

No Regrets – A Post-Reunion Reflection on the Visual Arts at Dartmouth

Cary Bernstein 7.12.09

concurrency: Peter Garfield, Cola Parker, Tom Rivard, Chris Von Eckartsberg, Robert Young

On the plane ride home from our fantastic reunion, I read the class book as a way of keeping the spirit of the weekend alive for just a few more hours. The essays brought a laugh and the photos a smile but as I read individual personal reflections, I was taken with some of the responses to the questionnaire tag line: "If I could have done one thing differently." The regret that stood out, again and again, was how many people wished they had spent more time taking classes in the arts and/or art history.

While there was the perennial "wish I studied more/wish I studied less" and many people who wished they had spent more time outdoors/playing sports or participating in an LSA/FSP program, only one academic area received a disproportionate number of regrets – the visual arts. Twenty-seven people said they wished they had spent more time taking classes in Art History, Studio Art or spent more time in the Student Workshops. The next closest subject receiving the benefit of hindsight was History – 11 regrets. Only 4 people wish they had studied more Economics.

A desire for more engagement with the arts is not what many of us who were, and still are, engaged with the arts would expect to hear – but it's heartening to hear now. As much as we can all love Dartmouth for so many of her strengths, the visual arts as both an academic subject and as an integral part of campus experience have never been given a commitment on par with other disciplines or institutional priorities. This could not have been more apparent when we came back and saw the new additions to campus.

Vox Clamantis

At the class governance meeting, Peter Garfield adamantly protested the number of banal new buildings on campus (according to the class book, 50 major construction projects have been completed since 1984). The response he was given from the panel is that the College had recently received an anonymous \$50-million donation for the construction of a new arts center behind the Hop. See! - there is support for the arts! A new building is in the works! While this is a wonderfully generous donation (thank you - whoever you are) and no one is ungrateful for this magnanimous philanthropy (especially today), the form of the answer itself underscores fundamental problems with the narrow reading by the panel, and the College itself, of how the role of the arts at Dartmouth:

1. There is a misconception that engagement with the arts and arts education exists only inside designated "arts buildings" and that all the other structures and landscapes which comprise the campus are "not part of the arts."
2. There is an unfortunate equation of targeted spending with sustained commitment and leadership. Just because a large sum of money given by a single donor is earmarked for an "arts building" does not mean that the College has a comprehensive commitment to the arts: ask your kids if they confuse a present from a relative with real parenting from you.
3. The corollary to these misunderstandings by the College governors is to mistake the growth of the campus with cultural value added. Quantity does not equal quality. As a result of the average-to-poor quality of the new buildings, Dartmouth has not only missed educational opportunities for the students but has also lost opportunities to enhance its reputation as an institutional leader and possible economic opportunities which may benefit the College's endowment.

Her Spell on Us Remains

During reunion, many people stood on the Green and admired its beauty, remembering their impression of the school on their first day, their favorite place to study (or not), the bench on which they kissed a special date and places, like the Green and Bema, in which we gathered together as a class. These memories are simple examples of the legacy of the arts which constitute the aesthetic experience of campus, independent of an "arts building" and in concert with academic and student life. Dartmouth Hall was designed to both house and represent the aspirations of the College mission – a likeness of the building even appears on the college seal (fyi - Dartmouth is the only Ivy League school to have a building on its seal). The Hop, classical in symmetry but modern in transparency, firmly positions the institution in the 20th century. Etc.

These buildings, and the Green itself, have both pedagogical and aesthetic value. The new construction does not. It is disappointing to see that, since graduation, and especially in the wake of two decades of a global architectural gold rush, not one outstanding building or landscape has been added to campus. There have been 50 major construction projects yet none have made a significant national or international cultural contribution. As empirical data, this is, to say the least, discouraging.

Scholarship

Historical falsehoods, anemic design and visual illiteracy are the trifecta of cultural and academic mediocrity. For a school that is committed to teaching its students the value of excellence borne of rigorous and critical thinking, in any discipline, how is it possible that it could sponsor so many historical cartoons? McLane-Fahey, for example, is so mangled in its attempt to mimic the adjacent Georgian buildings while tacking on contemporary amenities that it has rendered itself mute. The new buildings neither respect nor interpret history - they shred it. As such they are a-historical: they belong nowhere, in no time. As is too often the case, "something for everyone" results in "nothing for anyone."

What values can these buildings possibly communicate to the students? No professor would have accepted this kind of performance from us in our coursework - the written analog of these new buildings would surely have received barely passing grades:

"The student shows minimal understanding of the assigned material and an unfortunate reliance on secondary sources. The writing lacks original insight and is weakened by numerous clichés, typos and grammatical errors. Content C/Style C-"

A Problem of Excellence

How is it possible for a college which celebrates the actions of its alumni in shaping the modern world to have such low expectations for the construction of itself? The answers are long and nuanced and don't lie in simplistic dichotomies between modern and historicist architecture, preservation and innovation, tradition and progress. This is a problem of excellence and vision, not style. An excellent work, of any era, is a teaching tool - a mediocre work teaches nothing. Every built work on campus has the potential to be an instrument of education as well as a functional artifact. Given the high cost of construction plus significant use of resources, it is almost negligent not to get the most of each effort. No matter what the scale of built work (bench, dorm renovation or new facility), Dartmouth must think about its commitment to the arts beyond the territory of any academic department and consider the excellence of campus construction as a symbol of its aspirations and abilities.

Our Muscles and Our Brains

Public art, architecture and landscape design are extremely hard to do well: the resulting work embodies many forces which give it form, including macro-economic and social conditions, the skill of the designer, influence of a donor and the will of the client. The will of the client cannot be overstated – the very best artists and architects may deliver their worst projects when the client's resolve is too low and fear too high. At the institutional level, the process of constructing a new project can be more than tedious and requires marathons of stamina. This means an even greater effort must be made to have the best team in place: the people involved in capital improvements should include critical thinkers as well as patrons and administrators. This may require a new model for design review with voices outside the College payroll. No one will forget excellence but no one remembers mediocrity.

It is our greatest hope that an open dialogue about the future of the arts at Dartmouth will begin. A new paradigm is required to establish Dartmouth's program for the arts where the campus is understood - and taught - as a living product of cultural history, where Dartmouth can compete on the global cultural stage with other institutions and where visual literacy is held to be as paramount as text-based education. When the College makes its own constitution a vision of the future as well as a display of respect for the past, it will provide the best classroom for the greatest number and ensure a cultural legacy beyond the boundaries of a single department. And no regrets from alumni who expect the College to demand of itself the same high standards that were asked of us.

With this, a few closing thoughts by others:

"I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study paintings, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain."
John Adams (Founding Father)

"America somehow thinks that leadership relates to governance, and it certainly does. . .But society is much bigger than governance, and some of the truly great leadership of our society is outside the governance arena. Our culture is more shaped by the arts and humanities than it often is by politics."
Jim Leach, (R) Iowa, current nominee to head the N.E.H.

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End Note: These reflections represent the view of the writer and supporting classmates: they are not intended to represent – or misrepresent - the view of the class as a whole. Several reviewers have asked "what's next?" For the sake of brevity, the reflections here end with a set of questions without proposals – they are meant to encourage thought and dialogue. The parties above are currently talking with college officials about these issues.

There will, no doubt, be people who disagree with the opinions in the reflections above. I welcome all discussion, concurring or dissent, with respect and encourage engagement with passion rather than disaffection.

-Cary