



Arnold Gold/Register file photo

The renovation of Yale University's 12 residential colleges was finished with the completion of work at Ezra Stiles College.

## Thinking big preservation

**T**HE last dozen years have seen what may be the largest privately funded historic preservation project in history right here in New Haven.

I do not refer to the high-profile revivification of Yale University's art galleries, but of the stealthy, unbroken dozen years of burnishing and updating of Yale's student housing — its residential colleges.

Ever the competitors, Yale and Harvard University each have 12 residential colleges. (Harvard calls them "houses") patterned on antique role models provided by Oxford and Cambridge universities. These American copies have a common patron and mentor from the first half of the 20th century — Yale alumnus Edward S. Harkness.

They are places where the best and the brightest not only live for the last three years of undergraduate life, but learn in-house and form a more intimate community than being part of a class. To call them "dorms" insults their intention — to fuse learning and living for those newly pushed out of the comfort and confines of the family home into the vagaries of college life.

The bulk of these neo-Gothic and neo-Georgian buildings were designed by James Gamble Rogers, who also designed Yale's signature law school and library, as well as Harkness Tower, which bears the college patron's name.

Rogers' buildings are gentle, correctly detailed, using exquisite materials. They have proven to be good neighbors: following the lines of the streetscape, scaled to fit the surrounding buildings.

Two of the colleges, Morse and Stiles, designed 30 years after Rogers' efforts by Eero Saarinen, are wildly different: Modernist reflections of medieval villages. They are set to the looping Grove Street, across from the looming Payne Whitney Gymnasium, and behind the Yale bookstore, away from the rectilinear blocks of downtown New Haven.

In 15 years, a half a billion in inflation-adjusted dollars has been spent in a feat of master planning that rivals the reconstruction of Pearl Harbor Memorial Bridge and the intersection of interstates 91 and 95.

The huge effort's essential purpose was to update the structures to meet the building code and use less energy; but, also — and most important for those of us who do not live in them — magnificently restore the facades and exterior

appurtenances of these Hogwarts-esque halls to a pristine state of repair.

Early on, Yale built a swing college, designed by Herbert Newman, where students living in a college undergoing renovation could stay for a year as their homes became serially reinvigorated. Students dubbed it "Boyd Hall" (as in "Boy'd we get screwed") upon realizing that they would not be spending all of their three post freshman years in their beloved college. The building, originally conceived of as being temporary student housing, is so useful it will be fully given over to house law school students.

Yale has been focused and relentless in its drive to rebuild its core residential component. It has used a single architect, Kieran Timberlake of Philadelphia — a firm that is the industry standard for educational renovation.

The extreme triage, planning and design meant that each college could be renovated within one year and three months. Despite huge ebbs and flows in financing, this effort was completed this fall with the occupancy of Ezra Stiles College, perhaps the most ambitious redo as it created whole new unseen subterranean common spaces.

Branford College's decade-old redo needs tweaking, but in essence, a huge human undertaking is finished and a dozen delightful buildings that create a large part of our little New England city's urban fabric have been seamlessly renewed, preserved and silently enriched — the very model of preservationist and environmental values.

As this successful effort ends, the next residential college effort looms for Yale: the two new colleges designed as an homage to Rogers by the dean of the architecture school, Robert A.M. Stern. These new full-on academic gothic complexes are designated to be set next to Grove Street Cemetery, on a site that, contrasting the last 15 years of careful renovation, is just about fully demolished for a project that is not yet funded.

As the cost estimates hover around \$300 million for these two colleges, the \$40 million average spent on each of the existing colleges' restoration seems like a better and better investment.



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