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The Quadrangle isn't square

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The Quadrangle isn't square

Law School is an unusual architectural mélange

Many of those who visit and admire the Law Quadrangle assume that it was modelled by architects York and Sawyer on some existing complex of buildings at Oxford or Cambridge. While the Law School's buildings are in the tradition of English Gothic used at other institutions, they are unique and very much more varied in style and use of ornamental detail than is apparent to the casual observer. A recent descriptive evaluation of the Quadrangle written for an architecture class at Michigan by student Paul Weller demonstrates that the buildings are not only original designs but also "tend to represent styles which span the fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries."

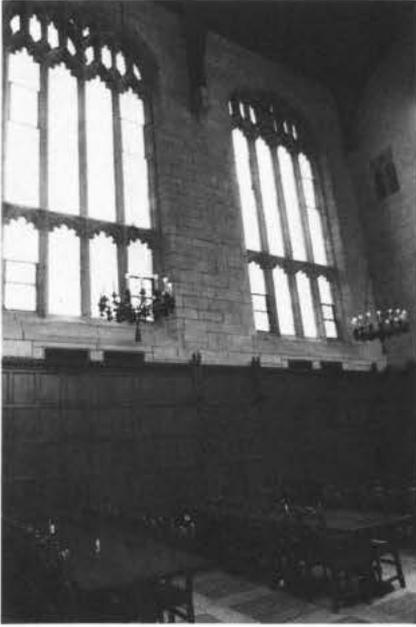
While the Legal Research Library, Hutchins Hall, and the Dining Hall make use of English Gothic features which prevailed in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the Lawyers Club building and the two dormitories have a late Tudor or Jacobean character. They reflect Italian and Flemish influences which had only affected English architecture by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

According to Weller, York and Sawyer wanted to evoke a "sentimental connection between legal education at Michigan and a rich legal and academic past." To do that, he points out, "they need

not design a perfect period piece or copy of an English college. As long as the result had an apparent unity and completeness, each building, in fact each architectural element, could be from a different period. If variation in detail were controlled by a consistency in the materials used, the subtle variety of architectural ornament could be all the more delightful and amusing." In Weller's estimation, the Quadrangle as completed in Massachusetts granite and carved Indiana limestone, decorated with lead fixtures and topped with slate roofs, does achieve a harmony whose "quality derives from the complexity of detail appropriately carved and assembled in durable, pleasing material."

The prevailing effect and feeling of the Quadrangle is Gothic. The Dining Hall and Legal Research Library, with their crenellated parapets, their finials, turrets, wall buttresses, and tall windows subdivided by vertical stone tracery, resemble English buildings in the perpendicular Gothic style of the early Tudor period. Hutchins Hall, which sits between these two buildings, is "essentially a twentieth century structure," according to Weller, but is ornamented with wall buttresses, pointed doorways, and carvings which "make it blend with the other buildings in the complex."

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*At far left:
The Dining Hall, with its solid masonry construction and structural oak trusses supporting the roof, is modelled on the chapel at Eton College. Like the Legal Research Library, it has tall pointed windows, subdivided with stone tracery, which are characteristically Gothic.*

*At left:
Even where pointed arches and turrets are absent, the Quadrangle retains an overall Gothic feeling derived from the consistent use of heavy, carefully cut blocks of stone.*

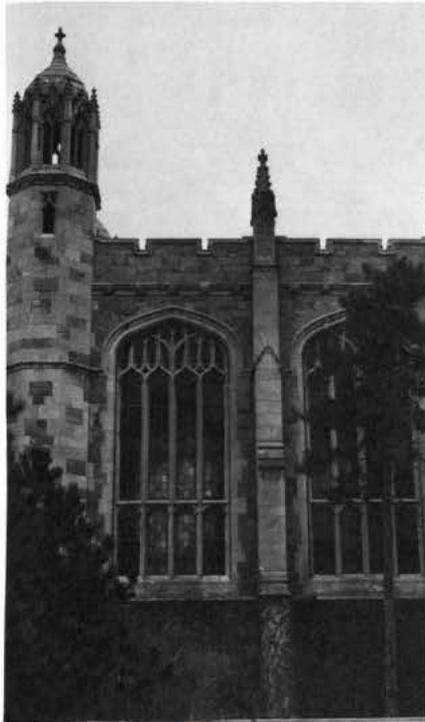


The Club building, with its Renaissance portico, forms a link between the Perpendicular or early Tudor style of the Dining Hall (left) and the late Tudor or Jacobean style of the dormitories (right).

The most delightful structures of the Quadrangle, in Weller's estimation, are the Lawyer's Club, its dormitory, and the John P. Cook Dormitory. Both dormitories are decorated with ornamental stonework in the shape of scrolls, curves, and shields, forms which did not appear on English buildings until the Jacobean period.

The Club building, Weller notes, is the most unusual. "It speaks the language of the Renaissance in a direct manner, which seems right for a building meant to function in many capacities," he says. The rounded arches and Tuscan columns on its balustraded parapet lend the Club its Italianate feeling. The Italian Renaissance reached England in the Tudor period, so the Club building evokes English architecture constructed between the Gothic and the Jacobean. Thus, the Club serves as an appropriate transition linking the perpendicular buildings south of it on the Quadrangle with the stylistically later dormitories north and east of it.

The diversity in architectural style of the Quadrangle's buildings is echoed in the rich variety of its decorative detail. Some features are purely ornamental, adding pomp, solemnity, and esthetic pleasure to the experience of entering the Quadrangle. Other decoration on the buildings is symbolic, designed to instruct the observer and convey William W. Cook's intentions in donating the funds for the buildings. Still other details, like the Quadrangle's many carved heads, gnomes, and painted glass medallions, are satiric in intent. They offer a special delight to the spectator who takes the time to appreciate their humorous incongruity, Weller observes. Many of the faces and figures on the buildings good-naturedly poke fun at eminent



The Dining Hall and Legal Research Library make use of fourteenth and early fifteenth century Gothic stylistic features like crenellated parapets, finials, turrets, and wall buttresses.



The entry arch, bay window, and ornamental scrollwork evident in this picture of the Lawyers Club are curved, and thus characteristic of seventeenth century English architecture.



Doorways into the dormitories reflect the harmonious melding of diverse styles accomplished in the Quadrangle. While doorway P is Gothic, doorway M has classical elements like those used in Jacobean buildings. Doorway F combines classical and baroque features, a tendency also characteristic of the later period.



Satiric ornamental details in the Quadrangle mock the fallible humans who practice, teach, and learn the law, but never legal and political institutions.



jurists like Coke, Blackstone, and Marshall or at the University's presidents, as well as at law students. "Jolting anachronisms are part of the entertainment," Weller says, with law students carrying tennis rackets and stony gargoyles peering out from behind horn-rimmed glasses.

How do these fit with William W. Cook's stated aims in making his donation? Cook wrote that he wished to construct facilities which would attract the best students and "establish the moral tone and dignity proper to the study of law." It is significant that the satiric ornaments mock only those who practice, teach, and learn the law. "Neither the law, nor constitutional principles, nor American political institutions are part of the mockery and fun," Weller points out. The satiric ornaments encourage students to recognize human foibles and failings, as lawyers must. Their effect is counterbalanced, however, by the overall aura of the Quadrangle. Weller concludes that "the satiric gnomes and heads relieve in miniature the Quadrangle's ponderous character without disrupting its atmosphere of reverence and hushed dignity."

"The buildings, with their Perpendicular, Tudor, and Jacobean elements carved in limestone and set against granite, conjure up a feeling not only of the Anglo-American legal tradition but also

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of the durability and permanence of the law," Weller says. He concludes that they have certainly contributed to legal education as

Cook wished: "The ability of The University of Michigan's students and faculty may not be exclusively the product of the struc-

tures wherein their activities take place," Weller says, "but certainly the quality these buildings speak cannot be overlooked."