

The New Criterion

Features September 2017

Yale's sense of place

by *Peter Pennoyer*

On the two new residential colleges at Yale.

In 1962, the studios of the architecture graduate program at Yale University occupied the top floor of the Louis Kahn–designed 1953 Yale University Art Gallery. As a student in the architecture program, Robert A.M. Stern had a perfect view through the north-facing glass walls of the historic campus beyond, a lively collection of academic buildings with the 1912 Weir Hall, a near-replica of Magdalen College, Oxford, in the foreground and various versions of the Gothic style beyond. This architectural ensemble captivated some of the students, but under the sway of modernism the graduate school faculty dismissed these buildings as false.

Yale's foundational architecture varied from the austere brick 1753 Connecticut Hall to the stout, 1870s Ruskinian Gothic Revival of Farnam and Durfee Halls to the collegiate Gothic of James Gamble Rogers's Harkness Memorial Quadrangle and his many other buildings. But despite the prevalence of the Gothic style, the campus has achieved architectural diversity. Among the notable exceptions to the Gothic style, Rogers contributed three colleges in the Georgian mode, and Carrère and Hastings designed the Bicentennial Buildings in full Beaux-Arts classicism. Modern buildings by Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, and others have added to what has been called a museum of architecture.

Yale's sense of place is defined by its residential colleges.

Within the campus, Yale's sense of place—the character of its buildings and the academic lives they contain—is defined by its residential colleges. Whatever the style, each college, with its student rooms, dining hall, library, common room, and Head of College (formerly Master's) house, gives individuality and community to each student. The Oxbridge model, which inspired Yale to adopt the college system in 1929, meant that Yale would apply more than a paste-on style to its colleges. Each college would establish a defense against an increasingly bustling and industrialized New Haven to create a community that, while in the city, was apart from New Haven in its focus on the pursuit of scholarship and collegial spirit.

Starting in the 1950s, Yale, like its peers, embraced modernism. The purge of history was impressive: in 1970 the library held a sidewalk sale of historic folios for 10 cents a sheet. Yet Yale's commitment to

history encouraged the close relationship of the study of precedent to design. While Paul Rudolph was designing the Art and Architecture Building (now known as Rudolph Hall) in a brutalist style that has been much maligned, he was referring to historical examples in his teaching, encouraging students to take lessons from Wright, among others.

Rudolph was not alone in his devotion to history. Vincent Scully, a galvanizing figure whose active scholarship spanned the arts and architecture, eschewed the silo effect of the academic world and illuminated the past as a true public intellectual. Scully's impact on Stern (who would later serve as Dean of the Yale School of Architecture) and some of his contemporaries helped unleash a revolt against the narrow strictures of modernism leading to Postmodernism. Even when modernism seemed to have an iron grip on the imagination of the architectural profession, history was the root of Yale's best new buildings. Perhaps the most admired modern building on the campus, Louis Kahn's Center for British Art (1974), seems to telegraph the primordial power of the classical ruins that Kahn studied while a fellow at the American Academy in Rome.

As modernism reigned, the living lesson of Rogers's colleges was so potent that Eero Saarinen, who had no use for what he called "pseudo-Gothic" architecture, nonetheless referred his Yale architecture students to the colleges as models of processional and space-making complexity. Saarinen, whose definition of modernism gave him scope to invent architectural forms, including the two Terminal at JFK, summoned a wave-like envelope for his design of the Ingalls Rink. But in 1959, when he was chosen to design the first new colleges since the pre-war era, he avowed that this challenge "could not be solved within the general current vocabulary of modern architecture." Alluding to European vernacular architecture, his Ezra Stiles and Morse Colleges evoke the mural power of an Italian hill town, creating a variety of spaces and a compelling procession between massive folded planes of concrete mixed with rocks—his response to the problem of creating "modern" masonry.

Since the completion of Ezra Stiles and Morse in 1962 brought Yale to a total of twelve colleges, the University has only planned one expansion in 1972, a pair of colleges as block-like towers that represented the worst of modernism, and which were fortunately vetoed by New Haven on the grounds that the site should remain commercial.

After years of study, Yale's decision in 2007 to expand the student body by 15 percent required the addition of the thirteenth and fourteenth residential colleges. Given that the location of the site was seen as remote by most students, Yale wanted the architecture of the new colleges to connect Old Campus to Science Hill, the Divinity School, and other facilities beyond, in style and planning. These were not to be poor cousins.

In 2008, Yale announced the selection of Robert A.M. Stern Architects (RAMSA) to design the new colleges. The firm specialized in the careful study of historic campuses as the basis for designs that

would embrace and extend the sense of place of each institution it touched. For example, at the University of Virginia, where architecture built starting in the 1960s strayed to alien forms, ramsa reintroduced Jeffersonian classicism. At Harvard, ramsa designed in the Georgian vernacular that McKim, Mead & White had introduced to the campus in the early twentieth century. This method means that the firm's body of work of campus architecture is as varied as the institutions themselves. The trademark, self-referential expression of the "starchitect" is not the ramsa approach.

When Yale selected ramsa to design the new colleges, the mandate was to make them in a style that would relate to the existing, pre-Saarinen colleges, primarily those of James Gamble Rogers. The decision to make the colleges in the Gothic style, once it was proven feasible under the \$500 million budget, creates buildings that are sympathetic to the style of the campus and serve as an effective stylistic bridge between the center of the campus and Science Hill, and allows for the flexibility in form, massing, and detail that must have been essential tools as the architects, led by ramsa partners Melissa DelVecchio and Graham Wyatt, grappled with a triangular site.

ramsa's portfolio of campus architecture is as varied as the institutions themselves.

The program for the colleges was ambitious: each contains 452 student beds in a variety of rooms and suites, a house for the Head of College, apartments for the college deans and fellows, a dining hall, a library, a common room, and many other facilities. Unlike the earlier colleges, current codes and practice required accessibility to all rooms and service spaces including loading docks and networks of tunnels to connect the buildings both for service and students. To weave all of this together and make over half a million square feet of new construction feel appropriate, comfortable, and part of Yale must have been an infernal puzzle.

Benjamin Franklin College and Pauli Murray College are marked on the skyline of Yale by three new towers. The Edward P. Bass Tower, at 192 feet, suggests a Nicholas Hawksmoor church tower interpreted by Edwin Lutyens. The towers are positioned to announce the new colleges from the heart of the old campus by following street alignments to make the new buildings an indelible part of Yale as a whole—just the sort of approach to design that Scully was advocating in the 1960s. From the distance of the older colleges, the towers serve as a signal that the architecture of the two new colleges is about procession. Like Rogers's colleges, these buildings unfold in sequence at the scale of the city, the campus, the street, the walk, the courtyard, and, finally, the entryway to each set of student suites and rooms.

The main approach to Benjamin Franklin College and Pauli Murray College is along Prospect Street,

which connects to College Street at the heart of the campus and passes the Grove Street Cemetery, a quiet buffer between the new site and the edge of the main area of the campus. The corner closest to the center of campus is anchored by a stocky tower that contains Benjamin Franklin College student rooms. As the façades of this muscular corner break free from lower, flanking gables, the architects present forms that are familiar yet new: the square mass recalls towers in the Old Campus colleges but is enlivened by limestone quoining, projecting bays, and checkered “flushwork” masonry. This tower is answered by a tower on Pauli Murray College which brackets the length of the colleges along Prospect Street.

Throughout the almost mile and a half of façades on the streets and courtyards, the mixture of brick and limestone adds texture and interest to the architecture. Following other examples on the campus of brick and stone façades, ramsa has achieved a balance that follows the trend toward more brick and less stone towards the edges of the campus.

From Prospect Street, a walkway runs between the two colleges inspired by Library Walk, which passes between Branford and Jonathan Edwards Colleges. This passage has an intimate, welcoming feel. As a public passage it engages New Haven, as space between the colleges, offering glimpses of bay windows, oriels, towers, bays and gables, each of which identifies a student room, a stair in the Head of College House, a common room, or any one of the myriad parts of the colleges. Each of these features displays a variation of the palette of materials and artisanship that pervade this project: a molded, handset brick water table, a carved corbel, a buttress cap, a faceted frieze, or an inscribed limestone lintel.

The architecture seems fresh and yet indelibly connected to the dna of the original colleges.

From the walkway and from the surrounding streets and a bicycle path that follows a greenway, nine gates lead to arched passageways that open to the courtyards ranging from intimate spaces tucked between the second-floor level of gables at Pauli Murray College to the two larger graduation greens. These gates, inspired by the work of the great metal craftsman Samuel Yellin, are among the signs in this project that first-rate artisanship is alive and well. These touches are no mere ossified copies but newly forged creations satisfying a practical need. From within the courtyards, the impression that the colleges are related but different is confirmed by the essential distinctions in architectural character of each: Pauli Murray tending to more rectilinear massing and form compared to Benjamin Franklin’s seemingly looser organization. But within the Gothic style, repetition of materials and elements, made individual by an extensive program of carved ornament, makes these colleges close siblings.

Each common space is a highly developed architectural essay of great character. The dining hall at Benjamin Franklin is capped by a soaring, paneled, plaster barrel vault springing from an oak screen of robust pilasters. The mantel at the end of room supports the frame of a huge round window that connects the library above. Some elements can be traced to the work of admired masters like Edwin Lutyens, yet the seamless quality of the result is proof that precedents have been completely absorbed into the architects’ own vocabulary. That the design of one dining hall holds traces of a 1903 house in

Sussex and the Viceroy's Palace in Delhi yet feels welcoming—even warm—is a mark of the skill of the design team.

Even though this is serious architecture, it doesn't take itself too seriously: humorous and quirky carvings and inscriptions appear throughout. For instance, Stern chose lyrics by the alumnus Cole Porter to be carved in the oak paneling in the dining halls: "It was just one of those things" and "Delightful, Delicious, De-Lovely."

In arranging the student rooms and suites, ramsa followed the "entryway" model of the existing colleges that creates separate entries connecting groups of rooms vertically and thereby avoided the anonymous, dull, long corridor that is standard in conventional dormitories. The roofs are carefully arranged and lowered at the south sides of each courtyard to increase the exposure to the sun. Mechanical vents and other protuberances that typically mar new buildings are obscured within chimneys. The rooms themselves are simple but derive their character from their solid oak doors and leaded glass windows with the views of the Gothic architecture, roofscapes, courtyards, and campus beyond.

The presence of these new colleges is remarkably quiet given the huge scale of the construction and the complexity of the program. The architecture seems fresh and yet indelibly connected to the dna of the original colleges—essentially an extension of their spirit. This is a remarkable achievement of design but it is even more extraordinary considering the vast number of new requirements that rule campus architecture today. The colleges are fully accessible to the disabled yet nowhere is the access for the disabled on a second rung in the design. These buildings will achieve leed Gold standard for their environmental performance, but the technology stands discreetly behind the architecture. ramsa has made architecture that performs well but doesn't flaunt these virtues or confuse them with aesthetic expression.

With students, Heads of College, fellows, and staff moving in for the first year, the University will be able to see how this monumental project meets the goal of providing an authentic Yale experience while weaving the ends of campus together and invigorating an underappreciated site into the life of Yale and the City of New Haven. The reception of the new colleges is likely to reflect the invitation they present in the form of architecture that is fundamentally humanist. Seen from a distance, as the old colleges were from the windows of architecture school studios in 1962, Pauli Murray College and Benjamin Franklin College are signs of the continuity of history and its relevance to the present. For each student, particular courtyards, passages, and rooms will soon form a specific, individual, and intimate world that will mark times of scholarship and collegiality.

Peter Pennoyer is an architect, historian, and teacher, and the author, with Anne Walker, of the forthcoming *Harrie T. Lindeberg and the American Country House* (The Monacelli Press).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 36 Number 1 , on page 12

Copyright © 2017 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

newcriterion.com/issues/2017/9/yales-sense-of-place