

## **In Defense of One Western Avenue**

by George Thrush FAIA

Let's face it. The graduate student dormitory at the Harvard along the Charles River, known as One Western Avenue, is an almost uniquely reviled building. Since its completion a few years ago, it has been pilloried by neighbors, activists, critics, and even architects.

So why is the reaction to One Western Avenue so universally negative? My own unscientific polling reveals a shocking level of what might charitably be called reactionary aesthetic conservatism, or worse, a kind of deep cultural pessimism. Among my neighbors in Cambridgeport (just across the river from the building), the negative reaction is near universal. Mind you, these folks are the sort who would never express a negative thought about modern painting or music, or performance art, or any other such evidence of cultural experimentation for fear of being labeled "conservative." But when it comes to architecture, they seem to feel that the stakes are higher; after all, buildings are continuous performances in a way that Philip Glass symphonies or Robert Wilson plays are not. And so the architectural tastes of many of my fellow citizens tend toward the Kenny-G-like stylings of the Genzyme faux-cathedral of biotech adjacent to One Western Avenue, designed by the Cambridge firm ARC.

It is a bizarre situation that in this Blue-est of Blue States, in the heart of world-altering technological innovation in biotechnology and pharmaceuticals and computing, that the architectural taste of the region be so retrograde. Obviously there are exceptions, such as the newer Genzyme building in East Cambridge, the Stata Center at MIT, and MIT's "sponge" – the Simmons Hall dormitory. But these largely isolated examples (and without residential neighbors, they are indeed literally isolated) are not examples of buildings or imagery with which people in Boston or Cambridge can apparently identify. And why not? Why does our forward-looking community remain so addicted to the image of the past? Why is the architecture of the Victorian era so beloved at the expense of the work of our own time?

Some possible answers bear directly on a more detailed review of this complex and challenging building. One Western Avenue is a relentlessly modern composition. It is unapologetic about its austerity (as are building budgets, and construction materials and methods, by the way). Composed of rectilinear bars that make as little distinction as possible between their vertical and horizontal use, the building is quite stark. Though the building skin is made of brick, it deploys brick in completely atypical ways to create depth and shadow on the lower levels, and decorative patterns above. These patterns make a two-dimensional reference to the more traditional three-dimensional relief found in Harvard's older buildings. The vertical bar (or tower) does not achieve the iconic character of other Harvard buildings, but it is also clearly not the primary objective of the work. This is an ambitious project that seeks to create a portal to the new campus. It is not the portal through which neighbors of Harvard, or Bostonians in general, might have

themselves designed to pass (and this radical unpopularity could still prove a devastating political error), but this is a building that shows the way to a future.

Ah, the future. This is the second reason that One Western Avenue has been so savaged. This building announces, celebrates, and embraces the future. How well it does so is open to some debate. The building has no doubt failed to perform a key political act, namely securing a modern future for the new Harvard in Allston. And the building's negative press has since fed on itself to the point that One Western Avenue is now seen as a serious cautionary (and very negative) example of how things might go wrong in the high stakes world of Harvard's institutional planning for its expansion. Politically, One Western Avenue has been a fiasco.

And to be sure, architects who seek to do work on significant public buildings cannot assume that the criteria for evaluation of that work will exclude the political. It comes with the territory, and the possibility of public rejection is simply another of the many anxieties that accompany aesthetic and creative ambition. But just because political concerns are part of the complex series of issues that engage all serious architects doesn't mean that they are the only ones that matter. Certainly architects from Michelangelo and Bernini to Thom Mayne and Rem Koolhaas have navigated the political issues of the day while also creating works of lasting architectural importance

But this problem with the perception of the building is interesting because Harvard and Allston are entirely about the future: the future of the World's Greatest University; the future of the city; and the future of bio-technology and scientific invention. But unlike my hometown of Chicago, which continues to act as though her future will be greater than her past, Boston and Cambridge continue to imagine that their best days are behind them. This is a very odd sensibility with which to move forward, and this ambivalence is going to continue to give us problems in deciding what the future should look like.

Ironically, this architectural task of trying to re-connect modern architecture meaningfully with the past couldn't fall to more accomplished architects than the buildings designers, Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti. I often wonder if One Western Avenue's many detractors are aware that many leading architects around the world consider Machado and Silvetti to be the most important, skilled, and influential architects in Boston, followed perhaps by Office dA. The firm has so influenced a generation of practitioners throughout Boston and the rest of the country that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to refer to a 'school of Machado and Silvetti,' much as the term is used to describe the circles of influence around master painters."

The "Boston Architecture" of the late 1980s and 1990s that has become the house style of the many Boston firms that employ and export it throughout the country owes its birth to a conflation of the Cornell School (where one of the critical transformations of post-war, high modern architecture occurred in the 1970s), represented locally by Fred Koetter and Mike Dennis, with... Machado and Silvetti. This marriage of figure-ground driven urban design with mannerist manipulations of more traditional (and often brick) architecture

tropes has become the style of choice for our area's hospitals, dormitories, libraries, and even office buildings.

At One Western Avenue, Machado and Silvetti simply continued their mannerist distortion of this language beyond what their public audience could handle. There is the naturalistic mural of clouds or water facing the river; the faceted soffit underneath the great bridge that opens the courtyard to the river; and the woven patterns of low building with high, and light brick with dark. Architecturally, there is a lot going on at One Western Avenue.

But there is also a great deal that ties it to our past. The building does have a courtyard facing the river (like other Harvard dormitories) after all. It is made of brick. It uses its lower parts to define the street. It meets one of the cardinal responsibilities of a good urban building in that one can easily imagine many ways in which it not only works well with the adjoining existing buildings, but could also work well with many different ones in the future. Can you say that about the Genzyme building next door?

How is it possible that in a hotbed of progressivism, the sophisticated work of one of the world's best firms is rejected completely out-of-hand? By any rational measure, One Western Avenue is a solid piece of urban design, upon which one can easily imagine more new blocks of the new university being modeled. Perhaps what has really happened is that we have allowed our hyperactive political antennae to supersede our aesthetic judgment. The arguments against One Western Avenue, after all, are really echoes of the "we shall not be moved" protests against Peabody Terrace and the perceived arrogance of architecture and institutions against "the people" in the 1960s.

In a final irony, Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti are themselves children of Berkeley, circa 1968, and all of the presumed political efficacy that was imagined for architecture in those heady times. But we have them to thank for working to separate that kind of political determinism from architectural discourse in the intervening decades, and replacing it with an architecture about "realism" and language. The unique choices for materials, surfaces, and imagery that one finds in their work is a great step forward from those far less interesting days.

And perhaps an ambitious society must risk building the occasional building it doesn't love in order to aspire to a more interesting and inventive future. One Western Avenue isn't Machado and Silvetti's best building. Their new Getty Villa in Malibu, California, is truly extraordinary, as are their smaller local buildings like the Allston Public Library and the new Provincetown Art Association and Museum. They have done better work, but their ambition in this building is clear: to invent new ways of expressing the modern world against a long history of architecture and urbanism. The alternative, reproducing the image of a past that often bears no relation to our time, doesn't seem very promising.

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