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Abstract

The 2006 renovation of Harvard University’s Woodberry Poetry Room, one of the few American designs by the 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, and so on, were larger, often unarticulated, questions about what constitutes a poetic text or an architectural work, whether they have definitive forms, and 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 (WPR), 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 Collection,” 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 multimedia 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 “Woodberry Poetry Room Collection,” n.d.).

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The room's character—warm, rich, domestic, yet modern—is such that it feels livable and opens itself up to a variety of uses. According to former curator Don Share, the WPR 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" ("Woodberry Poetry Room Renovation Under Way," 2006). 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 the noted Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (Fixler, 2006a; Pogrebin, 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 Under Way," 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 Massachusetts Institute of Technology (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 although 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 WPR; 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

(Abercrombie, 1979a, 1979b; Packard, 1950).¹ I was among those who discovered the room through news, in a Fall 2006 architecture magazine, of its supposed ruin. As someone who studies 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 against poetry, could have been perpetrated—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. 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 voices were rarely heard. In seeking out those voices, I discovered that librarians, curators, students, faculty, architects, historians, preservationists, and other invested groups not only had differing opinions, but that, more significantly, they were often talking about different rooms. The 2006 upheaval illuminated contrasting ways of conceiving of the WPR—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.

Before we turn our attention to the Aalto room and its renovation, we must consider that the WPR lived for 18 years in Widener Library, Harvard's "flagship" library, before moving to Lamont in 1949. In the interest of time, I focus in this piece on the Aalto and Fixler incarnations of the room. Still, it is worth saying a few words here about the spirit of the gift with which the room was founded, since that spirit infuses the room's later incarnations. In early 1931, Harry Harkness Flagler, Standard Oil heir and Columbia University alum, offered Harvard College a \$50,000 gift to establish a Poetry Room in memory of his friend and former Columbia professor George Edward Woodberry. "It had been Woodberry's constant regret," Flagler stated, "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). Woodberry advocated 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" (Moody, 1994, p. 37; Sweeney, 1954, p. 65; Woodberry, 1910).

Woodberry and Flagler envisioned a "comfortable *unlibrarylike* [italics added] 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 . . . for the enduring delight and significance of poetry" ("Woodberry Poetry Room Collection," n.d.). In a longer version of this article, I examine the relationship between this vision for the room and prevailing pedagogical and critical approaches to the study of literature during the early years of the room's existence.² I explain that the original, rigidly formal Widener room seemed to privilege New Critical approaches and created an elitist, unaccommodating, "red velvet" aura—precisely the atmosphere that Woodberry did *not* want to cultivate. In the present article, I aim to show that Aalto's approach to design, one concerned primarily with the user's embodied experience of both architecture and media, proved more 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 how users (readers, listeners, writers, inhabitants) engage with those texts. These disagreements are informed by theoretical and pragmatic debates in librarianship, education, media and literary studies, and architectural preservation. The concerns at the

center of the Harvard debate undoubtedly surface in other renovation projects—and the way they were handled, or mishandled, here may provide valuable lessons for other projects.

A Place for Delighting in Poetry, Printed, Recorded, and Performed

In 1949, Kenneth Koch had just graduated, and John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara were finishing up their studies at Harvard; a few years later, all three would be part of a circle known as the New York Poets. That same year, the WPR, after 18 years in Widener, relocated to its new 1,030-square foot home on the fifth floor of Lamont Library, the newly constructed undergraduate library. There is little discussion of the process by which Alvar 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.-a). According to Fixler, Lamont represented “a definitive break with precedent both for Harvard and for Shepley, Bulfinch,” 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). 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 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 libraries³), 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 (Pope, 1954).

Aalto seemed incapable of designing anything that approximated a mechanistic processor. Although 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 (1954),

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 WPR, Don 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).⁴ 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), the room proved much more popular than it had in Widener. Sweeney (1954) reports that the room attracted three times more visitors in 1952-1953 than it did in 1947-1948. 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, 1950).

What place inspired such reverie?

To access the WPR, one walked to the fifth floor of Lamont, 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. 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 2) divided the reading room proper from a record storage area. Long-playing records (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 semiprivate status was symbolized by the screen, was the nonpublic region: a door in the back corner led to the curator's office (Figure 3).

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 (Figure 4). 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 5). On many of the perimeter shelves, the fifth shelf slanted upward; Aalto intended for this shelf to be used for displaying featured books face-out, retail style. The stepped shelving arrangement helped visitors 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. The collection



Figure 1. Display case near front door of the Woodberry Poetry Room, circa late 1970s
 Source: Image courtesy of Cervin Robinson.

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 adjacency is significant; it suggests some ideological and experiential consonance between the poetry collection and the popular, “pleasurable” reading next door.

Overhead were brass pendant light fixtures, and throughout the room was Aalto’s iconic furniture, known for its experimentation with techniques for bending wood into fluid, organic forms. 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, p. 38) describes it. Such a design philosophy seems perfectly suited for a room committed to conveying poetry’s similar complexity, as we will discuss later.

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 (see Figure 4). 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



Figure 2. Ash screen separating public from private areas, circa late 1970s
Source: Image courtesy of Cervin Robinson.

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,

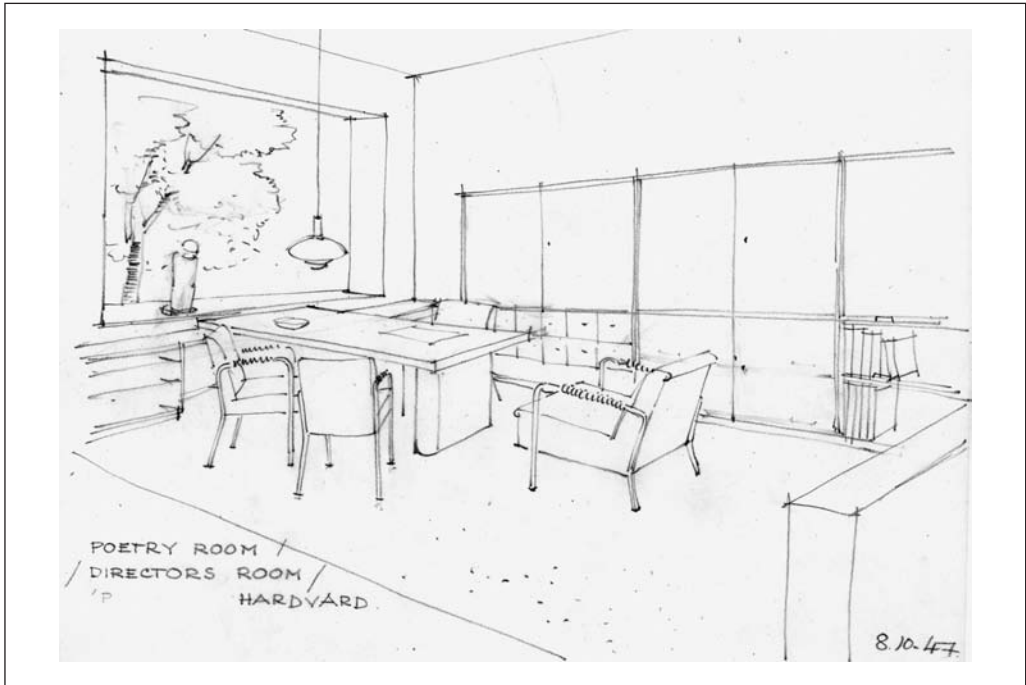


Figure 3. Rendering of curator's room, 1947
 Source: ©Artek.



Figure 4. Stepped bookshelves in the background, circa late 1970s
 Source: Image courtesy of Cervin Robinson.

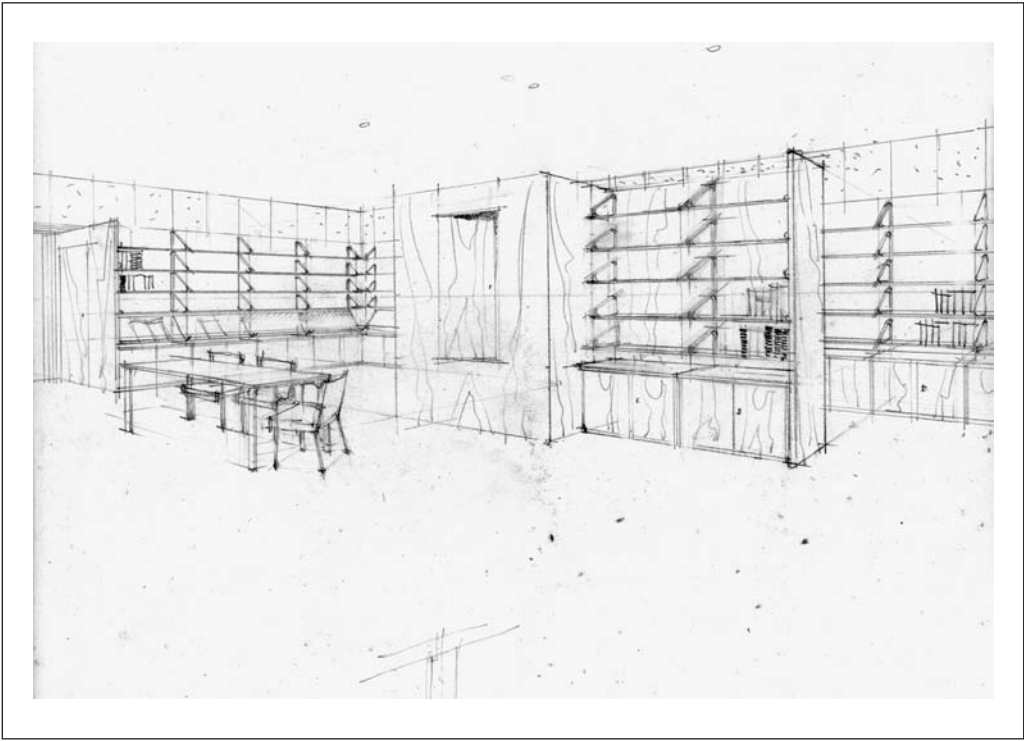


Figure 5. Rendering of book shelves, showing a proposed cabinet in the center (not realized), circa 1947
Source: ©Artek.

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 (see Meyrowitz, 1985). The room wove together signifiers and experiences of poetry as a visual, auditory, and haptic medium (Figure 6). The texture and color of the wood linked 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 nonorganic media.

We see similar sensitivity to the integration of sensation and cognition in Aalto’s other designs. “Repeatedly,” Goldhagen (2008/2009) 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 furniture design and color choices—“sprang from Aalto’s imagined projection of an embodied user hearing, seeing, and prospecting” (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” (p. 48). His library at Viipuri 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” (p. 49). From the main entrance, users could ascend via a monumental staircase toward a grand reading room with a “conserving and externally closed



Figure 6. The room's accommodation of poetry in myriad formats, circa late 1970s
 Source: Image courtesy of Cervin Robinson.

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” (p. 49). The Viipiri library, Goldhagen writes, is a building “designed around the users’ bodily being when they are engaged in different pursuits: researchers standing and moving about or readers quietly sitting in imaginative thought” (p. 48).

At Harvard, Aalto considered not only users’ different styles or postures of study but also their *objects* of study (Figure 7). 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” (reads, listens to, watches, etc.) a particular medium. Here, poetry was approachable, visible, audible, tangible; it 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 obliviously reciting words aloud. Attendant said student was ‘out’; they often get that way” (Strout, 1949). It would seem that Woodberry’s mission had been achieved: Students

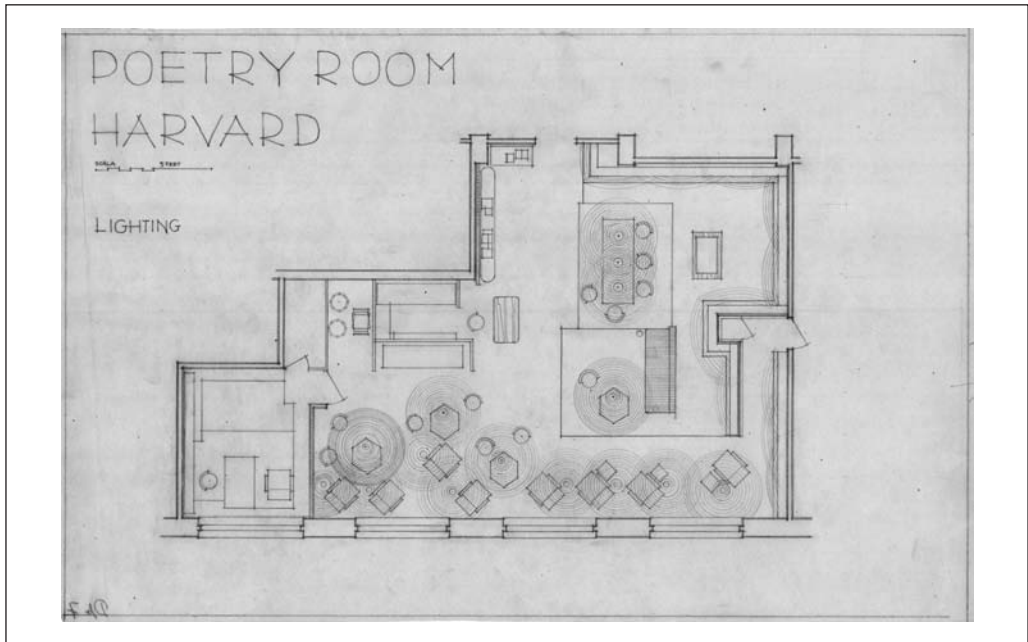


Figure 7. Aalto's careful consideration of how lighting would support the room's various activities, circa 1947
Source: ©Artek.

were using the room and its resources to become immersed in, to contemplate—as Woodberry might put it, to *delight in*—poetry. It is 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.⁵

The reporter's anecdote also illustrates that, here, poetry is something printed, recorded, and performed, and one can experience it all three formats at the same time. This possibility for multiplicity, or synchronicity, is a defining characteristic of the Woodberry collection. The 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” (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.⁶

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. Although 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*. Joseph Grigely (1995) and John Bryant (2002), among other literary scholars, address this “plural” and amorphous nature of the Text, which the scholar-poet 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 (1998) aims 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” (p. 8).

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 disparate formats to the enjoyment and critical study of poetry. The scholarly importance of the printed text and the manuscript is well established—but what is the unique value of the audiorecording 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? In the interest of time, I will examine only a few facets of the different poetic formats in WPR’s collection.

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 WPR, 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 Communications 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. He also remembers Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky’s reading at Harvard, 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. The 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)

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, as literary 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).

In a 1985 article in the *Harvard Gazette*, the former Woodberry curator Stratis Haviaris imagined “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” (Haviaris, 1985).⁷ Looking forward, Haviaris also predicted that “someone with a home computer might be able to get poetry ‘on-line,’” the quotation marks illustrating the concept's nascence. Realizing that prediction had been among Share's top priorities as curator. He used a recording studio in his office to build the WPR's audio archive, and he was committed to digitizing the collection's manuscripts (including, e.g., Emily Dickinson's *Herbarium*, which, with its pages of pressed flowers, had been 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 WPR as a hub.⁸ 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 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 social experience (Figure 8). The WPR, unlike most other special collections, is responsible for creating a good portion of its own audiovisual collection; it is here where some of the readings take place from which the recordings are made.⁹ Thus, the room's staff do not simply collect and catalog recordings of performances; they regard the live reading itself as part of its collection and give it a place in the WPR among the other media.¹⁰

Bernstein (1998) proposes that we “look at the poetry reading not as a secondary extension of ‘prior’ written texts but as its own medium” (p. 10). Bernstein (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. 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” (Bernstein, 1998, p. 10). 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.

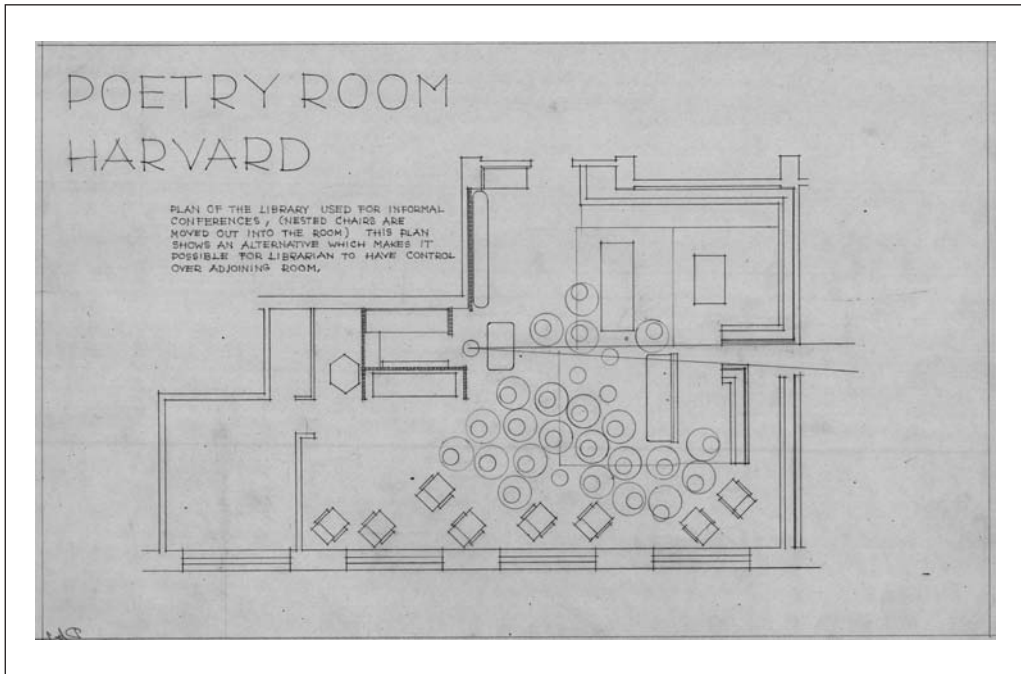


Figure 8. Aalto imagined how the room's furniture could be reconfigured for live readings, circa 1947
Source: ©Artek.

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... and those interactions mediated by communication apparatuses (pp. 14-15).

In the Poetry Room, the voice, regarded as the essential stuff of many poetic forms, circulates throughout the room, enveloping all 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.

The room itself plays an integral role in *mediating* all these interactions—between media, readers, viewers, listeners, and the physical, imagined, and acoustic spaces they inhabit.¹¹ In this space, Aalto acknowledged poetry as aesthetic object, as material text, as time-based medium; he accommodated poetry reception as a 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 (1977) calls a “methodological field,” a landscape for the exploration of poetry in its myriad forms. The Poetry Room, like Barthes’s Text, is characterized by the “stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers,” but here the intertextual weave is not just semantic or metaphorical, but also spatial, material.

Architecture as Fixed or Fluid: Preservation or Revision?

Before the 2006 renovation, the WPR 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. Perhaps Bachelard would have noted that its domestic scale, honey-hued wood paneling, ample daylight, upholstered seating, and elegantly shaped wood furnishings, even its 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 WPR 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,” 1931). But 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, post-structuralism, cultural studies, etc. — have shaped both the creation and reception of the poetic text. How has the WPR changed in response to “today’s volume and character of use”?

Fixler’s (2006a) renovation involved the removal of one bookcase, purportedly to increase the size of the reading area and to improve the staff’s sightlines to the stacks (Figure 9). 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 while the removed book stack does increase visibility and open the passageway to the Farnsworth Room next door, that opening-up compromises the “enclosedness” of the corner reading area in the WPR—a subtle change in character whose significant implications Bachelard would appreciate. In addition, two of the four record consoles were transformed into four-person listening stations with rather ungainly attached work surfaces and non-Artek task lighting.¹² Share noted that visitors had long been holding books in their laps while listening to recordings; the new work surfaces, unattractive though they are, now allow visitors to more



Figure 9. The removal of a bookcase creates more space for this Works-In-Progress event in January 2009
 Source: Photograph by Christina Davis.

comfortably read while listening. Moreover, Fixler (2006a) 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 chairs around. Share 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. Critics were concerned that, although many of the original pieces are still in production at Artek, the University chose non-Artek replacements. 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 (2006a) strove to remain faithful to "the spirit of Aalto's original design."¹³

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." DOCOMOMO US (2006) asserts that "renovating 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 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, the then chair of the Department of Architecture, wrote in a letter to 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, the 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 the 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.” Perhaps cordoning off the space, establishing it as a gem, a sculpture to be “memorized by the affectionate eye,” as Sweeney (1954) said of the original Poetry Room in Widener, 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 (was) “one of the greatest examples in this country of total design,” integrating finishes, furnishings, and lighting under an over-arching vision (quoted in Gendall, 2006). The architectural 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 echoes of New Criticism, with its interest in a text’s aesthetic unity. In the catalog 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, 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 (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.¹⁴ Furthermore, as Benjamin explains, if we are to maintain a work’s “aura of authenticity,” we must keep users at a perceptual distance. 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 added] 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 US (2006) disputes the need for 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).¹⁵ 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.

Stubbs (n.d.), of the World Monuments Fund, wonders in a letter to Mori, “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?” “Equipment” and “amenities” are not, and never have been, external to reading. The codex is reading equipment, and functional furnishings can hardly be reduced to “amenities.” Furthermore, even if the room serves “simply” as a “reading room” (The WPR is frequently misidentified in the design press as the “Woodberry Poetry Reading Room,” exemplifying 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.¹⁶

“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 argue (Pogrebin, 2006). 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 (2006a) wrote.¹⁷ Furthermore, “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 elucidate original qualities that have been lost in the intervening years.”¹⁸ 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 used 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.-b). He advocates stressing “the creation of a critical dialogue with the *essence* [italics added] of the original—both the idea and the material—rather than treating it as a fixed object awaiting the



Figure 10. Seth Rosenbaum (not pictured) and Christina Davis lead students in an audio seminar in April 2010

Source: Photograph by Christina Davis.

overlay of the intervention.” Indeed, the renovations at Harvard may well honor Woodberry’s original wish for the room: “bringing alive the poet’s voice and creating a place at Harvard for the *enduring* [italics added] delight and significance of poetry.” It is the “delight and significance of poetry” that are to endure; the space that promotes those qualities must *evolve* to remain relevant and effective in achieving this mission. The motivations behind the renovation may honor the essence of Aalto’s idea, too, although the choice of substandard materials, when appropriate Artek pieces were available, may have unfairly compromised the materialization of that idea.

Nevertheless, 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 said, and “not one student has complained about the new room.” The WPR’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 nonintimidating environment, at a time when “[c]ontemporary 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 that 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 (Figure 10), her “populist approach to poetry” attracted even more students to the room for more active engagement with poetry (“Davis Outlines Plans,” 2008). 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 (“Davis Outlines Plans,” 2008). “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. 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” (C. 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.” 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, 2008).

This “poetry room,” more than 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 and character are 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.

As Goldhagen (2008/2009) 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; serious scholarship and “delight” coexist. In the same room to which an undergraduate comes “to encounter *The Waste Land* for the very 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” (C. Davis, personal communication, October 1, 2009).

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 room’s curators’ commitment to promoting myriad ways for diverse publics to engage with poetry in various forms. Fixler’s and the University’s obligations to Woodberry and the WPR’s publics demanded that the room be updated; their obligations to Aalto required negotiating between the Aalto idea and a particular materialization of that idea. Meanwhile, the wider renovation debates reveal that the 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.

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Notes

1. The room is mentioned only in passing, if at all, in published reviews and catalogs 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 WPR design—but this untranslated correspondence remains inaccessible to non-Swedish- or non-Finnish-speaking researchers.
2. See <http://www.wordsinspace.net/wordpress/publications/peer-reviewed-articles/> for the expanded article.
3. 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)

4. 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.
5. Haviaris (1992) reports that the 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)

6. See Frederick C. Packard's (1950) discussion of the Vocarium, exemplified in both the Woodberry Poetry Room and the Forum Room at Lamont Library (pp. 69-74). "The 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).
7. I synopsise the debate over the value of poetry videorecording in the longer version of this article.
8. We can assume that Al Filreis, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Kelly Writers House and codirector, with Charles Bernstein, of its PennSound online poetry audio archive, likewise believes that digital literary resources and physical literary places can *support* one another's existence.
9. Events, usually organized by the room's curator, are often cosponsored by Harvard academic departments, schools, or museums, 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. These events are then 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 cosponsoring organizations.

10. 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).
11. In an extended version of this article, I examine the WPR in relation to the “borrowed spaces” where, according to Middleton (1998), avant-garde poetry readings typically take place, as well as the public accessibility of the readings that take place in the Poetry Room and on the Harvard campus (the 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).
12. 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, 2006b)

13. 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).
14. 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, 1977) since he returned to Finland in the fall of 1948 to attend to his ailing wife, who died shortly before the room opened.
15. Goldhagen and I would take issue with Share’s characterization of the room as an example of “high modernism.”
16. One of the room’s many values is that it links patrons to poetry’s technological past and its future: today, alongside the second-generation record players are plug-ins for computers. Wax cylinders and mp3s coexist. One of my few criticisms 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 on request. 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.
17. In his letter to *Architectural Record*, Fixler (2006b) 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.

18. In the expanded article, I address some of these incremental changes.

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