

# Harvard messes with a masterpiece

## The university's renovation of the Woodberry Poetry Room goes awry

By Robert Campbell, Globe Correspondent | October 8, 2006

The magic is gone.

With the best intentions in the world, Harvard has ruined the Woodberry Poetry Room.

The Woodberry is -- or it was, anyway -- a miniature masterpiece tucked away on the top floor of the university's Lamont Library in Harvard Yard. Its shelves are stocked with contemporary poetry and its seats, originally, were mostly comfortable lounge chairs. Warm woodwork and cork floors created a homelike getaway for students.

The architect of the room was Alvar Aalto, the Finnish master who is all but universally recognized as one of the half dozen greatest of the 20th century. The Woodberry is one of only four surviving Aalto designs in the United States, the best known of which is the marvelous Baker House dormitory at MIT. Baker and the Woodberry both date from 1949, at the end of a period when Aalto taught architecture students at MIT.

The Woodberry, along with the rest of Lamont Library, re-opened this fall after a renovation. You can walk into the room today and you'll see what appears to be a perfectly nice place, pleasant and forgettable. Harvard has carefully preserved a lot of what was here before. Nothing is gone except, well, everything.

What nobody understood is that the Woodberry was an ensemble. To change any part of it -- like altering a few bars here and there in a piece of music -- changes everything. Aalto was a master designer who designed everything himself, including lamps, vases, chairs, and tables that became international classics. At Woodberry, he arranged the elements of his interior in a relaxed, informal, but easily disrupted harmony.

Baker House, too, was renovated a few years ago. But where Harvard klutzed everything up, MIT got everything right. The lesson is especially clear because the same architect did both jobs. He is David Fixler of the firm Einhorn Yaffee Prescott.

"It was a rush summer project," Fixler says of the Woodberry. "There was a donor and a minimal budget. 'We have to get this done' was the attitude. We tried to do as little harm as possible. Harvard was a good client and we didn't feel we could turn this down."

He compares the Woodberry with Baker House. "At Baker, we spent two years talking about the building. We convened a small committee of historians and architects and even

someone from the National Park Service to evaluate it. Harvard has never had that process. That's not how things happen at Harvard."

The way things happen at Harvard, in truth, is that everyone distrusts everyone else's taste in architecture. Last winter, Harvard's president, Larry Summers, decreed that a row of large trees must be planted in front of the new One Western Avenue apartment complex facing the Charles River. He disliked the building so much that he didn't want the alumni (or potential donors) seeing it at Commencement. One Western was designed by two architects both of whom teach -- in fact, both of whom have chaired departments -- at Harvard's Design School.

Famously, Harvard is every tub on its own bottom. The Business School, in love with redbrick neo-Colonial, certainly doesn't want a committee of taste police from the Design School telling it what to do.

Projects like the Woodberry can go forward in virtual secrecy at Harvard. Emilie Norris, the university's Curator of Cultural Properties, says: "Nobody heard about the renovation until it was well under way, and the area was off limits all summer."

In fact, if it had not been for a letter in early June, sent to a number of people, including this writer, by a member of the Cambridge community who wishes to remain anonymous, it is likely the whole renovation would have been complete before anyone knew about it. And Harvard's intention, at that early stage, was to auction much of the original Aalto-designed furniture on eBay!

Nancy Cline, the Librarian of Harvard College, was in charge of the Lamont job and therefore of the Woodberry. She heads a Harvard department -- a tub -- of professional librarians. There is no reason why she should ever have heard of Alvar Aalto. Architect Fixler warned her there would be a fuss but, having just gut-renovated the much larger Widener Library without opposition, she was skeptical.

And in truth, the architectural community isn't very reliable on these issues. Without yet knowing the details of the Woodberry renovation, critics threw around words like "destroyed" and "dismantled." They were expressing, one feels, their personal outrage at not having been consulted.

Letters poured in from all over the world. Wrote one alumnus, "Please -- please -- postpone the work until this issue has been thrashed out more thoroughly with the (enormous, unwieldy, multitudinous, chronically opinionated) Harvard community."

But in other letters, exaggerations were common. A very prominent American architect wrote to the university, "Please, we must acknowledge the supreme significance of Alvar Aalto as one of the greatest architects of the 20th century and his Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard as one of his great works." But by phone with me, this person admitted never having seen the room.

Even odder, no architects protested the recent heavy-handed renovation of the Harkness Commons graduate student center, a superb building designed by Walter Gropius, the famed teacher and architect who brought modernism to Harvard. Says architectural historian Neil Levine, "They made it into a Starbucks." Apparently, nobody sent the Design School an anonymous letter about Harkness.

The merit of the original Woodberry is hard to describe in words. A row of lounge chairs and side tables stood beneath the room's only windows. Lined up there, they resembled the deck chairs on an ocean liner. They looked toward the room's entrance, across a floor so loosely arranged that it reminded you of a landscape. Four eight-sided consoles, for playing old 78 and 33 rpm vinyl records, stood in the space like rock formations.

And the room was brilliantly made to seem mysteriously larger by a wall of four overlapping bookshelves. You could step behind a bookcase, where you'd discover a door into an adjacent room. You had the sense of being beckoned or teased beyond the boundaries of the room.

So what should have happened at Woodberry? There are three options. The whole room could have been dismantled and shipped to Finland -- a possibility that in fact was discussed -- where it would have been welcomed as a national treasure. Or it could have been lovingly restored to its original condition, with only such changes as were necessary, such as repairs and refinishing and new wiring. Or it could have been bastardized, with chunks of Aalto standing like forlorn survivors next to incompatible new elements.

Harvard chose option three. The mysterious overlapping bookcases have been cut back for "security," so that an attendant at the desk can see into every corner of the room like the warden in a prison. Maybe someone doesn't want students necking behind the shelves. But on two recent visits, one by me and one by a faculty member, the room was open and there was no attendant. So much for security.

The light is too bright, overwhelming the delicate domestic character of the space. The four eight-sided consoles have been reduced to two, and these are surrounded with new countertops, surfaced in plastic laminate, so students will have a place for their laptops. The eloquent row of chairs and side-tables beneath the windows is gone. Many elements have been saved, but they count for little in the shattered ambiance.

Backtracking in the face of criticism, Harvard is now planning to retrofit the room with chairs and tables either by Aalto or similar to his. I don't think they will make much difference.

My choice is option two. I normally have no problem with the accretion of change in a building over time. Often it enriches the architecture. Harvard's buildings are forever changing, including the great ones. But in this case, the room was so small, so easily saved, and so delicate, that change was surely the wrong choice. How wonderful -- and

how educational -- if Harvard had valued it enough to restore it. (It still could, of course.)  
The laptops and bright lights could be accommodated somewhere else.

Next time, maybe Harvard will avoid a lot of trouble by going public before, rather than after, some tub-on-its-own-bottom decides what's going to happen. I wouldn't count on it.

Robert Campbell is the Globe's architecture critic. He can be reached at [camglobe@aol.com](mailto:camglobe@aol.com). ■

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