

The Significance of Baker House

Paul Bentel

Baker House sends a message that beauty matters, quality matters, excellence matters in all human endeavors.

Rosalind Williams, former Dean of Students and Undergraduate Education, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Since its first appearance in Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* in 1949 until the present, Baker House has held a position in the architectural canon as a work representative of the design sensibilities of Alvar Aalto and that strain of the modern movement he has come to personify. The building is regularly mentioned and poignantly illustrated in historical literature ranging in subject matter from modern architecture to the architecture of American colleges and universities (SEE BAKER HOUSE PHOTO ESSAY FIG. 1).¹ Seeing the dormitory is a priority for architecture students on their pilgrimage to the great buildings of North America.² As the epigraph to this essay demonstrates, there is a reliable public consensus about its value as well. Baker House is routinely presented as an architectural monument whose aesthetic qualities make it an important historical figure.

This is remarkable given the building's idiosyncratic form and the specificity of its program. Certainly, Baker House is a noteworthy building with special material, formal, and spatial qualities. Yet the fact that there is such broad agreement about its significance is a matter that deserves some attention. How is it that the historical persona of this building transcended its particularities to garner high and unanimous esteem?

The relationship between the historical significance of a building and its intrinsic architectural qualities is not a simple one. To the architectural historian, physically remarkable buildings such as Baker House are self-evident focal points for investigation since their uniqueness suggests a noteworthy commitment by a patron and an architect. Writers with a strong point of view about historical change may use such buildings to illustrate their understanding of prevailing or emerging sensibilities. Once present in the historical discourse, these buildings acquire authority as evidence of the historical narrative they have been called on to substantiate. Subsequent historical interpreters may choose to accept, redefine, dismiss, or ignore the building and the historical narrative with which it has been associated. Some buildings may rise to the level of a canonic work and are commonly cited. Once ensconced in this discourse a canonic building operates as an intellectual touchstone whose status inspires conflicting claims about why it is important but whose authority as a significant building is undiminished over time.

Baker House is a case in point. Despite disagreements among pundits about the lessons that Baker House offers the student of history, the building has retained its role as a monument for over fifty years. Its emergence as a canonic work demonstrates how difficult it is to disentangle the historian's celebration of its aesthetic qualities from his or her interest in the building as proof of a historical thesis. For example, Sigfried Giedion—its earliest and staunchest proponent—argued that the building's curvilinear facade links it to Le Corbusier's Swiss Pavilion (1930–32) and to what he described as



FIGURE 01 Alvar Aalto. Baker House, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass.. Aerial view in context of West campus. The ceremonial domed entrance to the MIT Main Group is at the upper right.



02. FRANCESCO BORROMINI. Undulating wall of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, 1662–67. This late baroque invention, the undulating wall, reappears in English town planning toward the end of the eighteenth century.

FIGURE 02 Francesco Borromini, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Rome, 1662–67. This facade image appeared in *Space, Time and Architecture* accompanied by this caption: “This late baroque invention, the undulating wall, reappears in English town planning toward the end of the eighteenth century.”

an evolving tendency among modern masters like Le Corbusier and Aalto to “free architecture from the threat of rigidity.”³ We might regard this as an apt reading of the building’s form and a sensitive interpretation of Aalto’s ambitions as an architect. It is also clear that the building’s value to Giedion as historical evidence was immeasurable, because it supported his prior claim that the “undulating wall” was one of the recurring “constituent facts” in architecture, “producing a new tradition.”⁴ For Giedion, Baker House revealed a link between the plasticity of the baroque, the formal invention of eighteenth-century English town planning, and the sculptural shapes of modern architecture. He reinforced the point by including an aerial view of Baker House that suggestively recalls illustrations of Francesco Borromini’s San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane (Rome, 1662–67), Landsdowne Crescent (Bath, 1794), and Le Corbusier’s “Scheme for skyscrapers in Algiers” (1931) that appear in an earlier chapter of *Space, Time and Architecture* (FIG. 1–4). According to Giedion, Baker



83. Lansdowne Crescent, Bath, 1794. *Its serpentine windings follow the contours of the site.*

FIGURE 03 Image of Lansdowne Crescent, Bath, England, as it appeared in *Space, Time and Architecture*



85. LE CORBUSIER. Scheme for skyscrapers in Algiers, 1931. *Late baroque space conceptions came very near to contemporary solutions like this one.*

FIGURE 04 Image of "Scheme for skyscrapers in Algiers, 1931," by Le Corbusier, as it appeared in *Space, Time and Architecture*

House showed that the human aspiration for formal invention in buildings was inexorable and destined to resurface no matter how vigorously it was challenged by the popular taste for ornament.⁵ From the moment Giedion first advanced this claim, the historical figure of Baker House would grow, nurtured by the ideologue's continuous endorsements of its significance and the rising influence of his writing on a generation of architects and architectural historians. Propelled into the historical discourse by Giedion, Baker House has remained one of the central and defining examples of modern architecture.

There is now an opportunity to consider not only this building as a work by Alvar Aalto but also the ways in which we define—and then subsequently work with—the significance of canonic buildings. I will give examples from elsewhere in Giedion's work as well as the ensuing discourse on the building's significance in which interpreters reinvent its historical meaning. I will examine Baker House's rise within the history of the modern movement, its resurfacing in the post-modern critique, and its past and current role as an international emblem of its institutional patron, MIT. I will conclude with a brief reflection on the effect that its status as a canonic work has on us individually, as spectators of the building itself. But first let us consider the circumstances that compel us to rely on such declarations of significance.

The Epistemology of Significance

As the case of Baker House shows, collective or institutional determinations of significance have an impact on the maintenance and, by extension, the appeal of a structure. Baker House also demonstrates how fickle the custodians of historic resources can be. The success of MIT's recent meticulous renewal of Baker House should not cause us to forget the deleterious effects of prior inattention. Alternatively, determinations of significance may provoke overzealous reactions, embalming the building as a monument. Such has been the fate of other canonic works whose historical importance challenges their contemporary use-value. Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts comes to mind as an example of a building whose cultural value as an art piece with clear provenance

has, at times, preempted its role as an art center so that its guardians have enshrined it as a testament to its historical legacy.⁶

The process of signification and the subsequent public actions that flow out of it put us at risk of losing historic buildings physically, for reasons of neglect, or emotionally, because of their estrangement from our private lives. In view of the latter, establishing the significance of Baker House is urgent since among the qualities most highly prized by its historical chroniclers are those that present themselves gradually through an individual's direct experience of the building. Aalto interpreters attribute this to the unpredictability of the architect's resolutions of programmatic and structural issues and to his unusual juxtapositions of uses and materials, as well as to peculiarities in the siting of his buildings. The singularities that result yield unanticipated consequences for the user, making it necessary to experience the building for oneself and, presumably, impossible to comprehend through secondhand accounts.⁷

The idea that Baker House is critically unintelligible to those who do not know it through personal encounter is part of its historical lore. Sigfried Giedion was among the first to encourage this point of view. Not having seen the building firsthand, he presented the words of a surrogate, the "English Observer," to evoke its special qualities in editions of *Space, Time and Architecture* before 1967.⁸ In remarking on Aalto's accomplishment, Giedion went so far as to characterize the effect as an emancipation of the "individual," stimulating his or her sensibilities with its spatial, material, and programmatic variations. Aalto, Giedion maintained, "imbues things with an almost organic flexibility."⁹ More recently, Stanford Anderson described the variety and unpredictability of Aalto's work as a result of the architect's eschewal of patterned responses to the design problems he encountered. For this reason, Anderson notes, "The programmatic thinking of critics seeking formal or even stylistic consistency over a body of work . . . reveals a mindset that cannot incorporate a method like Aalto's that generates diversity not only within his oeuvre but even in aspects of the same building."¹⁰ By all accounts, Aalto's work is intimate and episodic. It places demands on viewers' powers of observation and rewards them for the time they spend in close

contact. Efforts to circumscribe the individual's experience—whether by historical narration or physical barriers—can impede this revelatory process.

Yet conventional determinations of a building's historical significance based on a prevailing canon by their nature fall back on a modality of knowledge that is both arbitrary and authoritative. For example, historic preservation, an increasingly familiar discipline which marshals legal and economic support for historic buildings on the basis of their cultural value, depends on a strong and enduring "statement" of historical significance as a point of departure. Within this and other fields of cultural-heritage management an "epistemology of significance" predominates, characterized by standards of cultural value that do not change over time.¹¹ Institutional patrons of historic buildings such as MIT are also encouraged by definitive and enduring assessments of historical significance, because they offer hope of a result whose good outcome will not be overturned simply by changes in fashion or taste.

While authoritative proclamations of significance may legitimize an official act of preservation or undergird an institution's will to restore a significant historic building, they also tend to exclude unprecedented points of view, especially those that depart from the mainstream. This dichotomy has drawn much recent critical attention and fomented a backlash from cultural conservators and historic preservationists against assessments of historical significance which invoke a fixed canon that excludes diverse points of view about the cultural value and meaning of the buildings themselves.¹²

Baker House presents us with an intriguing test case since its power as a building capable of fomenting diverse and private reactions lies at the heart of its historical persona. Commentators claim historical significance for this building on the basis of, on the one hand, its impact on a professional discourse and, on the other, the emotive power of its form. Is it possible that Baker House possesses intrinsic architectural qualities so potent they preclude an expression of its value as mere historical evidence? Or are the claims for its significance that tout its evocative power self-serving punditry intended to bolster some historical narrative? To probe these questions, let us consider Sigfried Giedion's use of Baker House in *Space, Time and Architecture* more closely.

Baker House, Giedion, and the Modern Movement

From the moment Giedion first included Baker House in *Space, Time and Architecture* in 1949, he heralded its historical significance and proclaimed its architect a dominant figure who carried forward "new means of expression and their elements—standardization, new methods of construction and, above all, a new space conception." Giedion presented Aalto as a successor to Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and proponents of *De Stijl*, among others.¹³

Beyond this, Giedion saw in Baker House a relationship to the core strategies that he associated with the modern movement: a new "space conception" liberated from the confinements of structure-bearing walls, a rejection of period styles and historical references, a relating of form to program, and the incorporation of contemporary building technologies. Recalling the ambitions of early modernists to achieve an "existenzminimum" in their housing units, Giedion also reported that the dormitory's "bedrooms and workrooms . . . were as small as possible without destroying the vitality of the atmosphere." In black and white, Baker House presented itself as an "unadorned" building that demonstrated the volumetric possibilities presented by the rigid concrete frame. To emphasize its stylistic independence, in the 1959 edition of *Space, Time and Architecture* Giedion added a comparison to the Harvard dormitories "built in the style of English country houses of the eighteenth century." In contrast to these, Aalto's work demonstrated a modern aesthetic brought to life by the creative vision of the architect.¹⁴

At the same time, Giedion perceived evidence in Baker House of a shift within the modern movement. In its "organic" formal vocabulary, the dormitory avoided the regularity and repetition of the earlier work of European modernists, such as Gropius, without departing ideologically from the movement Giedion espoused.¹⁵ Its design was novel with respect to both the stylistic eclecticism of the *École des Beaux-Arts* and the rigid and sanitized work of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. It possessed a vigorous free-form plan, "flexibly" organized to accommodate different needs; sculptural features such as the curvilinear facade; and, finally, the contrasts of rough and smooth surfaces by which

these formal features were enhanced.¹⁶ It is in this capacity that Baker House became definitively intertwined with the historical evolution of the modern movement as Giedion narrated it, cementing Aalto's role as the "integrator" of its early and later phases.¹⁷

The aesthetic possibilities presented by Baker House appear to have had a powerful impact on Giedion, causing him to change the words he used to describe its historical significance. In the 1949 edition of *Space, Time and Architecture*, in which his first reviews of the dormitory appeared, he titled the chapter on Aalto "Elemental and Contemporary" to evoke the sculptural simplicity of the architect's work. Giedion subsequently renamed the chapter "Irrationality and Standardization," as a public acknowledgment that the unpredictable forms that characterized Aalto's work constituted a legitimate formal strategy for the new architecture. This change in the chapter title coincided with Giedion's inclusion of his own firsthand observations of the building, suggesting that his reclassification of Aalto's work was provoked by his experience of Baker House in person.

The spirit of change that Baker House signaled to Giedion was not merely to be construed in its formal or material character. The historian's growing conviction of the significance of Aalto's work, demonstrated by his increasing coverage of it in *Space, Time and Architecture*, followed his ruminations on the more essential shortcomings of modern architecture as a vehicle of contemporary culture. Giedion revealed this line of thinking as early as 1943, when he prepared a short manifesto with José Luis Sert and Fernand Léger titled "Nine Points on Monumentality."¹⁸ In it the three declared a desire to move the modern movement beyond its commitment merely to satisfying humankind's physical requirements for shelter toward service to its social and symbolic life as well. This assertion led Giedion to contemplate the ways in which architectural form might stimulate a transcendent collective social memory.¹⁹

In his search for architectonic forms that were "abstract" and yet still stirred the human imagination, Giedion found something in Baker House that answered the challenge, namely Aalto's derivation of a modern formal vocabulary linked to human experience. Of Baker House, he wrote, "As Joan Miró is rooted

in the Catalan landscape, as the cubists transmitted experiences—tables, glasses, bottles, newspapers—of a Parisian café into a new conception of space, so Aalto found a direct incentive in the curved contours of the Finnish lakes, shaped with astonishing smoothness by nature itself and set in high relief by forest masses pressing on all sides down to the water's edge."²⁰ In its plasticity and formal inventiveness as well as its recall of landscapes and the material richness found in nature, Baker House served Giedion in a way that the rigid and functional work of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* never could. It both enlarged the movement formally and enabled him to weave a historical narrative describing Aalto's work—and by extension, the work of his modernist colleagues, such as Le Corbusier in his later years—as fully rounded, satisfying the human instinct for lyricism and metaphor.

But did Giedion's assessment of Baker House and the significance he accorded it accurately reflect qualities that he apprehended in the building, or was he inspired to celebrate these qualities of the building because they revealed a way forward to a new design thesis for the modern movement? A direct answer to this question is not available to us. However, the tension between the demands of historical narration and the discrete revelations of the building itself becomes apparent when we compare Giedion's written descriptions of Baker House before and after 1967, the date of issue of the fifth edition of *Space, Time and Architecture*. As I have noted, prior to 1967, Giedion used the reported impressions of an unnamed "English Observer" as a substitute for his own words, since he had not seen the building firsthand. That borrowed text makes note of many of the features that relate the building to its locale and revel in its material richness. For example, it references the relationship between the curvilinear wall of Baker House and the Boston brick bowfront. The English Observer is also prescient in her observation of a lyrical connection between the curving facade and the waterfront beyond, establishing what has surely become one of the most often repeated explanations for this form. Following this narrative, Giedion explained why he dwelled on the local influences on Aalto's design: "Aalto's attempt to free architecture from the threat of rigidity, points, like every constituent work, forward and backward, and is rooted at the same time in its own soil."²¹

After 1967, Giedion removed the text of the English Observer. He replaced it with his own words describing Baker House's relationship to other significant buildings by Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Sert.²² Instead of discussing the curvilinear shape in its relationship to local architectural forms, he focused on its connection to the "undulating wall," on the basis of which the historical lineage from Borromini to Le Corbusier could be traced. Why the change? Why omit the reference to those intrinsic characteristics of the building that so influenced a firsthand encounter with the building and replace them with comparisons that situate the building in abstract relationships across time and space? Perhaps, by 1967, Giedion had seen Baker House and found it less stimulating than anticipated. More likely, he focused his descriptive faculties on the historical legacy of the building rather than its local associations or material qualities because the narrative of canonic significance best fulfilled the rhetorical expectations of his readership.

Baker House after the Modern Movement

Aalto's role as a modern master was canonized inalterably by Giedion's embrace of his work (which grew, as Stanford Anderson has pointed out, to 9% of the total volume of illustrated works in the final editions of *Space, Time and Architecture*).²³ Nevertheless, Giedion's assessments of both Aalto and Baker House would be challenged. Nikolas Pevsner criticized Aalto's design methods as being irrational and aberrant when viewed against the historical trajectory of what he termed "modern design," this judgment notwithstanding his recognition of Baker House as evidence of the movement's international reach.²⁴ Frank Lloyd Wright, with whom Aalto is occasionally associated in historical accounts of the modern movement as having enriched its formal vocabulary, was also a critic of the building. Wright's reaction to an interviewer's suggestion in 1952 that Baker House had influenced his design of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1943–59) stated his position clearly when he wrote, "Incidentally, Aalto's work on MIT affects me as inspirational as a clumsy grub. No chrysalis is that Dormitory of his."²⁵

Despite the exception taken by Pevsner to Aalto's design sensibility on ideological grounds or Wright's put-down of Baker House, historical surveys of Western architecture written before 1980 that regarded the modern movement as historically inevitable included Aalto as a de facto modern master and as a link between its early and later phases. For example, in his collection of essays on American architecture titled *The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-twentieth Century* (1972), William Jordy connected Aalto with Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier, and Wright on the basis of their use of wood and brick to create texture in walls. He also pointed to Aalto's and Breuer's common study of folk craftsmanship.²⁶ In his contribution to the *Pelican History of Art* series, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1977 edition), Henry Russell Hitchcock presented no illustrations of Baker House. But he stressed Aalto's leadership role within the modern movement particularly in the formal and material richness he brought to the modern idiom. Hitchcock linked Aalto with Louis Kahn and the "Neo-Brutalism" of Paul Rudolph.²⁷

By the 1980s, however, both the inevitability of the modern movement and the role Aalto played in restoring continuity between its rational and organic phases were subject to critical revision. In *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Kenneth Frampton described Aalto's work as a synthesis of Nordic "Romanticism" and a prevailing "Doric sensibility" in Scandinavia that resulted in a merging of idiosyncratic tendencies and the normative "rules" of classicism. By explaining Aalto's work in relationship to his personal history rather than as the consequence of a historical imperative, Frampton's *Modern Architecture* gave a hint of things to come in the historiography of Aalto, who would be increasingly celebrated for his idiosyncratic design sensibilities. In Frampton's view, Baker House was "a somewhat unresolved design" that looked forward to the rustic Säynätsalo Town Hall rather than back to the Bauhaus or Borromini.²⁸

Histories of American architecture during the same period are less consistent in their coverage and assessment of Baker House. This is understandable since the theme of the modern movement (and the related International Style) did not figure centrally in studies that dealt with national or regional architecture.

Among those that acknowledged Aalto's historical status as a modern master, *The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History* (1961), by John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, was the most vigorous in its praise. It states: "By 1960, acclaimed from Zurich to Tokyo as one of Aalto's greatest buildings, Baker House remains a landmark in American university architecture."²⁹ No doubt the authors' MIT affiliation played some role in their strong affirmation of its significance. Marcus Whiffen's and Frederick Koepfer's *American Architecture, 1860–1976* (1983) describes Baker House as "forward looking, forecasting the experiments of the sixties." This book, it must also be pointed out, was published by MIT Press. In his *American Architecture* (1985), David Handlin accorded Baker House high praise, attributing to it an influential role in the transformation of the work of Louis Kahn from light tubular steel structures to his monumental and classically inspired work in concrete and masonry.³⁰ In contrast, Robert Stern's *Pride of Place: Building the American Dream* (1986) and Dell Upton's *Architecture in the United States* (1998) make no mention of either the architect or the building, a circumstance that stands to reason since both books embrace American exceptionalism, emphasizing the historical influence of national and popular culture (in the case of Stern) and regional or local circumstances (in the case of Upton) on architectural production.

The range of treatment of Aalto and Baker House that we see in the writing of Frampton, Stern, Upton, and others can also be explained by the waning influence of the modern movement and its supporting historical ideology. As a consequence of the declining authority of this canon, it became possible for survey histories such as those by Stern and Upton to exclude Aalto or Baker House. When Aalto does appear it is for his iconoclasm as a modernist rather than his role as a modern master. We see such a representation in the regroupings of prominent architects by Reynar Banham and Vincent Scully, both of whom put Aalto in with the New Brutalists. While Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960) failed to include Aalto as a modernist alongside Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, his polemic, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (1966), portrayed Aalto's work as having influenced that of architects such as Peter and Alison Smithson, Paul Rudolph, Denys Lasdun, Louis Kahn, and James Stirling.³¹ In his textbook, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (1969), Scully presents Aalto within the context of a younger generation of American architects such as Rudolph, Kahn as well as John Johansen and Moshe Safdie. Scully goes on to describe Baker House as having reinforced a nascent movement toward strong and rough shapes carried out in inexpensive but permanent masonry and brick which would



FIGURE 05 Image of Baker House as it appeared in *Space, Time and Architecture*.

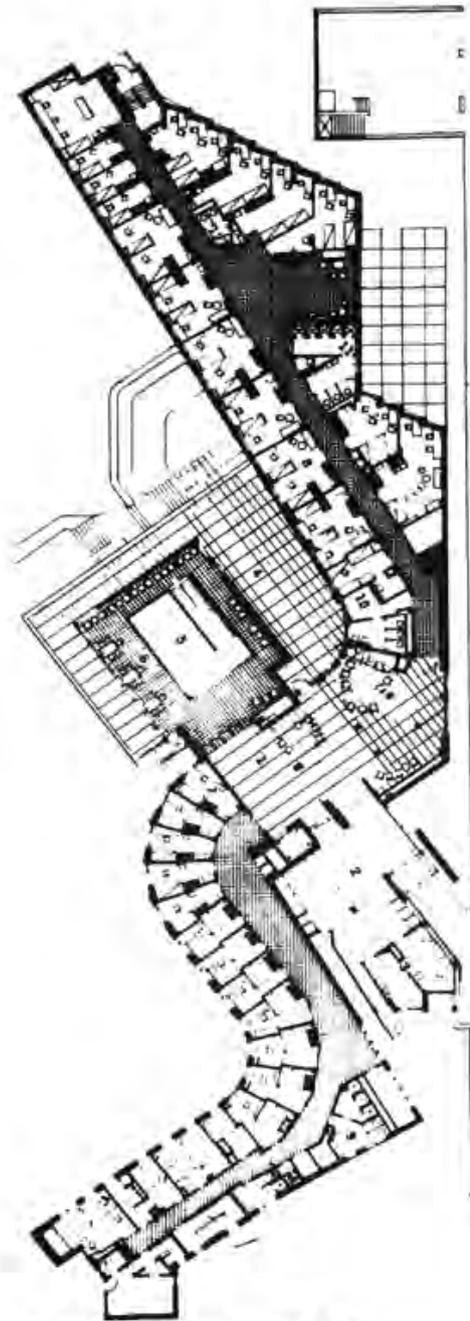
become the material and formal well-spring of a contemporary vernacular architecture.³²

Writers who championed postmodernism saw Baker House as a manifestation of Aalto's modernist apostasy, a claim that coincided with the rise of the historical thesis proclaiming the epistemological failure of modernism. Notable among them was Robert Venturi, an architect whose polemical work, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), attacked the reductive simplicity of the modern movement and presented Aalto as its ideological opponent.³³ Baker House, Venturi wrote, was "exceptional" because its curvilinear river front contrasted with the rectangularity of the back of the building. In celebrating this discontinuity between front and back, Aalto disclosed the "complexity and contradiction" inherent in the relationships of program and structure, which modernists—eager to express the universality of industrial technology—would otherwise attempt to conceal.³⁴ As with the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society Building (George Howe and William Lescaze, 1932), a building Venturi praised in his text, the dormitory had two different sides in recognition of "its specific urban setting" and its role as "a fragment of a greater exterior spatial whole." To illustrate the point, Venturi compared the plan of the dormitory to that of a "double axis" Parisian hotel, the *Hôtel de Matignon*, whose "ingenious double axis . . . accommodated outside spaces differently at the front and back," and the Florentine *Palazzo Strozzi*, whose plain side elevation similarly contrasted with its heavily rusticated street front and referenced two different urban conditions (FIG. 5).

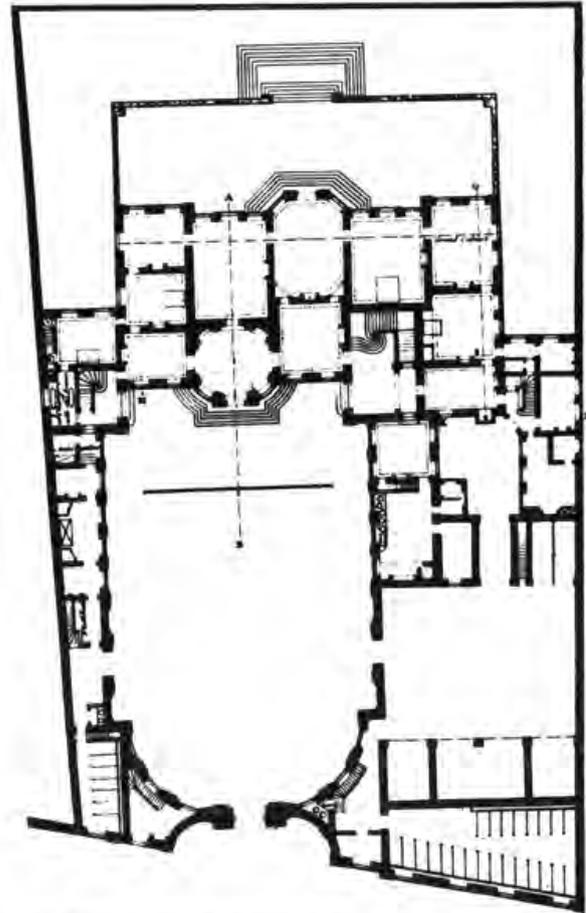
How different is Venturi's interpretation of the historical significance of Baker House from that of Giedion, who compared the dormitory to Borromini's *San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane* and English crescents of the eighteenth century? Where Giedion perceived formal coherence forged by the powerful gesture of the curving line, Venturi saw the opposite; namely, the building as a matrix of formal gestures, each responsive to its local condition. As an example of a modernist sensibility, the building evoked a comprehensible unity forged by artistic vision and the rational deployment of program and structure. As an example of a postmodern ethos, the same building demonstrated the architect's acceptance of disunity and discontinuity, a trait Venturi advocated in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.

Sixteen years after Venturi's book, Dimitri Porphyrios published *Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Alvar Aalto*, in which he claimed not merely that Aalto's work diverged from the rationalism of the modern movement but that it represented an ideological shift away from the "homotopia" of European rationalism. In its place, Aalto substituted a "heterotopia" that "was to destroy the continuity of syntax and to shatter predictable modes of the homogeneous grid."³⁵ Porphyrios's characterization of Aalto's work as eclectic created a new historical role for the architect in the 1980s and removed him from the pantheon of modern masters whose singular vision Giedion had heralded years earlier. Remarkably, Aalto's stature as a historical figure rose meteorically in this period despite the growing intellectual disaffection for the modern movement with which he had been so intimately connected.

Spiro Kostof's architectural survey, *A History of Architecture* (1985), is the most important re-affirmation of the significance of Baker House within the historical narrative of postmodernism. The dormitory is described in the text and appears in a stunning aerial photograph, which depicts it against the backdrop of the rectilinear buildings of the MIT main campus, a view that highlights its sculptural form (this view is reproduced in the Baker House Photo Essay fig. 1). Baker House assumes the role of a visual icon alongside other significant modern buildings (it is located between Oscar Niemeyer's *Church of St. Francis Assisi* [1942–43] and Le Corbusier's *Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp* [1950–55]) and within the sweeping context of architectural history spanning back to 400,000 BCE. In his written description of the building, Kostof noted the architect's "lyrical" sensibilities, his formal inventiveness, and the "undulating" wall, repeating language that had appeared forty years earlier in *Space, Time and Architecture*. The "coarse brick" and random spacing of the clinkers of Baker House, to which Kostof drew parallels with the rough concrete of Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles*, was a "deliberate affront to the International Style sensibilities." The building also provided Kostof the opportunity to explain Aalto's role in turning an international generation of architects away from the "doctrinaire rationalism of the Germans" and back to the lineage of "traditional" architecture, thus helping



205. Aalto. Baker House Dormitory, M.I.T., Cambridge. Plan



206. Courtonne. Hôtel de Malignon, Rue de Varenne, Paris. Plan



207. Maiano. Strozzi Palace. Florence. Perspective

FIGURE 06 Comparative figure from Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), showing the plan of Baker House; the plan of a Parisian hotel that Venturi reprinted from Nikolas Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (London: Penguin Books, 1943); and the side elevation of the Palazzo Strozzi, Florence.

to conclude the revolutionary experiment that had commenced with the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and pointing the way toward new aesthetic possibilities for those who sought to reconnect with the architecture of the past.³⁶

With the endorsement of Kostof and after almost six decades of constant historical attention since the 1949 edition of *Space, Time and Architecture*, Baker House's significance can hardly be contested.³⁷ In fact, the circumstance is reversed: due to the unquestioned significance of Baker House, an author's ability to demonstrate the veracity of his or her historical thesis can be demonstrated by the success he or she has in showing it to be pre-ordained in Aalto's work generally and Baker House in particular. This condition is borne out even in the face of the supposed decentralization of the historical discourse through the medium of the World Wide Web: as of the writing of this essay, the Wikipedia entry for "modern architecture" listed Aalto as one of two "mid-century masters," alongside Eero Saarinen, and Baker House as one of five "significant buildings" cited for Alvar Aalto.³⁸ From the point of view of the historiography of the building and Aalto, contemporary studies of the dormitory need not dwell on the legitimacy of its canonic significance. Now ensconced in the historical canon, Baker House is part of the *lingua franca* that both facilitates and shapes our discussions about architectural production in our own day.

Baker House and MIT

When it was completed, Baker House was as distinct in its immediate physical context as it was in its historical relationship to the work of Aalto's modernist forebears. Since its construction, the curvilinear form of the riverfront dormitory has provided a powerful sign of MIT's presence in the Boston metropolitan area and among other academic institutions with a prominent position on the Charles River, such as Harvard and Boston University. It is reasonable to suggest that the significance of Baker House to its institutional patron has gone well beyond its utility as a dormitory.

At the time that it was constructed, Baker House was one of the first dormitories built by the institute for "on-campus" housing. It fulfilled the administration's desire to create a distinct academic community within

the city. Aalto's prior relationship to the school—first, through his affiliation with the Albert Farwell Bemis Foundation and then as a faculty member in the architecture department at MIT—is not to be discounted as an influence on his selection.³⁹ Nevertheless, his status as an internationally recognized modernist carrying out his first permanent building in the United States suggested a progressive outcome. Apparently content with the results of the process, MIT administrators praised the architect for a "stimulating and unconventional design" at the inauguration of the building.⁴⁰

In order to appreciate the forward-mindedness Aalto demonstrated in his design of Baker House, the dormitory must be considered in the context of both American campus planning and the modern movement. MIT was not the first major American university or college to engage a prominent architect associated with the modern movement. Before the war, with the aid of the Rockefeller Foundation and the spiritual leadership of supporters of modernism such as Lewis Mumford, a series of competitions featuring modern designs were held throughout the Northeast.⁴¹ Frank Lloyd Wright's work at Florida Southern College in Lakeland (started in 1938) had provided an internationally recognized architect the opportunity to build a whole campus. Also in 1938, the most famous example of academic modernism was initiated by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe on behalf of Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. But even with these as precursors, Aalto's project was distinctive due to its stunning proximity to MIT's existing neoclassical buildings, which were so different in design from Baker House. As Paul Turner has pointed out, Baker House was among the first of several buildings, including the Alumni Pool (Lawrence Anderson, 1939), that would be carried out by the Institute according to a novel design methodology ostensibly based on the modernist goals of functionality and flexibility but also preoccupied with the clarity of these buildings as objects set against the other buildings on the campus. This agenda marked a departure from the "traditional" American campus planning, which had sought permanence, stability, and visual continuity in the designs of buildings for institutions of higher education.⁴²

It would be incorrect to suggest that the distinctiveness of Baker House rests completely on its visual difference from the William Welles Bosworth campus

or, as Giedion pointed out, the “Georgian” dormitory format adopted by Harvard and present in numerous exemplars just up the river. Baker House was also remarkable as a building within the modern idiom, as I have already noted, by virtue of its rough brick walls and formal complexity, features that were inconsistent with standardization and the machine-made. As an academic building, Baker House gave expression to the relationship between the student and the institution. Commentators from within the MIT community noted this quality in the plan layout, in which a variety of room sizes and shapes were present, each with their own relationship to public spaces. These aspects were evidence of a sophisticated response to the “communal” program of the dormitory and further signified the progressive cant of the school following World War II.

The significance of Baker House to MIT remains in its symbolic role as a progressive, modern, communal building with a distinctive presence in the public domain. The institute recognizes, as well, the importance that the building has acquired by virtue of the repeated commentary by Giedion and others. This understanding is reflected in the words of MIT’s own promotional literature describing Baker House as “one of the pivotal modern buildings in North America.”⁴³ By its current, well-thought-out, and highly visible stewardship of Baker House, the institute has acquired more than just the reputation of a public guardian of important architectural heritage. Its image as a first-rate technical university is burnished by its patronage of and commitment to good, modern design. The words of Rosalind Williams, dean of students at MIT at the time of the renovation of Baker House, suggest the self-awareness with which the restoration of the building was carried out in 1998. “Baker House,” she wrote in the promotional literature that accompanied the re-opening of the building after its refurbishing, “is part of the postwar vision that MIT should become a place where communal life is important and is leveraged for educational benefit. As President [James R.] Killian was fond of saying, our campus should give our students ‘a sense of the first rate.’”⁴⁴

Though dichotomous, these two forms of signification—the one celebrating Baker House’s association with Aalto, the other describing its intrinsic qualities as a building of excellence—overlap and amplify one another. It is undoubtedly reassuring to those who

believe in Aalto’s importance among his contemporaries that this building should still provoke positive responses from audiences who witness it today. MIT’s commitment to “excellence” in cultural and scientific pursuits, as expressed in Rosalind Williams’ pronouncement in the epigraph to this essay, is reinforced by this tasteful and important monument. But these circumstantial and fortuitous relationships between our evaluations of architectural quality and historical significance hide a fundamental conflict between the criteria of cultural value on which we base them. Indeed, there is danger in the use of one kind of signification to substantiate the claims we make to the other. Allusions to Baker House’s historical significance threaten to undermine the credibility of our admiration of its gravity as a physical and spatial object, because they raise the possibility that we are celebrating its physical attributes in order to substantiate historical claims. The zealotry with which Aalto’s proponents seek a place in history for him and his building undoubtedly provokes a positive response in popular taste which privileges the Aalto aesthetic. To what extent, we might ask, is the current approbation of the building a result of an authentic and individual response to its architectural qualities, the residual effect of a prior evaluation of historical significance, or a mixture of both?

The current re-estimation of Baker House as a monument testifying to the values of MIT has gained greater depth in recent years with the commencement of an MIT building program that includes new dormitories. In this regard, Baker House provides an example of the utility of the progressive designs with which the school is associated. The former dean of the School of Architecture and Planning, William Mitchell, used the example of Baker House to foment support for the new building project by Steven Holl, who was designing a residence hall while the Baker House renovation was ongoing. In this context, Mitchell’s comments about Baker House are revealing: “Baker House shows the value of investing in thoughtful, well-designed buildings that are fundamentally good in basic human terms and that have a robustness that allows them to adapt over time. It sets a very high standard for the new student residences MIT will be constructing over the next few years.”⁴⁵

Baker House Itself

In the current critical climate, it is difficult to sustain the belief that our opinions about the architectural qualities of a building are not influenced by prior evaluations of historical significance. Professional evaluators of Baker House—historians, critics, architects, representatives of MIT—are limited in what they can say about a building like Baker House by the larger historical project they have underway. We have seen that Giedion's favorable comments on Baker House coincided with his efforts to redirect the modern movement toward greater formal diversity. His interpretation of the building as a "constituent work," locked in its place in time and destined to play out its role as evidence of a historical continuum reaching back to classical antiquity, cannot be divorced from his celebration of the curvilinear wall. His interpretation of the building form as "free" is linked inalterably to his portrayal of Aalto as an aesthetic liberator whose independence and creativity were bulwarks against the "threat of rigidity" borne by standardization. Vincent Scully's use of Baker House to demonstrate a point of origin within the modern movement for the historical events leading to the work of Louis Kahn or the New Brutalists is an example of how opportunistic the treatment of canonic works can be. MIT's relatively sudden rekindling of enthusiasm for the dormitory, its deserving qualities notwithstanding, coincides with the institutional recognition of the way in which progressive design, in the past and today, can reflect well on the school. In each case those making claims for the significance of Baker House can be shown to have interests which those claims also service. Were we to rely on these competing claims as the basis for determining historical significance we would inherit their limited and biased view.

One would be hard-pressed to show that this kind of appropriation of meaning for the purposes of constructing a historical narrative leads to untruthfulness. It is, nevertheless, troubling that historical narration diminishes the artifact by yielding to it a meaning that only partially reflects its intrinsic value as architecture. We have seen this in the way that Baker House lost its historical identity as a building with regional associations in Giedion's text when the author committed himself to codifying its role as the marker of continuity between the first and second generations of the modern movement. We also see it in Robert Venturi's claim

that Baker House was a fragment that was rooted in an urban context, an interpretation that disregards the building's powerful formal integrity. Estimations of value based on extrinsic, historical, or associational significance seem invariably to cause this kind of loss of depth in our interpretation of buildings.

Yet Baker House is instructive in this regard as well. The dormitory continues to foment a desire for close observation and rewards viewers for the time they spend with it by disclosing additional qualities of space, form, and surface. Students, alumni, visitors to the building from outside the MIT community, architects and non-architects, all comment positively on its siting and shape. The persistence with which we find critics and historians returning to Baker House as an example of this or that particularity of history is itself reassuring, since it suggests that the building retains its ability to stimulate the individuals who witness it even though their attentions may be focused elsewhere. Despite the role of the building as a historical touchstone, our strong reactions to Baker House's sculptural forms, its robust material features, and its idiosyncratic plan suggest that it is possible for the building to outperform its historical persona.

Could we suppose that the significance of Baker House lies in its ability to attract our attention, compel us to engage it as a physical object, and, subsequently, to write our histories around it? By its presence and entrancing physicality, Baker House challenges the intellectual abstractions with which we support the thesis of its historical significance. In a moment when we seem to be able to muster so little conviction in the capacity of things to inspire a collective sense of their unmediated value, recognition of this quality is no faint praise.

- 1 Survey histories on modern architecture, American architecture, and academic buildings in which Baker House is mentioned are identified the sections that follow. Among regional and local histories in which the dormitory is described or illustrated, consider G. E. Kidder Smith, *The Architecture of the United States*, vol. 1, *New England and the Mid-Atlantic States* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 264–65 (with illustration); and Boston Society of Architects, *Architecture Boston* (Barre, Mass.: Barre, 1976), 170–71 (with illustration). Books on architectural compositions specifically addressed to architecture students that use Baker House as a subject of analysis include Francis Ching, *Architecture, Form, Space, and Order* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1979), 223 (with plan); and Roger Clark and Michael Pause, *Precedents in Architecture* (1985; New York: Van Nostrand, 1996), 197 (with plan). Figure 1 in the Baker House Photo Essay in the present volume appears both in Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and in Demetri Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Alvar Aalto* (London: Academy Editions, 1982).
- 2 This has been true since the building was first constructed. In his short account of the travels of architecture students from Texas A&M University in 1949, Max Levy describes “field trips” throughout the Midwest and Northeast. Their first stop in the Boston area was at MIT, where, after meeting William W. Wurster, dean of architecture, the group was invited to spend the night in the Baker House dormitory even before the building was completed. “The building, which famously looks up and down the Charles River rather than at it, offered the students the unexpected opportunity of actually living in modernism for a few days.” Max Levy, *Chasing the Modernist Rainbow* (College Station, Tex.: Texas Architect Press, 2000), 29–30.
- 3 Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), 637. All subsequent references are to the 1967 edition unless otherwise noted.
- 4 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 18. “Constituent facts are those tendencies which, when they are suppressed, inevitably reappear. Their recurrence makes us aware that these are elements which, all together, are producing a new tradition. Constituent facts in architecture, for example, are the undulation of the wall, the juxtaposition of nature and the human dwelling, the open ground plan.”
- 5 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 18.
- 6 Having been a student in the Visual and Environmental Studies Program at Harvard College in the late 1970s, I can attest to the difficulties which we, as students, had in gaining access to the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts for use as a studio environment.
- 7 For descriptions of Aalto’s work that make reference to the unfolding experience of the visitor to an Aalto building, see Kostof, *History of Architecture*, 732; Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), 200; and William Curtis, “Modernism, Nature, Tradition: Aalto’s Mythical Landscapes,” in *Alvar Aalto in Seven Buildings/Alvar Aalto in sieben Bauwerken*, ed. Tino Tuomi and others (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1998), 132.
- 8 The “English Observer” may have been Mary Jaqueline Tyrwhitt (1905–1983), the distinguished, South African-born, British town planner and town-planning educator. Tyrwhitt met Giedion around 1947 through her association with the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne and would become his translator and editor. She also traveled and provided images to Giedion for his publications. The collection of her images dating from between 1950 and 1957 intended for Giedion’s use in *Space, Time and Architecture* as well as *Architecture You and Me: The Diary of a Development* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958) is part of the Tyrwhitt collection at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) archive. Tyrwhitt held a teaching position at the New School of Social Research in New York City starting in 1948, so she was in a position to travel to see Baker House, which was finished in 1949. It is known that Tyrwhitt was in New England in 1949, carrying out research on soil conservation at the farm of Walter Hadala in Adams, Mass. See “Tyrwhitt, Jaqueline, 1905–1983” (British Architectural Library at the RIBA archive, Acc. M98 and M150). For the collection of images intended for use in the Giedion publications, see RIBA Archive Record Control Number P005203, P005151. For a synopsis of Tyrwhitt’s life and work see Catharine Huws Nagashima, “M. J. Tyrwhitt: Annotated Curriculum Vitae,” *Ekistics* 314/315 (Sept.–Oct. and Nov.–Dec. 1985): 403–7.
- 9 Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952), 472
- 10 Stanford Anderson, “Aalto and ‘Methodical Accommodation to Circumstance,’” in *Alvar Aalto in Seven Buildings*, ed. Tuomi, 143.
- 11 Joseph Tainter and G. John Lucas, “Epistemology of the Significance Concept,” *American Antiquity*, 48/4 (Oct. 1983): 707–19.
- 12 See, for example, Daniel Bluestone, “Preservation and Renewal in Post–World War II Chicago,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 47/4 (May 1994): 210.
- 13 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 618–19.
- 14 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), 636–40.
- 15 See for example, Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, liv. See also Alan Colquhoun, “Rationalism: A Philosophical Concept in Architecture,” (1987) reprinted in Alan Colquhoun, *Modernity and the Classical Tradition: Architectural Essays 1980–1987* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 84; and Kostof, *History of Architecture*, 732.
- 16 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 640.
- 17 In the fifth edition of *Space, Time and Architecture*, Giedion described Aalto as an integrator of the “rational geometric” and “organic” sides of the modern movement. Aalto’s work resolved an epochal confrontation of opposites visible in the early work of Le Corbusier but not fully resolved until the 1960s in the work of Aalto and late Le Corbusier. Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, liv–lv.
- 18 Written in 1943 and published in Giedion, *Architecture You and Me: The Diary of a Development*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1958), 48–52.
- 19 Kenneth Frampton has described the task as forging a connection between “the abstract forms of modern art and the traditional representative forms of collective memory.” Frampton, “Giedion in America: Reflections in a Mirror,” *Architectural Design* 51, no. 6/7 (1981): 50.
- 20 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 640.
- 21 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* (2nd ed), 472.
- 22 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 637.
- 23 As Stanford Anderson has pointed out, illustrations of Aalto’s work grew to 9 percent of the total volume of illustrated works in the final editions of *Space, Time and Architecture*. These forty-nine pages eclipsed the page totals of sections on any other architect with the exception of Le Corbusier. Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 618–67.
- 24 On Pevsner’s critique of Aalto’s work, see Kostof, *History of Architecture*, 732. His reference to Baker House as an example of the “internationalism” of the “style of the twentieth century” first appears in the seventh edition of Nikolas Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (London: Penguin, 1963), 421.
- 25 Letter from Frank Lloyd Wright to Joseph Samona [Giuseppe Samonà], 20 March 1952; reprinted in Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, *Letters to Architects: Frank Lloyd Wright* (Fresno, Calif.: California State Univ. Press, 1984), 191.
- 26 William Jordy, *The Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), 188, 372.
- 27 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 579–80.

- 28 Frampton, *Modern Architecture*, 200.
- 29 John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, *The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1961), 483.
- 30 Marcus Whiffen and Frederick Koeper, *American Architecture: 1860–1976* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), 343; David Handlin, *American Architecture* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1985), 255.
- 31 Rayner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (London: Architectural Press, 1960); Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (New York: Reinhold, 1966): 14, 47, 75. Two years after the publication of *Theory and Design*, Banham affirmed Aalto's historical role as a "Master" of the modern movement and "the quiet man of the Big Four" alongside Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. See Banham, *Guide to Modern Architecture* (London: Architectural Press, 1962): 126.
- 32 Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 209–10.
- 33 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 18.
- 34 Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, 86.
- 35 Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism*, 2, 93.
- 36 Kostof, *History of Architecture*, 730. The image of Baker House used by Kostof is the same as that which appears in Porphyrios's *Sources of Modern Eclecticism*.
- 37 A bibliographic search in the Avery Library Architecture Catalogue at Columbia University for titles in which Aalto's name appears revealed over eighty different book citations, twenty-one of which were published between 1995 and 2005.
- 38 See *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Modern architecture," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_architecture (18 July 2011).
- 39 During his first academic visit to MIT, Aalto received support from the Rockefeller Foundation to carry out studies of postwar relief housing. He was also a personal friend of William W. Wurster, dean of architecture, at the time the Baker House commission presented itself.
- 40 Quoted in "Baker House at Fifty: Renewing the Commitment," a pamphlet printed by MIT on the occasion of the reopening of the building after its renovation in 1998, n.p.
- 41 On the history of the pre–World War II competitions for modern academic campus buildings, see James Kornwolf, ed., *Modernism in America, 1937–1943* (Williamsburg, Va.: Muscarelle Museum of Art, 1985); and Paul Bentel, "The Re-examination of Modern Architecture: A Review of Modernism in America, 1937–43," *Places* 3/1 (Winter 1986): 43–53.
- 42 Paul Turner, *Campus: An American Planning Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 260–61.
- 43 "Baker House at Fifty," n.p.
- 44 "Baker House at Fifty," n.p.
- 45 "Baker House at Fifty," n.p.