

THE QUADRANGLE

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One of the best-known and most beloved buildings at the University of Pennsylvania is the Quadrangle. From campus tours for prospective students to Spring Fling and alumni reminiscences, the Quad has long been a central feature of campus life.

A quiet haven in the noisy city, it symbolizes collegiate spirit and comradery. The Quad's historical importance cannot be overestimated. Its construction in 1895 denoted a vision of the modern institution that the University of Pennsylvania was then striving to become. For the next seventy-six years, from 1895 to 1971, it served as the only men's dormitory at the University. Through its history are threaded the stories of the heirs to that new vision, the students who lived in the Quad.

Prior to the construction of the Quadrangle in 1895, the University had shown little concern for student housing. It had maintained a few small dormitories, but these are rarely mentioned in historical writings and seem to have played little or no part in university life. The great majority of students were commuters, so the administration saw no pressing need for campus housing. In 1895, the year the Quadrangle was built, the only housing assistance the University offered was a list of boarding houses which it approved, inspected, and supervised. These were sufficient to accommodate the small number of non-local students who had no relatives in Philadelphia with whom

they could live.

The absence of dormitories at Pennsylvania is attributable to two things: the local character of the student body and the provincial character of the University. Some years before 1885, according to a letter published that year in the *Nation*, Penn had declined the offer of a legacy dedicated to the building of dormitories. The reason given by the author is that the University had a "settled policy" of imbuing its students with the "doctrines, ideas, atmosphere and surroundings" of Philadelphia and that provision of common dormitories would weaken the boys' connection to the city.² This interpretation of the University's attitude and policy is open to doubt, but the underlying fact remains that, in the mid-1880s, Penn was still pre-dominantly local in composition and orientation. Conditions were rapidly changing, however, as Franklin's Academy began to acquire the character of a modern university and a national reputation based on the scope and quality of its faculty and curriculum.

Between 1872 (the year Penn moved to its present site in West Philadelphia) and 1895 (the year the Quadrangle was begun), eight new academic programs were established. These included the Towne Scientific School, the Dental School, the Wharton School, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the Veterinary School, the Architecture School, a degree program in electrical engineering, and the Wistar Institute.² As the enlarged curriculum attracted more and more students from diverse regions outside the Philadelphia area, the administration slowly expanded the scope of its concern with students and student life beyond the limited realm of the classroom and lab.

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FIGURE THREE. UNIDENTIFIED ROOM IN THE QUAD, CA. 1955.

In 1891, responding to the increasing geographical diversity of the student body and hoping to encourage the trend, the Board of Trustees considered a proposal to build a dormitory. The building plan called for a four-story structure in the form of an irregular trapezoid with a single row of rooms on each floor opening on a hallway that ran along the inner side. The design provided for later expansion of the structure to meet demand by building a second tier of rooms on the inner side of the corridor or by erecting another free-standing building in the central court. All the rooms were nearly equal in size, but they communicated with one another so that students could take one, two, or three rooms, according to their needs and financial ability. The building was to be provided with steam heat, electric light, and forced ventilation, with open fireplaces available as an option. Each floor would be served by four bathrooms.³

The plan of 1891 was ultimately rejected, but the Philadelphia architectural firm of Cope and Stewardson, in conjunction with a specially created University committee on student housing, presented a new design in 1895. Much more than a set of structural blueprints or building descriptions, the new plan expressed a vision of college life which took account not only of the physical needs of the students, but also of the educational principles of university-sponsored housing. As expressed by Provost Harrison, the administration viewed higher education as a "divine mission:"

Taking the years at the university as a formative epoch in the years in life that will influence all the hereafter, they want

the student's life to have all that life at that age requires (physically, socially, intellectually, morally and religiously)....[The university] cannot meet...all [of its students' needs], nor any of them completely, until every student who comes to Philadelphia for his education can find a proper home which is in and of the university... [where] there is careful provision for all the twenty-four hours of the students' daily life.⁴

Inspired by the English college systems of Oxford and Cambridge, the Quad was planned as a complete community.⁵ The complex was conceived as a harmonious and artistic series of "separate, yet contiguous buildings of very varied external design" broken up by the occasional structures of the chapel and dining hall.⁶ The popularity of the Quad and the continually growing need for additional dormitory rooms that it brought about eventually forced the elimination of the dining hall and chapel facilities from the plan, leaving "a series of contiguous dormitories of moderate size [enclosing] a large quadrangle, each separate building accommodating, with sleeping, study and bath rooms, from twelve to fourteen students." Students would be offered a choice of single, double, or triple suites,⁷ although the administration maintained as a matter of policy that, aside from differences in the size and location of rooms, "the poorest students [would] receive the same service and attention as the wealthy students."⁸

Whatever his financial situation, each student was supplied with a bedstead, mattress, bureau, washstand, table, bookcase, chair, and toilet china. Steam heat and electricity were supplied directly to every room; many of the rooms also had fire-places and bay windows. Bathroom facilities, including running water, toilets, sinks, baths and showers, could be found on each floor.⁹ Provision was also made for student laundry, which could be contracted out at minimal expense—the laundry would even do "all reasonable mending without charge." There was also a building for storing wood and coal, a bicycle room, and a mail room.¹⁰ The only important facility the Quadrangle lacked was a dining hall. Quad residents had to take their meals in Houston Hall or a nearby eatery.

The rooms were cheerful and homelike, with elegant dark quartered-oak paneling and furniture designed by the architects, Cope and Stewardson.¹¹ Nevertheless, the students were allowed not only to redecorate but even to make permanent alterations to their rooms so long as they obtained permission from the administration.

The liberality of this policy was characteristic of the early history of the Quadrangle, although the administration sometimes expressed misgivings about its lack of control over dormitory life. According to University historian Edward Potts Cheyney, there had been some fear that students would take advantage of their detachment from all oversight to make the dorms a place where wine, women, and song might play an equally large part with study and sleep.¹²

Cheyney maintains, however, that fears of student debauchery had little or no foundation, although students certainly appreciated the ease of life they enjoyed at Penn. The dorms were self-governing, convenient, and no more expensive than the nearby boarding houses.¹³

The Quadrangle became an immediate success and was widely praised. In 1906, the campus weekly, *Old Penn*, described the dormitories as "the heart of University life and spirit."¹⁴ Three years later, George Henderson's book, *Old Penn and Other Universities*, included the following encomium:

Did you ever live in the dorms? Then you do not know what dorm life means for college spirit....Several hundred men who live in the same big family have a feeling of common fellowship....Men who live there learn to care for the associations that brought them together, that keep them related.¹⁵

The Quad's popularity with students led to the rapid expansion of the dormitory complex. Fifteen of the thirty-nine houses which make up the Quadrangle were built within the first two years. By 1906, seven more had been added. Thus, the present structure was more than half completed in the first decade of the Quad's existence.

Contemporary photographs suggest that life in the dormitories established itself easily and quickly. Students were not content to leave unaltered the understated elegance of the decor. The room shown in Figure One (ca. 1901), for example, is almost overwhelmed by the personality of the students who live in it. Extra furniture, draperies, pillows, rugs, pictures, and personal knickknacks crowd about, suggesting wealth and leisure rather than study. The flowery, tasseled, and opulent fabrics are almost feminine, although the presence of athletic equipment attests to the masculinity of the occupants.

Figure Two (ca. 1917) depicts the dorm room of a wealthy student of the 1910s. In comparison with the previous example, the furnishings and decor are simpler and more refined, denoting a



FIGURE FOUR. ROOM IN MORRIS HOUSE, LOWER QUAD, DECEMBER, 1968.

more modern vision of masculinity and a more serious attitude toward life, perhaps induced by World War I. A Persian rug covers the floor while pictures and plates grace the wall above. A baby grand piano and ornate fireplace equipment proclaim the wealth of the student in a quiet but unequivocal manner. Aside from showing that students were still being allowed to furnish their rooms according to their own wishes, the presence of such items suggests that the dorm room served as an important extension of the student's personality and not solely as a place to sleep and study.

According to Hamilton Elliott, Associate Director of the University of Pennsylvania Archives, the Quadrangle enjoyed its greatest popularity during the 1910s. It was the setting for many campus events. The Terrace, dorm steps, and courtyards were popular places for songs, cheers and celebrations.¹⁶ Nevertheless, despite the administration's official policy of self-governance and much to the consternation of students, life in the Quad was becoming more regulated through the gradual imposition of a variety of rules and prohibitions. For example, both poker¹⁷ and spooning¹⁸ were prohibited in 1911.

During the period between 1920 and 1950, life in the Quad continued to evolve: the building was completed, the encroachment of regulations continued, and student use of room space became increasingly austere. During the 1920s, six more sections were completed, bringing the number of houses to thirty-six. As in previous years, most students living in the Quad came from affluent fami-

lies and lived out a prescribed lifestyle in rooms that were elegantly decorated. By the end of the decade, the Big, East, and South Quads, which contain most of the rooms, were given over to freshmen, leaving the remaining dorm space to upperclassmen. A major change affecting residents during this time was the enlargement, by the end of the 1920s, of the system of self-governance into a two-house system with both judicial and legislative responsibilities. Because the new system was supervised by the University Council on Welfare and Student Activities, it helped to facilitate the administration's efforts to regulate student life in the Quad.¹⁹

The stock market crash of 1929 and the economic difficulties which ensued prevented construction of new sections of the Quad until the 1950s. As a result, dormitory space was limited, which did not deter the University from tightening residential regulations. By 1931, freshmen were required to live in the Quadrangle unless they had official permission to live with their families or other relatives.²⁰ By mid-decade, even upperclassmen were restricted to living in the Quadrangle, with relatives, at a fraternity, or at one of the rooming houses approved and supervised by the University.²¹

Despite the trend toward administrative regulation of student life, the emphasis on democratic experience remained. A prominent event of the late 1930s was a "bold experiment in residential education and self-government by forty-two students sharing the Rodney dormitory" which brought together "students, faculty members, and prominent civic leaders to share their experiences and activities on a more or less regular basis."²² In the 1940s, an official pamphlet declared

the student at Pennsylvania is a part of a cosmopolitan and democratic community....Not to be overlooked...are the intimate associations which he will enjoy in his life in the dormitories. This experience in democratic living will serve to broaden his horizons and add immeasurably to the significance of his years at Pennsylvania.²³

The last three sections of the Quadrangle—Butcher, Speakman, and Class of 28—were built in the 1950s. Compared to the elegant English Jacobean character of the older units, their plain style is functional and severe. The conservatism of the era manifested itself in other ways too. The rules governing parties, for example, were stringent. Co-ed parties were

allowed only in certain rooms and only if attended by at least two couples. Moreover, by the 1950s, the dormitories were no longer truly self-governing. The Parietal Committee had assumed responsibility for student behavior and student government had been reduced to giving opinions and sponsoring special events.²⁴

In keeping with the conservative tone of the era, a typical dormitory room of the 1950s (Figure Three, ca. 1955) was furnished and decorated in a plain utilitarian style. Compared with Figures One and Two, this room shows far less refinement. The curtains that hang in the windows appear to be made of cheap, inelegant material and Persian rugs have been replaced by institutional carpeting. The furniture, though serviceable, is less tasteful and expensive than earlier.

In the 1960s, life in the Quad was highlighted by a variety of activities including mixers in McClelland Hall, post-football game parties, jazz jam sessions, and intramural sports. In spite of these activities, however, students living in the Quad may have found life frustrating at times because the list of prohibitions to which they were subjected continued to grow. Residents were strictly forbidden to make any physical alterations to their rooms, even to the point that pictures could be hung only through the use of molding hooks. Football games were banned in 1961.²⁵

A renovated room in Morris (Figure Four, 1968) shows the austerity of student life in the Quadrangle during the late 1960s. The white plaster walls stand in sharp contrast to the original wood panelling. Their bareness is hardly relieved by the row of record albums which serves as a functional decorative element. The general effect of sparseness is heightened by the use of dark blinds instead of curtains, providing privacy rather than decorative effect, and there are fewer small personal items and knickknacks than in the rooms from earlier decades. It appears that the students who adopted the plain style evinced in Figure Four had shifted the focus of College life from their dormitory rooms to other arenas.

The construction of the Quadrangle between 1895 and the 1950s was essential to Penn's emergence as a major University. By examining plans, photographs, and administrative regulations, we can see how the Quad evolved to fit changing needs and tastes. From the wealthy young dandies at the turn of the century to the more serious, studious men of the 1960s, the Quad has symbolized the essential elements of collegiate life at Penn.