

Gerardo Diaz
February 28, 2012
Workshop I Essay

In Defense of Eliot Hall

“I don’t like it at all. Very awkward design, and hard to navigate.”

“It’s a pretty terrible building. Feels cold and heartless.”

“I hate it. It makes me feel antsy and depressed and expectant of a soviet-era bomb drill.”

“It feels like a prison cell. The classroom I’m in now leaks.”

It is clear that no one on the Washington University in St. Louis campus will miss Eliot Hall when it is demolished in June.

As soon as class is out, students scurry out of the building, not one person stopping for an impromptu chat with a classmate or sitting outside reading, and they all, at least the ones I was able to question, seem to share the same feelings on the building, ranging from mild disapproval and confusion to absolute disdain. Countless articles in the school’s newspaper have established its status as “campus eye sore”, and one April Fool’s issue goes as far as awarding it “Prettiest Building on Campus,” decided through a sardonic survey.

These are all reasonable judgments, after all looking across from the other side of campus, the stark concrete finish of Eliot bores a hole in the assembly of the unironically “pretty” pinkish buildings that have been built in recent years to fulfill the school’s growing needs. There are no triumphant arches announcing the school’s academic sanctity here – no pointed windows or turrets (the small towers you will find on fortified medieval castles and coincidentally on many buildings on campus), and not one hint that a comforting faux fireplace might be waiting for you inside – only bare slabs of concrete. Upon closer observation, the

dismal surfaces appear to have survived a fire, with dark sooty streaks running down from the roof as a reminder, and admittedly presenting an unattractive public face.

But you can't judge a book by its cover, right? Stepping inside reveals a similar, if not more severe, austerity. Instead of the grand entrance typical of many buildings on campus, this entrance is on the side and students must walk around a large portion of the structure before finding the modest door punched out of the stained concrete. Once entering, you will notice that not only is there no comforting faux fireplace, but that there isn't much inside at all. Rough whitewashed concrete exposes the repetitive structure that holds up the floors, cheap gray linoleum covers the floors, and an assortment of mismatched benches line up against the walls for students to sit on while they wait for their next class. One bench with scarlet satin upholstery looks as if borrowed from a Catholic church altar, another roughly constructed of wood I'm sure belongs to a neighborhood park somewhere, and one shiny modern with metal legs and a black leather cushion rounds out the building's miserable collection of furniture.

Walking through the hallway also validates students' complaints about the difficulties of finding their way about the building. Its organization can be simply described as a tight corridor with everything crammed as efficiently as possible around its sides, particularly in the rear part of the building where office doors line both sides of the hallway about every five feet. The only two staircases in the building are obscured behind the same brown doors that indiscriminately line the entire length of the hallway, making vertical passage through the building a lot like gambling on the prize behind door number four on *Let's Make A Deal*. The confusion is so bad that someone was compelled to place "STAIRS HERE" signs on some of these doors along with a deceiving photograph of a beautifully lit and spacious staircase. However, behind these doors you will find a cramped, artificially lit stairwell, and well is the perfect word to describe these

stairs, which seem like they lead to a mine shaft and have the kind of pipe railings you would expect to see on a submarine or the massive cargo vessels that ship our favorite consumer goods from Asia.

You probably get the point by now, and if you are a student that was [un]fortunate enough to have a class in Eliot you've probably made all of these observations yourself, but what I'm trying to get across is that I know that Eliot Hall is a crummy building and I understand why most people on campus hate it: it has aged poorly, it is inhospitable inside and out, and conflicts with the image that the university wishes to present to prospective students and the larger academic community.

Three years ago I chose Eliot Hall as the subject of a ten foot analytical drawing for an architecture course because its strong geometries were interesting to my design sensibilities. However, in light of its forthcoming demise, I defend Eliot hall not for its forceful abstract composition, but for its historical significance as an artifact of a great period of American history, when post war prosperity and optimism allowed ambitious leaders to take on social, economic, and projects of unprecedented scope.

John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential acceptance speech marked the 60's as the beginning of new era of American growth, but not the kind of territorial expansion identified with the use of the word "frontier" in older American political discourse. Kennedy described this *New Frontier* as such:

"Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus."

And although his assassination prevented him from seeing this vision carried out, his Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson led the country through the rest of the decade with the same idea that government could be used to positively affect the lives of ordinary citizens. He undertook major national spending program referred to as “The Great Society” with the intent of eliminating poverty and social injustice through educational, health care, job placement, and cultural programs. The results of these efforts are still present today in laws and institutions that we all know and sometimes take for granted such as the National Endowment for the Arts, HeadStart, Social Security and Medicare, the Peace Corp, a number of pivotal Civil Rights Acts that turned the hard work of civil rights groups into laws, public broadcast programs like PBS and NPR (including the funding for the extensive development of a curriculum for Sesame Street, my favorite American institution), and was responsible for the expansion of many universities around the country.

In 1969, a great feat of human ingenuity and collaboration put a small group of human beings on the moon in one of the greatest displays of the capabilities of mankind, and fulfilling the late JFK’s promise to get a man on the moon by 1970. This same year Concorde supersonic airplane, which could fly from London to New York in three hours, took its first flight. Poverty levels fell, and this period of legislation was the most efficient in the history of the United States.

It was an exciting time to be an American.

It is from a similar belief about the power and responsibility of institutions to positively affect people’s lives that Eliot Hall was conceived.

“Modern Architecture” as an intellectual movement originating in the early 20th century was fundamentally grounded in a social agenda, attempting to improve the lives of everyday people whose lifestyles were drastically changed by the effects of modernization and hoping to

alleviate the social problems of the working class in new cities, through the use of modern technology and a focus on functional healthy dwellings. By the 1960's, this idea had evolved into a belief in the Utopian possibility of the present, and a sense of a moral obligation to the improvement and progress of the human condition through new the planning of a cohesive collective of buildings where "society could come to the realization of its self." Pretty abstract stuff, but to understand how these ideologies are manifested in Eliot Hall, you must consider the building as it was originally designed: as a part of a complex shared by the Law School and the department of Social Sciences; Mudd Hall the previous home of the Law School was demolished, cutting the courtyard in half, to make room for the construction of the Knight Center, an enormous, swanky campus hotel and conference center for visitors.

The design by Weiner Vas, a Swiss architect, was selected through an international



competition that was a part of a larger effort headed by Chancellor Thomas H. Eliot to turn the school from a mostly commuting student body to a national university. The original design, completed partially in 1969 and finished in 1972, organized lecture halls, classrooms, lounges, and faculty offices around a large central courtyard with the intentions of providing a framework

Mudd and Elliot Halls as built in 1972

for the integration of the law and social science departments. The courtyard was actually the roof of the underground multistory library that is still partially there and unoccupied. This large open area contained areas



View of Calder sculpture in courtyard with Eliot Hall in the background

differentiated by a few steps and a large bleacher-like section by the entrance of Mudd Hall where you could imagine meetings or classes taking place in agreeable weather, or even a small performance.

The courtyard was the crux of the design, envisioned as a forum of social interaction and cultural exchange. A colorful kinetic sculpture by the renowned artist Alexander Calder provided the only variation to the austere concrete finish of the courtyard, an ideological decision based on the belief that social and cultural activity would be the animating forces of the space. It is for this reason that the entrance of Eliot Hall is unassuming and circuitous; the project's emphasis is not on the individual buildings themselves but on the students that they direct into the courtyard from its opposite sides, like a human pin ball machine at the end of every class period, resulting in an exciting head on collision of student energy. Contemporary architecture journals, reviewing the new building described the courtyard as the place where students spent most their time, although this might be because they preferred the outdoors to the buildings' rough interior.

Other areas in the project also proposed new kinds of social spaces and encouraged spontaneous interactions between students and faculty. Multistory common rooms and informal lounge spaces were shared by both schools in hopes of stimulating cross disciplinary dialogue

and integration. The concept of integration was carried through to the physical construction of the building, utilizing a repetitive system of flexible modules that could be easily expanded in accordance with the departmental needs and suggested that it could be used campus wide for efficient and inexpensive mega-structural approach to expansion. These “modules” are



Multi-level lounge

expressed on the exterior as the roof profiles of the building and to the relief of everyone were never considered as a means of expanding the campus.

However, when the law school’s need

outgrew the size of Mudd Hall, it saw the

buildings’ flexible capability for expansion simultaneously as a flexible capability for demolition and in 1998, a line drawn down the middle of the courtyard and down through the underground library severed Mudd Hall from its Siamese twin, Eliot Hall. The dean of the law department was not asked to participate in the original selection of the design contest winner, and was designed without discussion of the department’s needs beyond the basic area requirements, and students and faculty were said to have despised the building before it was ever built. The building also began leaking soon after its completion. Furthermore, rising protests against the Vietnam War in campuses across the country escalated in 1970 after the Kent State shootings, in which several unarmed students were shot and killed by National Guard officers, and protesters at Washington University set fire to the campus ROTC building the next day. The political climate of the early 70’s was far divorced from the Utopian visions of the architects and the oppressive concrete structure was seen by a rebellious student body as a symbol of militarized American institutions.

Without Mudd Hall and half of the project's original courtyard gone, Eliot hall is lobotomized and remains nothing more than an ugly building. Instead of exiting into a large generous and chaotic public square, Students walking out of the building are now confronted with the overwhelming brilliance of the Knight Center's limestone and wood clad courtyard, and by a fence separating it from Eliot, possibly so the nasty concrete building won't walk over and ruin its calculated dignity. This explains why students always seem to be running away from the building when they leave; now that the courtyard is gone, they have no place to go but out and away.

I remember sitting in Eliot one day in a discussion for modern European History, asking the instructor to summarize the ideas of the *Communist Manifesto*. I must have touched a topic of personal interest because he got up out of his chair and in an oratorical and over caffeinated fashion began to expound on the struggle of the proletariat and how their only hopes of escaping oppression is a to rise up in a violent revolution, establish a socialist government and then end in communism. This is the only way.

Eliot Hall's strengths and failures are the same of almost any dogmatic manifesto. Blinded by a relentless, yet virtuous ideology, the project is exhausting in its rigor, with or without Mudd hall. Its rigid structural system creates awkwardly shaped classrooms and obscure stairwells and its austerity is discomfoting and unjust.

However, its underlying motives offer a significant point for us to pause and wonder if our "society [has] come to a realization of its self." Did the architects succeed in their hopes of

providing a space where awareness would flourish and cross disciplinary relationships would lead to new perspectives in law and the social sciences?

These are unrealistically high expectations to place on any person, university department, or larger institution. But still, forty years after the completion of Eliot and Mudd Hall, the space program, along with Concorde's three hour flights to London, are no more; NPR and PBS are in constant need of outside sources of funding and their access to federal funding has been questioned in its entirety by many members of Congress; the same can be said of the failure of Social Security; the constitutional validity of affirmative action will be reviewed by the Supreme Court next year; and countless other examples suggest an increasing apathy towards the kinds of programs that made this generation one of hope, diversity, and potential. Political and economic arguments aside, the optimistic promise that life can be better, the one made by JFK, Martin Luther King, countless other individuals who worked for social change, even unwavering manifestos and clumsy pseudo intellectual designs for campus buildings, are necessary reminders of the incredible human capacity for change, growth, and understanding.

As I walk under the elevated back wing of Eliot hall, I notice that a large portion of the parking garage on the other side of the street has already been demolished in preparations for the new building that will replace Eliot. While the architects of Eliot and Mudd halls were free to propose their own bold vision for new life on campus, this new building will most likely be "planned" in the design-by-committee model that the school uses to insure they get exactly what they want: another watered down gothic style building with the same pink stone that will look nice in panoramic photographs of the campus, and will hopefully increase the number of applicants to the school, by effect also raising the school's statistical ranking. In this design

process they will go through every room in the building and select a packaged variety of finishes ranging from “high-end” to “middle” and if it comes down to the last dollars of the budget, there’s “economy.” I think it will feel much nicer than the cold walls of Eliot.

Still walking around the columns of the building, I notice the furniture under the elevated offices is a lot like the furniture I encountered in the hallways. A fun range of patio tables are oddly laid out in a family reunion at the park configuration.

It is dark now and looking at the building from its back, the evidence of its amputation more evident and slightly disturbing. A large portion of concrete appears to have been physically ripped off its side and a lone staircase leads to a padlocked door. The staircase has noticeably newer handrails meant to keep people from walking onto the missing ramps which once led to Mudd. From the drawings I found detailing the project, I know the room at the end of the staircase must be the library. I step over a chain hanging from the hand rails that is holding, up a sign, “NO ACCESS”, and nervously walk up the isolated stairs. To my surprise, the windows are not papered over or concealed, but it is pitch dark inside so I have to press my face up against the dusty glass to see in. With my hands cupped around my face to block the glare of the street, I am able to see a long row of old bicycles that disappears into the depth of the room and a large wooden desk laying at an oblique angle from the wall. After staring for a few seconds I realized I had been looking at this empty cob webbed room for way too long and jerked away from the glass in a delayed reaction. There was something tragically sublime about this scene that filled me with a strange and overwhelming feeling of compassion for the old building, bordering on shame on its behalf, and the thought of its destruction didn’t seem so terrible anymore.