PUTTING COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TO THE TEST: PRESERVING POSTWAR DORMITORIES IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

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Abstract

Thesis Question
Can private colleges and universities bring their modernist dormitories up to contemporary living standards without compromising their historic and architectural integrity?

The purpose of this thesis is to prove the importance of modern architecture to the evolution of the American college and university campus, and to suggest a course of action with respect to its increased protection through the presentation of case studies that will examine the architectural intention, building performance, public reception and preservation of three mid-century modernist dormitories. The primary case study presents the history and significance of Harvard Law School’s Graduate Center (Walter Gropius and TAC, 1950), and then shows how perceptions of the Graduate Center’s aesthetic and technical failure currently threaten its architectural integrity and future viability. The following section summarizes current discourse in the historic preservation field on the appropriate treatment of modern architecture, both philosophically and physically. The final case studies offer an analysis of recent preservation work done on two modernist dormitories. In the case of MIT’s Baker House, designed in 1949 by Alvar Aalto and renovated by Perry Dean Rogers from 1998 to 1999, MIT’s institutional agenda combined with a consideration for the building’s status as an international icon of modernism produced results both positive and negative for the vitality and integrity of the dormitory. In the case of Ferry Cooperative House at Vassar College, designed in 1951 by Marcel Breuer and renovated from 1999 to 2000 by Herb Beckhard Frank Richlan & Associates, aesthetic intervention was guided by the judgment of Herb Beckhard, former associate of Breuer, and results demonstrated the integral role of the modernist interior. The concluding section highlights important differences in the architecture and status of the three dormitories examined, and summarizes the challenges specific to preserving modernist dormitories.