

Regular night's dinner: Serves two to four people

Dinner at LifeSavor: Helps serve over 650 people in need

boston.com News

your connection to **The Boston Globe**

Home **News** A&E Business Sports Travel Your Life Cars Jobs Personals Real Estate

Today's Globe Politics **Opinion** Education Science NECN Special reports Obituaries

Traffic | Weather

[HOME](#) > [NEWS](#) > [BOSTON GLOBE](#) > [OPINION](#) > [OP-ED](#)

An unsettling look into the future

The Boston Globe

By George Thrush, 3/29/2004

THE MOST controversial structure to come to town in quite a while is the Harvard Business School's new graduate dormitory at One Western Avenue.

ADVERTISEMENT

Get paper
and
plastic.



Get Globe
home delivery
at **50% off** and
receive a
Stop & Shop
gift card for up
to **\$40!**

[CLICK HERE](#)

The Boston Globe
Your world, unfolding daily.

Designed by Machado and Silvetti Associates, the austere brick structure has been rejected by citizens and critics alike for its stark, overly spare modernity. I, too, have been among its many architectural critics. An ambitious building designed to establish the gateway to Harvard's soon-to-come Allston campus, One Western Avenue, while successful at the ground level, seems both harsh and confused above.

The architectural intention to assemble a Harvard courtyard out of abstract vertical and horizontal brick bars doesn't work. The tower is not elegant enough to serve as an urban focal point, and the bars are not sufficiently similar to achieve the idea of an element working both vertically and horizontally.

But there is a much more important question that attends a contemporary review of the building. It has to do with the significance of modern architecture on this site, and what it says about the social and physical terms we will use to describe Boston's future in general, and the look of Allston in particular.

Even for those Bostonians who pay little attention to Harvard and its architecture, this issue remains important because we all have a stake in our city and its image. From a marketing perspective, Boston is known as a significant historical city with wonderful old buildings -- a blue state theme park for red state out-of-towners.

Whatever we think of One Western Avenue, though, we must understand that it represents the future of architecture in our city and deserves a second (and third) look. Harvard could have chosen to return to the comfort of what has become the "branded" language of America's architectural past -- tasteful, familiar brick buildings and nicely scaled courtyards. But while Bostonians have always acknowledged their past, they have also looked to the future.

Harvard, as an intellectual and cultural leader in the region, makes choices for its campus that have enormous ramifications for the city and beyond. Unlike the previous ivy-covered, traditionally brick buildings of its "original" campus across the river, One Western Avenue reflects an entirely new direction for the university that speaks well beyond the design of the building itself to the battle for the soul and identity of Boston. The questions it raises: Are the

best days of this place behind us, or do they lie ahead? Are we about looking to the future or back to the past?

The opportunity for a "new" Harvard is extraordinary. In Allston, the university has a chance to reflect its 21st century ideals as well as to complement those of the 18th and 19th so well reflected in Cambridge. That the new campus will lie across the Charles River means that the public will be able to maintain more than one perception of the institution; the "new" Harvard needn't replace the character of the old, but can, instead, add to it.

Our own generation is not completely averse to modern architecture. But we are very cautious about it. Its use is often limited to singular buildings of specific cultural significance -- such as William Rawn's new buildings at Northeastern, Norman Foster's soaring glass atrium for the new MFA, and Frank Gehry's new Stata Computer Science Center at MIT.

One Western Avenue is different from what we've grown accustomed to, and it should be. The building sits at the edge of an entirely new place, at the threshold of a new idea for our city. Though just a dormitory, the building seems to have an effect greater than its humble purpose, and it has prompted a necessary debate. Already, many suggest that it was a mistake for the university to build a modern structure on such a significant site, that its designers and institutional owners should have known better.

Harvard has already built the deeply depressing Spangler Center on the campus of the Business School, and one can imagine yet another row of neo-Georgian red-state buildings

TOOLS

- [PRINTER FRIENDLY VERSION](#)
- [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)
- [TOP E-MAILED ARTICLES](#)

SEARCH GLOBE ARCHIVES

[GO](#)

- Today (free)
- Yesterday (free)
- Past 30 days
- Last 12 months

- [Advanced search](#)
- [Subscribe now and get free archives](#)

SPONSORED LINKS

ORBITZ
MOST LOW FARES

[Low Airfares.](#)
[More Choices.](#)
[Cars & Hotels.](#)
[All at Orbitz!](#)

song
flysong.com

[We're more than just a pretty fare...](#)

LO/JACK

[Protect your vehicle with our Street Smarts Guide](#)

BOSTON UNIVERSITY
CORPORATE EDUCATION CENTER

[Free Project Management Seminar](#)

lining Western Avenue in Allston as the consequence of this ambitious, though less-than-loved building.

It is hard to imagine Harvard University advocating traditional views on science, law, or literary theory simply because they're more comfortable and less risky. Of course it is easier to achieve consensus on a vision of the past. But even One Western Avenue will age, and this moment of transition between one image of Harvard University and the next will too become part of the landscape of our lives. What the future should look like is hard to pin down. But if we succumb to the occasional uncomfortable feeling that comes with seeing buildings that look unfamiliar, we risk relinquishing our crucial leadership in the American culture of ideas. One Western Avenue reminds us of what we deeply know -- that the future is always uncomfortable.

George Thrush is chairman of the Department of Architecture at Northeastern University.

© Copyright 2004 Globe Newspaper Company.

 [PRINTER FRIENDLY VERSION](#)  [E-MAIL TO A FRIEND](#)

[feedback](#) | [help](#) | [site map](#) | [advertising](#) | [globe archives](#) | [rss](#)

© 2004 The New York Times Company

Get a **\$40** Stop & Shop gift card with
Globe home delivery at **50% off!**

[CLICK HERE](#)

