

Nancy Cline
Roy E. Larson Librarian of Harvard College
Widener Library Room 110
Harvard University
Cambridge MA 02138

Dear Ms. Cline,

Thank you very much for your letter dated July 3rd 2006. I continue to find it regrettable that we only learned of the current renovation plans through an anonymous letter, rather than through a larger discussion at the University level. The GSD has faculty who are experts on architectural history and preservation, and we would have liked to been able to provide assistance in the planning process. As I stated in the previous letter, the Woodberry Poetry Reading Room by Alvar Aalto is an important example of twentieth century architecture that requires careful consideration when a renovation or an alteration is proposed.

I wish your letter had demonstrated a more obvious recognition of the significance of this room. When you describe the relocation of the room from Widener to Lamont, you make no mention of the special design commissioned for the current room, which was designed in its entirety by Alvar Aalto in 1949. This is a very important part of the history of the Woodberry Poetry Reading Room to skip. The oversight is such that no credit is given to Aalto's programmatic invention in the evolution of that room when you state, "Because the room has functioned in the way that was intended, it requires renovation."

No real reason is given for why such drastic renovation as you propose is required. Rather, the justification that follows – a list of all the ways the room has been altered in its 57-year history – only documents the Library's poor stewardship of this architectural gem. (Although it must be noted that an article in *Interiors* magazine from 1979 remarked on an "admirable state of the room's preservation," thanks largely to the affectionate care of the present curator, poet Stratis Haviaras, and his predecessors.) Aalto's creation, a rare and excellent example of "total design" by a master architect of the twentieth century, has not been treated with the respect and care it deserves.

I am concerned about the lack of a clearly outlined functional or preservation program, without which there cannot be a rational design strategy. Indeed, while I respect concerns for safety, I must remark that in the course of preservation, no one outright removes a historically significant artifact simply because it becomes "unsafe." The proper course of action 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.

The decisions regarding what is altered, what is preserved, and what is discarded seems random. In your description of the 2006 renovation plan, you write about "the need to address problems in the Woodberry Poetry Reading Room," but you do not specify what

these are. You describe the scope of the work as “removal of asbestos, old electrical wiring and a badly worn floor.” This scope of work does not and should not affect the interior design and furnishing of the room.

In the presentation of June 27th 2006 by the Library and the Architect, we were shown a reconfiguration of the original octagonal Aalto record consoles conceived for listening by eight students into four-sided study carrels, which is an example of the appalling inappropriateness of the proposed renovation. The furniture selected had neither the distinction of nor the resemblance to Aalto’s. In fact, Artek, the company that Aalto founded, which produced the original furniture and textiles used for the Woodberry Room, is still in production and able to comply with any special needs and standards required for the Library in its current use.

The bullet-pointed criteria for renovation that you mention are not specific, and leave me wondering: What are “the needs of contemporary library users” exactly? Does “heavy usage” imply an increase in the room’s use, and if so, is this due to a planned change in the Woodberry Poetry Reading Room’s program?

According to articles in *The Crimson*, a number of other spaces are being created within Lamont that should be able to absorb heavy use, lounge use, or technologically challenging activities easily. In light of this information, the argument for the drastic renovation and remodeling being planned for the Woodberry Room is even more difficult to defend.

There is a social contract involved when one is an owner of a historically significant piece of architecture. There is a privilege in that ownership that one cannot abuse. Responsibility must extend beyond immediate needs. One must carefully evaluate and balance the needs of function and preservation of a legacy. The Woodberry Poetry Reading Room does not belong only to an individual or an institution but also to a culture, a world civilization that prizes and cherishes it for what it represents in the annals of mid-twentieth century modern architecture and in the body of work by Alvar Aalto.

If it is true that the Library and the University seeks to acknowledge and respect Aalto’s contribution, it must be possible to stop the proposed work that brutally damages the original design. Careful and thoughtful documentation and research must be conducted before any renovation takes place.

Sincerely,

Toshiko Mori
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