obscure an experience of the authentic whole (Figure 21).

PDR could have opted to confine the new lighting fixtures to the basement, within
the “build-out” spaces they designed to accommodate new uses like student conferencing
and exercise. The planning phase identified student demand for dedicated studying space
and an exercise room, and the basement presented the obvious location for these new
uses given that it was left an unfinished space upon the dormitory’s opening, and had no
uses other than utility and storage. In the boldest insertion of new design, PDR designed
birch-framed, glazed partition walls to create new rooms for exercising, conferencing,
and studying throughout the basement (Figure 22). PDR argued that these new spaces
served the dual purpose of utility and enhancement of Baker’s unusual spatial volumes,
as the glass partitions curve along with the building’s footprint.157

156 Bowen, 159.
157 Fixler, 9.
New design, arrived at as a compromise between original designs and existing form, provided the solution to code compliance in the case of dining room railing. The renovation team conserved the maximum amount of original wood and steel in bringing the railing’s height and opening size to code, a step that also resulted in a design closer to Aalto’s original drawings for the railing. Throughout Baker’s interior, wooden elements and surfaces were refinished and patched or replaced as needed (Figure 23). New wood received the same finish as old wood, resulting in a difference of patina intended to fade over time but never entirely disappear. As a final step in the renovation, PDR drew up a maintenance plan for Baker to encourage MIT to implement a regimen of care that will maximize the life-span of the restored dormitory.

Baker House benefits from harboring a continuous and vital use original to its purpose, and the choices made throughout the renovation process acknowledged its status as an institutional creature. If Baker House had had the misfortune of losing its purpose as a dormitory, the renovation story would have ended differently. An “empty” Baker House could have left more room for a strict curatorial-style approach just as easily as it could have accommodated radical conversions for a different use. As it happened, institutional agenda informed a renovation strategy that resulted in positive changes for the student body inhabiting the building, but in certain cases negative changes for the authentic whole of the building itself. In the words of scholar Paul Bentel, “As the case of Baker House shows, collective or institutional determinations of significance have an impact on the maintenance and, by extension, the appeal of a structure. Baker House also demonstrates how fickle the custodians of historic resources can be.”

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Figure 2  (Rasmussen, Steen Eiler. *Experiencing Architecture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964)
Figure 3  (Photo by author)
Figure 4  (Courtesy of Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design)
Figure 5  (Courtesy of Loeb Library)
Figure 6  (Courtesy of Loeb Library)
Typical double bedrooms gives each student a semi-independent space of his own by partitions of Brazilian pine. Aioio's uncovered heating risers are unostentatious through thoughtful design.

Large bedroom, at southwest corner, serves three students, is an example of provision for those whose temperament lets them work side by side. The building recognizes that people are of many kinds.

Figure 7  (Courtesy of Loeb Library)
Figure 8  (Courtesy of Loeb Library; Trencher, Michael, “Mass Housing and the Individual.” *ARQ*, vol. 4 no. 3, pp. 247-256)
Figure 9  (Photo by author)
Figure 10  (Courtesy of MIT Facilities Department)
Figures 11 and 12  (Trencher; Courtesy of MIT Facilities Department)
Figure 13  (Amelar, Sarah, “Stephen Holl Puts MIT on the Grid.” *Architectural Record*, May 2003: 204-215)
Figure 14  MIT published a commemorative booklet on the history of Baker House and its restoration for the dorm’s rededication in 1999. (Courtesy of MIT Facilities Department)
Figure 15  The restored stucco on the north stair provides an interesting textural contrast to the waterstruck brick, but it makes the cantilevered stair seem almost like a temporary structure. Aalto’s intended metal cladding would have given a more substantial appearance. (Photo by author)
Figure 17  Top: the original plaster ceiling in the dining room, 1949 (Photo by Ezra Stoller, ESTO. In Fixler). Bottom: the new wood-slat ceiling, 2006 (Photo by author).
4. Case Study 3: Dexter M. Ferry, Jr. Cooperative House, Vassar College

Vassar College is a unique college with a remarkable history of architectural patronage and stewardship. This tradition began in 1860, when Matthew Vassar, founder and president of the country’s first women’s college, commissioned architect James Renwick to design a building to house students, classrooms and college administration. Renwick, Auchmuty & Sands’ Second Empire style Main Hall, a six-story mansarded colossus, was completed in 1861 and subsequently determined the Victorian gothic character of Vassar’s core campus (Figure 1). In the first half of the 20th century, under the leadership of Vassar’s first female president, Sarah Gibson Blanding, Vassar’s campus was augmented with three daring works of modern architecture: Ferry House (Marcel Breuer, 1950), Noyes House (Eero Saarinen, 1958), and Chicago Hall (Schweiker & Elting, 1959). President Blanding’s dedicatory remarks at the opening of Noyes House included the bold statement that “Vassar has always tried to retain leading architects of each period, and has encouraged them to experiment rather than to follow conventional patterns.”

Towards the end of the 20th century, this self-aware tradition of patronage was continued when Vassar President and architectural historian Frances Fergusson commissioned prominent post-modern architect Cesar Pelli to design the Frances Lehman Loeb Performing Arts Center (1993), as well as a new lobby for Main Hall. Continuing her leadership into the 21st century, Fergusson initiated preservation campaigns for Ferry and Noyes. As a small liberal arts college with a strong tradition of personal leadership,

Vassar has been able to mold a more cohesive institutional image than other larger, less centralized academic institutions. Blessed with a distinctive natural landscape, the growth of the college’s physical plant has been set against a constant backdrop of green expanses, wooded dells, and spectacular specimen trees; the landscape element thus provides the unifying “ground” for architectural design of all eras.\textsuperscript{161}

Nearly a century and a half and several architectural masterpieces later, Vassar’s campus has become the subject of the Getty Foundation’s Campus Heritage grant program, launched in 2002 to “assist colleges and universities in the United States to manage and preserve the integrity of their significant historic buildings, sites, and landscapes.”\textsuperscript{162} Vassar’s Campus Heritage grant program is intended to highlight its modern architecture, represented by eight out of the total 52 buildings to be surveyed under the grant (exterior survey only, with the exception of the 1937 Van Ingen Library). The New York firm of Platt, Byard, Dowell & White is responsible for carrying out the survey, and for drawing up recommendations for repair, maintenance and rehabilitation. Principal Paul Byard explains the modernist focus of the project, writing:

> With other arts in the period, architecture explored the expressive possibilities of abstraction to arrive at arresting proposals for the allocation of scarce resources to meet human needs. Vassar’s masterworks all come from the period when Modernism had lost its political edge but not the formal bravery of its assumption that thinking again in new ways would make things better.\textsuperscript{163}

The first work of modern architecture on Vassar’s campus, and the first construction since World War Two, was a rather petite building erected in the shadow of Main Hall. In February of 1950, counseled by an influential Vassar alumna with ties to

\textsuperscript{163} Progress report to Getty Foundation re: Vassar College Campus Heritage grant. July 20, 2006.
the Museum of Modern Art, President Blanding commissioned Hungarian-born architect Marcel Breuer (1902-1981) to design a cooperative dormitory for 27 girls. Vassar had operated a cooperative-style dormitory since the 1930s, but it was located within remote Blodgett Hall and residents complained that the out-dated kitchen was unequal to the task of feeding scores of girls. The new cooperative house, which was to be self-contained and have all the modern amenities for proper home economics, was funded entirely by the family of Queene Ferry Coonley (Vassar, '96). The choice of Breuer as the architect stemmed from a Coonley family tradition: herself an admirer of modern art and architecture, Queene’s daughters (also Vassar alumnae) were responsible for securing three Baltimore commissions for Breuer, and Queene’s grandson had matriculated under Breuer and Walter Gropius at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design in the early 1940s. Owing to the reservations of alumnae and trustees still ambivalent towards modern architecture, Ferry House was ultimately sited in a discreet location behind Main Hall, “near the outbuildings that served the college” (Figure 2).

The Dexter M. Ferry House was dedicated on October 5, 1951, and “marked Vassar’s entry, in a visual sense, into the twentieth century” (Figure 3). Breuer is said to have called Ferry an “oversized house, not an undersized dormitory,” and it was indeed Breuer’s reinterpretation of the traditional domestic program that gave Ferry a formal impact out of proportion to its demure stature. Ferry House is composed of two elongated boxes, one anchored to the ground plane, and the other floating above it, but

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166 Hyman, 195.
167 Hyman, 196.
rotated 90 degrees. The grounded volume is intended to express the public, communal space of the cooperative, while the elevated volume is intended to express the private, secluded space of the individual bedrooms. Beginning in 1943, Breuer began experimenting with what he termed the “bi-nuclear” house plan, where private and semi-public functions were isolated in two separate wings usually linked by an entryway. His experimentation with biaxial expression was rooted in his early career in Europe, defined by his pioneering work as the Dessau Bauhaus furniture master,\(^{168}\) and in his observations of European villa architecture of the 1920s, in particular Le Corbusier’s 1931 de Mandrot House (Figure 4).

Breuer’s early designs for private houses absorbed the lessons of the de Mandrot House’s salutary plan, attenuated for maximum light and ventilation, and its textural treatment of natural materials. A prominent feature of the architecture of leisure represented in the de Mandrot House was the roof deck, and Breuer incorporated this element into the design of Ferry, perching it atop the main entrance vestibule. Ferry’s entry vestibule serves as the point of origin for the public and private wings that emanate outwards perpendicularly, held in tension on two different planes and by a slight axial shift that avoids true symmetry (Figure 5).

In his 1970 essay titled “The Domestication of Modern: Marcel Breuer’s Ferry Cooperative Dormitory at Vassar College,” scholar William Jordy summed up the meaning of Ferry House’s architecture, writing that it “exemplifies a position somewhere between the mechanistic polemics of the twenties and the more profound appeals to

\(^{168}\) Breuer’s “Wassily” chair (1929), for which he is perhaps most famous, demonstrates the similarity in principle of the cantilever and the “bi-nuclear” plan: opposing forces poised in tension.
human consciousness which modern architecture from the fifties onward essayed.” In support of his thesis that Breuer “domesticated” American modern architecture with Ferry House, Jordy illustrates Breuer’s adaptation of the regional vernacular to modern effect: specifically, his use of white-painted brick, interior stone flagging, and wood paneling between window openings to suggest a continuous ribbon window. More recent scholarship on Breuer extends Jordy’s thesis to consider the ways in which Ferry actually opposes its immediate context: Breuer’s plate glass walls, floating foundation, and bright colors (applied to exterior as well as interior surface planes) are thus intended to be the antithesis of the intrinsic heaviness and opacity of Vassar’s gothic architecture (Figure 6).  

Scholars generally agree that while Ferry House embodies an important Breuer type, it is not the architect’s most memorable building. As for Isabelle Hyman’s contention that Ferry became a “premier example of modern architecture in the U.S.,” it is important to note that the visual effect of Ferry’s architecture was its most modern attribute and that, technologically, virtually the same building could have been built in the 19th century (Figure 7). If traditional construction compromised the building’s modernist status in some eyes, even more problematic was its purpose, which was seen as far removed from the radicalism of early European modernism. Jordy gave voice to these negative perceptions of modern architecture’s second (i.e., American) incarnation in his essay on Ferry House, writing that “the tender-minded humanism of convenience, relaxation, and escape threatened the tough-minded humanism of the early modern quest.

170 Hyman, 196.
171 Hyman, 196.
for the reconciliation and enhancement of modern life with what was technologically, psychologically, and symbolically at the heart of modern existence”\textsuperscript{172}

Polemics aside, Breuer’s rigorous aesthetic in Ferry House did amount to a new meaning within the context of traditional American domestic architecture. Ferry’s demure scale, neat lines and solid materials were all signs of the building’s progressive function (by American standards) as a cooperative dormitory for modern young women-scholars. Ferry’s flowing, informal common spaces, its interior and exterior amenities, and convertible bedroom arrangements were designed for maximum comfort, efficiency and communality in the domestic as well as the scholarly and recreative arts (Figure 8). The bi-nuclear plan was especially suited to the dynamics of Ferry’s communal life: the bedroom wing, with eleven double rooms (14’ x 16’) and three single rooms (9’ x 14’), was afforded a measure of privacy and seclusion, both from the greater campus and from the downstairs communal area, by its height above the ground; the open plan of the common wing offered multiple configurations for studying, socializing, and recreating through the use of sliding panel partitions, and also provided easy access to the outdoors through sliding glass doors and the entry vestibule-breezeway (Figure 9). Jordy made much of Ferry’s modern expression of the domestic realm, writing: “in a less grandiloquent, more prosaic sense, Ferry House faces up to the unheroic aspect of modern life. It flaunts ease of maintenance and encourages the informality of blue jeans and Bermuda shorts.”\textsuperscript{173}

The cooperative style of living was given full expression in Ferry, and was hailed by the Vassar community as a new alternative to traditional dorm life. In becoming a

\textsuperscript{172} Jordy, 175.
\textsuperscript{173} Jordy, 213.
part of the Ferry community—and personal accounts indicate that it has always been regarded as a tight-knit community\textsuperscript{174}—girls were given the opportunity for domestic creativity as a counterpoint to a “day in the library,”\textsuperscript{175} as one Vassar student wrote in her review of Ferry for Vassar’s \textit{Miscellany News}, eight years after the dorm had opened.

Ferry girls were also expected to take on the character-building responsibilities associated with home economics, including cooking, cleaning, and managing household expenses. “Home economics” took on a new meaning at Ferry, as residents discovered that living there was a cheaper alternative to the conventional dorm-and-dining hall living style; in 1959, Ferry residents paid a $590 annual fee (that went directly into a house treasury), compared to a $1,175 fee for other dorms.\textsuperscript{176} Ferry’s low fee translated into the daily tasks each resident took on as part of her role in the cooperative. Being a Ferry resident came with a regimen of two-week “job periods,” in which three girls would cook daily meals for all 27 girls (Figure 10); this was balanced by two-week “off” periods.

Although the initial emphasis was on the domestic, the Ferry motto was always “homework comes before housework.”\textsuperscript{177} Ferry no doubt accommodates a diversity of mottos in its present-day incarnation as a co-ed cooperative with a reputation for outlandishness, ironically anticipated in Jordy’s quip about “blue jeans and Bermuda shorts.” Vassar’s website describes the expectations that go along with being a Ferry resident today:

\begin{quote}
…the smooth operation of the house is dependent on the active participation and dedication of each resident to live in a cooperative environment. Every resident is responsible not only to him/herself, but also to those he/she lives with. This arrangement
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{174} Based on the author’s interviews of former Ferry House residents, and articles published in the \textit{Miscellany News} during the 1950s.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
allows for personal growth somewhat different from what occurs in a more traditional residence hall living situation. Cooperative housing welcomes all students who wish to live cooperatively in an environment that is unique and supportive of individuality.”

Past residents generally agree that Ferry’s original cooperative philosophy has been borne out in practice, albeit with varying degrees of democracy (appointed house managers and voting on house-wide decisions) and anarchy (“MoFo,” the Mobile Ferry Organization for vehicular pranks and merriment). To quote a young woman (and Breuer fan) who lived in Ferry from 1998 to 2000:

[Living in Ferry] was one of the most transformative experiences of my life. It steered me in a totally different direction than the dorms would have. It’s not that you can’t get a community experience in the dorms, but Ferry teaches you how to live in community in a way that promotes a fuller human interaction. Breuer was repulsed by the suburbanite blasé comfort enabled by 50s building styles. He preferred a brutally real form of living and architecture. I agree – living real doesn’t translate into living easy.

This former Ferry resident now lives in Brooklyn, NY, where she enjoys the “high-contact” living common to cooperatives and New York City.

Ferry House’s distinctive communal culture continues to grow out of Vassar’s progressive institutional culture, thus satisfying the dormitory’s original architectural intention. The dormitory’s rehabilitation in 2001-2002 demonstrated Vassar’s commitment to providing a high-quality environment for the personal and educational growth of its students; it also revealed a creative approach to the college’s mid-century heritage. To direct and oversee the renovation, President Fergusson engaged the services of Herbert Beckhard, who was hired to Marcel Breuer Associates in 1954 and became a partner a decade later. The major objectives of the renovation were to upgrade the

179 Author’s interview with Dakota Kim, Vassar alumna. Vassar alumni were by far the most responsive to the author’s inquiries about dormitories; much more so than alumni of MIT and Harvard.
lighting, introduce telecommunications wiring, to improve heating and cooling and to repair or replace existing “period” furniture.\textsuperscript{180}

Similar to the approach taken in the case of Baker House, the renovation team introduced strategic design changes in order to improve the dorm’s performance. While the Baker team relied heavily on archives and expert advice to interpret Aalto’s intentions, the Vassar team relied on Herb Beckhard’s judgment as a personal representative, in effect, of Breuer’s intentions regarding Ferry. Vassar, like MIT, also engaged student opinion to inform renovation decisions. The most significant design change introduced in Ferry was the installation of a heart cypress ceiling in the common area. The new ceiling, which was raised in the space between the lounge and the dining area, allowed for the insertion of an enhanced lighting system. The new ceiling is a beautiful architectural element, adding warmth to the common area, which can seem washed out depending on the quality of natural light. Breuer often chose wood cladding for the ceilings of houses he designed, according to Beckhard, who explained the motivation for adding the wood ceiling to Ferry by stating that “…it reinforces the sense that this is just a big house.”\textsuperscript{181}

It is possible that Breuer would have opted for a wood ceiling if Ferry had been a true private house (with a private budget), but, intention aside, the visual impact of the new ceiling is so strong that it severely compromises the integrity of the aesthetic that has inhabited the space for 50 years. The wood’s color and warmth are magnets for the eye, making the space seem smaller than it actually is. Perhaps this is a positive change for Ferry residents, who have been known to complain about the exposed feeling of the

\textsuperscript{181} Brake, Alan, “Modern Architecture 101.” (\textit{Interior Design} May 2003 Vol. 74 no. 7).
common wing. Another, less design-related change was the installation of wall-mounted radiators to supplement the original radiant heating system that had proven inadequate in the largely glass-enclosed common area. The new radiators are presumably as unobtrusive a size and shape as possible, but they stick out despite the attempt to camouflage them with a coat of the “Breuer Blue” wall color (Figure 11).

Furniture was a major component of the rehabilitation work carried out in Ferry, although the results have been less than satisfactory (through no fault of either Beckhard’s or Vassar’s, as we shall see). The original Charles Pfister sofas in the lounge were refurbished, and reproduction Eames chairs were provided for the dining area and lounge. The Eames chairs chosen for the dining area are not the same model as the original Eames “Pony” chairs, but they differ only slightly in the thinner profile and cooler appearance of the metal supports. Several of Eero Saarinen “Grasshopper” chairs were added to the lounge area, although in the original program this type of chair had been relegated (with only one or two exceptions) to student bedrooms.

Vassar made a critical decision not to attempt to replicate the original bedroom furniture in light of what President Fergusson gently refers to as Vassar students’ penchant for “aesthetic migration” (Figure 12).\(^{182}\) Over the course of just one semester, furniture may disappear, reappear, or even change appearance, all according to the creative whims of Vassar students. During the renovation, planned changes to the furniture (most of the original pieces were long gone by the time of the renovation) included the addition of a granite-and-metal coffee table, of Beckhard’s design, and Formica-and-metal dining tables. As the original coffee and dining tables were mostly wood, this represents a change to a sleeker, more industrial aesthetic. But, the industrial

\(^{182}\) Author’s e-mail interview with Ms. Fergusson, November 4, 2006.
aesthetic has its practical advantages in being more durable than certain natural finishes. As discussed in the preceding chapter on preservation theory, treatment of interiors can make or break the preservation of a modernist building. Unfortunately, modernist dormitories are that much more susceptible to having their “total aesthetic” compromised by the rough wear-and-tear they receive from constantly cycling student populations. In tandem with the Ferry project, President Fergusson had initiated the restoration of Eero Saarinen’s futuristic all-white lounge in Noyes House, his arc-shaped dorm of 1958. President Fergusson explained the challenges specific to restoring Vassar’s “moderns,” saying that “one of the tricks in redoing campus interiors of the modernist period is to use materials that are essentially rock solid and able to withstand a lot of abuse.”

Furniture is ultimately more “reversible” than interior architecture and finishes, and so in this respect Ferry House remains intact and presumably now better serves its residents. With respect to the feeling of space in the common area, the renovated Ferry is less intact, although maybe more homey (the key feature of the white ceiling plane will probably never be retrieved). Scale was certainly an important factor playing into the renovation process; unlike the monumental Baker House, Ferry is a diminutive, unassuming piece of architecture. To a degree, public scrutiny corresponds to a building’s stature, and thus it follows that Ferry did not receive the intensity of preservation attention that informed Baker’s renovation job. Finally, Herb Beckhard’s guidance determined the free-handed, revivalist tone of Ferry’s renovation.

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183 Author’s e-mail interview with Ms. Fergusson, November 4, 2006.
Figure 1  Antique postcard showing the grand approach to Vassar’s Main Hall.  
(http://www.rootsweb.com/~usgenweb/ny/dutchess/postcards/vassar.jpg)
Figure 2  Map of Vassar’s dispersed physical plant: Ferry House is No. 20, up and to the right of Main Hall, Nos. 32 and 13. (Courtesy of Vassar College)
Figure 3  Photograph and elevations of newly completed Ferry House. The futuristic effect of boxes hovering in space belied Ferry’s traditional construction: brick bearing walls for the ground wing, and steel skeleton for the bedroom wing. (Courtesy of Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design)
Figure 4  Le Corbusier’s house along the Riviera for Madame de Mandrot (1931). (Jordy, “The Domestication of Modern: Marcel Breuer’s Ferry Cooperative Dormitory at Vassar College.”)
Figure 5  
Top left: Breuer’s “bi-nuclear” plan for Ferry avoids monotony through displacement of axes and planes; the shaded boxes represent the grounded entry vestibule and commons wing, while the white box represents the floating bedroom wing. Top right: Breuer’s cantilever chair in tubular metal echoes the tension of the “bi-nuclear” principle. (Jordy, 211) Bottom: Breuer’s competition design for dorms at Smith College (1945) shows a more sculptural expression of the bi-nuclear plan. (Hyman, 194)
Figure 6  On Ferry’s patio, macadam pavers are laid irregularly but strictly circumscribed by the low brick wall, a metaphor for hedges. The underside of the bedroom wing was painted a bright red-orange color, not unlike the color of the sun-struck brick seen in the Victorian stable building to the right. (Photo by author)
The sunshade was probably Ferry’s most technologically advanced element, but it was also an artistic device, creating abstract patterns of light and shadow across the façade. (Courtesy of Loeb Library)
Figure 8  Top: Ferry’s plan and program. Single rooms, lounge and communal bathroom were clustered around the stair to minimize noise from circulation and utilities. Bottom: suggested double room arrangement, in plan and in a historic view. Breuer designed the millwork for the bedrooms. (Courtesy of Loeb Library)
Ferry’s common area featured flexible, informal furniture arrangements and an overall minimalist aesthetic quite opposite to that of the traditional Victorian “parlors” in older Vassar dorms. Breuer chose furniture by Pfister, Saarinen and Thonet & Eames, and fabrics and upholstery by Knoll Associates. (Courtesy of Loeb Library)
Figure 10  Historic view of Ferry residents in the state-of-the-art kitchen that formed an integral part of their modern Vassar education (Courtesy of Loeb Library). Vassar alumna Elizabeth Daniels wrote in *Main to Mudd*, her history of the Vassar campus, that “the well-equipped cooperative Ferry House kitchen would, it was hoped, assure better luck for male visitors of the fifties.” (Daniels, *Main to Mudd*. Poughkeepsie, NY: Vassar College, 1987, pp. 56).
Figure 11  Publicity photo showing the results of Ferry’s renovation, 2002. The minimalist aesthetic is recreated with a combination of original and replacement furniture, but the new cedar ceiling changes the room’s dimensions. (Brake, Alan, “Modern Architecture 101,” Interior Design May 2003 Vol. 74 no. 7)
Figure 12  Top: the same view, October 2006. Students’ “aesthetic migration” is abundantly evident. Bottom: the new mixture of Eames chairs. (Photos by author)
Conclusion

This thesis only begins to show how preservation practice is influenced by the character of participants, the caliber of the architecture at stake, and a building’s performance in the eyes of its users, past, present and future. College and university dormitories occupy a position where, interestingly, all of these factors seem to converge: the personality of an institution, and, by extension, its student body will define to a certain degree the appearance of and appreciation for campus buildings; architectural caliber will always be gauged within the greater context of the campus, making individual appraisals a less clear-cut issue; finally, building performance is of utmost concern for constantly cycling populations of students expecting ever-higher living standards and causing wear-and-tear out-of-proportion to building age.

My examination of these three modernist dormitories was inspired by what I view to be a difficult but opportune confluence of intellectual discourse: the Modern Movement’s insistence on critical thinking and progressivism should provide the model for protecting its architectural expressions, both in the institutional context, where modernist buildings simultaneously contend with nostalgic images of the traditional American campus and contemporary images of academic caliber, and in the context of contemporary preservation practice. Preservation has already responded to the lessons of the Modern Movement by expanding fundamental notions of value to include objects and symbols that stand distinctly outside of the presumed historical continuum. But it must do more than accommodate modernism’s differences; it must seek to raise awareness of and appreciation for the modernist aesthetic.
The Woodberry Poetry Room scandal is an indication of rising awareness of modern architecture’s value; but the event only became a scandal precisely because of the room’s prior invisibility to the majority of the Harvard community. The Graduate Center is similarly invisible to those directly involved with it, and it is doubtful that Harvard’s community will rediscover the Graduate Center’s weighty history and architectural merit before current management policies effect significant physical changes. The Graduate Center is a very tough preservation case because it lacks the broad appeal and monumentality of icons like Baker House, and has a limited audience in its immediate community of users, who, furthermore, are largely unfamiliar with present and past discourse in architectural culture. Architectural style aside, the question of functionalism comes to the fore in the most basic, practical sense as Harvard faces the Graduate Center’s undeniably substandard features, like the communal bathrooms and small room size. Perhaps there would be less pressure to alter the existing dormitories if they housed a less sophisticated population, i.e. undergraduates instead of graduate students. HLS has its sights set on an entirely new campus, across the Charles River from Harvard’s main campus, and I would suggest that in the event that the school ever vacated its old campus, Harvard would have a wonderful opportunity to insert a more appreciative constituency of users into the Graduate Center; say, for instance, students of the Graduate School of Design.

At MIT, Baker House’s international status and high quality of space ensured a devoted and activist constituency, but also an intense level of scrutiny by Aalto experts, conservationists, and preservationists. Whether the renovated Baker House retains its integrity depends upon the value one ascribes to the dormitory’s present vitality as an
environment for the undergraduate community relative to its value as an architectural masterpiece and historical artifact. The approach taken by the renovation team certainly demonstrates a greater appreciation for the former, and wider latitude for intervention was critically justified as a means of engaging the building-as-artifact in contemporary architectural culture on behalf of an engineering student community. The positive lesson of Baker’s renovation seems to be the value of thorough planning and debate among stake-holders in formulating preservation strategy. The negative lesson in Baker House’s renovation is the difficulty of extending a monument’s useful life through new design without compromising original intention.

The renovation of Ferry House showed how Vassar, as a smaller academic institution with a defined architectural identity, took a very personal interest in its mid-century dormitories. The involvement of an architect with first-hand experience of Breuer’s work resulted in a high standard of exterior restoration, but a freer interpretation of the original interior aesthetic. Vassar’s attitude towards Ferry House, on the part of both students and college administrators, indicates a hopeful trend that appreciation of modern architecture is on the rise among younger generations. In turning her attention to the preservation of Ferry and Noyes, President Fergusson recognized that things “retro” are popular with today’s student body: in 2002 she told a reporter doing a piece on the refurbished Noyes lounge, “As you may know, students today love the 1950s.”

The historic preservation paradigm indicates that as buildings age, they naturally accrue value. Modern architecture’s contribution to historic preservation discourse was to liberalize this notion of age-value. Although modernist dormitories of the postwar period have by now crossed the threshold of respectable age, and in some cases proven

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themselves outside of it, it is apparent that age alone will not ensure their increased appreciation and protection.
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