

10 - Bennington College Arts Policy Committee - Report
re New Haven - Boston visit

AUG 6 1964

Dear Lydia,

I think all of us were overwhelmed beyond already optimistic expectations
At how valuable the tour was.

I had the feeling that we missed one important ingredient. Our diversity
of opinion and differences of what we saw in a building would have gained
heightened value if we had had time for a free-for-all summary discussion
afterwards.

I had the feeling that potential users of the buildings (faculty) and the
laymen involved saw quite differently, and that those of use within
each segment also saw variously. Writing our opinion to you will tend to
reinforce our separateness of view, while a discussion could bring
about a synthesis.

One thing came out loud and clear in everything we saw: that without a
good synthesis you get a poor building, whatever its esthetic merits,
with the users revising or destroying the intentions of the architects
in order to teach as they want.

It is also clear that it is not easy to get a good building .

In trying to do so, the role of the architect is of undoubted importance
but sensitive establishment of good committee mechanisms and procedures
seems ever more so.

This has to encourage good rapport and communication between the various
elements of the community that is the real customer, so that the
architect , again in communication, becomes an instrument for translating
a program into block or wood or whatever.

I would favor choosing the architect now-- before we have building funds --
so that the necessity for this kind of thinking (the kind of thinking
we had on the trip) becomes urgent, and that , with the architect
as catalyst, the program and the economics of implementing it are
evolved at the same time.

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Incidentally, from the interviews last winter, all architects talk as if they viewed their role more or less as I have defined it -- most convincing. But boy, when you get to looking at buildings and talking to users of them, is the reality ever different.

The trip reinforced an entirely personal prejudice of mine. I find a gallery least enticing possible exposure to art. And I find the permanent collection of galleries the most deadening art of all to look at. Whatever the qualities of the paintings in such a collection, they have the air of just being there because there is nothing else going on. I find art shows palatable and, to some of my degree of visual illiteracy, instructive in that they generally have a unifying idea of viewpoint behind them. If a one-man show, one sees enough of his struggles to begin to get an inkling as to what are his dimensions of interest, technical preoccupation, and the boundaries he has set himself. If a collected exhibit, the collector is generally attempting to show similarities or contrasts between different minds with somewhat equivalent objectives.

But besides this, the show is something that occurs within a time limit channeling community attention and discussion to it as an occasion. I guess I am saying that my drives to look at art are weak enough so that I consider it a social rather than an anti-social endeavor, with a gallery as a gathering place, or perhaps (so that the gathering doesn't block one's view of the pictures) a viewing area next to a gathering place.

There should be lots of storage and shipping area near it for the permanent collection, which I should like to see 90% stored 90% of the time.

Ideally the gallery should look handsome with no pictures or with one or two, and I would like our permanent pictures parsimoniously displayed in ones or twos for short periods only.

Feld

REPORT ON

Jules Olitsky - *Bennington College*

New Haven - Boston

July 26, 1964

I think the trip itself served an educational purpose, in two ways: 1. The members of the committee came to know each other a bit better. 2. After seeing the six or seven buildings, we know more clearly what we do not want.

I thought almost all of the buildings we saw were gloomy. Vaguely menacing, heavily oppressive. Certainly the Yale Building was tomb-like, an unworkable maze. The painting studios seemed added on - an after thought. Closed in, airless, lacking space, it struck me that the kind of painting done in those studios must be cold and clammy and dark. Crippled art. However the space in the Yale Art Gallery was more than adequate. But here surely the intent was to have one look at the ceilings rather than the paintings on the walls. The ceilings triumphed over Monet, Degas and Picasso.

Although we had been firmly admonished not to look at the art or the work being produced in the buildings - "We're here to look at architecture, remember!" I must admit that I concentrated on the way paintings looked in the galleries we visited, and the kind of art that was being produced in the art school buildings. Going about it in this way, I felt that almost everything we saw, failed. The Brandeis Gallery had a kind of Miami Beach "elegance" that fitted perfectly with their mish-mash of a collection. The building would have served beautifully for a travel bureau. One wanted to jump into the pool. Where are the pretty travel folders? I wondered. Bermuda, anyone? Was it merely my fever which produced the fantasy - or was it the building itself?

The studios at Brandeis as well as those at Andover had a "look" of cool competence that was somewhat misleading. It seems to me the architect in both cases had little, if any, awareness of what the contemporary art experience can be for students. These studios seemed designed for precisely the kinds of art being produced in them, for making dead Bauhaus - like gee gaws, or for puttering around with crayons, paint, and clay.

The kind of big, open warehouse like space which would invite the making of huge paintings and enormous sculptures - of space that would test and encourage the students capacity for invention and inspiration was totally lacking.

It seems to me that the only space we saw that was of interest was that huge empty space at Andover where we sat for a few moments at the end of our tour. If only the students could be given that space to work - who knows, something might happen, something other than the deadlines of the Andover student show that we saw.

I thought Wellesley, a disaster. A tomb. The studios creepy and somehow prim places for hard virgins to make brittle clay figurines and harsh scratches and scrapes in plaster and do dead, nasty little paintings. The mosaic room literally terrified me. The space of their art gallery was good, but somehow did not escape the mausoleum like atmosphere of the place.

The merit of the LeCorbusier building was that it had strength and character - was in itself a huge piece of sculpture - a work of art. I don't think it succeeds as workable space - at least not the kind of factory - one level - space we are interested in. But the other buildings we saw lacked the kinds of space in which visions and inventions could be born and failed as well in not being strong, really beautiful architecture. At best they achieved a gloomy elegance or something worse, something threatening and mad. One thought with longing of the calm good sense and loveliness of the carriage barn, of the St. Johnsbury Truck warehouse.

I think the trouble is that these buildings are dreamed up by architects who are not really aware of art today as a living reality and of the ways in which art is made today. It is merely 19th century thinking with a "modern" look. Phooey! The art that the students produce in these buildings goes hand-in-hand with the buildings themselves. Where these architects are faced with the problem of how to present works of great art, they manage to create some feature or detail that will defeat the art.

Interestingly enough the best features of some of the buildings were the auditoriums, the rooms to house slides and the slide projection room (as at Andover) on the formal class rooms (again Andover). But for the places where art is to be made - well, my reaction is obviously negative. Much as I enjoyed being with all of you - and the view from my room at the Chapter House was magnificent (I thought of Turner as the sun set - a radiant knife of orange light on that lovely river) and our very pleasant meals together - all this was so nice - but my total impression of all the architecture - in one word - distressing.

AUG 21 1964

REPORT - HARVARD and NEW HAVEN TOUR

July 26, 1964

From

Peter Stroud. (Continued)

After further consideration I feel that for me probably the most important issue that emerged in my mind after the Tour was the problem of organizing the internal space of the building. I had a conversation with Louis Kahn when he visited Bennington and his attitude, almost uncompromising, that the architect should be the prime mover in space creation, seems to pinpoint an area of conflict which must be removed if a satisfactory building is designed - the functional needs must dominate in the interior planning.

I feel, too, that building as a total unit must be related to frontier thinking in an education at Bennington aiming to create a real art place in which students can plug in to conviction that Art is a living entity today and that this is a place to make it in.

We Need:

Neutral uncluttered interior

Optimum light

Freedom to move

A permissive participationally-oriented space in which
the student does not feel an intruder.

Stroud Report Continued:

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We Do Not Need:

A dark Medieval Monument - Yale School

A visually aggressive interior - Yale Museum

A Marble Mausoleum - Brandeis University

An oppressive-antistudent-antiart Building - Wellesly

Too much internal stasis and

closed circulation pattern - Brandeis Studios

File
AUG 21 1964

NOTES ON A TOUR OF RECENTLY BUILT ART BUILDINGS AND MUSEUMS
June 1964

Stanley Rosen

The buildings we visited, with the exception of the Harvard Art Building and the Yale Museum, do not approach what I feel we are after. In any case, our building will require its own solution.

Interestingly, Harvard did not have a thoroughly worked-out program beforehand, as I understand, though there must have been a general sense of its needs. Of course we need a program, though I feel that we must be wary of the kind of a program that will bind us; rather, we should look for one allowing a flexible and expandable operation.

From our travels I see the danger of excessive structuring and abstraction--a concise plan that seems reasonable when diagrammed (but not necessarily suitable to the situation) of a day-to-day workshop. For instance, Brandeis' interlocking studios I assume is an attempt to promote communication by making studios directly accessible to each other, but it seemed in no real way to help. There was a dressing booth and storage area, both of which in a descriptive and diagrammatic way might strike one as reasonable, but in reality rigidified because it was so specific; and being so essential to the room plan, it had to be accepted, once done, effective or not.

The Brandeis studios, in their department, created the old art school feeling. One feels set up to a traditional activity, and I don't think these studios could tolerate anything out of the ordinary for any length of time. They do not absorb activity; they spell it out.

The Andover art installations, too, have a nicety, a format giving one a sense of a white-collar creativity. There is always the danger that outlandish or excessive activity would engulf or destroy this format.

The teaching facilities--classrooms, science labs and auditoriums--at Andover and Brandeis Humanities Center were the best I've seen in actual encounter, and I should be disappointed if Bennington were to have less in its facilities. The architects deal very well, and with originality, with the traditional problems of classrooms, etc. Where they do not do so well is in an open situation, where uncommitted space is a major consideration or where function is not specifically spelled out. This latter they handle with no particular distinction.

On the whole I found Yale and Wellesley art buildings ineffective. They are primarily oriented toward sedentary effort and static activities. I mention particularly Yale's low ceilings, interminable passageways and crucial elevator communication, and a total lack of working space.

I was interested in the Yale architecture past, but for other purposes. I could see it as countering the formality of a lecture room such as Barn 1. I see it as a gathering place, having various levels, which does not hold the audience in a formalistic confrontation.

Many of the Yale drafting rooms had a slightly different approach to the traditional drafting room, and I can see certain psychological advantages to working there. They had a certain dramatic quality, which might help one to endure long periods in a sedentary situation. There is a certain privacy in which to think and contemplate.

Aug 21 1964

Dear Lydia,

I started this over a week ago, but sailing in the Tonic (now we're in Cate) + a visual arts building for Bennington are an incongruous combination. I'll probably end up by telling you what's good about the Jewett Arts Center + what's wrong with a Great Temple.

Your letter arrived just before we left + I didn't have time to answer it. Forgive the delay + what will be a brief outline of my impressions. I have no comments to make on the architecture of any of the buildings as we did not make the trip in search of an architect. Also, our needs + those of the five institutions we visited are not comparable so far as educational aims, size, etc. are concerned. I feel, also, that we learned more from the mistakes we saw + heard about rather than from the good aspects.

Harvard - The meanness, to any way of thinking, to what we might want for Bennington.

Pro -

- a. Well thought out programming before consulting architect.
- b. Flexibility of space for ^{teaching of} all media.
- c. Simplicity + practicality of interior construction - i.e. flooring, lighting
- d. Good student art gallery.
- e. adequate storage space for student's materials + supplies.

Harrison cont.

Con.

- a - lack of ventilation
- b - Too much glass - lack of wall space.
- c - Lack of room for expansion. (Prof. Trotterby remarked that they are already turning away students)

Uale.
Pro.

- a - Student lounge & gallery for students work - (a possibility for Bennington as a "connection" between studios & a gallery-museum.
- b - adequate working library.

Con.

- a - An "architect's dream" with no programming or thoughts on the part of the faculty before building was designed & built.
- b - Lack of adequate working space, i.e. - low ceilings, no wall space for canvases.
- c - No ventilation or air-conditioning.
- d - Lack of storage space for students' supplies
- e - Poor flooring & lighting.

Braudeis

Pro

- a - Museum - marvelous display space - well air-conditioned.
- b - Studios for visiting artists
- c - Adequate office space in "studio building"
- d - Good, adjustable lighting.

Con.

- a - Too much money with no thought of an

Draiders - cont.

- art program - as a result no students.
- b. Museum - lack of offices & storage space -

4. Wellesley

The entire thinking & purpose of the Jewett Art Center is so diametrically opposite from ours that it's impossible for me to make any positive comment so far as studio & working space is concerned.

Con.

- a. Utter lack of ventilation.
- b. No storage space for works of art.
- c. No adequate security measures for gallery causing expense of guard & high insurance.

5. Andover

Pro.

- a. Relation of visual arts center to Addison^{gal} Gallery & George Washington Hall (Theater)
- b. Combined studio on two levels for study in various media. Not necessarily good for advanced students but for those who are exploring the visual arts for the first time.

Con.

Difficult to comment as art at Andover is not that important in the academic program of the school. Tremendous interest & great art this level.

In Conclusion - Priorities

- #1 - Programming not only for now but for the future
2. Flexible working space
3. Adequate storage space both for materials & works of art.
4. Adequate lighting
5. Adequate ventilation
6. Interior construction should be simple, practical & unpretentious
7. Gallery should be a separate unit but connected to studios. If we could not afford both, the studios, offices & working areas should have first priority but the site planning should be worked out ~~at~~ simultaneously for both.

I hope you can make head or tail of this. If I don't mail it now you'll never get it. So I haven't even re-read it. We'll be home (Bedford) on Aug. 15th if you want to get in touch with me.

Best love to you & Harry -

Zain

AUG 31 1964

REPORT on MUSEUM-STUDIO TOUR

Jane McCullough

Because many of the obvious details will have been reported by other observers, I would like to focus my comments on the question of an approach to designing an art center, as I saw it elsewhere and as it might help clarify what we -- as the collective "client" -- might look for in a building and the person who designs

1. RELATION BETWEEN BUILDING, PROGRAM, AND FUNCTION

In judging studios and museums for other institutions, it is sometimes hard to remember that the clients (not architects) have made the decisions affecting policy and program --- but that architects can be held responsible for carrying such ideas into a workable building. He also has charge of a raft of small decisions and details that are part of his expertise, which determine whether a building is humane, livable, and pleasurable in the long run.

Some lingering impressions:

Yale Graduate School (Rudolph) Formal...monumental....rigid...brutal dramatic forms...handsome all-over texture is hostile, untouchable.

Excitement and variety of spaces is achieved at the expense of user's logic, his ability to move through building easily or know where he is. It frustrates normal human impulses (orientation, prediction), arouses anxiety (from unprotected heights). Many unique and lovely effects -- to be admired, not lived with.

The image here is a popular Hollywood notion of the artist in his impregnable tower. Building is too vertical for any integration of teaching functions (32 interior levels). Severe acoustical problems arise from work areas around a busy "open pit" on two floors. If there was a program for individual departments, the painters were clearly ignored: they have massacred their picturesque but impractical "garret" in an open war between architecture as "art" and as a servant of function.

Yale Gallery (Kahn): The battle between curators and architects shows up here. Ritchie has put up floor-to-ceiling partitions to make "rooms" out of once-lovely open span space dominated by a poured concrete ceiling of strong triangular form. Partitions of course fight the continuous view of the ceiling, but in a sense Ritchie is right: the strong diagonal drive of the ceiling is so aggressive that it takes the eye away from even masterpieces.
(Is it not possible for architecture to serve other arts, as well?)

Poses Museum, Brandeis (Abramovitz): Attempt to be slick, imposing, formal... result is stiff, pretentious, a structure much too small for the shape and scale of detail. Interior lightness is pleasant. But dominant stairwell and pool (with donors collection of lustreware) say that commerce comes before art.

Building is ill-planned for almost all gallery functions, lacking even basic facilities. This is donor's building, but it is hard to understand how the architect could have gone through with it. "Showcase" seems an impossible compromise.

Art Studios, Brandeis (Abramovitz): Pleasant arrangement around a central court is a promise not fulfilled, as it serves neither work nor display of art... Planning of some small one-man studios may be good idea... Teaching studios have good light from large slanted skylight walls (assume north), with all studios lined up and linked by clean-up areas. This makes all studios virtually identical in size and atmosphere (functionally dubious), yet they feel remote, disconnected, out of communication with each other. No flexibility; no "working walls" or ceilings because of brick construction. The image here is The artist as putterer, busy with a small-scale world of disconnected arts, from easel painting to pot making.

Wellesley Art Center (Rudolph): Here the artist is represented as bearded scholar busy in his archives. Architect made an all-out effort to create "campus Gothic" feeling in contemporary form and material, to blend with traditional campus buildings. Result: trickiness, complexity, fussiness of scale on the outside. The amount of concern lavished on the visible exterior is completely absent inside.

Interior lacks niceties of scale and light, and is fully of thoughtless mistakes that drive the users' wild. . . unmovable doors, an entrance without a lobby or weather protection, unadjustable metal grilles that throw shadows into studios, and especially an unventilated roof dome that turns the gallery into "l'art sous cloche" in summer. Group lecture rooms are dark and airless, inflexible, a shoddy background for art.

Placement of the gallery in the center of the building creates undesirable security problems. Display areas along the main corridor is virtually useless for valuable prints for the same reason. Storage of an excellent collection is inaccessible and hopeless for anything of large size. (Dual purpose stage, in the other half of the building) seems an excellent idea for theatrical flexibility.)

The building was obviously tightly programmed for a conventional art program, and called for complicated relationships between studio, museum, library and theatre, to be resolved. Last minute cuts were made. Still, posts in front of office windows and half-ton doors, malfunctioning and unpleasant space, can be called the architect's responsibility.

Carpenter Center, Harvard (LeCorbusier): The image here is The Artist as Artiste. Harvard's policy of "buy a great architect and let him put up his masterpiece" was frankly stated, and both program and client were broad-gauged enough to take the results. There was no staff and virtually no detailed program to get in his way. The dramatic sculptural result is, in a poetic sense, the main function of the building: to make art a traffic stopper with other-worldly appeal to the general student.

Principal appealing feature from our standpoint are the large open studios of about 2,000 sq. ft each, peered into by passersby on the ramp. This space seems generous, flexible, unconfined. Professor B. warns: studios with all-glass walls and no solid areas are a problem in teaching and especially in exhibition use. Also, too many floors makes for isolation and poor communication between disciplines that should be working together; students can take 2-dimensional design and never learn that there is also 3-dimensional design.

As loft space this is tempting... but costly at \$40 per sq. ft. Aside from polished concrete work floors, there is almost no attention to materials or finish, *surprising at this price*

Andover Art Center (Thompson): Though at a prep school level for an "elective" art program in a traditional school, this building solves some problems that even elaborate college buildings have failed to face. It ties together six separate functions in limited space, in a way that allows them to relate and work together while keeping

an identity and clear orientation. It includes a major entrance to the school and a new auditorium, adjacent social areas, link to the museum, a new theatre workshop, ~~and~~ 2-d and 3-d teaching studios, and an audio-visual center for the entire school. You feel that art is the central focus and a function with many branches. Planning is tight, meticulous, and painstakingly concerned with the needs of both staff and administration, according to Shertzer and Bartlett Hayes. With all its requirements, the building does not seem labored. Spaces, actually quite limited, seem generous and humanly-scaled.

Andover Science Building (Thompson): Though it has nothing to do, literally, with an art building, it is to my mind a too-rare demonstration that an architect can on occasion face up to a very strict program, and satisfy many users in minute detail, and still bring out of it a sense of clarity, order, continuity of space, a sense of enjoyment in being and working inside a building. It works, it fits, and it feels good-- and that aint easy. It was reassuring at the end of this trip.

II. What is flexibility?

One theme/song in the art faculty's discussions has been the need for a flexible art building. From the buildings seen to date, we can find some clues about what does or does not make for real flexibility in planning and building.

A flexible building is NOT one designed for just "anything," which really means designed for nothing. It is not just a big enclosure that can be adapted to suit --- because buildings once built are permanently cast in most details. In dealing with any specialized purpose such as art teaching, or exhibiting, there must be a commitment to some basic functions at the outset. (Mies' big "hangar" at IIT has proved an impossible work space, because not even the light requirements were really considered in terms of how it would be used.)

A flexible building is not necessarily one big space, or a series of identical spaces. It is tempting to think that anything unfform or factory-like in its make-up is more flexible than something with elements of variety in it. It does not necessarily follow, unless the flexibility has been consciously design into it.

A flexible building anticipates changes that are inevitable, likely, or even vaguely possible. (Mechanical installations at Andover foresee changes in emphasis among the sciences.)

A flexible building allows for changes and uses that cannot be foreseen.

A flexible building allows for different uses of the same space without giving up its central function. ("Jury pit" at Yale might have this possibility for different group uses. Wellesley convertible theatre allows for concerts immediately followed by productions.)

A flexible building allows for individual ways of adapting a space. (Seminar rooms in Brandeis Humanities Center have tables that can be pushed into many configurations to suit the teacher's whims. Lecture hall in the same building has two different capacities -- one for lectures ((seats with arms)), one for general events (auditorium seats)) -- and either one is comfortable.)

A flexible building allows for short-term or temporary changes of function. (Continuous art studio space at Andover would allow expansion of class sizes of changes of emphasis in the curriculum; Brandeis studios would not.)

A flexible building allows for long-term expansion and addition. (Most buildings visited were immutable in size and in design.)

A flexible space, one faculty member has said, will absorb activity without spelling it out. The conclusion is obvious: flexibility occurs by design, not by accident. It occurs by planning of a high order of discipline and foresight and human awareness (as does any successful architecture.) If we expect anything less, from our programming and from our architect, we can expect buildings that are bound to be unsuited to an evolving future, and possibly even to the needs of the present.

III. General comments.

1. I believe that our art department is in strong fundamental agreement about what it wants as working and exhibition space for art. I sense that all of them were viewing the buildings we saw (functionally and architecturally) from these premises.

2.) These premises, which ~~are~~ really constitute a philosophical agreement about what Art at Bennington is and should be, have a far-reaching effect on everything that will go into a new art building. They have to do not only with the sizes and shapes of the studios, but the relationship between them, the character of the building itself, and its placement on the campus. They have to do with the use of space around the building, its maintenance, the relation of the studios to a college gallery. All of these considerations are specific, not general, and an inseparable part of a total "program" for an art building.

3) About the relationship of studios and ^{musculon} gallery, we did not discuss this after the trip. But it is my impression that the question was clarified almost beyond doubt by the dramatic extremes of the Poses Museum and the Wellesley Gallery ---- the former much too isolated, the other much too central to be practical. I suspect that the relationship of the Addison Gallery to the new art building at Andover came through as the best pattern: connected parts of the same unit, close and related, but separable whenever necessary so that both halves can function by themselves. Here also the display function extends out of the museum into the art building, with corridors along the second floor where prints or student work can be displayed (nicely visible also from the court outside.) I think this question can be firmly answered as soon as the committee has another meeting.