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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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