WEEKEND *MUSINGS*

ARCHITECTURE

Complexity and contradiction in Yale's campus architecture

// BY TAJRIAN KHAN

"What is your least favorite building on campus?" attendees were asked at this year's first meeting of Ink & Vellum, the undergraduate architecture society. One sophomore offered up Arthur K. Watson Hall, the home of the Computer Science Department — which the student had just left to major in architecture. A professor said that his least favorite building was the newly-built 87 Trumbull Street, because of how oddly it sits between the two Victorian Gothic mansions that house Yale's Economics Department.

By a decisively large margin, however, students at the Ink & Vellum meeting said their least favorite buildings on campus were Morse and Ezra Stiles colleges, designed by the visionary modernist architect Eero Saarinen, Yale School of Architecture class of 1934. Many students elect to come to Yale, especially over other elite schools such as Harvard or Brown, partially due to the unified, collegiate Gothic style that gives our central campus its quintessentially "Yale" look. But Morse and Stiles were built in 1961, at a time when a "less is more" International Style of modern architecture had taken hold across continents and butted heads with the anachronistic designs of collegiate Gothic colleges.

The seasoned architecture critic might deem Saarinen's design nothing short of masterful for the way he preserved the fundamental principles of a Yale residential college while adapting to more modern, technological ways of construction. Still, the places that show up most frequently in Google search results for "Yale University" do not include Morse and Stiles. Those buildings are concentrated near the center of campus: Old Campus halls; Branford, Saybrook, Berkeley and Jonathan Edwards colleges; Sterling Memorial Library and the Sterling Law Building. Morse and Stiles never appear once. Except for those on Old Campus, all of these buildings were designed by James Gamble Rogers and built during the two interwar decades.

There is perhaps no university in America as architecturally dynamic as Yale, which will soon hold both the engineering buildings being constructed on upper Science Hill and the still-standing Connecticut Hall from 1750. But it is also true that the average student, parent or visitor — the people for whom, ostensibly, architects design spaces — does not feel nearly as drawn to Ezra Stiles or Morse colleges as they do to the more picturesque Branford or Saybrook. And when considering some of the other additions to Yale's campus during the latter half of the twentieth century, one might get the impression that well-intentioned modern architects' hopes of making the world anew must have gone awry.

Modern architecture arrived at Yale in the form of Louis Kahn's extension of the Yale University Art Gallery in 1953, which was both the first major postwar building on campus and Kahn's first major commission. The Chapel Street building embodies a giant box with a sheer, unadorned wall of small glazed bricks.

One cannot imagine a more striking contrast to the rest of the gallery, which constitutes a complex Italian Gothic facade with large windows framed by compound stone arches. Egerton Swartwout, class of 1891, designed the building — but because only the first phase of his design was built before his death in 1943, the YUAG's Romanesque facade is abruptly cut off by Kahn's design. The latter addition was a nod to the new, pure, unornamented and unquestionably modern forms of Le Corbusier on one side and Mies van der Rohe on the other, with a glass-and-steel facade along York Street.

The newer gallery design is not easy to love. Upon closer inspection, one can admire the honesty and simplicity in the way Kahn's sheer blank wall along Chapel Street expresses the building floor lines with its four string courses, unlike the original construction, which hides its structure behind a bombastic facade. The contrast between the two flips along the back of the gallery, where Swartwout's original hides its plain wall from the public eye and Kahn's addition opens up to the sculpture garden with its panoramic glass facade.

All these redeeming factors go out the window when you look past Sheffield-Sterling-Strathcona Hall at the dull, concrete behemoth that is the Becton Center. Its face rises like a fortress along Prospect Street, and its length is populated with a monotonous line of protrusions. The effect is a structure that takes its monumentality so seriously that it sticks out, as if in defiance of its neighbors.

"Less is a bore," Robert Venturi wrote in 1966, denouncing the puritanical forms of glass-box modernism. In "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," he argued that by stripping away all historical or contemporary references to culture, modern architecture had removed nuance and meaning from buildings. With his wife and partner Denise Scott Brown, Venturi taught an architecture studio at Yale where students studied the urban form of the Las Vegas Strip, which critics once deemed kitschy.

Venturi and Scott Brown wrote about the "vitality that may be achieved by an architecture of inclusion" and "the deadness that results from too great a preoccupation with tastefulness and total design," and the pair helped usher in a new postmodern movement. It is this movement that emboldened a generation of architects to borrow from classical architectural forms in their design, like Robert A.M. Stern ARC '65, who designed Benjamin Franklin and Pauli Murray colleges in a Gothic style to match James Gamble Rogers' Memorial Quadrangle from 1921, which itself borrowed heavily from the collegiate gothic style of Cambridge University. It is due to this profound shift in architecture after the '60s that the Gothic design of Franklin and Murray today was possible, something that would be unthinkable in the architecture establishment in which Saarinen designed his colleges.

"The curious thing about human life is we get used to anything in time," legendary art historian Vincent Scully '40 GRD '47 '49 said in a 2008 interview with the News. So even as we might think some buildings to be out of place on Yale's campus, a graduating senior might be looking at the long, crescent masonry facade of Morse and Stiles just a bit more fondly as she walks by the Payne Whitney Gymnasium for the last time. And if she is able to stop at the right time, she might just get a glimpse of Harkness Tower peeking out from the center.

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PHOTO BY TAJRIAN KHAN

CAMPUS

A love letter to Yale

// BY MAYA ASHABOGLU

It was the December of my sophomore year, and I was homesick. I was overwhelmed with finals and papers, but I couldn't wait to be back home with my friends and family. That's how I ended up writing "A Love Letter to Istanbul," one of my favorite WKND pieces from my time at Yale.

It is now the May of my senior year, and I have to fight back tears when I'm reminded that I can count down the days until I move out. As graduation nears, I'm nostalgic for something that hasn't yet ended. I am homesick for a home I have not yet moved out of. That's why I wanted to express my gratitude to the people and places who have defined these four years in my "Love Letter to Yale."



ILLUSTRATION BY NELLIE KENNEY

To my room in Bingham Hall, which became my first home at Yale. Even though we had to carry our wardrobes out the common room to fit into our double, the blue curtains matching me and my roommate's bedding, along with the plants my mom bought and my suitemates' seemingly infinite snack supply made it feel like home. With the common rooms where we celebrated birthdays, the floor that gave me my first group of friends at Yale and the round windows with the best view of campus, Bingham C9 will always hold a special place in my heart.

To my parents, without whom I would not be here. They've been by my side each step of the way, from giving logistical instructions over FaceTime on how to rearrange my sophomore year single to building furniture for my off-campus apartment. They were always there to pick me up at the airport and to wave goodbye at passport control until I disappeared from sight. They supported me through every stage of these four years, even across an eight hour time difference. They believed in me when I did not, for which I will always be grateful.

To my sister Mina, who was upset because I was "leaving her" four years ago. I turned out to be lucky enough to have her join me here two years later. I feel beyond grateful to have been able to share my home away from home with her and to have seen her adjust so much here that she now has things to teach me. I might have been too parental at times, most of which eventually led to my "I told you so"s. But I mostly loved being her best friend throughout the simplest moments: calling each other about anything and everything from course selection to friendship drama. I loved taking a class with her, having her over for Turkish tea, hosting occasional sleepovers, meeting up for study dates where everything except studying was done.

To our apartment, which turned out to be an even cozier home than Trumbull. Moving in two years ago felt unmanageable: How would we combine three different ways of living, from the way we put cutlery in the dishwasher to the measurements we use to cook rice? There was so much we had to determine. Yet somehow, we ended up building ourselves a home, finding new routines and starting new traditions. We exchanged late night buttery runs with homemade cookies in our kitchen. I don't know if it was the orange couch that hosted many of our closest friends or the sunset view from my bedroom, but our apartment always radiated warmth. More likely it was the endless laughter in the hallway as we all got ready for bed, the sweet chaos of shared hair tools and the outfits preparing us to go out, the smell of Turkish food in our kitchen and the hours of conversation that followed every meal. It was not only the space but also the people I shared the space with that made it feel so much like home. I will cherish our perfectly synchronized "good morning"s and "good night"s.

And to my dearest friends, who made Yale as special as it is. I've made friends from all around the world, who introduced me to brand new cuisines and brand new ways of saying good night. Through sleepovers at our place and trips to different destinations, we got to know each other so well, so quickly. They taught me how to continue dancing even when rain was pouring, how to see the positive in everything and that we can have fun as long as we're together. I know that distance won't keep us from having hours-long conversations, whether they are forms of therapy, intellectual debates or deciding which jungle animal each one of us would be.

Lastly, to Yale, which turned out to be even better than what my 16-year-old self could have imagined. I'm grateful for the hours spent in libraries — often accompanied by anxious tears — and at parties that just as often ended in a little too much fun. For the humanities classes that ended up teaching me the most, the walks I took simply to admire the campus architecture, the international community which gave me the best friends I could have asked for. For the Yale Symphony Orchestra concerts we scrambled to find last-minute Halloween costumes for, all four Harvard-Yale games we won, the snow days that made me feel like a child and the Spring Flings that tested how many hours we could dance.

I'm not sure when the "August 18" response to the "When are you moving to the U.S.?" question became "I leave on May 20." I'm also not sure when the aforementioned May 20 became just a few days away. Apparently, everyone was right when they said it'll be over before I know it. Flying in for the Office of International Students & Scholars' orientation program, I thought they were exaggerating. Four years seemed like a lifetime. Well, now I'm not sure where the time went. This realization has motivated me to be more present, to say "yes" more, to worry less — or at least try to — because as it turns out, time really does fly when you're having fun.

I don't know if I'm ready to graduate, but I don't know if anyone ever is. I know that even though this change feels hard right now, I will look back to this moment in my life and think it went by all too quickly. And I know, from the bottom of my heart, that I will forever hold on to the dearest memories I made throughout my four years here at Yale — at my home away from home.

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