Bricks & Politics

What gets built at Harvard, what doesn’t, and why

by Joan Wickersham

Every year, on a hot summer day, 10 Boston-area architects pile into a van together and drive around for hours looking for beauty. Lately, at least, they haven’t been finding it at Harvard.

They are members of a jury assembled annually by the Boston Society of Architects to award the Harleston Parker Medal, a prize given to the recent building judged to be “the most beautiful.” It’s not the biggest, fanciest award in the world, or even in the world of architecture (that distinction belongs to the Pritzker Prize, sometimes referred to as “the Nobel of architecture”). But the Parker Medal is a good gauge of how architects—who are both the toughest critics and greatest appreciators of one another’s work—view the aesthetic quality of what’s being built around Boston.

Since 2000, juries have recognized buildings on the Welles-
Peabody Terrace has always been admired by architects, but is generally to lead the architecture program at the Graduate School of Design (GSD) in 1937, and arguably reached its peak with the Carpenter Center, completed in 1965, the only building Le Corbusier ever designed in the United States. The campus also includes work by Alvar Aalto, Josep Lluis Sert, James Stirling, Robert Venturi, and Ben Thompson. Architects who studied or taught at the GSD—including I.M. Pei, Henry Cobb, Paul Rudolph, Philip Johnson, Hugh Stubbins, and Frank Gehry—have had an unparalleled impact on American architecture since World War II. Ada Louise Huxtable, the former architecture critic for the New York Times, wrote: “Harvard led an architectural revolution in the 1930s...that was virtually responsible in this country for the breakthrough for modern architecture” (see “The Forgotten Modernist,” page 58.)

So why isn't Harvard still hiring amazing architects to design amazing buildings?

In fact, the University has tried. During the past decade Harvard has given commissions to a couple of architects who are not just well-regarded but generally revered: Renzo Piano and Hans Hollein, both of whom have won the Pritzker Prize. Piano, best known for his museum work—the Pompidou Center in Paris, designed with Richard Rogers; the Menil Collection in Houston; and the recent addition to New York's Morgan Library—was hired in 1999 to design a new museum for Harvard's modern art collection. And Hollein, whose buildings in his native Vienna are described by design critics as masterpieces of urban contextual architecture (the adjective “jewel-like” comes up repeatedly) was asked to design a small building for the Harvard libraries.

Ultimately, neither design was built. Meanwhile other buildings, including Robert A.M. Stern's neo-Georgian Spangler Center for the Business School, have enjoyed smoother processes—though that building has also engendered debate about architectural taste. As George Thrush, head of the architecture program at Northeastern, says, “There are many problems a university can run into when it comes to getting things built—and Harvard usually runs into all of them.”

The politics of site: Who gets to say what Harvard does with its land?

The defeat of the Renzo Piano art museum on the Charles River began 40 years before the museum itself was even conceived.

The parcel of land on which Harvard proposed to build the museum was adjacent to Peabody Terrace, the complex of low- and high-rise buildings constructed in the 1960s to house graduate students and their families. Designed by then GSD dean Josep Lluis Sert, Peabody Terrace has always been admired by architects (Leland Cott, an architect and a professor at the GSD, calls it “one of the world’s canonical housing projects”), but is generally disliked by those outside the profession, who find it cold and oversized. The neighbors hated it.

The towering Peabody Terrace housing complex, built in the 1960s, rises behind older housing of a far smaller scale.

The Riverside neighborhood was (and still is) a patchwork of small streets and modest clapboard houses. Peabody Terrace's three 22-story towers cast a long shadow, both literally and figuratively. For years, front-yard fences in Riverside displayed, alongside the climbing roses, signs deploiring Harvard expansion. Riverside activist Saundra Graham (who went on to become a Massachusetts state representative) famously disrupted Harvard's 1970 Commencement with a protest against further development.

In 1999, James Cuno, then director of Harvard's art museums, announced plans to de-
have enduring cultures,” says Kathleen Leahy Born, an architect who was a member of the council at the time. She remembers seeing pen-and-ink sketches of the Piano project. “You couldn’t tell much about it, but it was low. I thought it would have been a nice and very fitting use of the land along the river.” The neighbors were concerned about traffic, and proposed that the University scrap the museum and use the site for a public park. That proposal recalled what had happened 25 years earlier when a citizens’ group foiled plans to build the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum at the edge of Harvard Square. The L.M. Pei–designed project was eventually sited at the University of Massachusetts, Boston campus in Dorchester, and a park was built on the Harvard Square site instead, along with the Kennedy School of Government.

The neighbors’ opposition to Piano’s museum also reflected their antipathy toward the new Harvard building that was going up directly across the river in Allston—a building Globe architecture critic Robert Campbell ’58, M.Arch. ’67, described by coin-ing the term “hate-object.” One Western Avenue (see cover), a 15-story graduate-student residence designed by GSD faculty members Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti, was intended as a gateway for the University’s new Allston campus. Boston mayor Thomas Menino publicly criticized the architects’ proposal, and the building’s tower was shortened and re-oriented as a result. And when the building finally opened in 2003, Campbell commented, “In 30 years of writing about architecture, I’ve never heard so many expressions of outrage over a new building.

Cambridge responded to the Riverside neighbors by imposing an 18-month development moratorium on Harvard’s proposed museum site. As Born explains, “A moratorium isn’t the same as a similar that external pressure from the neighbors accomplished what internal politicking could not.)

“Exhilarating,” one Riverside activist told the Globe in 2003, after the compromise was announced. But had the neighborhood really benefited? Instead of a two-story museum in a park-like setting, they ended up with taller student dorms and a small public park adjacent to heavily traveled Memorial Drive.

Born suggests that what was at stake was more than just building heights, or even the symbolic David-and-Goliath drama of the neighbors versus the University, but also two opposing ideas of what constitutes the public good. “When I became a city councilor, there was controversy about a supermarket chain wanting to build along the river. I thought the idea was ap-

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to say. The reaction was, “Don’t make your institutional problems into our neighborhood crisis.” The project was finally completed in 2006—on a different site, with its program split between two buildings (it was originally conceived as a single structure) on opposite sides of a busy street, and without the underground tunnel that Cobb and Harvard wanted to connect the buildings.

Yet the University’s senior director of community relations, Mary Power, points to many successful aspects of the CGIS process. “The dialogue produced many changes that were acceptable to the University and responsive to the community,” she says. Harvard preserved the green space behind the GSD; planted 200 trees; decreased proposed building heights; and moved old wood-frame houses to the edge of the site, where they were renovated as University office space—a practice which Harvard frequently employs, both as a way to rescue old structures and to mediate between the scale of residential and University buildings.

Power also cites two current projects where the public process has been going smoothly: the northwest corner of the law school, now in site preparation; and a group of new science labs bordered by Oxford and Hammond Streets, currently under construction. The latter project includes a building by Rafael Moneo, whose work, like that of Piano and Hans Hollein, other architects admire hugely.

“The strategy we’ve found successful in working with the neighbors is a culture of collaboration with a focus on mutual benefits,” Power says. “And we try to begin the dialogue early.”

**The politics of urban context: Who gets to judge whether a building fits in?**

Nobody, in the recorded history of the doomed Piano art museum, ever said, “I hate the building.” The aesthetic issue hardly came up: the battle was over siting and Harvard’s perceived encroachment into the neighborhood.

In contrast, the controversy around Hans Hollein’s design for 90 Mount Auburn Street was, right from the beginning, a fight over aesthetics. The design was presented: some people loved it, some people hated it, and the question became not “Who’s right?” but “Who has the power to prevail?”

The story began in 1999, when Harvard Planning and Real Estate announced it was going to tear down a couple of old buildings on Mount Auburn Street between J. Press and the Fox Club. The retail tenants—the Harvard Provision Co., Skewers restaurant, and University Typewriter—left cordially, but they were the kind of quirky small retailers whose passing dismays Cambridge residents (and Harvard alumni) who’ve lamented the gradual loss of the “old” Harvard Square to glossy chain stores and banks.

Because one of the buildings on the site, an undistinguished clapboard triple-decker, dated from 1895, the University could not demolish it without permission from the Cambridge Historical Commission. Furthermore, the site was within a conservation district, so any new design would have to navigate a narrow Scylla-and-Charybdis set of requirements encouraging “creative modern architecture” that must also “complement and contribute...
Cooper says. “He doesn’t need someone to explain to him what ‘contextual’ means.”

In a memo to the commissioners several days earlier, the commission’s executive director, Charles Sullivan, had called the building “inappropriately scaled” and “incongruous because of its aggressive indifference to its surroundings.” At the hearing, after a brief discussion, the commission voted 7-0 to reject Hollein’s design because it did not “complement and contribute to” its urban context in Harvard Square.

Contextual architecture, like beauty, can be subjective and difficult to define. At its simplest, it has to do with a response to the size, scale, and style of the surrounding environment. But as Cooper points out, that doesn’t mean just replicating what’s already there. “Is context in Harvard Square a big parking garage which has no architectural merit but is red brick? Is that context?” Sometimes, she says, an architect’s response to context might be “juxtaposition. Look at Norman Foster’s Carré d’Art in Nîmes—he’s saying, I respect the beauty of this very old architecture, so I’m going to respond to it by opposing it.”

There is also the question of a building’s symbolic and visual importance within the larger urban scene. Kathy Born says, “In a place like Harvard Square, you need buildings that fit in, but you also need punctuation. Some of Harvard’s greatest buildings are the oddballs: Memorial Hall, the Lampoon.” How does one decide whether a certain site needs an attention-getting “object” building, or a well-mannered backdrop? Some architects, for instance, believe Le Corbusier’s Carpenter Center would have worked better as a stand-alone building on a more prominent site (“Observatory
Hill,” suggests one), while others feel that the building’s excitement and energy come from the way it’s jammed in between the serene red-brick Fogg and the Faculty Club.

Ultimately, arguments about context boil down to taste. For everyone who says, “Yes, it’s contextual,” there’s someone else who says, “No, it isn’t.” In the case of the Hollein building, the power to decide rested solely in the hands of the Cambridge Historical Commission, which originated in 1963 partly in response to Harvard’s modern building projects (notably the Holyoke Center, whose “harsh exterior contrasted sharply with the comfortable brick vernacular of Harvard Square,” according to the commission’s website). Again, a public regulatory process trumped Harvard’s ability to build on its own land—and again, the public process had grown up partly in reaction to what and how Harvard built in the 1960s, the University’s single most explosive period of growth.

Among architects, no one is waxing nostalgic over the good old days of arrogant, autocratic development. But they do worry about the impact all this public process has on the quality of architecture. Says one designer: “There’s now so much community review that it’s hard to build a building that hasn’t been pushed and massaged and changed.”

So how good was the Hollein building? Nazneen Cooper found it “unusual and poetic.” Lee Cott, who calls the University’s choice of Hollein “a wonderful event,” believes the design was killed too early. “It was only a schematic design. It would have changed and gotten better if the process had been allowed to continue.” Before the commission met, critic Robert Campbell had written that the design seemed to “thrust and preen,” but also hoped it would be allowed to evolve in a way that was “feisty and inventive.”

A year after the historical commission rejected Hollein’s approach, they unanimously voted to approve a design for the same site by Andrea Leers of Leers Weinzapfel Associates. In some ways, the Leers building, completed in 2006, echoes Ben Thompson’s classic 1970 Design Research building on Brattle Street, which now houses several retail stores. It is elegant and austere: a carefully detailed modern glass box. No one could fault it aesthetically. Some people might feel a pang for the funky old buildings and stores it replaced, although the ground floor provides a home for another independent retailer forced from the other side of the Square by a steep rent increase a year or two earlier: the Globe Travel Bookstore. Among architects, admiration for the Leers Weinzapfel building is widespread but muted; and the mutedness seems to come from a wistful sense of what might have been. What they miss is not so much the Hollein building but the symbolism of it, the fact that it would have been a bold, provocative piece of art. As Cott says, “It could have been the beginning of a new kind of architecture in Harvard Square.”

The politics of branding: Who gets to define a “Harvard building?”

Mention the Spangler Center to an architect familiar with Harvard, and two subjects will come up: the building, and the speech.

The Spangler, a student center at Harvard Business School (HBS), was designed by Robert A.M. Stern. Currently dean of the Yale School of Architecture, Stern was a leading architect of the Shingle-Style Revival of the 1980s and is a respected architectural historian as well as a versatile designer whose work also includes modern buildings.

Spangler Center is a neo-Georgian red-brick building with white trim. Located on one of HBS’s great lawns, rather than in a residential neighborhood, it was built without a lot of conflict, opposition, or drama. It looks like a very nice country club—which to some people might sound like praise and to others an indictment.

But to Stern—and many would agree with him—the building is unmistakably Harvard.

In his speech at the Spangler’s dedication in January 2001, Stern argued that a university needs to have its own brand, just as a corporation or product does; and that in an era when competition for students and resources is fierce, Harvard’s venerable red-brick-Georgian look is an important marketing asset which the University ought to be perpetuating. In other words, the brand already exists and it ain’t broke, so don’t try to fix it. (Interestingly, Stern’s speech fudged the issue of whether he was advocating for the future of brick neo-Georgian branding at Harvard as a whole, or just at the business school. Stern is currently working on the new building at the northwest corner of the Law School—a modern Beaux-Arts-influenced design whose façade calls for pale limestone.)
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Former Harvard president Lawrence H. Summers feels that, “With the exception of the business school, Harvard architecture has tended very much towards eclecticism, with many different styles juxtaposed in close proximity. Reasonable people differ, but I think Harvard has in general erred more on the side of variety than on the side of coherence in its architectural choices.”

The reason the branding question is so important right now is, of course, Allston. The University’s plan to build an enormous new campus on the other side of the river has everyone wondering what it’s going to look like. As Lee Cott says, “Allston is the Harvard of the future.”

University insiders acknowledge that Harvard first turned its sights on Allston in response to the increasing difficulty of getting things built in Cambridge. The grass looked greener over there (but as has been reported in this magazine, the process has already hit a Cambridge-like snag, as neighbors objected to plans for a new art museum because they disliked its height and size and had not yet reviewed an overall master plan; see “Off the Fast Track,” May–June, page 64). The scale of the Allston campus—more than 200 acres, and up to 10 million square feet of construction—ensures it will provoke the same political questions that have dogged Harvard in Cambridge: the politics of site, the politics of urban context, and the politics of branding and style. In addition to the many voices within the University, there will be neighbors, civic groups, and city agencies, all of whom will use available planning and zoning tools as leverage to achieve their own ends.

As Kathy Born points out, “Harvard is up against pressures an ordinary developer doesn’t face. First, it’s here to stay. Every project is one of a series, and the repercussions from any given project last a long time. Second, there’s a perception that it’s a wealthy liberal institution and everything it does should benefit the public good. And third, pretty much everyone in the Boston area has a connection with Harvard. They went there, or didn’t get in, or worked there, or know someone who was fired. It’s personal. There’s no one who doesn’t have an attitude about Harvard.”

George Thrush acknowledges the importance of public input and says that understanding how to navigate it is key to the success of both an architect and a university. “Architects need to treat the public process with as much attention as they treat the composition of a façade.”

Tim Love is an architect who teaches at Northeastern and has done work for Harvard; he also worked as a designer for Machado and Silvetti on the Boston Public Library’s new Allston branch, sited on land provided by Harvard—a building that is praised as often as the firm’s One Western Avenue graduate-housing project is reviled. “The best architects know how to listen, and how to synthesize,” he says. “They hear different things from different stakeholders, and then come up with a design that gets it all in. The key is to do it democratically without moving a Ouija board around the community. Nor do you want to fall in love with a design concept and then have to defend it. It’s more like surfing—you watch carefully and wait, and then pick the right wave and ride it in.”

But the Allston campus also, inescapably, raises questions of architectural style, taste, and beauty. As Robert Stern says, many university campuses have a brand: think of Yale’s Oxford-inspired Gothicism, or Stanford’s Californian Mission-inspired sandstone, or the lean steel I-beams and glass of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Illinois Institute of Technology. Should there be a Harvard brand in Allston? If so, what should it be? And what should be the

The View from down the River

How do Harvard’s experiences with architecture and community process compare with those at MIT? Certainly MIT has erected some eye-catching buildings during the past few years: Frank Gehry’s exuberant Stata Center and Steven Holl’s jittery gridded Simmons Hall dormitory. Robert Simha, who for 40 years was MIT’s head of planning, points to the very different physical situations of the two schools. “One major advantage MIT had, in the past, is that it was surrounded by industrial land uses.” As a result, he says, MIT’s relations with its neighbors were “cordial but remote.”

In addition, Simha says, both MIT’s central administration and its planning officers were encouraged to become involved in Cambridge city affairs, as university representatives and as individuals. Simha once counted that he was a member of 15 different local boards and groups. “We had better eyes and ears on the street,” he says. “The institute had a human face, not just an institutional one.”

He suggests that Harvard’s decentralized organization creates difficulties when it comes to community relations. Because each Harvard school is financially self-sustaining, the University can be reluctant to reveal plans for a specific site until the money is in hand and the project is viewed as “real.” But in the meantime, he adds, information about a project usually leaks out, increasing the distrust of community groups who may be affected.

Yet the differences between the two institutions may be narrowing. Simha points out that as MIT’s residential neighbors have become more sophisticated, and as the Cambridge Historical Commission has taken more interest in the old industrial buildings around the MIT campus, MIT now faces the same kinds of constraints on university expansion that Harvard does.
The Forgotten Modernist

If there’s one name associated with the reputation of Harvard’s Graduate School of Design (GSD) as the cradle of American modern architecture, it is that of Walter Gropius. His tenure at Harvard—from 1937 to 1952—marked the end of the academic French Beaux-Arts method of educating architects. Gropius’s philosophy grew out of his leadership of the German Bauhaus: an emphasis on industrial materials and technology, functionality, collaboration among different professions, and a complete rejection of historical precedent.

But according to two books on the history of the GSD—Anthony Alofsin’s comprehensive The Struggle for American Modernism and Jill Pearlman’s Inventing American Modernism—Gropius’s celebrity has eclipsed another important figure in the history of modern architecture: Joseph Hudnut.

Hudnut, a respected educator and writer with a particular interest in cities, was brought in by Harvard president James Bryant Conant in 1935 to modernize architectural education at the University. Hudnut created the Graduate School of Design (uniting the three formerly separate programs of architecture, landscape architecture, and city planning). He got rid of antique statuary, replaced mullioned windows with plate glass, and hired Gropius to head the architecture program. (The other leading candidate was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who, according to both Alofsin and Pearlman, did not like the idea of competing with anyone else for the job.)

Hudnut and Gropius got along well for a decade or so. But even though Hudnut was the titular leader of the school, Gropius was by far the more charismatic figure and an expert self-promoter whose students routinely insisted on his greatness while at the same time praising his modesty. Ultimately, Hudnut and Gropius diverged philosophically. Hudnut believed Gropius had gone too far in denigrating both the importance of urban context and the value of historical knowledge for designers. Gropius’s supporters called Hudnut a “reactionary...skulking behind lantern slides of the past.” But Pearlman poignantly quotes architect Henry Cobb on Hudnut’s urban-history courses: “The most affecting single learning experience...for many of us.” The pedagogical dispute between the two men was unresolved, and they resigned within a year of each other. Hudnut was largely forgotten, while Gropius continued to be feted by students (sometimes sporting vote GROPE buttons) at an annual birthday bash until he died in 1969.