

September 19, 2006

For the past two-and-a-half months, DOCOMOMO US has hosted an international online debate about Harvard College Library's decision to "carefully renovate" rather than to restore or preserve the Woodberry Poetry Room, created in 1949 by Alvar Aalto. Located in Harvard University's Lamont Library, the 1,030-square-foot Woodberry is a rare surviving example—one of only four in the United States—of the renowned modernist's extraordinary ability to combine objects and materials into complex and sensuous environments. As the web postings show, a broad spectrum of individuals and institutions rallied to the call of the chair of Harvard's Department of Architecture, Prof. Toshiko Mori, to protest a course of action that the Library had publicized hardly at all. There were also expressions of concern from various guardians of Aalto's legacy as well as extensive coverage by the national and international press.

The renovation of the Woodberry Room has been completed. Because the space is not open to the public, it is only when the University chooses to publicize the project that we will learn if the various protests had an effect. But already we can draw lessons from this incident for those who have the privilege of owning and intervening in the life of important historical buildings and spaces and also for those who care about such buildings and spaces.

Harvard College Library assigned its architect, the Boston office of Einhorn Yaffee Prescott, Architecture and Engineering P.C., the task of making the room suitable for today's "heavy usage" by introducing changes that "to the extent possible" would respect its history and be "compatible" with Aalto's design. The room was to be made "safe" for a new "volume and character of use." Safety arguments were also invoked to justify such decisions as replacing the existing Aalto-designed furniture with Aalto-esque pieces (notwithstanding the fact that Aalto's firm, Artek, continues to produce pieces identical to those removed). Excluded from the start from "the possible" was the restoration of several original pieces, including all four large listening consoles that made the Woodberry a place where poetry was heard by circles of enthralled listeners as well as read. Two of the consoles as well as several other pieces were deaccessioned; some were offered to one of Harvard's museums and the rest were slated to be put up for auction so that they could be "enjoyed in a residential or museum setting," according to Nancy Cline, the Roy E. Larsen Librarian of Harvard College.

The university's charges to its architects were based on premises that must be considered problematic. For one thing, safety and restoration are hardly mutually exclusive. As Mori noted, the standard method is to "repair and reinforce the item for safer use to meet current standards. Just imagine what might happen otherwise to historically significant architecture – buildings would be deprived of cornices, capitols, and many other details and materials." In any case, safety concerns need not have dictated deaccessioning the consoles and other fixtures. New technology aside, reading and listening to poetry are not activities that have changed much in centuries. Aalto conceived the consoles as centers of circles of listeners, and had Harvard College's Library's commitment to poetry remained strong, they might have easily been restored. Although, fortunately, the surviving consoles' woodwork remains untouched, the appending of four personal

reading tables (with individual task lighting) to them has transformed their shape, scale relation to the room and, in the end, their nature. To judge from this and other elements of the university's scope of work, renovating the Woodberry was nothing less than a *stealth reprogramming* of the space from a room dedicated to poetry to a more conventional study hall/event venue.

Edouard Sekler, Harvard professor emeritus of art history and eminent international preservationist, suggested to the university that its interpretation of the project as a facilities renovation did not allow for the kind of archival and design research that would have produced a more sensitive proposal. This sort of research would not have been hard to do; restoring a mid-century Aalto room would not have been unusually difficult. Projects that might have been useful models include the ongoing restorations of the Viipuri Library, in Vyborg, Russia, and the Kaufmann Conference Center, in New York City. In fact, an important precedent was near at hand: the highly-praised restoration of Baker House at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Even closer to home was Harvard's own meticulous restoration of the public spaces of Widener Library (Horace Trumbauer, 1914).

What has Harvard's exercise in "careful renovation" taught us at this point?

- When a renowned academic institution that prides itself on intellectual exploration, academic rigor, and cultural leadership denies to Aalto the care and attention it had offered to the work of Widener's less celebrated and arguably less culturally significant Beaux-Arts architect, we must conclude that modern movement architecture remains misunderstood, unappreciated, and extremely vulnerable.
- Modern movement interiors are the most vulnerable of all. Interior designs that meet contemporary needs are inevitably temporary, and care must be taken that efforts at updating them do not compromise the future by irreversibly changing the past.
- Preservation of modern architecture should be, as it was here, equally a concern for the design, scholarly and preservation communities.
- Architecture culture has changed. Preservation is no longer seen as a hindrance to design innovation; design faculties are becoming acutely aware that the modernist heritage that cutting edge architects recognize as their legacy requires attention and even advocacy. The Woodberry became an international *cause célèbre* because distinguished members of a distinguished design faculty took up the cause of conservation and because they were willing to contest the decisions of their own institution and to call it to task for failing to act as a cultural steward.

As it has since its founding in 1997, DOCOMOMO US will continue to advocate for buildings and spaces of national significance and to support the efforts of its subchapters to advocate for those of regional and local significance. When, however, a case inspires debate about restoration principles and priorities and cultural stewardship for modernism, as did the Woodberry, DOCOMOMO US will again suspend its advocacy and transform its website into a forum.