

Poetic Form and Forum:
Alvar Aalto's Woodberry Poetry Room

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ABSTRACT

The 2006 renovation of Harvard University's Woodberry Poetry Room, one of the few American designs by noted Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, sparked an international controversy over the means and ends of architectural preservation. Arching over these debates about architectural heritage, the responsibility of the Harvard administration, the quality of Fixler's renovation, etc., were larger, often unarticulated, questions about what constitutes a poetic text or an architectural work, whether they have definitive forms, what their responsibilities are to the people who use them. I explain how the different constituents invested in this specific project bring to the table different understandings of the purpose of the room and its preservation, and the distinction between the physical design and the "institution" and collection it houses. I argue that the controversy over the recent renovation reflects disagreement regarding the fluidity or fixity of the architectural "object" and the poetic text -- disagreements informed by theoretical and pragmatic debates in librarianship, pedagogy, media and literary studies, and architectural preservation.

Keywords: poetics, poetry, reading, architecture, media, Woodberry, Aalto

The Woodberry Poetry Room, in Harvard University's Lamont Library, boasts a marvelous collection of 20th and 21st century poetry books, including many small press editions, pamphlets, magazines, broadsides, and manuscripts "from the entire English-speaking world, as well as poetic works in other languages translated into English" (Woodberry Poetry Room, n.d.). Visitors to the room can peruse author photographs, view poet-created paintings and sculptures, and listen to and watch audio and video poetry recordings. This multi-media collection, together with the room's events programming, which brings contemporary poets and scholars to the University for talks and readings, constitutes, in the words of former faculty member Seamus Heaney, "a living history of modern poetry" (quoted in *ibid.*).

The room's character – warm, rich, domestic, yet modern – is such that it feels live-able and opens itself up to a variety of uses. According to former curator Don Share, the Poetry Room has been the only place in Harvard's undergraduate library where students could find couches to sit on, where they could "feel at home," where they could pore over a manuscript, put a record on one of the record players, peruse the books on display, or, if they weren't in the mood for poetry, do their math homework. But by 2006, "after more than a half-century of use, the Woodberry Poetry Room was badly worn," said Harvard librarian Nancy Cline (quoted in "Woodberry Poetry Room Renovation Under Way," 2006). "Continuous use by students [had] simply worn out the furniture, and the room itself lacked contemporary study space and technological capabilities. Without these things," she said, "it couldn't fulfill its intended purpose...: to afford students both a rich collection of poetry resources and a space in which to study them" (*ibid.*). The University decided to update the room for "today's volume and character of use" by providing "improved comfort and security, and more functionality and technologically appropriate reading areas for patrons of the library," while remaining true to the spirit of the original design by noted Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (Pogrebin, 2006; Fixler, 2006). Boston architectural firm Einhorn Yaffee Prescott (EYP) planned to

remove the old cork tile flooring and asbestos-infested plaster ceiling; repair or replace worn-out furnishings; improve the lighting; and update the wiring so the room could accommodate computers and other digital playback devices.

According to the University, “options were carefully considered” – but EYP’s David Fixler, a historic preservation specialist who consulted on the project, is reported to have admitted that it was a “rush...project. There was a donor and a minimal budget. ‘We have to get this done’ was the attitude. We tried to do as little harm as possible” (quoted in “Woodberry Poetry Room Renovation,” 2006; Campbell, 2006). The work was to take place over the summer of 2006; the room would be closed and the collection placed in storage, and the renovated space was to be open again for business by the fall semester. Unlike Fixler’s work at nearby MIT on the Baker House dormitory, which was also designed by Aalto, the work at Harvard allegedly involved no consultation with design historians (Campbell, 2006; Fixler, 2001). The architects and preservationists at Harvard’s Graduate School for Design (GSD) were none too pleased to have been excluded from the process. A letter writing campaign was launched, and a stay of execution sought. Despite the critics’ efforts, when September arrived, students and faculty entered a Poetry Room changed – for better or for worse, depending on whom one asked.

There were many meetings and ex post facto justifications for the work. The international design press and the *New York Times* caught wind of the controversy. Docomomo, an international organization dedicated to the preservation of Modern design, took up the cause – though Fixler’s position as the New England chapter president of Docomomo-US likely necessitated careful diplomacy on all sides of the issue. The renovation, argues Toshiko Mori, former chair of the GSD’s Department of Architecture, “leaves a cruel trace” of the original design; “If they had decided to totally revamp it, it would have been more merciful” (quoted in Pogrebin, 2006). “What nobody understood,” suggests architecture critic Robert Campbell (2006), “is that the Woodberry was an

ensemble. To change any part of it – like altering a few bars here and there in a piece of music – changes everything.” So while the collection constituted a “living history” of poetry, the room that housed that collection was seen as a fixed composition, perfect and complete.

There has been little written about the Woodberry Poetry Room; only a handful of articles – in library science, architectural history, and interior design journals and magazines, and in Harvard’s own publications – existed until the recent controversy incited a small burst of often hasty, one-sided coverage in national and international design magazines and the Boston and New York press (Packard, 1950; Abercrombie, 1979a, 1979b). The room is mentioned only in passing, if at all, in published reviews and catalogues of Aalto’s works, and had been omitted, until recently, from a comprehensive list of projects on the Alvar Aalto Foundation’s website. The Harvard University Archives contain a selection of design documents, press clippings, and invoices related to the Room, and the archives at the Alvar Aalto Museum in Finland hold letters regarding the Poetry Room design – but this untranslated correspondence remains inaccessible to non-Swedish- or Finnish-speaking researchers. The dearth of available material about the room meant that few knew of its existence until the 2006 upheaval brought it to public consciousness.

I was among those who discovered the room through news, in a Fall 2006 issue of *Architectural Record*, of its supposed ruin. As someone fascinated by libraries and archives, I was immediately taken by the idea of a room dedicated to poetry, so I set out to investigate how such a crime against architecture, and poetry, could have been perpetuated – at Harvard, of all places. Although it is difficult to deny the value of architectural preservation, particularly the value of preserving for posterity one of Aalto’s few American designs, I soon learned that I couldn’t easily take sides with either the proponents or critics of the renovation, and that even among preservationists there were varying reactions to the affair. I also concluded that judgments regarding the appropriateness of the renovation could not simply be left to the architectural historians and

preservationists, who were most vocal in the debate. There were other stakeholders in this issue whose opinions were not solicited, whose voices were infrequently heard. In seeking out those other voices, I discovered that librarians, curators, students, faculty, architects, historians, preservations, and other invested groups of course had different options, and, even more important, that they were often talking about different rooms.

The 2006 upheaval illuminated contrasting ways of conceiving of the Woodberry Poetry Room – as an idea, as an architectural embodiment of that idea, as a collection of media – and different ways of temporally framing those conceptions, either freezing them in time, at a moment when they supposedly represented some perfect or complete form, or taking as a given their inevitable evolution. One can tell the history of the room through the history of its relationship to its political, technological, and cultural contexts. It began as a response against prevailing critical and pedagogical approaches – Woodberry intended for the room to provide a space for students to encounter poetry in an extracurricular context – yet the room found itself initially housed in a space that ultimately reinforced those approaches by setting poetry apart from the larger collection and outside its political and social contexts. The Poetry Room then moved into a new space designed by Aalto, whose approach to design, one concerned primarily with the user’s embodied experience of architecture, is consistent with the pedagogical approach implied in the room’s founding mission – an approach that recognizes the integration of affect and cognition, of delight and critical engagement – and the curators’ appreciation of the fluidity and dynamism of poetry’s forms. I argue that the controversy over the recent renovation reflects disagreement regarding the fluidity or fixity of the architectural “object” and the poetic text, and demonstrates how those disagreements are informed by theoretical and pragmatic debates in librarianship, pedagogy, media and literary studies, and architectural preservation.

I'll begin by briefly examining the history of the Poetry Room – the ideas on which it was founded and the spaces in which it lived. I'll explain how the original room served as a site on which historical battles over pedagogical and critical approaches were played out. I'll then explain how the Poetry Room's new home in Lamont Library better embodied the spirit in which the room was founded by promoting dynamic, embodied engagement with poetry in its many forms. In the next section, I'll focus on those many forms that constitute the poetry collection, and how the room's curators have conceived of their pedagogical function. Finally, I'll examine the fit between the institution, its collection, and its architecture: I'll view the renovation controversy through the various ways in which the Poetry Room has been conceived and defended by proponents and critics of the 2006 renovation. We will see that the different constituents invested in this specific project bring to the table different understandings of the purpose of the room, the purpose of the preservation, and the distinction between the physical design and the “institution” and collection it is meant to house. These concerns undoubtedly surface in other renovation projects – and the way they were handled, or mishandled, here may provide valuable lessons for other projects.

RED VELVET AND TEA SETS: THE FIRST POETRY ROOM IN WIDENER

In early 1931 Harry Harkness Flagler, Standard Oil heir, Columbia University alum, benefactor of the New York Symphony Orchestra, offered Harvard College a \$50,000 gift to establish a Poetry Room in memory of his friend and former Columbia professor George Edward Woodberry. Woodberry – Harvard grad, poet, critic, and beloved teacher – was known as a generalist, a humanist, and a genteel idealist. He, alongside colleagues including Henry Van Dyke of Princeton and Barrett Wendell of Harvard, waged battles in the English departments of the early twentieth century to maintain that the study of literature was a “contemplative activity,” rather than, as their philologist colleagues would have it, “a documentable research discipline” (Cox, 1994, p.

220, n. 18). Woodberry “had the miraculous gift,” a former student recalled, “of making poetry alive and attractive to large masses of fairly average boys” (quoted in Haviaris, 1992, p. 5). Another wrote, in a tribute to his teacher published in *The Nation* after Woodberry’s death in 1930, “In interpreting a poet, Mr. Woodberry never failed to interpret the man and to relate him to living problems and passions in terms which the students could understand” (Kellock, 1930, p. 121).

Still, “[i]t had been Woodberry’s constant regret,” Flagler discovered through years of conversation with him, “that so many undergraduates were passing through their college years without sufficiently realizing that poetry is primarily for delight and entertainment” (Sweeney, 1954, p. 65). Advocating that readers look to poetry for “delight” and “entertainment” was not meant to trivialize poetry or equate it with a mere pastime. Rather, he was advocating that students have an opportunity to encounter poetry outside “the chore of the curriculum,” where, under the influence of new approaches to criticism, poetry was increasingly analyzed with a “rigorous empiricism” and mined for “facts” (Woodberry, 1910; Sweeney, 1954, p. 65; Moody, 1994, p. 37). Woodberry hoped students would “find an enduring delight in poetry if it were made available to them as a recreation for their leisure and pleasure outside their regular studies” (Sweeney, 1954, p. 65).

Harvard had already taken steps to increase poetry’s extracurricular visibility. When the University inaugurated its Charles Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetry in 1925, the *Harvard Crimson* commended the “renascence of the provision of scholars,” such as Gilbert Murray, the first Eliot professor, “who might arouse intellectual enthusiasm in undergraduates beyond the confines of tabulated courses” (“The Chair of Poetry,” 1928). In 1929, alum Morris Gray donated \$42,000 for the “purchase of books of current modern poetry, and books upon the subject, and for talks by poets and critics”; the gift, a *Crimson* reporter argued, would “aid in calling attention to the present neglect of contemporary literature by the Department of English” (“Gift of \$42,000...,” 1929; “Forcing the Issue,” 1929). The plan was to add these new volumes to a room in the Harvard

Library that housed the Amy Lowell Collection, and then to move this material to the Art Room in Widener Library. “In this setting poets and critics will be brought to speak to gatherings of Harvard undergraduates. No more than 40 or 50 [undergraduate] students will be expected at a time in order that the donor's wishes for small and friendly conversations... may be carried out” (“Gift of \$42,000...; “Plans are Outlined...”). Woodberry gave the first talk, on April 17, 1929, on the topic of “The Purpose of the Morris Gray Fund, and the Place of Poetry in the Life of College Undergraduates.”

Providing poetry a fitting physical place was of concern to students, too. Shortly after Woodberry’s lecture, a *Crimson* writer lauded the University’s search for a separate room for the new modern poetry collection:

A start has been made in the right direction, for of all forms of literature poetry most of all requires comfortable and quiet surroundings for its appreciation. The hurly burly of the main Widener reading room with its scraping chairs and hoarse whispers or the deadening fastness of the stacks are equally inappropriate for the sort of pleasure to be found in the reading of verse (“Poetic Justice,” 1929).

Yet he also offered a caveat: “In the minds of too many students the extra flight of stairs” to reach the proposed new room in Widener and an “atmosphere of New England reserve” would give the room “a sort of mystic unapproachability inconsistent with every-day use” (ibid.). The library should aim to make the room and its collection feel approachable, and it should have a librarian present at all times to help students access the rare books in the collection.

Shortly before Flagler’s gift was announced in the *Crimson* on February 27, 1931, I. A. Richards, a visiting professor of English (who would become a permanent member of the faculty in 1944), delivered a Morris Gray lecture titled “An Ideal Poetry Room.” His recommendations were likely informed by his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929), widely regarded

as foundational to the development of New Criticism, an approach to literary criticism that had then begun rising in prominence in the academy, “sweeping aside the historical, philological, and genre courses that had originally won English studies a place in the University” (Flood, 2003, p. 20); we’ll return to New Criticism later on. Regardless of how Richards pictured the “ideal” poetry room, Woodberry and Flagler, seeming to heed the *Crimson* columnists’ recommendations, envisioned a “comfortable *unlibrarylike* (italics mine) room where students might find on tables and shelves the poetry of their own century” (Sweeney, 1954, p. 65). The room would be dedicated to “bringing alive the poet’s voice and creating a place at Harvard,” as Woodberry had created in his classroom at Columbia, “for the enduring delight and significance of poetry” (Woodberry Poetry Room, n.d.).

When the gift was announced, *Crimson* writers noted that the room would have to play dual roles: first, as a memorial to Woodberry, Morris Gray, Amy Lowell, and “to all the Harvard poets,” and, second, as a place of “practical service to the undergraduate,” providing “an opportunity for literary research,” a “pleasant atmosphere for casual reading,” and “a congenial surrounding” for the Morris Gray lectures (“The Poetry Room,” 1931a). Others acknowledged the room’s potential to accommodate varied forms of engagement – from serious scholarly study to casual enjoyment: “Centralizing the scattered collections of poetry is of service to the scholar and should at the same time give many the opportunity to browse who would otherwise not have been able to do so” (“The Poetry Room,” 1931b).

It is in this latter respect that the Poetry Room can be of greatest benefit. A college education today involves so much specialization and attempts to cover such a vast territory that many of the cardinal points in the older traditions are lost sight of. This is true, in large measure, of reading and writing the English language from a purely literary point of view. The average student on leaving college is in no way master of the art of composition and he has little unofficial acquaintance with his own literary background. That this should be so is

unfortunate both because the individual loses a source of life-long enjoyment and also because he will be constantly handicapped by his limitations no matter what line he may follow.

Although the establishment of a Poetry Room... is no guarantee that Harvard undergraduates will come into closer contact with English and other literatures,...it offers a splendid opportunity for those who choose to avail themselves of it (ibid.).

Numerous articles in the *Crimson* indicate that some students were dissatisfied with the limited course offerings in the English curriculum, and with the mechanical way foreign languages were taught.¹ The Poetry Room promised to provide opportunities, outside the regular curriculum, for students to enjoy, delight in, and engage critically with poetry – both contemporary works and those representing “older traditions” – and, furthermore, to use those experiences to inform and improve their own writing.

The original dedicated Woodberry Poetry Room opened on the top floor of Widener, Harvard’s “flagship” library, on May 26, 1931. John L. Sweeney (1954), former head of Harvard’s Lamont Library (and former student of Richards’s at Georgetown), spoke fondly of the room, “one of the warmest and most welcoming rooms” in Widener (p. 66). It was intended to be a place for self-motivated, student-centered discovery and activity. Travis Ingham, in a 1931 *Boston Herald* review, commends those undergraduates (mostly male, since Radcliffe women had only limited access to Harvard libraries until 1956) who, without being asked to do so as a class requirement, climbed the stairs to the top floor to visit the room: “Theirs is the spirit of adventure, the joy of discovery as they met the poets alone, without the interpretation of a faculty guide.”² The room offered a “cultural background such as no course can provide” (“Poetic Justice,” 1931).

Harry Levin, former comparative literature professor, remarked some years later: “As I look back, I can now see how significantly the opening [of the Widener poetry room] was timed: Harvard was officially recognizing modern poetry.... And it was Ted Spencer and F. O. Matthiessen... who really brought it into the English curriculum, and their efforts were crowned by T. S. Eliot’s year (1932-33) as Norton Professor” (quoted in Haviaris, 1992, pp. 7-8). The administration of the Morris Gray Fund had also been transferred to the English Department, which sought to publicize the events more widely; they previously had been by invitation only.

Although groups of students met occasionally in the room to discuss contemporary poetry or workshop their own writing, and the Gray lectures drew occasional audiences, “the convivial possibilities of the poetry room in Widener were only slightly explored” (Sweeney, 1954, p. 67). Sweeney acknowledged that the cramped conditions of the room made it a less than ideal venue for public readings, and similar architectural limitations compromised the room’s ability to uphold its broadly conceived mission. Its top-floor location kept it “out of reach of all but the most aggressive and hardened readers,” and, Sweeney surmised, also made it difficult for readers and staff to find hot water for the library’s silver tea service, “intended to provide a gracious bracer for poetic sociability” (pp. 66-7; It seems not to have occurred to Sweeney that undergraduates of the time might not have had a taste for the Victorian practice of taking tea from silver cups.). The prohibition of smoking also seemed a particularly “formidable infliction on premises which proudly preserved one of Amy Lowell’s cigars” (p. 66). Editorials appearing in the *Harvard Crimson* offered additional explanations for why the Poetry Room “failed to fulfill its high promise”: the room’s short hours – it was open only in the afternoons – limited attendance, and the materials in the Lowell collection were secured behind glass and in vaults and were thus not available to the “casual reader” (“Poetic Justice,” 1931; “Untapped Resource,” 1932).

The room's general architectural character seemed to reinforce this sense of guardedness and elitism. A *Crimson* writer complained:

It stands for an artificial sentiment about poetry as a kind of writing which requires to be set off by itself and cradled in an arty setting of red velvet to distinguish it from its weaker brethren. In the atmosphere of the Woodberry Memorial, poetry becomes a minor specialty, with no discernible relationship to anything vital, but somehow valuable for sentimental associations ("The Enormous Room," 1933; see also "\$50,000 for Poetry Room").

Prescient *Crimson* writers saw this coming: the room's "red velvet" preciousness and "New England reserve" seemed to cultivate a "sort of mystic unapproachability" and to shelter and sentimentalize poetry rather than promoting its "delight and significance" ("Poetic Justice," 1929).

One might detect the influence of I.A. Richards, particularly considering his presence at Harvard during the room's planning. Setting poetry "off by itself" seems consistent with New Criticism's regard for the text as a self-contained, self-referential unit whose meaning derives primarily from its internal form and literary devices – not from such external factors as the author's intentions, its historical context, or readers' responses. Given the New Critics' prioritization of poetry as an exemplary mode of communication, it might be easy to assume that the Widener Woodberry Poetry Room was a physical manifestation of a New Critical approach to the study of poetry, providing an ideal place, separated from the library's other subject collections, for close reading. Sweeney (1954), Richards's former student, seemed to think so: he found that the room's open shelves, comfortable chairs, good light, and the presence of the Lowell books, imbued the room with "the character of a private library large enough and various enough to be useful and interesting, and small enough to be memorized by the affectionate eye" (p. 66). Although meant as a compliment, Sweeney's characterization of the room as a private library suggested that its atmosphere was precisely that which Woodberry did *not* want to cultivate. This space, scaled

appropriately for the “affectionate eye” seemed to delimit the field of visibility, to guide the visitor’s eye toward a “close reading” of the room itself, and perhaps the texts on its shelves, too.

Richards seems to have had a significant impact on the design and ideology of the Widener room. But the Woodberry Poetry Room as an *idea*, outside of the particular, unfortunate architectural manifestation of that idea in Widener, does not impose a particular methodology or pedagogy; to the contrary, as I will explain later, it encourages methodological play. The Poetry Room’s multi-format collection does indeed, in accordance with New Critical approaches, encourage an interest in poetic form – but it does not emphasize formalist approaches to the exclusion of other critical approaches. In fact, the room’s founders’ concern with the “delight” of undergraduate readers, and with their conviction of poetry’s historical and contemporary “significance” indicates that reader response and historical criticism, to name just two additional critical approaches, are also central to the Room’s mission.

A student writing in the *Crimson* only months after the Widener room opened argues that a change in the room’s atmosphere would allow it to better serve its intended function. “The austerity which inevitably walks with first editions must be scrupulously avoided, and in its place must come the informal atmosphere which fosters literary enjoyment” (“Poetic Justice,” 1931). In 1934 and 1935, the Library responded to some of these perceived shortcomings by rearranging the books and adding hundreds of new ones, preparing card indices, and cataloguing letters in the collection – but found they could do little about the shortcomings of the material space (Kahrl, 1935).

In particular, they could do nothing about the fact that the Widener room, its all its rigid formality, was poorly suited to accommodate new poetic forms. The same year the room opened, 1931, marked the beginning of the library’s “spoken” poetry archive, with T.S. Eliot’s reading of *Gerontion* and *The Hollow Men*. The Poetry Room, the Harvard Film Service, and the English Department launched the *Harvard Vocarium* record label to record the voices of prominent writers,

thereby extending the Woodberry mission by providing other means of access to contemporary poetry.³ Yet the room itself did not allow for the full appreciation of the spoken archive's potential. Sweeney (1954) notes that the two record players in the room were insufficient to meet demand; “[a]s the record collection grew its attraction increased and the need for additional listening facilities became more acute” (p. 69). In order to achieve its mission, and to provide a space for student-directed engagement with poetry that is not defined by any single critical approach, the Poetry Room idea would have to come to fruition in a new space.

A PLACE FOR DELIGHTING IN POETRY, PRINTED, RECORDED, AND PERFORMED

In 1949 the Woodberry Poetry Room relocated to its new 1,030-square-foot home, designed by Aalto, on the fifth floor of Lamont Library, the newly constructed undergraduate library. There is little discussion of the process by which Aalto was selected as the designer of the room, but his international reputation and local presence – he was a faculty member and the designer of a residence hall at nearby MIT – likely factored into Harvard's decision. Lamont, at the corner of Harvard Yard where Massachusetts Avenue meets Quincy Street, was “the first modern structure in Harvard Yard and Harvard Square” (Fixler, n.d.). According to Fixler, Lamont represented “a definitive break with precedent both for Harvard and for Shepley, Bulfinch, [Richardson and Abbott,]” the Boston architects whose earlier work for Harvard included the more traditional residential houses. Fixler notes that the architects had taken “considerable cues in massing and detail from Aalto's own 1932 library for Viipuri, Finland (now Vyborg, Russia), the first great library of the modern movement” (about which more later).

Lamont was new in other ways, too: it was the first library in the United States designed specifically for undergraduate students – *male* undergraduate students. Radcliffe students weren't welcome until the mid-1960s. And unlike next-door Widener Library, intended for advanced

research, Lamont “was designed to work efficiently, and not only to provide the student quickly with those books he knew he wanted, but to bring him into contact with others by placing them in open stacks right before him” (Pope, 1954).⁴ Lamont represented a new relationship between readers and texts. In a 1954 *Crimson* article celebrating Lamont’s fifth anniversary, John Pope writes,

Among the major ideals behind the conception of the library was the hope that it would make the students aware of books, and although the positive personality of the building itself sometimes overclouds the significance of its contents, it has made an impression that Widener never could have. The older building represents the abstract idea of the great library. Lamont is the working avatar.

Lamont’s patrons were becoming “aware of” of and mingling with new books (albeit a limited, rotating collection focusing primarily on the humanities and social sciences, and drawing from the Widener collection via tunnels that connected the two libraries), but the building wasn’t universally liked:

Too much like a huge machine, with the soft breathing of its air conditioning, the almost imperceptible but constant humming of its lights, its often subterranean atmosphere, the building seems to some students a monstrous trap or an educational processor – the Frankenstein’s monster of a mechanistic age (ibid).

Aalto was no Frankenstein. While the Woodberry Room shared Lamont’s blond wood and cork floors, Aalto’s design set the room apart from the rest of the building. According to Sweeney, “Aalto’s guiding purpose was to provide an arrangement of space and color and peculiar accommodation which would distinguish this room from the other rooms in Lamont without, in any way, impairing the harmony of the total interior of the building” (p. 69). The Poetry Room, Share (personal communication, May 24, 2007) said, was separated spatially and in character from the

more academic areas of Lamont, where the focus was “more on the text than on its enjoyment” – in other words, more on the classification, cataloguing, and regulation of access to the text than on readers’ fruitful interactions with it. The room was positioned between the Forum Room, a meeting room, and the Farnsworth Room, one of the first browsing rooms in a university library. Aalto, who presented two similar design alternatives to Harvard, designed all the furnishings and architectural elements, while his wife Aino chose the upholstery (Sweeney, 1954, p. 69).⁵ Thanks to its improved location and its more informal design (and, perhaps, to the ashtrays that are visible in many early photographs, which implies that smoking was then permitted there), the room proved much more popular. Sweeney reports that the room attracted three times more visitors in 1952-3 than it did in 1947-8, when it was still in Widener. In 1950 a *Boston Herald* reporter marveled at what effect this new space seemed to have on Harvard’s undergraduates:

Who says that poetry is dead? When college men clamor to take their dates to hear a bard, instead of going to the movies or a hop, it can’t be dead... When a football star loses himself in poetry reverie for three hours at a time when the sun is shining outside, one knows that the fascination of measured cadences is still immortal (Dame).

What place inspired such reverie?

To access the Woodberry Poetry Room, one walked to the fifth floor of Lamont Library, past the open stacks, and entered through a wooden door. **[FIGURE 1]** Immediately inside and to the right of the room’s entrance was an ash-and glass display case containing exhibition-worthy poetry artifacts. Visitors’ immediate impression was thus that of poetry-as-aesthetic-(or historical)-object – something to be looked at and appreciated, though not touched. Adjacent, however, was poetry in its most manipulable, contemporary, disposable form: here were two rows of periodical shelving, recessed into the wall. Warmly lit by the overhead lights, the journals’ and magazines’

variegated colors and patterns played off the wood panel backdrop. **[FIGURE 2]** The placement of these materials in such close proximity to the room's front door reflects the *immediacy* – both in terms of currency and ready access – of the medium. Beside the periodicals sat the attendant's desk, behind which a perforated ash screen **[FIGURE 3]** divided the reading room-proper from a record storage area. LPs presented unique security concerns that necessitated their special handling, but one perhaps unintended consequence of this separating-out of audiovisual material was the preclusion of browsing and the kind of serendipitous discovery possible in a stack of books. Beyond the secure record storage area, whose semi-private status was symbolized by the perforated screen, was the non-public region: a door in the back corner led to the curator's office. **[FIGURE 4]**

[FIGURE 5] Poetry took on a more massive, architectural form on the opposite wall, to the left of the entrance, which featured four “stepped,” or overlapped, rows of bookcases. The back row of shelves wrapped around to the side wall and extended to the room's door. This perimeter cabinetry featured four or five shelves at the top and, beneath, closed cabinets for record albums; again, the open access to the books contrasted with the inaccessibility of the audiovisual media.

[FIGURE 6] On many of the perimeter shelves, the fifth shelf slanted upward; Aalto intended for this shelf to be used to for displaying featured books face-out, retail-style. The stepped shelving arrangement helped visitors to gauge the depth of the room and the breadth of the book collection; it imparted a sense of weight and, at the same time, dynamism, to the collection.⁶ The collection was growing, shifting – and its arrangement promoted movement, conveyed rhythm; it drew readers toward the back wall, where they found a passageway to the Farnsworth Room, the browsing library. The adjacency is significant; it suggests some ideological and experiential consonance between the poetry collection and the popular, “pleasurable” reading next door.

Overhead were “organically shaped” brass light fixtures, and throughout the room was Aalto's iconic furniture, known for its experimentation with techniques for bending wood into fluid,

organic forms (Pogrebin). Most was manufactured in Sweden by Artek, Aalto's own company. In these chairs and tables, as in most of his designs, Aalto blended craft and technology, tradition and modernity, into a humanistic variation on Modern design – an “embodied rationalism,” as architecture critic and historian Sarah Williams Goldhagen (2008/2009) describes it (p. 38). Such a design philosophy seems perfectly suited for a room committed to conveying poetry's similar complexity, as we will discuss later.

[SEE FIGURE 7] Positioned irregularly along the room's long axis were four “listening stations” – octagonal consoles that could accommodate up to eight patrons listening simultaneously to a record album. These pieces exemplified Aalto's approach to furniture design: they encased technology in natural materials, thereby transforming equipment into furniture, softening and humanizing the machinery, blending technology into the woodwork, so to speak, and creating an associative link between the wood shelves that held the books and the wood cases that contained the phonograph players. These stations, massive and immediately visible as one enters the room, made manifest the room's commitment to media forms that extend beyond the printed text, and they advertised the embodied, exploratory, engaged forms of access that the room espoused. The stations also said much about Aalto's sensitivity to conditions of media reception: they suggested that listening, like reading, need not be a solitary activity. Even today, few libraries provide spaces for *collective* listening like those that Aalto created.

Adjacent to the listening stations was a couch, and along the windows, a row of lounge chairs and side tables, which provided space for contemplative private reading or listening. Four of these chairs featured private “listening posts,” where patrons could “eavesdrop” on any of the records playing on the consoles nearby (see Packard, 1950). Between the consoles and listening posts, 36 patrons could listen to audio recordings simultaneously – but because those 36 jacks were linked to only four record players, the variety of programming was limited. Still, Aalto created

various conditions of attendance conducive to listening to audio recordings of poetry – and with the book stacks only steps away, the room’s layout reinforced the connection between printed and recorded forms. The room wove together signifiers, and experiences, of poetry as a visual, auditory, and haptic medium. **[SEE FIGURE 8]** The texture and color of the wood linked together the room’s disparate elements into an atmospheric whole, while also subtly confirming the genealogical links between the wood of the cabinetry, the furniture, and the paper lining its shelves – but it also incorporated, as in the case of the listening stations, other non-organic media.

We see similar sensitivity to the integration of sensation and cognition in Aalto’s other designs. “Repeatedly,” Goldhagen (2008/9) says, “Aalto spoke of how humans appropriate architecture through the entanglement of its forms with sensory perception and intellectual cognition” (p. 46). For his sanatorium at Paimio, every design decision – from the complex’s relationship to its site, to the layout of patients’ rooms, to the furniture design and color choices – “all sprang from Aalto’s imagined projection of an embodied user hearing, seeing, and prospecting” (Goldhagen, 2008/9, p. 48). The design “interweaves... mnemonic associations (e.g., the ingrained rhythms of daily life), cognitive schemes, and primary metaphors (e.g., darkness-into-light sequences that connote healing) to create a lived experience of peaceful comfort and calm” (ibid.). His library at Viipiri is likewise built on a cognitive-mnemonic-affective metaphor: ascent through the building alludes to the ascent toward knowledge. Yet within that procession, Aalto provided varied environments in which library visitors could interact with the collection. From a secondary entrance, users could access a periodical reading room with shoulder-height, stand-up reading tables, evoking “the transitory hustle and bustle of modern life” (ibid., p. 49). From the main entrance, users could ascend via a monumental staircase toward a grand reading room with a “conserving and externally closed character” that would, unlike the periodical room downstairs, shelter readers from the world’s distractions and attend to the interrelationship between “the reader, the book, and light” (quoted in

ibid.). The Viipiri library, Goldhagen writes, is a building “designed around the user’s bodily being when they are engaged in different pursuits: researchers standing and moving about or readers quietly sitting in imaginative thought” (ibid., p. 48).

At Harvard, Aalto considered not only users’ different styles or postures of study, but also their *objects* of study. He considered how bound volumes, chapbooks, and record albums interacted with the room’s light and acoustic conditions, and how visitors engaged objects intellectually and affectively in those conditions and in particular situations. In other words, Aalto attended to poetry’s “conditions of attendance,” which media scholar Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) defines as the conditions – environmental, situational, emotional, sensory, etc. – under which one “attends to” a particular medium. The assumption is that different media forms necessitate or benefit from particular conditions in which they can be accessed and attended to. Aalto created a room where poetry was not set “off by itself,” secured behind glass doors or “cradled in an arty setting of red velvet.” Here, poetry was approachable, visible, audible, tangible. The room and its contents were not to be “memorized by the affectionate eye,” as Sweeney said of the Widener room, because here, poetry came in many forms that were appropriated in myriad ways, and the room’s conditions accommodated these varied practices of engagement.

FORMAL MULTIPLICITY

In 1949, a *Christian Science Monitor* reporter recounted his visit to the room: “Asked attendant if I would disturb student if I listened to Robert Frost. Student had songbook in lap, earphones over head, was obviously reciting words aloud. Attendant said student was ‘out’; they often get that way” (Strout). It would seem that Woodberry’s mission had been achieved: students were using the room and its resources to become immersed in, to contemplate – as Woodberry might put it, to delight in – poetry. It is again important to remember that “delighting in” something does not preclude its

critical contemplation, or vice versa; “enjoyment” is not inimical to serious study, nor does the promotion of enjoyment trivialize poetry, despite what some critics of the room have argued.⁷

The reporter’s anecdote also illustrates that, here, poetry is something printed, recorded, and performed, and often all three at the same time. This possibility for multiplicity, or synchronicity, is a defining characteristic of the Woodberry collection. Former curator, Don Share (who left Harvard in July 2007 to become senior editor of *Poetry* magazine), recognizes the ontological or methodological value of offering up the “living history of modern poetry” in myriad formats. “We have so many different kinds of evidence of how poems came into being,” he comments in the *Harvard University Gazette* (quoted in Tomase, 2006). The room allows for multiple forms of inquiry: comparing print editions; reading and listening simultaneously to a poem and its author’s recorded voice; tracing a poem’s genealogy, the process by which it came into being, through manuscripts and correspondence; hearing printed words come alive in performance, and connecting those words to the historical context from which they arose.⁸

The collection, and the room that permits access to it, promote an understanding of the poem as something plural, something dynamic, something static *and* living, something seen, heard, and felt. It presents poetry as *Text*, rather than as *Work*, as Barthes (1977) defines these terms. While the *Work* is a “fragment of substance,... the *Text* is a methodological field.” The *Text* “decants the work...from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice”; in the Poetry Room, poetry is *practiced*, reading (and writing) is *performed*. Jerome McGann, Peter Shillingsburg, Peter Donaldson, Joseph Grigely, and John Bryant, among other literary scholars, address this “plural” and amorphous nature of the *Text*, which Charles Bernstein (1998) sums up as follows:

[The poem] is not identical to any one graphical or performative realization of it, nor can it be equated with a totalized unity of these versions or manifestations. The poem, viewed in

terms of its multiple performances, or mutual intertranslatability, has a fundamentally plural existence (p. 9).

And these “plural existences” together constitute the Text, with no single iteration taking primacy over the others. Bernstein continues:

I want to overthrow the common presumption that the text of a poem – that is, the written document – is primary and that the recitation or performance of a poem (in recorded or live form) by the poet is secondary and fundamentally inconsequential to the “poem itself.”

The first edition, the audiotape, the handwritten letter, and even those poet-created objects – the magazine-in-a-can in the Woodberry’s collection, for instance – should be valued as integral, not incidental, components of the poetic Text.

Several scholars of textuality – and of the poetic text, specifically – have focused on the unique contributions of the disparate “genres,” or formats, of artifacts to the enjoyment and critical study of poetry. The scholarly importance of the printed text and the manuscript is well established and undisputed – but what is the unique value of the audio recording or the live performance? What kinds of evidence or qualities of engagement can each of these formats provide that other formats cannot? How do these media constitute and reconstitute the poetic Text?

The recorded voice, Share (personal communication, May 24, 2007) reminded me, was a 19th century fascination, captivating the likes of Emerson and Edison. In a letter penned in 1926, Rainer Maria Rilke wondered, “How many readers still miss the real relationship to the poem because in running over it silently they only graze its individual qualities, instead of bringing them awake?” (quoted in Sweeney, 1954, p. 70). With Professor Frederick Packard’s launch of the *Vocarium* series in 1931 and the consequent birth of the Poetry Room, Harvard acknowledged the value of poetry recordings in “bringing...awake” the poetic text, and committed itself to building “one of the largest and oldest repositories of recorded poetry in the world” (“Poetry Room Collection,” 2005; Harvard

College Library Communication Service, 2003). The recording collection and the increased presence of phonograph players in the Aalto room enabled visitors to “discover the pleasure of following the text of a poem with ear as well as eye” (Sweeney, 1954, p. 70).

“Hearing a poem in the poet’s own voice, with its intended tone, emphasis, and rhythm can elicit a whole new understanding of that poem,” Share acknowledges (quoted in Tomase, 2006). Variables ranging from vocal quality to affected accents offer insight into the way the poet relates to his or her audience and vice versa, how the poet might sound to him or herself, or how the printed text relates to the performed poem. Recordings also reveal how poets regard their work as a reader; some poets believe their job as a performer, Share (personal communication, May 24, 2007) says, is “to make the reading different from the printed texts” – to acknowledge that the reading is a different medium. He recalls Ezra Pound’s reading of “Sestina: Altaforte,” in which the poet accompanied his own voice by playing the kettledrums. Recordings also allow for examination of the situational specificity of the reading. Share recalls some recordings in which poets had to speak loudly to overcome the clang of the Poetry Room’s radiator. He also remembers Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky’s reading, which attracted an oversized audience and was broadcast over loudspeakers outside the library building; here, the relationship between the listener and the poet’s voice varied widely, depending on where one was sitting.

Readings also provide an opportunity for poets to explicate their work, addressing the potential influence of the poet’s personal background or their creative or political motivations. Current curator Christina Davis (personal communication, October 1, 2009) notes that “the audio marginalia and impromptu comments that one encounters when listening to a recorded poetry reading in our collection (e.g., Robert Frost reflecting on President Kennedy’s election and the sea change he believes that will ensue in the American religious landscape or T.S. Eliot meditating on the London Blitz)” can situate the work within its social, political, and historical contexts. Thus the

Woodberry's collections of audio recordings – some, recordings of live performances in front of an audience; others, studio recordings created in the Poetry Room – can, Browning scholar Stefan Hawlin (1992) proposes, “reveal the special relationship between personality, physical voice, and poetic voice; between poet, poet's voice, and poem” (p. 546). I would go farther, to argue that these recordings reveal the relationships between poet, poem, the space of performance, and the larger social and political context within which the poem exists and the poet works (p. 546).

The value of the videorecorded reading is often questioned. Share claimed that few visitors to the Poetry Room ask to view videotaped readings. He argued that videos “distract” viewers by enticing them to pay attention to “superfluous visual cues.” Bernstein suggests that video “is often less engaging for poetry, since the typically depleted visual resources – static shots of a person at a podium – are no match for the sound track and tend to flatten out the affective dimension of the live performance” (p. 12).⁹ Former Woodberry curator Stratis Haviaras, however, seeks to debunk the assumption that “poets were better read, or heard, than seen” (quoted in Sandor). He claims that videotaping poetry readings “will bring contemporary poetry to a wider audience. It can also provide a more complete contact – if not with the poem, then at least with the person who created it, and who continues to improve it through performance, commentary, and audience participation” (Sandor, 1985, pp. 1, 4). In a 1985 article in the *Harvard Gazette*, Haviaras predicted “a day when a person to whom Harvard's doors are not open might subscribe to the video collection of readings through a subscription agency, and take home a video tape of, say, Robert Penn Warren...” (ibid.).

Or, he predicts, “someone with a home computer might be able to get poetry ‘on-line,’” the quotation marks illustrating the concept's nascence. Realizing Haviaras's prediction had been among Share's top priorities as curator. He used a recording studio in his office to build the Poetry Room's audio archive, and he was committed to digitizing the collection's manuscripts (including, for example, Emily Dickinson's *Herbarium*, which, with its pages of pressed flowers, is currently

inaccessible in its physical form), printed texts, audio, and video, and making all materials available online as a digital “package.”

If the collection is no longer place-bound, if people no longer have to come *to* the collection, what is the value of the room that houses that collection? Share believes that the online offerings, far from decreasing the need for a physical space of access, will only extend the Woodberry community and likely increase dependence on the Poetry Room as a hub. Arguments that the digitization of the room’s recordings would render the room obsolete echo similar arguments about the supposed irrelevance of physical libraries in this age of Google Books. Such arguments ignore both the role that curators and librarians (and faculty who make use of the room in their classes) play in helping patrons to sift through an ever-expanding digital collection, and, in this particular case, the unique experience of inhabiting a physical space designed specifically to accommodate a particular collection and its communities of users. These obsolescence arguments, in short, disregard the social and material dimensions of “delighting” in and studying poetry – dimensions that are central to Aalto’s design – and forget that certain aspects of embodied poetic reception (and production) cannot be replicated online.

The live performance is one such embodied experience. The Woodberry Poetry Room, unlike most other libraries and reading rooms, is responsible for creating a good portion of its own audiovisual collection; it is here where many of the readings take place from which the recordings are made.¹⁰ Thus, the room’s staff do not simply collect and catalogue recordings of performances; they regard the live reading itself as part of its collection.¹¹ The “un-mediated” poem – or, rather, the poem mediated only through the poet’s voice – is an integral part of the poem’s fundamentally plural existence and is allotted its place in the Poetry Room among the other media.¹² Events, usually organized by the room’s curator, are often co-sponsored by Harvard academic departments, schools, or museums (e.g., the English and Slavic departments, the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, the

Harvard Divinity School), the student-run Bow & Arrow Press, or by local or national literary organizations or entities, including the Grolier Poetry Bookshop, the Massachusetts Poetry Festival, the Library of Congress, and the Poetry Society of America.¹³

Bernstein proposes that we “look at the poetry reading not as a secondary extension of ‘prior’ written texts but as its own medium” (p. 10).¹⁴ He (1998), Hawlin (1992), Frederick Stern (1991), and Peter Middleton (2005) have studied how the poetry reading brings together a listening public and places that public in contact with the poet, how it contributes to a listener’s understanding of a poem by conveying “unscripted” elements of meaning outside semantic meaning, how it reveals the poem as a “breath of the poet’s life” (Hawlin, p. 546). The reading grants one “the pleasure of getting lost in language that surges forward, allowing the mind to wander in the presence of words” (Bernstein, p. 7). The live reading offers the audience an opportunity for direct response, and, as an “oasis of low technology,” it is “among the least spectacled events in our public culture” (ibid., p. 10). It is immersive, yet interactive and potentially more democratic than other performance “media.” In presenting the reading as an alternative to recorded media and the spectacle of mass culture, Bernstein implies that it provides a political alternative, too.

Just as Kracauer, in his own critiques of mass culture, attended to the physical sites in which spectacles were staged, Middleton (2005) acknowledges that the poetry performance is “first of all a performance of the actual space and its occupants at a particular moment.” The dynamics of this performance include:

the interaction of bodies with each other and the space; other forms of communication such as smell, touch, and gesture; the sharing of emotion among those present; the internal narrative of the event; the importance of the reader’s introductions, errors, asides, and even bodily noises; the significance of group histories and allegiances, as well as poetry movements and cliques for the occasion...; the need for social contact between poetry-

lovers and how the reading plays a part in satisfying that need alongside other types of gathering, ranging from educational courses to entirely social occasions; and those interactions mediated by communication apparatuses (pp. 14-5).

The space itself plays an integral role in *mediating* all of these interactions – between media, readers, viewers, listeners, and the physical, imagined, and acoustic spaces they inhabit.

The Woodberry Poetry Room is of course not one of the “borrowed spaces” where, Middleton (1998) says, avant-garde poetry readings typically take place (p. 270). Woodberry readers typically do not have to “stumble over stage sets, talk above the noise of drinkers returning from the bar,” fumble with a PA system designed for rock shows, or deal with “unplanned sound...[and] obtrusive failures of attention” (ibid.). The politics of the Woodberry space are indeed different from those at a bar. The Poetry Room’s readings often take place either in the room itself or in other venues on the Harvard campus, where decorum typically reigns. While we cannot ignore the political significance of the room’s location in a secure library on an elite campus, or the room’s primary commitment to serving Harvard undergraduates, we also must acknowledge that the Woodberry Poetry Room *is* open to members of the public (all they have to do is present a photo ID and sign in at the security desk in the Lamont lobby), and that the staff occasionally partners with external groups in organizing its events and frequently advertises those events through public fora.¹⁵ So, while not “public” in the same way that a bar basement might be, the Woodberry Poetry Room does reach out to publics beyond Harvard’s walls.

The fact that the Woodberry Poetry Room was expressly built *for* poetry means that, rather than examining all the accidents of performance that occur in a “borrowed space,” we can instead focus on the intentional resonances between the performance and its physical and acoustic spaces. Here, the voice, regarded as the essential stuff of most poetic forms, circulates throughout the room, enveloping all of its material occupants – people, books, records, wood, paper, plastic. The poet’s

voice ties together the poetic text, the space in which it is read, and its readers and listeners in an acoustic, social, and political space. In this space Aalto acknowledged poetry as aesthetic object, as material text, as time-based medium; he accommodated poetry reception as solitary and collective experience. Curator Davis (personal communication, October 1, 2009) concurs:

[The room] is a wonderful embodiment of what the art-form as a whole is capable of. The room celebrates poetry as an intellectual pursuit and poetry as a sensory experience; poetry as a textual encounter and poetry as an auditory performance, poetry as a solitary meditation and poetry as the source of solidarity and social life.

The physical space is what Barthes calls a “methodological field,” a landscape for the exploration of poetry in its myriad forms. The Poetry Room, like Barthes’ Text, is characterized by the “stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers,” but here the intertextual weave is not just metaphorical, but also spatial, material.

ARCHITECTURE AS FIXED OR FLUID: PRESERVATION OR REVISION?

Before the 2006 renovation, the Woodberry Poetry Room seemed a rather singular place. There were very few other dedicated spaces like it, including perhaps the Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania and Poets House in New York, which moved into a new home in Battery Park City in September, 2009. There was a particular quality to the Woodberry’s space that seemed uniquely well suited to poetry: “it’s not an auditorium, not a multi-purpose room,” Share (personal communication, May 24, 2007) noted. It was some other “species” of space, Georges Perec might say. And perhaps Bachelard would have noted that its domestic scale, the honey-hued wood paneling, the ample daylight, the upholstered seating and elegantly shaped wood furnishings, even the original cork flooring (which, although standard throughout Lamont and not unique to Aalto’s

design, did, according to Share, contribute a distinctive, pleasant smell to the room) all coincided to craft a spatial poetics that supported Woodberry's mission.

One question that must be addressed in light of the renovation controversy, Share proposes, is whether "the room is so unique that it can't be done anywhere else." One needs to distinguish between "the idea of having a poetry place" and a "particular deployment" of that idea. The "architecture didn't implement use of the room," Share says; poetry and the reading of poetry existed well before the Woodberry Poetry Room did. The room's unique contribution, Share said, is its demonstration "that a space could do that" – that a material site could promote the "enduring delight and significance" of poetry, that it could provide "an opportunity for literary research," a "pleasant atmosphere for casual reading," and "a congenial surrounding" for live events and workshops ("The Poetry Room," 1931a). But in order to "do that," does the site "have to look a particular way?" Share wondered. What, in short, is the relationship between the *idea* central to Woodberry's plans for the room, the *idea* of Aalto's design, and that idea's embodiment? By staying faithful to one particular installation of the idea, "are you staying faithful to the conception?" Share wonders. These are some of the questions dividing the renovation's supporters from its critics. Since 1949, the materiality of poetry has evolved, and new technologies and critical theories – reader response, poststructuralism, cultural studies, etc. – have shaped both the creation and reception of the poetic text. How has the Woodberry Poetry Room changed in response to "today's volume and character of use"?

Share notes that many critics mistakenly regarded the 2006 renovation as sudden, wholesale change, when in actuality the room had undergone several piecemeal renovations over the past half-century. New artwork appeared on the walls over the years. A third periodical bookshelf was added, too. The two shelves installed in 1949, Share suggests, could most likely hold all the poetry journals and magazines published at the time, but eventually another shelf was needed to accommodate a

growing number of poetry periodicals. A computer one day appeared on the curator's desk, and when the room's multimedia collection began to grow, monitors and audiovisual playback devices – DVDs, VCRs, etc. – were stored behind the ash screen and brought out for patrons' use upon request.

Fixler's 2006 renovation involved the removal of one bookcase to increase the size of the reading area and to improve the staff's sightlines to the stacks. The reconfiguration of the stacks and the removal of some seating, said Share (who was not involved in the renovation), do create more open space, which is desirable when reconfiguring the room for a reading, though there are obvious drawbacks to having fewer places for visitors to sit and read. Two of the four record consoles – which, one might assume, were rarely used to their full potential, by eight students at once – were transformed into four-person listening stations with attached work surfaces and task lighting.¹⁶ Share noted that visitors had long been holding books in their laps while listening to recordings; the new work surfaces now allow visitors to more comfortably read while listening. Moreover, Fixler (2006) noticed that Aalto's placement of the listening consoles adjacent to the lounge chairs proved “an unworkable arrangement for contemporary technology and the ways in which students presently use the space”; so, Fixler moved the row of lounge chairs to make the arrangement more functional. Share (personal communication, May 24, 2007) suggested that the placement of the chairs against the wall was never “intentional,” not even in the original design; because none of the furniture was bolted to the floor, students had long been turning the chairs around so they could look out the windows while reading. Much of the furniture and original lighting was refinished, but some pieces – a console, a stool, a floor lamp, and ceilings lights – were retired to Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum or put up for auction (“Woodberry Poetry Room Renovation,” 2006). Finally, additional power outlets and rewiring equipped the room for computer use. The rest of the room, Fixler said,

was left untouched (Gendall, 2006). Throughout, Fixler (2006) strove to remain faithful to “the spirit of Aalto’s original design.”¹⁷

Too little was left untouched to satisfy Toshiko Mori, who equates the renovation with “vandalis[m]” (quoted in Pogrebin, 2006). Campbell (2006), too, complains that in the renovated space “the light is too bright, overwhelming the delicate domestic character of the space.” (I did not find this to be the case.) He laments the loss of the “eloquent row of chairs and side-tables beneath the windows” – even though that “eloquence” was likely compromised every time students rearranged the chairs. Docomomo (2006) is grateful for the preservation of two of the four listening consoles, but they argue that the addition of reading surfaces changes the remaining consoles’ “shape, scale relation to the room and, in the end, their nature.... [R]enovating the Woodberry was nothing less than a stealth reprogramming of the space from a room dedicated to poetry to a more conventional study hall/event venue.” As architectural critic Robert Campbell (2006) said, “To change any part of it – like altering a few bars here and there in a piece of music – changes everything.” The renovation thus allegedly transformed the room into a different species of space.

In 2006 Mori, then-chair of the Department of Architecture, wrote in a letter to Harvard librarian Nancy Cline,

There is a social contract involved when one is an owner of a historically significant piece of architecture... One must carefully evaluate and balance the needs of function and preservation of a legacy. The Woodberry Poetry Reading (sic) Room does not belong only to an individual or an institution but also to a culture, a world civilization that prizes and cherishes it for what it represents in the annals of mid-twentieth century modern architecture and in the body of work by Alvar Aalto.

John Stubbs, Vice President of Field Projects for the World Monuments Fund, agrees that the room “should be one of the gems in the crown of America’s greatest university” (quoted in Gendall,

2006). Yet medieval art historian Michael Tinkler (2006) complained on his blog that all this talk of cherished gems has led some to “worship...the architecture as sculpture rather than [as] usable environment. The Preservationists aren’t interested in Harvard students encountering poetry, they’re interested in Aalto.” Cordoning off the space, establishing it as a piece – a gem, a sculpture – to be “memorized by the affectionate eye,” as Sweeney said of the original Poetry Room in Widener, effectively places a conceptual “red velvet” cordon around the room. While Aalto’s design shunned the silver tea set and “private library” atmosphere that made the Widener room ineffective, some critics’ tendency to use “red velvet” language in discussing the condition of the Lamont space threatens to reframe the room as the kind of precious, jewel-like institution that Woodberry did *not* want it to be.

Yet the room is one of only four Aalto projects in the United States and is regarded as a model mid-century interior. According to Mori, it is “one of the greatest examples in this country of total design,” integrating finishes, furnishings, and lighting under an over-arching vision (quoted in Gendall). Architectural historian and theorist Mark Wigley (1998) explains that “total design,” inspired by Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, places the architect “at the center of the process...[to] orchestrate the overall theatrical effect”; we might hear in this description some echoes of New Criticism, with its interest in a text’s aesthetic unity. In the catalogue for a 1998 exhibition of Aalto’s work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, fellow Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa (1998) discusses the total design achieved in several of Aalto’s buildings, particularly the Jyväskylä Workers’ Club (1924) and the Paimio Sanatorium (1933): “A complete grasp and control of the architectural ensemble became an Alvar Aalto gesture” (p. 24). Pallasmaa’s choice of words seems almost oxymoronic: Aalto’s “complete...control” constitutes not a rigid method or technique, but a “gesture,” a subtle motion. Aalto’s works, Pallasmaa writes, “are dominated and held together by the cohesion of an atmosphere rather than by a unifying conceptual framework”:

He did not seem to be concerned with the conceptual and geometric purity or with the organization of the design as presented graphically in the architectural drawing; his real interest was in the experiential and material encounter of the actual building (p. 31).

In other words, Aalto's "total design" was defined not by an autonomous architectural unity (upon which the New Critics would have focused their attention), but through users' *embodied experiences* of his designs. Harvard Professor of Visual Art Eduard Sekler addresses the overall "poetic effect" of Aalto's Poetry Room: "He clearly wanted to have a concept that was appropriate for a room where poetry is enjoyed and this means everything [from] the colors and materials used [to] the arrangement of the furniture in relation to each other and to the way the light comes to the various parts of the space" (quoted in Moraski, 2006). Aalto's designs "project a rare sensuality and tactile intimacy," and are often inspired by the designer's interest in "intuition and play" (Pallasmaa, 1998, p. 32).

Aalto's approach to "total design" was unlike that of other Modern masters, in large part because his approach to Modern design was unlike that of the other Modernists. "Aalto developed his singular and lasting approach to Modernism in architecture," Goldhagen (2008/2009) explains, "partly by learning and partly by intuiting a model of human cognition and reason grounded in phenomenology" (p. 39). He is often regarded as "the most important early Modernist who doesn't fit" in large part because he infused Modern rationalism with humanism (*ibid.*, p. 38).

Clearly, others have a different conception of what constitutes an Aalto "total design." Sekler (2007) wonders in a letter to librarian Nancy Cline,

Should not Harvard undergraduates leave the college with a culture that includes an awareness of what value means in the visual and spatial environment? Should they not experience the aura of authenticity around historic masterworks of architectural design as something that can be an inspiration in one's own search for the authentically new?

The assumption here seems to be that the “value” of this “masterwork” is rooted in its formal unity, its adherence to the “master’s” vision.¹⁸ Furthermore, as Benjamin explains, if we are to maintain a work’s “aura of authenticity,” we must keep users at a perceptual distance; they may perceive the room with an “affectionate eye,” Sweeney suggests, and take inspiration from it. But what of the visitor’s embodied experience, and use, of the Poetry Room? What value is to be found in the room’s continued responsiveness to Woodberry’s mission – to promoting “the *enduring* delight and significance of poetry” (italics mine) as poetry itself, and the critical approaches through which it is studied, continue to evolve?

Highlighting the disconnect between the preservation and renovation camps, Docomomo argues against the renovation by suggesting that, “new technology aside, reading and listening to poetry are not activities that have changed much in centuries.” The problem is that “new technology” *can’t* be set aside. Even when it opened, Share says, the room was a “reflection of the latest thinking – high modernism and the latest technology” (see Packard, 1950; Goldhagen and I would take issue with Share’s characterization of the room as an example of “high modernism”). And contrary to the critics’ claims, what poetry is today and how it’s read and listened to, and even written, *have* changed over the past centuries, even decades, as a result of technological and cultural change. To cement the poem and its reading in static space is to falsely essentialize the poem and to deny that reading is a historical process. To fix the poem in an ahistorical form would be to freeze it in a New Critical space.

Stubbs (n.d.), of the World Monuments Fund, wonders in a letter to Mori reprinted on Docomomo’s website, “Is it not possible to place the needed computer equipment and other such amenities in an adjacent location so that the Reading Room (sic) can continue use simply as reading room?” First, “equipment” and “amenities” are not, and never have been, external to reading. The codex is reading equipment, and lighting and appropriate furnishings can hardly be reduced to

“amenities.” Second, even if the room functions “simply” as a “reading room” – the frequent misidentification of the Poetry Room in the design press as the “Woodberry Poetry *Reading* Room” exemplifies critics’ confusion over the room’s purpose and program – we cannot exclude computers, since born-digital poetry cannot be read or composed *without* digital technology. Technology, Share says, “has always been built into the ideology” of the room.

One of the room’s many values is that it links patrons to poetry’s technological past and its future: today, alongside the 2nd generation record players are plug-ins for computers. Wax cylinders and mp3’s coexist. One of my few criticisms of the design – not necessarily of the *renovation*, but of the way the space has been and continues to be organized – is that a once equitable allotment of space to various media forms and technologies today implies a hierarchization. In 1949, when records *were* the latest media, record players were assigned prime real estate in the room and were set on near-equal footing with print media. Today, books, magazines, journals, and records still have visual prominence. Television monitors and DVD and CD players, however, are stashed behind a wooden screen and brought out only upon request. Relegating *today’s* latest media to a backstage location implies that they’re the black sheep of the collection. Aalto found a way to integrate four clunky record players into his “total design”; perhaps Fixler could’ve improvised an equally innovative way to work some electronic and digital media equipment into the woodwork, thereby acknowledging its value to the collection while still maintaining consistency in the design.

“We believe that the [renovation’s] changes are evolutionary, sound and necessary to ensure the proper life and function of the room,” the university has said (quoted in Pogrebin, 2006). “We cannot create a museum piece by restoring [the room] to its 1949 condition,” librarians have argued (ibid). Some suggest that Aalto himself would not have wanted to see the room frozen in history. “Aalto spoke often throughout his career about the need to design for flexibility, and to accommodate the patterns of use through the ‘methodical accommodation of circumstance,’” Fixler

(2006) wrote.¹⁹ Furthermore, Fixler says, “it must be recognized that the room as it exists today has already undergone modification since 1949, and that a portion of the current work will in fact help to elucidate original qualities that have been lost in the intervening years.” Fixler has written and presented widely on the preservation concerns unique to modern architecture. Modern works “should be treated with many of the same disciplinary tools that are utilized in the preservation of traditional architecture,” he says, “though with perhaps more focus on the *idea* of the building, where this idea was important in giving meaning to the original work” (Fixler, n.d.). He advocates stressing “the creation of a critical dialogue with the *essence* (italics mine) of the original – both the idea and the material – rather than treating it as a fixed object awaiting the overlay of the intervention.” Indeed, Fixler’s renovations at Harvard may well honor George E. Woodberry’s original wish for the room: that is, “bringing alive the poet’s voice and creating a place at Harvard for the *enduring* delight and significance of poetry” (Woodberry Poetry Reading Room, n.d., italics mine). It is the “delight and significance of poetry” that are to endure; the space that promotes those qualities must *evolve* in order to remain relevant and effective in achieving this mission.

Given Aalto’s interest in the “experiential and material encounter of the actual building,” we might wonder how patrons are experiencing the recently renovated space, and whether its founding values do endure. “Some people didn’t notice the [recent] change,” Share (personal communication, May 24, 2007) said, and “not one student has complained about the new room.” The “vibe” and the use of the room remain unchanged, he claimed; the Woodberry Poetry Room’s purpose was “not altered by technology or changes in the room – except now more people come.” This means that more students are potentially exposed to poetry, in a non-intimidating environment, at a time when “Contemporary poetry’s striking absence from the public dialogues of our day, from the high school classroom, from bookstores, and from mainstream media, is evidence of a people in whose mind poetry is missing and unmissed” (Barr, 2006). Share says some students “come in to do their math

homework” – but the room still often works its subtle evangelicalism; by simply being in the room, “an interest in poetry can arise naturally.”

When poet Christina Davis, former head of publicity at New York’s Poets House, became curator of the Room in 2008, her “populist approach to poetry” attracted even more students to the room for more active engagement with poetry (“Davis Outlines...”). She introduced “Reel Time @ The Woodberry,” a weekly series in which students gather in the room to listen to recordings outside “the isolated experience of headphones” and to discuss how the author’s performance impacts their reception of the poem (ibid.). “Woodberry Works-in-Progress” presents artists’ and scholars’ work that is just taking shape, and an additional reading series tracks poets at the outset of their careers and at different stages of their development; both series reveal the processes by which poetry, and poets, come into being (ibid.). When these open events are not in session, the uses of the room range from “quiet study, perusal of literary magazines, the research of rare material (broadsides, manuscripts, chapbooks), listening to archival recordings, attending curated listening hours or audio seminars led by faculty, and (yes) writing poems” (Davis, personal communication, October 1, 2009). “The latter is, to my mind,” Davis says, “the surest sign of the success of the room: It means that scholarship and the art-form it hopes to perpetuate have come full circle” (ibid.). At her welcome reception in Fall 2008 Davis admitted that her “great hope” for the room, a hope very much consistent with the spirit in which the room was founded, is to create “a space that in some ways embodies the art of poetry – a place where people are writing poetry, reading poetry, researching poetry, and coming up with theories on poetry – the whole arc of the art form” (quoted in Barlow).

This “poetry room,” occasionally mistaken in the published criticism of the 2006 renovation as a “poetry *reading* room,” is thus a space for both reception *and* production, for theory *and* practice. It serves both the text and its users, who can take on a number of roles – reader, listener, viewer,

analyzer, theorizer, maker. It is a room whose functionality is informed by visitors' intuition, exploration, and play, which are also driving forces behind much of Aalto's design. His user-centered approach to design, one that is sensitive to media's conditions of attendance and visitors' patterns of use, has driven public library design for at least the past two decades, and has more recently caught on in academic library design. Aalto was ahead of the curve, seeming to foreshadow the rise of "reader response" and constructivist theories during the age of New Criticism.

As Goldhagen reminds us, Aalto recognized that affective, sensory interactions with space are an integral part of our more cognitive spatial perception; he acknowledged that humans "appropriate architecture through the entanglement of its forms with sensory perception and intellectual cognition" (p. 46). Aalto created a space where visitors can "appropriate" poetry in a similar fashion – through a sensory and intellectual engagement with its forms and content. Here, the "enjoyment" of poetry is entangled with critical engagement. In the same room to which an undergraduate comes "to encounter *The Waste Land* for the every first time," we also find "a visiting scholar seeking to deepen his/her knowledge of a particular poet's oeuvre by encountering a rare manuscript" and "a faculty member asking if we have a recording that will help him/her teach everything from Robert Creeley to the history of rhetoric" (Davis, personal communication, October 1, 2009). Davis notes that "the visiting scholars and faculty members have often remarked at the discipline and self-evident engagement of the undergraduates who frequent the Room." Here serious scholarship and "delight" coexist.

If we follow Fixler's advice to create a "critical dialogue with the essence of the original," we might wonder which "original" we are to dialogue with: the original mission of the Poetry Room, Aalto's original design for it, or both? The "essence" of Aalto's design, his embodied rationalism, seems well aligned with Woodberry's approach to integrating poetry into the lives of undergraduates, and the Poetry Room's curators' commitment to promoting myriad ways for diverse publics to

engage with poetry in various forms. Through the renovation debates, the Woodberry Poetry Room suffered a conceptual fracturing into an evolving collection, the dynamic services that collection supports, the space that accommodates that collection and those services, and, conversely, an architectural masterwork that manifests a complete and perfect architectural vision. It is the challenge of those responsible for the room's continued care and service to acknowledge that these multiple "poetry rooms" exist, and to find a way to bring their "essences" into "critical dialogue," in the hopes of maintaining a space that is the embodiment of the Woodberry idea.

¹ "The true appreciation of a literature must include the understanding and enjoyment of the work in the whole and of the literature in its historical and humanistic relations; the minutiae of the language can in themselves never give this appreciation. To allow men to count a knowledge of these minutiae in place of a genuine understanding of a literature confuses the purpose of the distribution requirement and omits from the required curriculum a prime essential of a college education" (Langauge and literature. (1932, December 8). *Harvard Crimson*. Retrieved October 15, 2009, from <http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=448251>; see also English 1. (1934, February 6). *Harvard Crimson*. Retrieved October 15, 2009, from <http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=450369>).

² An issue of *Harvard Graduates' Magazine* from 1922 indicates that Radcliffe graduate students had access to the Widener stacks (Radcliffe College. (1922, March). *Harvard Graduates' Magazine*, 30, p. 396. Accessed via Google Books). See also Kautzman, A. M. (2005). Undergraduate library collections. In M. A. Drake (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of library and information science* (2nd ed.). New York: Marcel Dekker, 377 and Radcliffe College. Library. Records of the Radcliffe College Library, 1881-1983: A finding aid. (2007). *Harvard University Library*. Online Archival Search Information System. Retrieved September 20, 2009, from <http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~sch01123>.

³The Library of Congress has since incorporated the entire body of work – roughly 110 records were created between 1931 and the early 1950s – into the National Recording Registry.

⁴This student-centered approach also characterized contemporaneous changes to Harvard’s undergraduate composition requirements. English A, a long-time requirement of all Harvard students, had recently been broken into two parts: the first part, a composition course, and the second, a tutorial for which students would write papers for their other courses and share those papers with composition instructors. “The hope is that students will enjoy their writing more and will have more to say if it grows out of their reading in so-called ‘subject-matter’ courses,” reported J. Milton French, who conducted a survey of the then-new curricula at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton (French, 1946, p. 74). Meanwhile, Harvard English majors had to take six courses in modern languages, at least four of which had to be in English, and before they graduated they had to pass three exams on outside reading: (1) one on ten books of the Bible, (2) one on twelve plays of Shakespeare, and (3) one on two writers from among Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Virgil, and Horace” (French, 1946, p. 74). Thus the new curriculum maintained the traditional foundation of classical texts, although that foundation was now to be established outside of class, and dedicated class time to modern languages. It is also important to note that just a few years earlier, in 1946, a committee of Harvard faculty had presented its *General Education in a Free Society* report, which influenced general education requirements at colleges throughout the country.

⁵ For plans, see “Library – Plans”: UA III 50.15.122 PF, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MA. Sketches were also provided by Ville Kokkonen at Artek.

⁶ Haviaris (1992) explains the curation of the room’s collection: “Although the recorded archive is permanently kept in the Poetry Room, the printed materials are renewed, as each year several hundreds of books and periodicals are transferred to the Widener stacks, thus enriching Harvard’s great research collection and freeing shelf space in the Poetry Room for new acquisitions.” (p. 10).

⁷ Haviaris (1992) reports that poet Robert Fitzgerald “used the authority of his Boylston Professorship to urge faculty and students to appreciate and learn from the room’s unique collections and services. Thus, while

for many users poetry books, recordings, and little magazines continued to be a matter of pleasure and personal enrichment, a number of others began to discover in these materials new tools of instruction” (p. 10).

⁸ See Frederick C. Packard, Jr’s (1950) discussion of the Vocarium, exemplified in both the Woodberry Poetry Room and the Forum Room at Lamont Library (pp. 69-74). “[T]he core of the vocarium idea,” he writes, “is that literature – be it prose, poetry, or drama, whether spoken or written – belongs in one location, and is readily accessible for study and enjoyment” (p. 69).

⁹ Powell’s Books is planning a series of short author films that “could eventually take the place of in-store book readings” (Bosman, J. (2007, March 21). Favorite author not on tour? See the movie. *The New York Times*, E3). Dave Weich, Powell’s marketing manager, said that the series, “Out of the Book,” would avoid the “two talking heads sitting there talking about literature” format.

¹⁰ A gift from James Merrill in the 1970s funded the installation of an audio lab in Lamont (Haviaris, 1992, p. 11).

¹¹ Haviaris (1992) indicates that lectures and readings in the Poetry Room were discontinued in 1949, presumably when the room moved to Lamont, and were revived, thanks to a gift from alum and faculty member Corliss Lamont, in 1978 (pp. 10-11).

¹² Bernstein (1998) claims that “studies of the distinctive features of the poem-in-performance have been rare (even full-length studies of a poet’s work routinely ignore the audiotext), and readings – no matter how well attended – are never reviewed...” (p. 5). The Poetry Room presents the live reading as “text” deserving of scholarly study.

¹³ Events are advertised on the Harvard College Libraries’ website and the Poetry Room’s Facebook page; via Harvard and MIT listserv’s, campus flyers, and the *Harvard Gazette*; in the *Boston Globe*; and through the efforts of local poetry societies and bookshops and co-sponsoring organizations.

¹⁴ See also Rilke, R. M. (1947). *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Vol. 2). (Greene, J. B. & M. D. Herter, Trans.). New York: Norton, 392-93, qtd in Sweeney, 1954, p. 70; and Eliot, T. S. (1947). Author's Note. *Language Study Leaflet*, 107 with the recording of *Four Quartets* released by Gramophone Co. Ltd, qtd in Sweeney, p. 71.

¹⁵ The room's admittance policy is clearly stated on its website.

¹⁶ Fixler notes in an October 2006 letter to the editor of *Architectural Record* that the original record consoles "are left intact and fitted with two-part tables that are pressure fitted with no fasteners, and can easily be removed if desired. They are being adapted to allow the students to listen to poetry in a wider variety of media and to facilitate the use of laptop computers at these locations." (Fixler, 2006c).

¹⁷ Fixler (2001) explains that his renovation of the Baker House at MIT involved researching the design's history, including "unsympathetic changes" throughout the life of the space, and assessing "the degree to which Aalto's original intent for the design...had been realized" (pp. 4, 5).

¹⁸ The room's status as a "masterwork" has been called into question. Some suggest that the Poetry Room may never have received Aalto's "filial authentication," (Barthes) since he returned to Finland in the fall of 1948 to attend to his ailing wife, who died shortly before the room opened.

¹⁹ In his letter to *Architectural Record*, Fixler (2006c) notes that his comments regarding Aalto's adversity to "freezing the room in a historic moment" refer to "conversations that [he has] had with various Aalto scholars over the years who suggest that Aalto was 'unsentimental' about retaining the pure original character of his work, and that he believed that design should remain flexible to accommodate necessary change. It is not meant to suggest that we are using this knowledge as a license to take a cavalier attitude...."

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FIGURE 1: Display case near front door of the Woodberry Poetry Room.

FIGURE 2: Students sitting at a table of Aalto's design, with illuminated periodical shelving behind.

FIGURE 3: Ash screen separating public from private areas.

FIGURE 4: Rendering of curator's room.

FIGURE 5: Stepped bookshelves in the background.

FIGURE 6: Rendering of book shelves.

FIGURE 7: Octagonal listening stations in foreground, with Aalto's light fixtures above.

FIGURE 8: The "atmospheric whole" of the Woodberry Poetry Room.