

# HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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Professor Toshiko Mori  
Chair, Department of Architecture  
Harvard Graduate School of Design  
Gund Hall 207  
48 Quincy Street  
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Dear Professor Mori:

I thought that it would be useful to respond at some length to the questions you have raised about the renovation of the Woodberry Poetry Room in Lamont Library. Please feel free to share my letter. For my part, I will forward our exchange to our deans, provost, president, and others.

As you know, the Woodberry Poetry Room is a beloved location within the library. The very good news is that the room functions as originally intended: it has been heavily used by generations of students and faculty. In fact, it began not in Lamont, but as a dedicated room in Widener Library, created to be a “comfortable, un-library like room where students and faculty might find, on tables and shelves, the poetry of their own century...”. (Haviaras, *Harvard Library Bulletin* Fall 1992, vol. 3, no. 1) When it opened in 1931, one wall of the room held Amy Lowell’s personal library. In 1949, Lowell’s books went to Houghton Library, and the Woodberry Poetry Room moved to Lamont, the new undergraduate library, to continue its role in providing easy access to contemporary poetry. Today, it continues to be a vibrant part of the library, with its specialized collections, poetry readings, and energetic staff.

Because the room has functioned in the way that was intended, it requires renovation. Looking at archives, old photographs, and early articles, as well as records of earlier improvements to the room, we discovered that there have been many physical changes over the 57 years of its existence in Lamont. For example, paint had been removed from some lighting fixtures, shelving had been added, pieces of furniture had been removed, items had been reupholstered, and many repairs had been made to individual pieces. Over the decades the room has been used for events as well as for study. The condition in which the room existed in early 2006 was not as it had been in 1949.



Thus, work has been done on the room, much of it to alter the 1949 conditions and some of it to preserve them. In 1999, many pieces of furniture had been carefully restored (re-springing, reupholstering, replacement of broken wood), but in the intervening time, the condition of many pieces had again become unsafe. In short, restoration of the furniture proved impractical. This is not the result of abuse, only of sustained wear and tear in a busy library. Chair legs were breaking, chair arms would not stay in position, the bentwood frames were splintering, and screws, pegs, and other repairs were no longer holding. The furniture had become unsafe. We also discovered that original light fixtures were unsafe – their metal parts broken and wiring frayed.

For the summer of 2006, we had scheduled and begun numerous facilities projects in Lamont, including a renovation of the HVAC system, upgrade of restrooms, and several safety-related projects, such as resurfacing interior stairs and replacing exterior stairs. Given the extensive work scheduled for the building, and the need to address problems in the Woodberry Poetry Room, we determined that a long-awaited renovation for the Poetry Room was in order if it was to remain functional. The renovation includes the removal of asbestos, old electrical wiring, and a badly worn floor. We engaged the services of Einhorn Yaffee Prescott Architecture & Engineering, P.C. as architect on the Poetry Room, as the firm was working with us on other parts of Lamont. From the outset we knew from the librarians, students, and faculty that:

- the room has to meet the needs of contemporary library users;
- it has to withstand heavy usage; and,
- whatever changes we make would respect the history of the room and, to the extent possible, be compatible with Aalto's design.

You can see from this account that we are trying to preserve and enhance the function of the room in a way that acknowledges and respects Aalto's contribution. We have no alternative space in which to place the Woodberry Poetry Room's program, and we cannot create a museum piece by restoring its 1949 condition. New furniture, floor surfaces, and lighting must be durable and safe for today's volume and character of use.

We announced our renovation plans on the Library's website:

[http://hcl.harvard.edu/news/2006/poetry\\_room.html](http://hcl.harvard.edu/news/2006/poetry_room.html), mentioning the special challenge of making this room contemporary and functional *while respecting the environment that Aalto created*. I believe you know that we are keeping a significant number of the signature elements of the room – the ash screens, two of the consoles, large study tables, lighting sconces, and the paneling. The replacement furniture has been selected with care for the purpose and intent of Aalto's design. We have worked with the curator of the Busch Reisinger Museum to select a set of the best or most intact of several exemplary pieces for the Museum's collection. Remaining pieces, which are not stable for institutional use but which have potential to be enjoyed in a residential or museum setting, will be sold through an auction house. This is a process that ensures any Harvard pieces moving into other ownership will be properly documented, a process followed by our museum curators and affirmed with legal counsel.

The renovation now underway intends to respect Aalto's design while providing for 21<sup>st</sup> century library users. Just as Amy Lowell's collection became too valuable to keep in the Woodberry Poetry Room, so we now face a transition in furnishings, due to another kind of aging. It is regrettable that so many have so quickly, and without information, formed an opinion that this was a thoughtless course of action. Providing a comfortable, welcoming, and safe facility that includes many of the original Aalto pieces and complementing them with new items sensitive to its initial design was not an easy process. Please know that the room is not being destroyed and dismantled – it is being carefully renovated.

I hope that this message allays your concerns about the renovation and gives you a better understanding of what we expect to achieve.

Yours sincerely,



Nancy M. Cline  
Roy E. Larsen Librarian  
of Harvard College



Sidney Verba  
Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor  
and Director of the Harvard University Library

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