

The way that College Hill treats Grad Center is the way a suburban neighborhood treats the house of the archetypal eccentric old man. It's a source of curiosity—those unaccustomed to it gawk at it while walking by, and rumors and half-baked theories about its design circulate among its neighbors. But the dorm has an austerity, a mythology completely unique to it. It has its own aesthetic, its own history, and its own place in the minds of its inhabitants.

Living in the future

In 1968, the Graduate Center was built largely as part of Brown's administrative solution to the expanding population of graduate students. On a larger scale it was intended to address a more complex problem of scholarship in the Brown community. It was meant to abate the confining rabbit-hole of specialization and isolated jargon in graduate education by creating a place for graduate students to live with each other and share a large, central common space.

"We delight in the attractiveness of the entire complex," President Ray Heffner wrote in a 1968 "Message from the President." "These are buildings in which we shall all take great pride and enjoyment... Its most important function will be to preserve and to strengthen the atmosphere of unity at Brown."

An October 12, 1968 *Brown Daily Herald* letter from the editor, titled "Grad Center Snobbery," noted the architect's effect on the students inhabiting it: "there is something very special about making one's home in the Grad Center—a feeling of 'living in the future,' as one student described it—that makes undergraduates keep their rooms neater than ever before, and makes graduate students insist on giving their girls tours before heading up to the room."

But the structure once lavishly praised by the *Providence Journal* as a "house of Ivy League standards," designed to "serve as a focal point for academic and social life," somehow spiraled into what many of its present-day inhabitants regard as a massive architectural failure. How can we account for Grad Center's decline from a House of the Future to a riot-proof fortress, from a life-filled community center to the housing lottery's form of cosmic payback?

Do the right thing

Taking a step back, the basic idea behind the design of Grad Center does not seem particularly objectionable or counterintuitive. The juxtaposition of the tall, stacked towers, the flat center with its elevated ramps and walkways and the sunken green spaces is undeniably imaginative. It reflects, beyond any dysfunction, an attempt at creating unusual, diverse and expressive structure.

"I think the architect was neither a bad architect nor an evil person as generations of students have suspected," Dietrich Neumann, Professor of History of Art and Architecture, said, laughing. "People think that he was really evil and this was some sort of riot-proof prison that they were put into. I think he tried really hard to do the right thing within the spirit of the time and the ideas that were floating among architects."

In 1963, Brown gave Jean Paul Carlhian, a leading designer in the architectural firm Shepley, Bullfinch, Richardson, and Abbot, a challenge that ultimately evolved into a nagging brainteaser: in a space of about 300 square feet, create a way to house 450 graduate students, their recreational facilities, dining facilities and administrative offices. No need to imitate the adjacent Neo-Gregorian architecture of Wriston Quad, but make the structure fit into the setting of College Hill.

Carlhian took the concern of "urban fitting" into account when he opted to divide the dorms into four separate towers, as opposed to creating one overwhelming high rise. He was sensitive to the issue of privacy. One of Carlhian's guiding plans was to channel the influx of traffic to the northwest part of the site (the Charlesfield Street ramp) so that people did not have to walk by

residents' bedroom windows. He tried to design the individual dorms so as to avoid the institutional box formula.

One of the most striking aspects of the architect's design is the raw expanses of concrete. In Carlhian's idea is the influence of New Brutalism—the bare exposure of utilities and materials in an architecture more expressive of process and function. One of the goals of both Grad Center's New Brutalism and Structuralist influences was to create a more honest, humane relationship between the building and the inhabitant. Though many would laugh at a reference to Grad Center as "humane," there is certainly a relationship, a dialogue, and, at times, a latent tension between the building and those that live in it.

In addition, Grad Center has a definite identity, an admirably monumental and imposing self-confidence. It knows what it is. Its characteristics are distinct, recognizable, abrupt. Though jarring at first glance, the architecture somehow manages to blend into the milieu of College Hill—not in an elegant way, and yet, not in a visually destructive way, either. The initial impulse may be to call Grad Center an eyesore, but even the most avid critic of Grad Center knows that its aesthetic has an underlying complexity.

The layout structure, for instance, has a subtle potential for metaphor: looking at Grad Center from an aerial perspective, one can see that the towers gathered around the Common Center suggest the image of chairs gathered around a table. Neumann spoke about the possibilities of this reading: "You see the 60s Structuralist influence in the attempt at emphasizing little units that have been put together as if they have just been attached to some central mast or something, or some central unit. Once you learn how to read it, it's actually nice to see."

"All in all, as a metaphor and as an image, I think Grad Center's still somewhat compelling," Neumann continued. "But in detail, it has never really worked very well."

Fortress of solitude

It's evident that Grad Center has not turned out to be the unifying force and cohesive community center that it was intended to be. Grad Center suites, first of all, have no common rooms, only a constricting hallway and sharp corners. The inherent awkwardness of the suites as common spaces is comically exemplified in the average Grad Center party. In the narrow hall, partygoers are forced to inadvertently bump and grind with those surrounding them. People attempt to squeeze their way from single to single, spilling drinks on those they pass. Any attempt at a large-scale Grad Center activity directly underscores the blatant lack of communal space in the structure.

Furthermore, the complex is largely outdated in terms of its function. Now almost entirely inhabited by second and third-year students, the name "Grad Center" is an ironic reminder of the lack of change that has occurred within the structure to accommodate that shift. Neumann, for instance, suggested that the building's shortcomings are "not only the fault of the architecture, [but] also the way we use it." Tower E was originally an important social space. It was intended to serve as a "cross-road" (as the Graduate Report called it) for students living in the complex. There were lounges, a game room, seminar rooms and a dining hall and kitchen that looked out onto the terraced sunken courts—all spaces to mingle. There were mailboxes and payphones where people ran into each other. With food and other activities as common denominators, people naturally socialized.

The function of the Common Center appears to be somewhat irrelevant to undergrads, and as a result the space is lifeless and dysfunctional. Because of the lack of administrative space in the rest of campus, the entry-level and the fourth floor hold the quiet offices of Continuing and Summer Studies, which the majority of Grad Center residents have never set foot in. Below is the Bear's Lair, the only bustling space in the entire complex, where students pound the pavement on treadmills and tickle the torsos of their iPods. Even farther below are more spaces for programs that are largely irrelevant to Grad Center inhabitants, such as the Graduate Center Bar (GCB), multimedia labs and the Women Writer's

A DEN OF SIN AND DIN

Grad Center's Sullen Senescence

Project. Aside from an occasional game of ping-pong in the Bear's Lair, then, people rarely use the Common Center to actually hang out.

Bring in the bulldozers

One can, of course, engage in hours of discourse about the shortcomings of Grad Center as a living space. But complaints echo back at the inhabitant from the surrounding concrete walls and stairwells. Nothing gives. Grad Center, in its austerity and haughtiness, can force one to realize that most things, including a sophomore- or junior-year living situation, are entirely what one makes of them. In the brutal honesty and craggy abruptness of the concrete lies a push to create, to make of the space what one will.

But despite the Nietzschean effort of some students to produce their own environment in an imposing structure, it is obvious that long-needed architectural changes should be made to the complex. If the structure is not completely abolished and remade, rising from the ashes—both the university architect and Neumann have half-jokingly contemplated this—then at least a series of adjustments should be made.

The Common Center, for instance, could be made to function more as a true student center, while programs like the GCB and the offices of Summer and Continuing Studies could be moved to other locations. With room returned to recreational purposes, Tower E has the potential to return to what it was. It can be what Grad Center is presently devoid of—space to gather.

Furthermore, to dull the claustrophobic nature of individual suites, walls could be knocked down, perhaps between two singles, and space could be redesigned to allow for a common area. Alterations of this sort would allow people to interact more and, more importantly, to have more control over the way they relate to the space they occupy.

Even the busiest of all Brown students typically spends at least about eight hours—a third of the day—in his or her dorm. Living space, no matter what form, has an influence on the mind of the inhabitant. Neumann noted that revisions to architectural space could subtly lead to larger, more metaphysical revisions: "If we rethought the use of Grad Center, its psychological impact would change."

Alison Nguyen B'08 finds the spiral staircase, you know, actually pretty sensuous.

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