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Classical Rotundas, Gothic Towers, and Memorialising a Modern Mythology for Yale

Stephen Gage

In 1921, the *Yale Alumni Weekly* published a retrospective celebrating two decades of "the most remarkable period of expansion that Yale has ever seen," the largest in its 220-year history.[1] Bookending either end of this period were two touchstone projects, each of a memorial character. 1901 saw the completion of the Bicentennial Buildings, a monumental Classical group centred on a domed rotunda commemorating Yale's war dead. In 1921, Yale was just completing the Memorial Quadrangle, a Gothic dormitory complex crowned by the soaring Harkness Tower, a symbolic memorial structure that instantly became the most prominent landmark on the campus. Both projects were similar in their intention to instil a sense of institutional unity and pride by commemorating Yale's past. The stylistic difference between them, however, resulted in vastly different receptions. The Bicentennial memorial was frequently seen as an expensive misstep, and made little lasting impact on Yale's self-image. By contrast, ecstatic praise was heaped on the Memorial Quadrangle from the moment the first drawings were published, and the project was seen to epitomise Yale's values as an institution. More broadly, the story of these two monuments reveals strikingly different attitudes towards memorialisation in early twentieth century America, with the Gothic providing a richer and more potent sense of symbolic expression.

By the late nineteenth century, Yale had expanded beyond its early eighteenth-century roots as a small college focused on the training of the clergy. The College's liberal arts curriculum remained prominent, but it was joined by the Sheffield Scientific School, the Law School, and other emerging graduate and professional programs. At the same time, sporadic and unplanned expansion had made its campus in New Haven, Connecticut jumbled and incoherent, its original "Brick Row" of austere dormitories competing with examples from a myriad of nineteenth-century revival styles (Fig. 1). The Bicentennial Buildings, built for the occasion of Yale's two-hundredth anniversary, were intended to rectify this by providing a central unifying space for the entire University. The goal was thus to commemorate the past *and* celebrate the modern centralised organisation that had developed under President Timothy Dwight and continued under his successor, Arthur T. Hadley.[2]

A limited competition for the project, held in 1899, was won by Carrère & Hastings, who would go on to complete the New York Public Library several years later. The project consisted of a dining hall and a large auditorium, joined together by the Memorial Rotunda to form two sides of a

[1] *Yale Alumni Weekly* Vol. 30 No. 36 (27 May 1921).

[2] For background on these institutional changes, see Kelley, *Yale: A History,* 273-297, 315-325. For a discussion of Yale's Brick Row and its transformation, see Turner, *Campus,* 38-46, 116-117, 217.

formal courtyard. Whereas Yale's earliest buildings were in a more vernacular Colonial/Georgian style, the winning design was in the monumental Classical tradition of the French Beaux Arts, then at the height of its popularity. The Rotunda is loosely based on Bramante's Tempietto (1502), itself based on various ancient Roman precedents. Thus, the Rotunda's memorial function was strongly tied to the typological precedent of the funereal mausoleum as developed over centuries of Western architecture. The dome, much shallower in the competition entry, was raised in the final design to create more usable interior space, thus giving a sense of Baroque exuberance to an otherwise sombre memorial.

In its positioning, the Rotunda not only served as the means of giving access to the different functions of the complex, but provided a conspicuous urban presence at the corner of Grove and College Streets (Fig. 2). Lined with prominent public entrances on both sides, the Rotunda connected Yale's historic central campus green with its outlying scientific buildings, and thus marked the central junction point of the campus, literally and symbolically (Fig. 3). Inside, the walls of the Rotunda were carved with the names of Yale's dead from many different conflicts, including the Revolutionary War and the Civil War (Fig. 4). In this way, people walking through the building were directly confronted with a visual tribute to Yale's past.[3]

The Rotunda thus functioned in many ways: a highly practical urban circulation link; a visual monument to the centralising power of the University; and a serious memorial symbolising the sacrifice made by Yale's students for their country. The Classical/Renaissance style chosen by the architects was particularly suited to meeting these varied expectations—rich in historic associations, it was also closely related to contemporary American civic culture, seen in projects like the redesign of the Mall in Washington DC and the civic centre plans of Daniel Burnham.[4] Further, its Classical style could also claim roots in Yale's Brick Row, a more monumental expression of the Colonial classism of these earliest buildings.

However, the image of a unified institution promised by the monumental classicism of the Bicentennial Group never took hold.[5] Even as it was being completed, Yale continued to construct dormitories, laboratories, and other structures in various styles, particularly the Gothic. These Gothic roots dated to the Library building of 1846, a miniaturised version of King's College Chapel in

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[3] See Pinnell, *Yale University,* 141-144 and Scully et al, *Yale in New Haven,* 175-180.

[4] See Peterson, *Birth of City Planning,* 77-97 and 139-172. The project for Washington, known as the McMillan Plan, was issued in 1902, while a year later saw Burnham's Group Plan for Cleveland's civic centre. These ambitious projects were joined by hundreds of new libraries, museums, and government structures in the Beaux Arts style.

[5] The project was not completed as originally envisioned; the third wing needed to complete the court was abandoned, while plans for a monumental central colonnade were put on hold, and only finished in 1927. As finished, the colonnade extended the memorial theme of the interior by commemorating Yale's dead from the First World War (Scully et all, *Yale in New Haven,* 180, 182-184).

Cambridge (Fig. 5). Over the next half century, the university began demolishing the buildings of the old Brick Row, replacing them with a fortress-like perimeter of Gothic dormitories that created a large enclosed quadrangle on the original Old Campus. While there was little stylistic coherency between most of these buildings, the idea of a quadrangle being Yale's dominant form became deeply rooted.[6]

The Memorial Quadrangle, designed by James Gamble Rogers, brought this longstanding Gothic trend to a new level (Fig. 6). The project was donated by the Harkness family in memory of Charles W. Harkness, who graduated from Yale in 1883 and died in 1916.[7] With a virtually unlimited budget, the site occupied an entire city block immediately west of the Old Campus, on which Rogers created a series of seven quadrangles providing dormitory space for over 600 students. Dominating the whole was Harkness Tower, a two hundred-foot ornamental bell tower based loosely on St Botolph's church in Boston, England (Fig. 7). If the positioning of the Rotunda had sought a symbolic joining of old and new conceived in relation to the urban scale of the entire campus, Harkness Tower connected old and new in a more direct and personal way. The tower was carefully positioned so that it would be seen directly from the Old Campus Quadrangle, assuming a conspicuous physical presence not found in the smaller-scaled Rotunda (Fig. 8). An ornate Memorial Gateway beside the Tower provided the main entrance to the complex, accessed directly from the Old Campus across the street (Fig. 9).

In a further parallel, just as the Rotunda of the Bicentennial Buildings served as a centrepiece memorial based on Classical mausoleum precedents, Harkness Tower fulfilled a similar function; it was conceived as a memorial to Charles W. Harkness, and included within it an elaborate Memorial Room. This space was crowned by an authentic masonry fan vault, proclaimed as the first to be newly-erected in several centuries.[8] Thus, medieval religious precedent was invoked as the appropriate memorial language for the Quadrangle, with its most sacred symbolic space achieved through authentic medieval building methods. Unlike the Rotunda, which was public and open to the surrounding city, the Memorial Room was withdrawn from the public eye, a place of mystery only hinted to the outside observer through its large traceried window (Fig. 10). And similar to their different positioning strategies, the Tower's single fan vault and single Gothic window established a

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[6] The details of these developments are meticulously chronicled in Scully et al, *Yale in New Haven,* 101-231. Successive buildings were inspired by Ruskin's Venetian Gothic, Richardsonian Romanesque, and finally, Charles Coolidge Haight's Collegiate Gothic, a style pioneered by Cope and Stewardson at Princeton, Bryn Mawr and the University of Pennsylvania in the 1890s (see Turner, *Campus,* 223-230).

[7] Kelley, *Yale: A History,* 372-374. The Harkness fortune was derived from their position as primary partners of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company.

[8] "A General Description of the Memorial Quadrangle," *Yale Alumni Weekly* Vol. 30 No. 16 (7 January 1921), 381.

sense of singularity that contrasted the more anonymous collective effect represented by the Rotunda's hundreds of carved names.

This sense of privacy was perhaps fitting given the character of Harkness himself, known for his shy and withdrawn personality, but also for his intense sense of loyalty. If the Memorial Room and Tower represented Harkness directly, they formed a highly personal example of the project's larger ambition—to memorialise the loyal and selfless "Yale Man", whose character would be directly shaped by his time living at Yale.[9] As President Hadley summarised at the building's dedication, "This is a memorial to a man who lived at Yale and loved it…In its whole design we see embodied the things which he cared for."[10] Hadley went on to connect the project's sense of mission by invoking the destruction of the First World War:

> The waste of war is destroying churches and castles and glorious monuments of antiquity…Doubly important, then, it is to renew our supply of tradition and inspiration by buildings like this; to bring home to the students who shall live within these walls the lessons of affection and loyalty and love of the beautiful which should go into the life of an ancient college.[11]

In Hadley's vision, the Quadrangle almost assumes the character of a War memorial, symbolising not those who died, but the values of Western culture as a whole and their manifestation through architectural monuments.

Hadley also invokes the idea of institutional loyalty. In the Quadrangle, this was achieved in the way traditional Gothic imagery was combined with extensive symbolic invocations of Yale's own history. Every gate, doorway, and common space within the project was inscribed with the names of famous Yale figures, and Harkness Tower was crowned with statues of Yale's most illustrious, including Eli Whitney, Nathan Hale and Noah Webster (Fig. 11).[12] As J Layng Mills commented in the *Yale Alumni Weekly* in 1921, "[Rogers created] an atmosphere of his own—something more pregnant than a mere repetition of the historic styles of architecture—and he has done it by working into his fabric every vital and significant fact he could find in Yale's history…Our past is so much richer than we had realized."[13] This symbolism was further cultivated through the elaborate ceremonials accompanying its construction and dedication. The cornerstone, for example, was laid 8 October 1917, exactly 200 years to the day when construction began on the first building on Yale's New Haven campus.[14]

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[9] Betsky, *James Gamble Rogers,* 104-106.
[10] Hadley, speech printed in *Yale Alumni Weekly* Vol. 27 No. 4 (12 October 1917), 84-85.
[11] Ibid.
[12] "A General Description of the Memorial Quadrangle," *Yale Alumni Weekly* Vol. 30 No. 16 (7 January 1921), 381.
[13] Mills, "The Wrexham Tower," in ibid, 378.
[14] James Gamble Rogers, "The Architectural Plan", in *Yale Alumni Weekly* Vol. 27 No. 4 (12 October 1917), 90.

Thus, even more directly than the Memorial Rotunda, the Memorial Quadrangle attempted to permanently enshrine Yale's history as an institution. It manufactured a kind of past-that-never-was by expressing names, places and events from its actual history with a romanticised Gothic vocabulary intended to maximise picturesque effect and the mysterious allure associated more generally with the medieval (Fig. 12). The simple red brick barracks of its early days, so recently demolished, were not worth remembering in this new vision of resplendent Gothic details. As architectural critic Paul Goldberger has commented, "Yale before the Memorial Quadrangle was an entirely different place from Yale after it…No single building project has changed Yale as much, or contributed as much to the creation of its architectural image."[15] Rogers' memorial established an almost mythic sense of Yale's illustrious past, a sense of heightened poetry that was absent from the austere classicism of the Bicentennial Buildings.

The success of this endeavour is seen in the ecstatic reactions by the architectural press upon the Quadrangle's completion in 1921. *The Architectural Review*, *Architecture Record,* and *Architecture* all dedicated entire issues to the project, and in a direct rebuke of the earlier Bicentennial Buildings, all three journals editorialise the project by touting its Gothic style at the expense of the Renaissance. The *Review* commented that "To have designed this Quadrangle in Renaissance would have robbed the architect of his...immortal tower,"[16] while *Record* wrote that Classical architecture "lacked that spirit of life which nothing but union with the people can give."[17] Most direct of all was architect and Yale alumnus Charles Collens: "the Bicentennial Buildings, dignified in their way...in no sense [symbolize] the life of Yale…Gothic speaks of other things…Its originality in detail, its pliability, joyousness, and intimacy of treatment bespeak literature, art, music, contemplation, interwoven with all the elements of a liberal education."[18] This promotion of Gothic at the expense of the Classical went hand in hand with elaborate praise of the Quadrangle's design, above all the Harkness Tower. As the *Review* summarised, "To describe it in words is rather futile. The tower has no rival in modern architecture…It is so superior to anything of the kind so far erected in this country, or in modern Europe."[19]

These reactions point to the peculiar suitability of Rogers' picturesque Gothic as a flexible language of memorialisation. While Classical architecture was also driven by the adaptation of precedent and a sense of reverence for the past (in this case, Antiquity and the Renaissance), in the

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[15] Scully et all, *Yale in New Haven,* 264.
[16] Goodyear, "The Memorial Quadrangle and the Harkness Memorial Tower at Yale," *The Architectural Review* Vol. 120 No. 2379 (36 October 1921), 308.
[17] Wilcox, "The Harkness Memorial Quadrangle at Yale," *Architectural Record* Vol. 50, No. 3 (September 1921), 167.
[18] Collens, "The Harkness Memorial Tower," *Yale Alumni Weekly* Vol. 31, No. 28 (31 March 1922), 733.
[19] Goodyear, "The Harkness Memorial Quadrangle," 313.

eyes of early twentieth-century observers its poetic power paled in comparison to Gothic romanticism. This is underscored by the fact that the Memorial Quadrangle was so fervently embraced by insiders and outsiders alike, even though Yale's actual Colonial roots had more direct links to the Classical tradition as developed in England in the seventeenth and eighteen centuries. Certainly, a sense of connection to Oxford and Cambridge were one part of the Gothic's appeal in a university setting. Yet Yale was also embracing a larger idea of the Gothic as a symbolic language in direct opposition to the Classical, at this point closely associated with the official civic culture of the modern industrial city. By contrast, the Gothic was irregular and vague, associated variously with nature, personal freedom, mystic ritual, close-knit community. In contrast to Classical rationalist order, it enlisted an emotional appeal that relied more on visual delight than a specific sense of time and place. Ultimately, a soaring and mysterious tower was a more thrilling visual spectacle than a stately rotunda (Fig. 13). As such, despite their many similarities in conception, Rogers' tower spoke more successfully to Yale's yearning for a mythology commensurate with its modern achievements. For all its anachronisms, the Memorial Quadrangle's marriage of institutional narrative, personal memorial, and an intensely picturesque visual language was an irresistible combination.

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