
SILVER RESIDENCE HALL AT NYU UPTOWN: A BRIDGE TO CO-ED HOUSING

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Perched on a cliff above the Harlem River, New York University's uptown campus in the Bronx captures a pivotal moment in architectural design, and student life. Designed by Hungarian-born Marcel Breuer in 1956 and opened in 1961, the 600-bed structure was the first co-ed dormitory at NYU. Its architecture reveals reluctant co-educationalization and faith in the power of architecture to shape student behavior.

This paper relies on original research conducted at the Archives of American Art, New York University, and the History of Student Affairs Archive in Bowling Green, Ohio in order to explore Breuer's co-ed dormitory as a microcosm of modernist campus design. It is one case study from a book-in-progress titled: *Live and Learn: The Architectural and Social History of Dormitories and Residence Hall*. The central research questions are: why have American educators believed for so long, and with such fervor, that one needs to house students in order to educate them? And, more specifically, what is the role played by architecture in legitimizing that idea?

The Breuer residence hall will form one chapter of a book on the social history of dormitories: a central hypothesis of the book, *Live and Learn*, is that the architecture of dormitories made visible the body of knowledge produced by student affairs professionals,¹ those academic officials who developed a distinct field of theory and practice at the start of the twentieth-century. The division of student affairs known as residence life is far less dominant in Europe than in the US. As one Vice President of Student Affairs explained it in 2011: "Students spend 80 percent of time outside of class. Student affairs professionals need to be there for that." He continued: "It's a complex setting today that needs great expertise.... Student affairs plays a huge role in developing the student that graduates from our college[s] today."² Much of that unstructured time is spent in residence halls, thus the residence hall becomes the locus for student development. For this reason, deans of students prefer the term "residence hall" over "dormitory": a dormitory is merely a place to sleep. *Live and Learn* will be an exploration of the role of architecture in establishing professional status for student affairs.

The book will consider how the profession of the dean of students is tied to the built environment and explore how that relationship changes over time. While tutors and professors have been around since the middle ages, student affairs personnel are latecomers on

the collegiate scene. Some scholars give credit to Oberlin for employing the first dean of women (called the Lady Principal) in 1835; others cite deans of women at Iowa and Michigan in the 1870s.³ The original student affairs professionals were female faculty members who expanded their duties to help women on co-ed campuses cope with college life. In other words, deans of women preceded deans of men. These women pioneered a profession within college administration, but, over time, "deans of women lost their positions,...almost always to men, [who] absorbed their roles."⁴ But then it took decades for the profession to gain prestige inside the university. As one Student Affairs expert put it, for much of the twentieth century, "residence halls, and for that matter many areas of student personnel, were staffed with retired military people, discarded football coaches, elderly housemothers, and random others who had... scout-like qualities."⁵ At present, student affairs is highly professionalized; it is now recommended that students hoping for a career as a vice president gain a doctorate in Higher Education, and there are 120 programs offering a Ph.D. with a specialization in student affairs. The profession of the student affairs dean has a history of its own that warrants further study in relation to architecture.

Student Affairs, as a discipline, expanded in size and influence after World War II. The wake of the second world war was also a time when modernism gained a foothold on university campuses, especially state-funded campuses. The modernist architects who were working in the 1960s, including Breuer, Saarinen, and Kahn, experimented with the best ways to establish an appropriate architectural evocation of the past; these gestures came before the bright colors, ornamental details, and heady theories of postmodernism. One attempt at creating a contextual campus design may be seen in Marcel Breuer's intervention at the Bronx campus of New York University. Silver Residence Hall was one of several connected structures at NYU Uptown, also known as the University Heights Campus.⁶ The Bronx site was considered bucolic compared to Greenwich Village, the original location of NYU, and when the Gould family donated land for a new suburban campus in 1894, the university used the land for a male-only liberal arts college. The premier architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White delivered a contained and elegant essay in classicism, modeled after the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and contemporaneous with Columbia University's classical campus on Morningside Heights. NYU Uptown was an orderly assembly of building with uniform cornice

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heights, buff-colored brick, and a domed structure as its focus. It is an excellent example of the arrival of the City Beautiful Movement on a college campus.

When Breuer was hired to construct a series of modern buildings in the vicinity of the McKim Mead and White structures, the latest news at NYU was that “the Heights” was going co-ed. Women had been allowed to enroll in certain departments at NYU as far back as the 1870s, but they were not included in University College, an all-male internal-to-NYU undergraduate liberal arts college.⁷ This was the academic unit that found its home on the Heights campus. Women were first enrolled in University College in 1959, so it was venturesome of the university to throw itself into a controversial dormitory scheme: a single structure that housed both men and women.⁸ (Co-educational colleges had existed since the 1830s, but this was a co-ed dormitory.)

Breuer’s scheme employed all parts of a difficult site which dropped off steeply to a highway below. The complex included a science building, a community center, lecture halls, and a 600-bed dormitory, the Julius Silver Residence Center, all of which cascade down the hill toward the Major Deegan Expressway⁹ and the Harlem River beyond.¹⁰ The New York Herald blared the headline: “NYU on Heights to go Co-Ed: Men and Women will be housed in New Dormitory.”¹¹ In contrast, an internal NYU publication soothed nerves: “Rigid division and control will of course be maintained.”¹²

The Julius Silver Residence Center was a seven-story high-rise, shaped to curve along the river. The community hall sat on relatively high ground, but the dormitory was in a deep well, with one of its levels below grade, and three dorm levels below the floor of the community hall. The community hall was designated as the space for men and women to socialize. From there, the plan directed men and women into their own separate pedestrian bridges, which in turn led to the male and female ends of the slab. [Figure 1, 2] Inside the men’s section, the services (stairs, elevators, and bathrooms) were in the center, bounded on both sides by parallel corridors. The women’s side was a more typical double-loaded corridor plan. [Figure 3] It offered more privacy, because every two bedrooms shared one bathroom, and the bathrooms were tucked inside the rooms. It was at that time taken for granted that women needed more space and privacy than men.¹³ The contemporary architectural press, no doubt prompted by the architect, boasted that this sectional arrangement made costly elevators unnecessary because the entrance level was on the fourth (or middle) floor, and, therefore, the maximum vertical communication was either up three flights or down three flights. If a first-floor student had the misfortune to strike up a friendship with someone on the 7th floor, the pair had to meet in the community hall in the middle, or one of them had to walk up seven flights of stairs. The head resident, or possible one of the two faculty fellows, resided next to the community center, not in the slab.¹⁴

Reluctant co-educationalization is manifest in this plan. There are even windows in the pedestrian bridges that would reveal the pres-



Figure 1. Photo by author. Breuer, Silver Residence Center, NYU Uptown, 1956-61. View of pedestrian bridges, one for male and one for female students



Figure 2. Photo by author. Breuer, Silver Residence Center, NYU Uptown, 1956-61, Interior of corridor.

ence of a person of un-approved gender to anyone viewing from outside or even from the dormitory itself. It is an architectural diagram of who-should-go-where, a blunt instrument of surveillance.¹⁵ The building itself does some of the work of social control, but not all of it: curfews, check-in procedures, and the usual array of parietal regulations governed visiting. To cite one of many examples, the Student Handbook explained that women visitors were not permitted on the men’s side, with the exception of mothers or guardians, who were allowed to visit on Sunday between 2pm and 5pm.¹⁶

A skyscraper accommodates a large number of students on a small site, and half of the room would have overlooked Hudson and Harlem Rivers and the New Jersey palisades. The dormitory was started with a government loan of \$3 million, and an additional \$1



Figure 3. Photo by author. McKim, Mead and White, Hall of Great Americans, NYU Uptown, 1894

million was raised when the structure was almost complete. Julius Silver, vice president, general counsel, and a member of the board of directors of the Polaroid Corporation, topped off the account. A plaque in his honor bore the following statement written by Silver: "It is my hope that his center of brotherhood and learning, dedicated to the democratic way of life, will assure to all equal opportunity to cultivate those qualities of intellect and character which provide the ferment for progress and thus contribute to the advancement, the power, and the dignity of a free society." The residence hall emerges as a bulwark against communism.¹⁷ The student handbook from 1963 advertised the dorm as a "place where the resident continues his education in an informal and personal manner."¹⁸

Although creative American architecture signified the freedom of the free world, Breuer was also attuned to tradition. As he once remarked: "We 'modern' architects don't hate tradition – the opposite is true."¹⁹ The aggressively sculptural concrete lecture hall, a perfect example of Breuer's signature style, was shaped by the angle of the raked floor of its interior. The cream-colored Roman brick, however, the same brick used on the nearby neoclassical McKim Mead and White building, [Figure 4] was a nod to context.²⁰ As the *New York Herald* reported, perhaps overstating the case: "The architects, Marcel Breuer and Associates, are using the same rough-stone foundation and brick as that in the adjacent Hall of Fame of Great Americans, so as to blend the structures optically."²¹

Breuer was a dominant figure in the world of architecture, especially recognized for his use of concrete. Selecting him, like hiring Saarinen at Yale or Kahn at Bryn Mawr, was a strategy for commu-



Figure 4. Photo by author. Breuer, Silver Residence Center, NYU Uptown, 1956-61

nicating eliteness in architecture-- not with historicizing styles, but with contemporary architects of international stature.

Uptown NYU is strictly zoned by function: the residences are separate from the classrooms, classrooms from administration, and so on. Mies van der Rohe's Illinois Institute of Technology was an extreme example of this type of planning, in which rectilinear buildings placed on a grid were divided by activity. This modernist zoning became a target for campus planners in the early 1970s, and a later chapter of *Live and Learn* will explore the messy, multifunctional postmodernist residence hall Kresge College, by the firm MLTW.

Many educational theorists warn that today's students, the so-called Millennials, have nothing in common with preceding generations. Millennial students are supposed to be focused inward, reliant on individualized entertainment, as dependent /for emotional sustenance/ on social networking sites as on traditional face-to-face contact. Some conclude that these students are fundamentally UN-social, and certainly not likely to be influenced by bricks and mortar, given their love of the virtual realm.²² This brings up a looming, and slightly depressing issue: do universities need dormitories?

Although skyscraper dormitories are common on many college campuses, it was not natural or inevitable that American universities would house their students in concrete blocks, or house them at all. Given that the ancient universities of Europe and local community colleges have not typically housed their students, and given that stu-

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dents frequently choose unregulated off-campus housing, it seems reasonable to question the centrality of the residence hall in the running of universities. Live and Learn will end with a consideration of the precarious future of residence halls. The gap between the haves and have-nots will likely widen, as the cost of living on campus will drive low-income students into convenient non-residential institutions, such as the University of Phoenix.²³ Students at elite universities will gain the advantage of networking in the flesh, potentially widening the socio-economic gap further. In 2012, the image of a college student as an 18-year-old who lives in a dormitory is fast fading; we inhabit a world where distance learning could make the realm of brick-and-mortar into a luxury for the few, rather than an expectation of the many. For these reasons, the architecture of residence halls is deserving of scholarly attention.

ENDNOTES

- 1 These collegiate officials have thus taken over the role of modeling responsible citizenship, a role once held by professors. Julie A. Reuben's scholarship admirably explains the process by which morality and religion became marginalized in American universities. Reuben suggests that as American higher education became more secular, moral guidance shifted out of the formal curriculum and into extra-curricular activities. Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University, Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*, (University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 2 "Challenging the Role of Student Affairs," March 31, 2011, *Inside Higher Ed*. Pierson serves as Vice President for Student Affairs at Longwood University in Virginia.
- 3 Robert Schwartz, "How Deans of Women became Men," *The Review of Higher Education*, (Summer 1997) 20.4 pp. 419-436, 421-422. The National Association of Deans of Women was founded in 1903, eventually became the National Association for Women in Education, and closed in 2000. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, or NASPA (not to be confused with the North American Scrabble Players Association) is currently active and traces its history to 1919; it evolved directly out of the association for deans of men. The American College Personnel Association traces its history back to 1913. The Association of College and University Housing Officers was formed in 1949.
- 4 Schwartz, "How Deans of Women Became Men," 419.
- 5 Gregory S. Blimling, "Residence Halls in Today's Compartmentalized University," 1-11, p. 6, in Gregory S. Blimling and John H. Schuh, Eds., *Increasing the Educational Role of Residence Halls*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Publishers, 1981.
- 6 NYU sold the entire uptown campus in 1973 to the Bronx Community College, and the dormitory is now known as Colston Hall. It presently serves as an office and classroom building.
- 7 The first women students enrolled in art, pedagogy (education), and then in law. <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/arch/womenhistory/womenshistory.htm> 8 <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/arch/womenhistory/womenshistory.htm> Until 1959, women were only allowed to attend summer sessions at the Heights Campus of NYU.
- 9 The Major Deegan was constructed from 1935-1958. 10 <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/arch/thenandnow/> In 1930, NYU became the largest private institution of higher learning in the US. Frusciano and Pettit, *New York University and the City*, 175.
- 11 Terry Ferrer, "NYU on Heights Goes Co-Ed in Fall: Men and Women will be Housed in New \$4,400,000 Dormitory," December 1959. Marcel Breuer Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian, frame 1209.
- 12 Clippings file, Archives of American Art, Breuer Collection frame 1212.
- 13 Bowling Green State Colleges, History of Student Affairs Archives, Association of College and University Housing Officers, MS 487, Box 1, Conference Proceedings ACUHO, First Annual Conference, 1949, p. 17,
- 14 "NYU University Heights Center: Handbook for Students," 1963-64, p. 12. NYU Archives, group no. 1 series no 10 folder 8-25.
- 15 For more on architecture and surveillance, with a good summary of Foucault's theories as related to actual buildings, see Anna V. Andrzejewski, *Building Power: Architecture and the Ideology of Surveillance in Victorian America* (University of Tennessee Press, 2008).
- 16 "NYU University Heights Center: Handbook for Students," 1963-64, p. 8. NYU Archives, group no. 1 series no 10 folder 8-25.
- 17 The building was dedicated on September 25, 1963. "The Proceedings of the Dedication of the Julius Silver Residence Center," NYU Archives, Buildings Collection, folder 9-5, "Silver, Julius, Residence Center." A similar Cold War discourse may be found in the justifications for building Yale's Morse and Stiles Colleges, by Eero Saarinen.
- 18 "NYU University Heights Center: Handbook for Students," 1963-64, p. 8. NYU Archives, group no. 1 series no 10 folder 8-25.
- 19 Cranston Jones, *Marcel Breuer: Buildings and Projects, 1921-1961* (New York: Praeger, 1962) 257.
- 20 Robert F. Gatje, *Marcel Breuer: A Memoir* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2000) 76-77. Gatje worked in Breuer's office.
- 21 *New York Herald Tribune*, Terry Ferrer, "NYU on Heights Goes Co-Ed in Fall: Men and Women will be House in New \$4,400,000 Dormitory," December 1959. Marcel Breuer Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian, frame 1209.
- 23 The University of Phoenix was in 2011 the largest private university in North America, with more than 345,000 students enrolled. It attracts the largest number of veterans. Some of these veterans specifically criticized the legislators who drew up the so-called new G.I Bill for being "romantic." What was romantic about it? The bill assumed that men and women would come home from war and "move into dormitories." *Inside Higher Ed*, "Disincentive for Distance Learning," January 23, 2009. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/01/23/gi>