

Amherst's Modernist Expression

Post - World War II Academic Buildings

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Music

Sometime between the completion of Frost and the ground breaking of the Music building in 1966, Amherst College decided that its new buildings should complement its old. When the Music department realized that with the success of the capital campaign their space in the Octagon had "unreasonable acoustic problems" the College was presented with the opportunity to, if not repair some of the mistakes it made with Frost, at least make another attempt at bringing modernism to the campus.³⁷ I see the unequivocally modern Music building as the college's most successful architectural statement of the last fifty years.

Benjamin Thompson, its architect, had the most important role in this.³⁸ Thompson was one of seven original members of "The Architects Collaborative," a

³⁷The Public Affairs brochure, "Music At Amherst" noted, "With societies increasing opportunities for leisure music is even more important."

³⁸How Amherst chooses its architect is still somewhat of a mystery. Plimpton implied that someone had a connection with Thompson and suggested him as a possibility.

Cambridge based group of architects (including Walter Gropius) who shared a rough set of architectural ideals, most significantly the importance of collaboration in the design process. In a book of TAC's work which the Frost library acquired a month after the Music building was completed, along with pictures of all of them together at Gropius's birthday party, they each take turns writing some of their ideas about architecture.

Thompson's comments struck me as especially relevant to Music:

The attitude is one of respect...a love of what is there is implicit in finding that natural solution, for if we are successful, we make both the old and the new more valuable.³⁹

Music does succeed in blending with and complementing its neighbors, most immediately Pratt Dorm and Hamilton House across the street. As the little blurb in Amherst's building brochure put it, "[Music] associates itself in scale and in its contrast of brick and whitish trim with its late colonial and classical neighbors."⁴⁰ Thompson's

words are emphasized by a more general listing of TAC ideals:

- 1) A sensitivity and respect for the land, the place, the people, the climate from which design determinants are drawn. ...the work takes root in its place, material and form. It is remarkably free of preconceived design ideals and always responsive to local conditions.
- 2) A concern for spatial composition, movement, view, sequence, and the total psychological environment taking precedent over structural and constructional composition in which technological and material factors dominate.⁴¹

TAC's version of intellectual architecture seems a long way from O'Connor and Kilham's work on Frost. I can easily imagine them, or at least Stanley King, shuddering at some of TAC's rhetoric. Even without Plimpton's confirming comment that Thompson was "a nice, interesting, whimsical soul with a dreamy look in his eyes," I would not hesitate to call Thompson "new age." In a section of the TAC book entitled "Miscellaneous Comments" Thompson says things like, "When we come down from the clouds a meaningful architecture will be created in our time. When we come to grips with our present, there is a chance we will influence the future," and compares the collaborative design process to group jazz improvisation, with the unity of the group

³⁹Gropius, *The Architects Collaborative, 1945-1965*, p 8.

⁴⁰box 10, folder 50

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p 8.

complementing the style of the individual.⁴² But perhaps most important to the architectural success of Music is Thompson's willingness to be innovative without resorting to what he sees as the "violent expressionism" and "muscle-flexing originality" of modern "name" buildings.⁴³ His rhetoric may be imposing but his building is not. As *Architectural Record* put it, "Thompson's buildings, like a Volkswagen and Rolls Royce do not begin to look sadly dated."⁴⁴

His emphasis on "functional relationships" is most clearly seen in his separation of Music into four "central interconnecting elements," containing vocal rehearsal, instrumental rehearsal, performance, and public spaces. The rationale is that all of the spaces in which music is performed are contained in the blocks, while the central glass box joins the three together.⁴⁵ The central glass is a wonderful space, but it seems that complaints about the practice spaces are almost ubiquitous. Musicians say that the soundproofing is not adequate and that the department has outgrown the building— both practice rooms and the two main classrooms are almost constantly in use. I have also heard varying complaints about the acoustics in Buckley. One friend insists that they are only good in certain parts of the hall. Both Plimpton and Professor Kennick think they are superb.

Once again I am faced with the reality that Music's success depends both on its aesthetic merit and its comparatively weaker functional success. Frequently I am reminded in these conversations that modernism (or just architecture in general) is a matter of taste. There are Amherst students (and I will resist blaming Jane Reynolds) who prefer the architecture of Chapin to that of Music.

Considering that, I will focus my comments on the connecting block, which I feel is one of the best public spaces in any building at the College. What impresses me most

⁴²*Ibid.*, p 22.

⁴³*Architectural Record*, January 1969. (From Archives, Box 10, Folder 50.)

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

is its merging of indoors and outdoors. All of the materials are carried over between the two spaces— the hexagonal slate floor, the globe light fixtures, the red “Flemish bond” brick, and, most impressively, the same floor to ceiling glass walls are used to define the exterior of the building and some rooms within it. Upon entering, the building gradually takes you from the expanse of the oval to the interior expanse of the glass box— first through the little roughly landscaped garden area which softens the front of the building; then through the middle ground of the portico, floored with the same black hexagons, formed by the widely cantilevered second floor; and finally, the only real barrier between indoors and outdoors is an unfinished wood cross-beam across the glass walls. But it is the middle ground where I am most impressed. The modernist version of a portico, defined by heavily patterned red brick columns set back from the corner of the building, has the true feeling of an outdoor room. Its generous space and open corner makes it feel like an extension of the central box when crowds come out of Buckley at intermission. The fact that it is sunken and surrounded by unimposing bushes and a small birch tree gives it a warmth that would be nonexistent if Music were set on a flat site. I would almost say that the building has an organic quality.

I— and probably Ben Thompson— identify its setting as one its greatest features. This is a building which depends on the gentle slope of the hill and the surrounding buildings for its context. Its materials are identical to Pratt, with its heavily patterned brick and sandstone trim. When looking towards Pratt from the portico the edge of the buildings line up, and it is almost difficult to distinguish between the two. From the rear (west) side of the building it is not quite as graceful, with a sheer brick wall rising out of the parking lot instead of the brick and glass and trees in the front, but its externally defined sections ease some of the bulk. The back is also quietly ornamented with a pair of slit windows reaching down from the concrete band under the roof which, unlike in Frost, succeed in bringing some verticality to the building. Another small

touch which I like is the slight cantilever over the rear stage exit, which seems to float the enormous block just slightly. Again, Frost would benefit from this feature.

The architecture of Music had a significant enough impact on the campus that all of the programs for the first season of concerts feature architectural elements of the building as their background photo. There are close-ups of the concrete cube ceiling, the slotted windows, and the wooden steps in the vocal rehearsal classroom. My favorite is an early public relations photo with students sitting in the glass box in a symmetrical pattern. It is as if the building inspired it, as if its architecture ordered the way we move within it. To me it seems that Music is a building which makes an architectural statement. Its includes no revolutionary new forms or stylistic breakthroughs yet quietly asserts itself as a thoughtful, modernist building. It is unfortunate that it is not as successful functionally. But especially when compared to Frost, Music makes a keen modernist statement while still relating to its setting and the buildings around it. As the music public relations brochure put it, "It harmonizes so well, the casual campus visitor may miss it entirely."⁴⁶ This may be an exaggeration (and a great pun) but I agree that Music remains assertive without being dominating.

⁴⁶Archives, Box 10, folder 50.