

The Henry Hornbostel MO: a story of serendipity on a 'yellow brick road'

I know why CMU is following the yellow brick road but I forget why Dorothy did. I believe it had something to do with some imaginary characters called munchkins telling her to take the yellow brick road to get to the Wizard of Oz so that she could achieve her goal of getting back to Kansas. Or was it a rabbit with a big pocket watch who told her that? I am sure I am mixing my metaphors here. I must ask Don Marinelli about this next time I see him so that he can straighten me out.

We got on the yellow brick road in the early 80s. During this time building of buildings on the CMU campus and in particular planning where and how to build was at an all time low. The Department of Architecture and the University administration did not see eye to eye on these matters (this is another interesting story that can be explored through the writings of Richard Cleary, former historian in the Department of Architecture, some of which in fact were published in the Focus). It is even rumored that a former Department Head and the university administration had almost come to litigious blows over controversies of an architectural kind.

Furthermore, in the early eighties, the university did not have a campus architect, as such, to look after the design and planning concerns. The university, in the previous two decades had embarked upon a building pattern, including academic buildings such as Hunt Library, Warner Hall, Cyert Hall and Skibo, which, at best can, be described as Modernism with less than mediocre results. I should hasten to add, for fear of creating impressions I would not be willing to defend, that there are important distinctions between these four buildings. Skibo is gone and for good reason. In spite of some positive features, it was a building worth every-blow-of-the-wrecking-ball demolishing. Cyert has had its share of troubles and I see no other destiny for it other than the one it will share with Skibo. Warner Hall has some redeeming architectural qualities but if it weren't for its real-estate value I would not hesitate to put it out of its architectural misery. Hunt is another story; I believe it is a building worth hanging on to, for posterity.

All of these factors resulted in a cavalier attitude which led CMU's planners (incidentally, a group which did not include any architects at that time) to operate in a vacuum (without the benefit of professional expertise). The decision makers believed, naively, that the best way to get that kind of expertise was by going out and hiring architects. This can work if one is lucky enough to find the right architect for the job but often this requires deliberateness and expertise. CMU did not possess either of these, back then. Its design-process MO was to find some money and then hire an architect who was either imposed on the university by the donor or was part of the old boy network. This clearly was an irresponsible way of investing in the future of our campus as evidenced by the mediocre, Modernist architecture that was mushrooming, willy-nilly, all over it.

I personally witnessed one "recognizance" mission by vice-presidents, deans and department heads to locate a future building. One member of the posse looked into the cavity separating (thank God, still doing so) Wean Hall from Hamerschlag Hall and remarked: "why don't we build the new CS wing right there." A more sensible member

of the group retorted “No, there isn’t enough space, here.” Planning on campus was reduced to eyeballing enough space during casual pedestrian excursions. It was at this time that we witnessed the appearance of the message bearing CMU-munchkins. (The reference here is simply due to the Wizard of Oz metaphor. No pejorative overtones are intended.)

In the early eighties, the Senior Vice President Pat Crecine was moving and shaking the campus. He came up with “a computer for every student” slogan which for a brief number of years turned CMU into “Computer-U” in the eyes of the entire nation. But more importantly he made everyone realize how essential it was for CMU to improve its capital assets to match its growing academic ones. As we all know that former President Cyert should be credited with elevating CMU’s status to national and international levels. We should be equally willing to credit Pat Crecine with bringing our physical assets to a level commensurate with these accomplishments (at least for spear heading the movement).

Crecine received help from erudite trustees like Ted Nierenberg (E’??). Ted was absolutely indispensable in persuading the president and the rest of the trustees as well as notable architects and planners of the world that there was an interesting design problem on campus. CMU had come to a junction in its process of building which was either going to overtake and in time overwhelm the original Hornbostel campus with chaotic planning, or it would create a new era of orderly and reasoned planning and growth. Ted Nierenberg, due to his engineering background and experience with creating and running Dansk Inc., had the right sensibilities and skills to persuade everyone involved that the latter course was the sensible one. He became the flag bearer of the new movement.

The Department Head in Architecture at the time (yours truly) also recognized the opportunity to change the university’s planning MO and to mend fences. I was instrumental in persuading the university administration to adopt a credible physical planning and design strategy including the recognition that the Hornbostel architecture was the most noteworthy architecture on campus. If this sounds as a flattering therefore self-congratulatory, I assure you it is not. Just wait till you hear the end of the story.

Two key decisions were made. The first one was to conduct a national search, through an invited design competition, for an architect/planner to design the new facilities. The second one was to fill a vacant position in the Physical Plant Office with someone who would supplement the university’s administrative staff with much needed architectural expertise.

In hindsight, this was truly a moment of serendipity. A confluence of factors -- the national agenda of the university, the poor state of its campus buildings, its substandard ways of dealing with planning and design -- was crossing paths with a confluence of institutional and individual agendas that transformed the past problems into future opportunities. Paul Tellers was hired as the campus architect. Pat Keating assumed the enormous task of integrating physical planning with institutional planning. President Cyert was convinced of the value of the new University Center and the public, selection process of a nationally recognized architect. Ted Nierenberg and Pat Crecine were forceful in persuading and creating consensus around the East Campus project.

This is how we got on the yellow brick road.

First the ranking members of the university were persuaded that the Hornbostel Buildings were the most noteworthy buildings we had. Then this notion became, through the awarding of the commission to Dennis and Clark, an accepted principle, the new MO, a truism, even dogma. This was the easiest, most practical way of improving the state of affairs and redirecting the focus of non-architecturally trained members of the campus community. In a nut shell, those of us in the design milieu said to the others: “look, this is better architecture, let us change course to this direction.” If Hornbostel’s architecture had used red brick, today, I have no doubt that we would have been on the red brick road. It is even conceivable that we would be building out of adobe, had this been the signature material of a successful, past architecture.

Lamentably, there is such a thing as little knowledge being hazardous. In the subsequent years, it became almost impossible to approve anything that did not reflect the Hornbostel MO. The Intelligent Workplace (those who do not know what it is should just look at the top floor of MM from the direction of the tennis courts), for example, had a hard time going through the Design Review Committee (DRC). In those years I used to serve on it. When the design for this cutting edge architecture which is exemplary in integrating the most advanced building technologies was brought before the DRC, all of its non-architect members and some who were trained as architects asked: “where is the brick?” There was the unshakable belief among the former group that good architecture needed to be a take off from Hornbostel’s brand of Beaux Arts, dressed in yellow brick. Agreeing with them at least in terms of the conclusion if not the rationale, the latter group believed that this was the best strategy for the post-modern era on the CMU campus.

We had come to the end of the yellow brick road. We had overcome the Wicked Witch (undisciplined design and building). Now this was the moment of truth: we were listening to the Wizard and discovering that his message (the Hornbostel MO or bust) was not only fake but a mere illusion created through public relations strategies.

Eventually the IW went through the DRC without modification. This was also a watershed moment for campus design at CMU. The message of the Wizard had to be modified. With IW we said: “good architecture can be achieved without the Hornbostel MO.” The absurdity of even having to defend such a proposition in architecture is equivalent to the same in defending arguments like “good chemical engineering can be achieved without Polymers”, “good software design can be achieved without object oriented programming”, in other fields. We realized that getting back to Kansas takes many roads. Some made of yellow brick, others out of aluminum and glass, and maybe even out of adobe.

There is an important subtext which I have ignored up to this point (my closing paragraph) because it is too important an issue to be treated as a subtext and so briefly. This is the issue of desirability or undesirability of homogeneity in our designed environment. While homogeneity in architecture is easier to achieve, reassuring to be surrounded by, and even easier to maintain; it is not necessarily better. As in the biological realm, genetic homogeneity can result in the extinction of species. Diversity, as is the case for portfolios, demographics, and publicly stated opinions, is good for

architecture as well. So, let us count our blessings for the moment that we still have Hunt, Warner, Cyert, Donner and even the old Navy Building to add to our architectural diversity. The day when we will no longer have most of these buildings is near. Even though I will not miss most of these buildings, I shudder to think that we will all be clad in yellow brick up to our noses.

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