

VASSAR ARCHITECTURE: ART 106

In a guest gig for Urban Studies two years ago I had the students VOTE for the building they liked least on campus. We then went to the site and one group was designated to defend the building (as if they were the architect); the other group had to attack the building for its failings. It was a lively discussion in which students learned to understand some of the logic that makes buildings. I think there would be time to do two buildings this way. One could camp out in the Science Quad (Mudd and Olmsted are generally disliked and misunderstood or Chicago with the Library addition—either Hardy or HOK. It makes a lively discussion. Alternatively, if you are feeling cheerier you can have them vote for their favorites—in my experience it produces a less satisfying debate since it is much harder to appreciate than to criticize.

These sheets have more than you will (ever) need but are the accumulation of thoughts on the buildings.

MAIN BUILDING, 1861-64 (architect: James Renwick)

The building is 473 feet long and housed about two-thirds of the original 350 students, along with administrators, professors, classrooms, chapel, dining room, gallery, and servants' quarters. Originally there was an outer stair to a second story entrance. The roof slates are largely replaced (although they were once striped) and it is possible that the wooden frames of the windows were painted another color (possibly darker)--or so thought Robert Venturi when he visited Vassar. The effect would have been to make the building more substantial—even more pompous than it already is!

Here students can be shown how the European architecture of the past was adapted to an ideal American community. The grounds combine a formal allée from the gatehouse (rebuilt as Taylor Hall in 1915, but originally a Second Empire mansard style like Main) to the carriage circle, with serpentine grounds uniting Versailles and English gardens such as Stowe. The French seventeenth century style with mansard roof, pavilion-and-linking wings was introduced by Renwick for the more monumental and primarily cultural buildings of the era; they borrowed their authority as cosmopolitan cultural images from the Second Empire Style (see Garnier's Opera). Like the Beaux-Arts, though more awkwardly, there was great concern for symmetry and circulation in these new institutional buildings. But the vision of a complete quasi-Utopian community in a rural idyllic setting is wholly American (see Jefferson's University of Virginia) although note that this community (unlike UVA) is cut off from the landscape by buildings and a wall. A minor point: visitors would have left New York City for Poughkeepsie from GCT (then also in the same style).

The hierarchy of the building reflects the distribution of functions. Public rooms, president's apartment and office are in the central pavilion; professors and classrooms in the end pavilions; students in the wings. Vertically the building is divided into labs, kitchens, servants at the ground floor, the parlor and president's rooms in the second story near the entrance vestibule, the library on the third floor, and the art gallery on the fourth. (The gallery was conceived of as an instrument of moral instruction.) The communal gathering rooms were in the rear central wing, dining room on the second story, chapel on the third and fourth -- where now there is a lounge. Externally all this can be followed in the massing and articulation: bare side wings for students, grander relief for the central pavilion. This grandiose

European model has been rendered in a provincial American quasi-domestic style: red brick and wood trim, as in the 18th c. Harvard Yard, or at Yale.

The interior circulation (corridor with room hung off the side) derives from hospital planning. The corridor provides light and air as well as offering ease of control. Renwick had just built a hospital on Roosevelt Island. You might suggest students visit Frederick C. Withers' Mid-Hudson Psychiatric Hospital on Route 9 of roughly the same date, with a similar plan but in gothic. Students often have heard that Main was based on a hospital plan--and that's true. Oversight was maintained by monitors who could keep an eye on the students. Before one laughs too hard at Renwick or at the naiveté of early Vassar administrators, have the students bear in mind that there was no precedent for the design of a woman's college. Given the protective role that the founders (and mid-century society) felt they needed to take towards women—and the concerns they must have had—the hospital was not a bad model. (James Madison Taylor, president of Vassar at the beginning of the century, rebuked history professor Lucy Maynard Salmon for wanting to teach the students on the seminar method: he feared it would be too stressful! He also disapproved of slides—the sensuality of the image!)

I have sometimes found it fun to ask the students to describe Main before we go outside to look at it. They tend to think that the stories are all equal height and the building a chicken cage covered with pilasters. In fact, there is enormous elasticity in the front expressed by the differing placement of the pilasters in relation to the stories. One can sometimes contrast their rather boring description of the building (regular, additive) before you go out to see it with the impression they had of Main when they first visited Vassar. (They tend to describe it as shooting upward or similar; it sounds rather more interesting.) In fact, that impression was not incorrect and you can justify it in relation to the fluid relation of the stories.

* If the window trim were a darker color (matching, say, the stripes in the roof) how would that influence your reading of the building?

*How would the building be different with the addition of the stairs mounting to the *piano nobile*?

*One can also ask students to discuss the way the hierarchy of the building is expressed (vertically and horizontally). Why do the pilasters begin at the *piano nobile*?

Other works by Renwick include the Corcoran Gallery (also Second Empire and for a friend of Vassar's) the original Smithsonian Museum and St. Patrick's in New York.

COLLEGE CENTER, 1977 (architect: Jean Paul Carlhian of the Boston firm of Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott)

Carlhian, originally French, is the only American architect who had a full Beaux-Arts training in Paris and a modernist education under Gropius at Harvard. (The parti meets the decorated diagram.) One point that can be brought out is the fusion of Beaux-Arts principles (symmetry, monumental spaces, formal entrances) and the traditions of early modernist design (bare steel glass and brick, exposed air-conditioning ducts, factory glazing) expressed in hi-tech. There is also a Crystal Palace-like space (sort-of) with constructivist bridges forming an entrance instead of more conventional Beaux Arts forms.

There are more bridges to the space outside. By providing a separate entrance away from Main's own entrance, he has made the building functionally and socially more "modern," but created serious problems for the symmetrical plan and entrance system of the old building. Thus the central area around the mailboxes is crowded, and the entrance into a corner before the post office is cramped. I sometimes have the sense that the building works well only early in the morning or late at night when one can truly take advantage of its clarity of circulation. (Odd that modernist "convenience" should prove "inconvenient"; Beaux-Arts formality would have had other virtues.)

There is also evidence for the new concern for historic preservation. Carlhian has saved the old walls and the utilitarian brick goes well with bare steel and glass and a modern-outdoor-indoor continuum. The Retreat is one of the disasters of Vassar planning—using the word loosely. Plants were intended to climb the walls of the old building (you can still find evidence in the holes in the ground next to the walls covered over by those vast fake wood tub containers.) The original Retreat supplemented the in-dorm dining practices and was NOT meant for meals. There was originally no exit towards Ferry and the provision of that door has made the eating area into a corridor.

I have had a good time in the Main Lobby, which was renovated by Cesar Pelli's office twelve or more years ago, discussing the nature of the renovation in relation to the rest of the building. Recall that this is the old servant's entrance (original entrance was up formal steps to the first floor) but it is still strangely discordant with the rest of the renovations—the 19th century of the parlors or the rugged jean-jacket style of the Retreat with its exposed ductwork.

*MUDD CHEMISTRY BUILDING, 1984 (architects: Perry, Dean, Rogers and Parker)**

The Boston firm of PDR&P have been fairly active on college campuses and students may know the Olin Library addition at Wesleyan or the Student Meeting place at Amherst. Since this building is due to be taken down it may be the last chance to look at it seriously.

The architects and the chemistry department are particularly proud of their energy conservation and exhaust systems. The south facade is a passive energy system consisting of a glass wall in front of the masonry wall. The masonry wall and the air between it and the glass is heated by the sun; warm air is then pumped by fans to the other areas. Much is also made of the fresh air intake and exhaust system, with major outlets on the crown of the building.

The architects also claim to have made a special effort to relate the building to the others in the science quad; "contextualism" is the argot for this. They could not go more than a half-story into the ground because of a high water table, and yet produced a building supposedly with more cubic feet than the physics building (deeper and as wide). The building is supposed to look smaller because the masses have been broken up, the brick surfaces rusticated, the upper part painted green to match the copper roofs of the quad. The elaborate entrance on the north (the glass bricks are not part of the energy system; they are there for looks) is supposed to suggest an entrance to the science quad. The asymmetry of the entrance on the south is purely aesthetic.

From the north you can draw a comparison to New England: stone held by metal frame at Mudd; stone embedded in the lintel at New England. And the exposed metal frame for the stone at Mudd comparable to the window shade struts at Ferry. It is all very clever. The exhaust towers like Main's mansarded towers.

Students might be asked how well they think the building relates to the others in its surroundings; to the normal approach (from the corner towards northwest); to the scale of the windows, doors and panels of the other buildings in the science quad. (The glass panes and mullions of the south wall are supposed to relate to these elements). To my mind the view from the science quad is a more interesting place for discussion.

This kind of architecture, making an erector-set or toy-like display of mechanical systems, and attempting to relate them, nevertheless, to older neighboring buildings, is part of a "pop" trend initiated in the late 60s and 70s by, in particular, the (early version of the) firm of Hardy, Holtzman and Pfeiffer. It can be contrasted to the utopian, universalizing ("international") machine image of Ferry.

You might also want to go into the lobby where students can observe the modernistic exposed steel beams and industrial lighting. Interesting things happen when the beams are painted as they are. Was the architect trying to soften the aggressive quality of the building's technological systems? (The interior of the building is rather poorly put together and students may spot inconsistencies in way paint has been applied and the pieces bolted together.)

LOCKWOOD LIBRARY, original, 1974-75 (architects: Helmuth, Obata & Kassabaum); replaced by MARTHA RIVERS AND E. BRONSON INGRAHAM addition, 1999 (architects: Hugh Hardy and Associates)

It might be fun to look at this corner of the library with the students. Elements have been picked up from the dorms (an unusual intrusion between the Library and Chicago. To appreciate how badly it has been made you have to go by at night and see how the cheap interior lights and the windows have been misaligned. It is as if the skin and the interior had only just met and the tailor had not yet made the alterations. Or perhaps the whole thing was purchased at T.J. Maxx and, well, one had to make do.

FERRY HOUSE, 1949-51 (architect: Marcel Breuer)

Built as a co-operative dormitory (the last remnant of the euthenics movement at Vassar), Ferry House is not the first modern work on campus (the Art Library, the old Taylor Hall renovation, and Baldwin Hall are prior) but it is the most visible example of European modernism (albeit in its Americanized form.

It may seem modest today but the idea of women of a certain class caring for themselves (cooking, cleaning) was still thought radical in the late 1940s—witness the magazine coverage of the time that shows young women proudly holding tins of Campbell's soup and bragging of their culinary skills! Hmmm.

Students may be disabused of the notion that the building is sited incorrectly. It is not only the right way round but Breuer and the trustees chose the site. However, it was one of some dozen possible sites. One of the more prominent locations was on the circle opposite Strong but the Trustees were uncomfortable with so discordant a display of modern design in the context of the old campus so it was put in "behind" Main next to the old stables! Its current prominence on a grass island hemmed in by Vogelstein and the manicured garden (named for President Fergusson) is recent.

(Euthenics is NOT eugenics. It an idea devised by the first woman professor of chemistry at MIT, Ellen Swallow Richards, a Vassar graduate, who believed that women should learn the hard sciences through

study of domestic activities. We'd call it domestic science. There was a "euthenics house" on campus, Blodgett, where students cooked, cleaned, and worked in the Vassar gardens. The euthenics program was closed down during the war--for valid intellectual reasons and because it was impossible to maintain the garden program. After the war there was discussion of substituting a cooperative living unit and the same family that gave Blodgett and, it should be added, the Alumnae House, the Ferrys gave Ferry House. The key connection is Queene Ferry Coonley, from Chicago and one of the patrons of FLW.)

The building is divided into two parts: the upper level box is for sleeping and studying; the lower level box for communal activities (eating and playing). This "T-shaped" plan represents a clear articulation of modernist principles of function. But despite its modernist plan the building reflects both Breuer's European origins as well as his American experience. Note that though the brick is painted white (with all those overtones of modernist efficiency that is not true to the materials which is what every good Bauhaus boy and girl should do. Also, while there are "strip" windows, there is extensive use of natural raw cypress wood giving an oddly rustic feel to the building. Note too the zinc pipe and corrugated metal Constructivist siding of the sun-screens (think Tatlin?) with their echoes of the building site. This upper-lower split continues through the building: the upper (sleeping) level is more obviously European with its aggressively white forms raised off the ground, the lower (dining) level is almost an American ranchburger with large plate glass windows. And American compromises like a fireplace (hardly a modernist idea!) are weirdly balanced with the Corbusian idea of a roof garden.

The plan has a spikey quality (with the low walls) like Mies van der Rohe's Brick Country House plan (1923) or the pinwheel of the Bauhaus building. (Breuer was an associate of Mies in Germany and Gropius in Germany and at Harvard.)

There is much to suggest that modernism had become a gestural language by this time. The painting of the bricks is one element; the truly non-functional sun-screens another.

The following are some questions you might ask:

*Why should Breuer feel that he could move the building around campus without changing its form? (Answer is about modernism's confidence in their analysis of function and indifference to site. You can point how, in the language of architecture, modernism sets a new datum line: thus topographic accidents are swept away and the building sits on a modern stylobate or podium.)

*How does the building acknowledge direction? (Note that the public areas to the south have an overhang shading the window; those to the north, not.)

*The present site seems to have conformed to the Trustee's wish to put the building out of sight and back with the service functions of the College. (The current computer science buildings were originally the home of buildings and grounds.) Wishing away Mudd and the new Film Center, what evaluations would students make of the site? (Old postcards show Ferry with the original elms.)

You should go inside. (Students can swipe you in.) The recent renovations by Herbert Beckhard (1926-2003), a former associate of Breuer, have vitiated its original modern character. Beckhard decided that Breuer would have wanted a wooden ceiling in the dining room and added one—the effect is odd (more intimate) since the original plaster ceiling floated out to the eaves. The new ceiling is also very badly

made and pocked with downlights. At the same time non-modernist doorframes were added! And if you spend the time inside, do look at the stairs leading up to the sleeping area. Originally made of solid pieces of wood, the old stairs were replaced and veneer set on the exposed cuts. (You can recognize this easily enough since the grain changes radically from place to place on what is, evidently, the same piece of wood.) This is a great place to show Bauhaus architectural principles—and how they can just as easily be undermined.

FRANCES LEHMAN LOEB ART CENTER, 1992-93 (architect Cesar Pelli & Associates)

The brief on this building changed mid-way and seems to have caused some of the problems in making sense of the architect's aims. Virtually up until groundbreaking the plan was to have a large entry pavilion that could be used for parties. At the last minute it was decided that there was no need for this structure and it was replaced by the present dreidel-shaped structure with the freestanding line of piers. (This Post Modern reference has become the building's logo and there is a Pelli-designed watch that shows it.)

It may be interesting to have students make sense of the pier forms (derived from Taylor) as they continue across the building, but better yet is to look at the sequence of Library, van Ingen, Taylor, Art Center. Few students will have noted the brilliantly quirky Taylor Hall (Allen & Collens, 1913). Note how the windows shift against the buttresses or how the oriel window rests on the buttress (an absurd, if witty balancing act). It is also beautifully made: note the stereometric carving of the moldings. (Show them the ceramic vaulting tile, too, which is by the Guastavino Company. The Catalan Guastavino family also supplied the tiles to the area around the Oyster Bar at GCT and hundreds of other sites.

Pelli's building turns the three-dimensional sculptural richness of that wall into an iconic front. The buttresses are turned into "symbolic" buttresses (they don't buttress anything and they are made of thin sheets) and the brick façade of the main building is a set of lines drawn on the surface.

Look at the northern façade of the building. It consists of a brick gable with its square and its round window. Ask the students about the idea of this facade. OK, the round window is contextual (from the Chapel rose window) but it also forms a face: two eyes and a buttress-like nose. Eyes = Art. One Round. One Square. It is a characteristically postmodern game: it's a window; it's a face. And the red molding line over the windows (red eye liner?) is meant to contrast for humorous effect with the molding below the window (which runs like an on-off streak across the middle). This is an art building, after all; so a little illusionistic fun is appropriate. And though I have always thought this a little cheesy, in fact, I think it works quite well. Most people, it turns out, don't notice it is a face. And just because you do recognize it, doesn't ruin it forever,

There are interesting issues regarding the planar character of postmodern building. If you want to make iconic figurative symbols, what happens to architecture's essential third dimension? It is interesting to see how Pelli turns the corners—or doesn't turn the corners, notably on the northeast edge. In effect, the building is very much the product of the techniques that the Pelli office uses to build; flat cardboard models are his design technique. One can remember sessions here with Pelli when six or eight of these flat panels were made available to "pick-a-façade" in much the way one chooses lens strength at the opticians.

The glass entry tunnel is also somewhat questionable and was challenged by faculty when it was first shown. Pelli defended it as “his signature” and so it is. His use of glass is noteworthy: from the PAC Design Center (Blue Whale) in LA (1975), to the MoMA tower, to Canary Wharf in London. It was designed to be lit from the inside and to bring up the facade of Taylor. Does it? The entrance is another problem. Students can talk about the entrance as “cooling down” the visitor and it is an idea to let them ponder the idea of a wooden floor for a ceiling in that area. There are distinct functional problems at the point that the passageway leads to the hall. Where’s the art? Where’s the entrance? Up the stairs? Overhead signs that compromise the structural/architectural integrity now direct you so that you don’t wander out into the garden (“Nope, there’s no art there,” I once heard a visitor say.) Blocking off the windows at the upper levels of the hall (to protect the art from light) tends to make the hall a little darker than it need be as well as subtracting another architectural element that might direct visitors.

Inside, the module is based on John Soane’s Dulwich Art Gallery, an appropriate choice given that part of Soane’s collection went to John Britton later purchased by Reverend Elias Magoon. You might want to have them consider some of the hangings as a way to judge the scale of the rooms, whether one side or another is more favorable for viewing, or one kind of art or another and so on. I have sometimes just gone in and critiqued the hangings. It is not a bad way to let students see how seeing art is integral with architecture. In case of rain, why not?

Seeing this play between figuration and abstract in the postmodern building is an excellent contrast with Ferry—though the distances may defeat you.

BALDWIN INFIRMARY, 1940 (architects: Faulkner & Kingsbury)

If you want to teach Bauhaus-like planning (after Ferry) you might take students over to Baldwin. Based on Y shape it is brilliantly coordinated with the landscaping. Each wing had a different function, which can, more or less, be read from the outside. There is a roof garden (buzz buzz) for those in recuperation. The elevator and stairs are also expressed on the outside. The original entry desk, long since ripped out, would have been at the join between the arms and there visitors would have been sent in different directions. If you can get the group off to the left, where there are still beds, you can see some of the original fittings. The building used to be surrounded by asphalt but the new plantings by Michael van Valkenburgh have improved the building significantly!

CHICAGO HALL, 1954-56 (architects: Schweikher & Elting; the screen sculpture is the work of Erwin Hauer)

If you do vote on least favorite building, you may well end up with Chicago Hall. Despite the general distaste for this building (and its unfortunate recollections of the work of Edward Durrell Stone) the building is rather finer as design than most think and extremely interesting.

The concrete screens are intended to provide an up-dated version of the gothic surface of the Library; the building seems to try to disappear into its site. (The cell-like forms of the screens by Edwin Hauer remind one that the electron microscope was invented in these years and architects, and others, saw into cell structure, the building blocks of matter.) One might contrast the screen-like transparent quality with the strategies used at Ferry House or Pelli’s Art Center. Also, in terms of function: Chicago was designed to be a foreign language island; in the original plan no English was to be spoken in the building. Thus, screening the building from the campus was a way to insist on the fact that it was “a foreign language island.”

But one must also imagine the site without the new historicist library (Hugh Hardy is, I am told, the only New York architect who is also a paid up member of the guild of set designers) and thus the screens may make rather better sense. Site the building from the angled opening and see if students can relate it to Thompson or to the site (nestled in the trees). Despite its diminutive size (when seen from the outside) the inside is rather grand, the vaults almost medieval in character. On the interior it is possible to consider issues of scale (what determines this effect?) materials (what role do they play?) and light (how does it work?). In effect you have a kind of tent structure with billowing sail vaults, like middle Eastern tents which is, of course, what modernists really liked. Le Corbusier did a tour of the Mediterranean in 1909 and came back full of enthusiasm for vernacular architecture. (One can also compare it to a forest; note the imprint of the wooden formwork, still apparent on the piers.) The outline profile of Chicago Hall recalls Le Corbusier's Monol House (1922) or even the Maison Jaoul in Neuilly (1954).

Paul Schweikher was a follower of Lou Kahn and the basic idea of the repetitive modules in concrete recalls the Yale Art Gallery of a couple of years earlier. It was a popular shape in that period. The English architect Ralph Erskine, for example, uses it in a housing estate—probably getting it from Kahn, too.

Hauer, incidentally, was a student of Joseph Albers, taught at Yale and was an early proponent of Modular Constructivism.

The building has been disastrously "spruced up." The worst things can be found in the entry hall where you can show them the erratic placement of the cream-colored paint: check under the eaves at the entry. To paint the concrete is particular offensive way to deal with the concrete rendering rather absurd the whole idea of *béton brut* (exposed concrete) that reflects the form work in which it was placed.

But a critical imaginative act: take away the Rivers addition and then have students think about the relation of Chicago to the library.

Finally, if you are there you can look out on the remaining Hellmuth Obata & Kassabaum (HOK) towers on the northwest corner and west side and look at its relation to Rivers (dreadful connection on the north face) and deal with relations between HOK and the original library and the Hardy addition and the library.

NOYES HOUSE, 1958 (architect: Eero Saarinen)

The building repays study and close examination. It is a good example of how architects use form imaginatively in relation to site.

Saarinen may be known to some of our students as the architect of the TWA Building at JFK and the St. Louis Arch. The building represents an interesting adaptation to site that a number of modern architects attempted in the late 1950s and 1960s, prior to the beginnings of postmodernism. In this instance the building follows the plan of the pre-existing circle. (Unlike Ferry where the parti was determined before the site was selected.) Saarinen conceived of the campus as a gothic campus (well, sort of) and the façade was built to provide a modernized gothic. It was originally planned to be one half of a two part building—with a second identical half coming to the west of the present building. A sundial was to be placed between the two halves. (The pair of buildings forming the outer edge of a

clock-face like circle.) The modernized gothic part is easy to spot. If you think of the building as a straight block that has been bent, the inner face has crinkled out to gothic peaks; the outer face has stretched. Important, therefore, to go around to the rear, where the effect is almost like the outside of a Roman amphitheater with pilaster and flat windows.

Incidentally the amphitheater is an appropriate reference to the extent that Noyes Circle was the original athletic field for the college. (Ultimately the beds around the outside were used as a demonstration garden by the Biology department.) Interestingly the circle was completely shielded with pine trees so voyeurs couldn't spy on the girls. Have the students look at the deformed overcooked bricks (they are very beautiful; almost as nice as the stones on Blodgett, arguably the most beautiful use of materials on a Vassar building); they have a handmade quality. And if you imagine the circle completely ringed with pines (as it was in the 1950s) the Noyes' bricks have a kind of bark-like quality and the modernized gothic windows the character of pine trees.

Inside you can see the Passion Pit (boys could go no further). Saarinen's style is to break the space into its component architectural parts: arch, bench, seat, planter. In effect Saarinen treats the interior like an abstract volume in which he can place objects. If you sit in the Pit, note how present the outdoors is: how the planters sit into the floor making the indoor plants part of the visual scenery. Finally, don't forget the cute little "arrow" balconies at the eastern end. (For smokers?)

Science Quad

New England Building, 1901, addition 1919, York & Sawyer Sanders Classroom (formerly Chemistry), Ewing & Chappelle, 1909 Sanders Physics Building, Ewing & Allen, 1926
Olmsted Hall of Biological Sciences, Sherwood, Mills & Smith, 1973 Mudd Hall, Perry Dean Rogers & Partners, 1986

preceded by Vassar Brothers Laboratory for chemistry and Physics, 1880-1938

Avery Hall, J.A. Wood, 1866
Alumnae Gymnasium (Ely Hall), William M. Tubby (1889) Blodgett Hall, York & Sawyer (1928)
Calisthenium (Avery Hall), J.A. Wood (1866)
Chapel, Shepley, Ruttan and Coolidge (1904)
Ely Hall (Alumnae Gymnasium), 1889
Jewett House, Francis Allen (1897)
President's House, Rossiter & Wright (1895)
Rockefeller Hall, York & Sawyer (1897)
Skinner Hall, Allen & Collens (1932)

Nicholas Adams

April 2013

(partially revised 3/21)

* demolished