



## Baker House is 30 Years Old, a Monument of Great Architecture in Need of Repairs

Walk in and you will be surprised.

Any misgivings you may have had before entering Alvar Aalto's Baker House are immediately dispelled.

From the outside the dark red brick is imposing but heavy, the staircase climbing up the wall cuts a strange pattern. But the undulating curves of the side facing the Charles are graceful and unexpected. And once through the door, after a rush of initial delight, further exploration will only heighten the effect. Aalto built for the enjoyment of the students, and he created a design "determined by human experience rather than mere abstraction: the changes in ceiling height that signaled degrees of privacy, the windows placed for the view rather than the formal pattern, the Aalto-designed furniture that never felt cold to the touch or reflected too much sound, the handrail shaped for a satisfying grip — the handrail that was also a continuous visual link from exterior through vestibule into lobby," writes John Morris Dixon, '55, in *Progressive Architecture*. In short, Baker House (one of three buildings the Finnish architect Aalto designed in the U.S.), is one of the most important monuments of 20th century architecture.

The furniture in all rooms is identical, but movable and sized to fit rooms of diverse shapes. (Aalto's plan provided 22 different room shapes in the 43 rooms of a typical floor.) Individuality and unity is the result.

Baker House corridors are not just halls — they curve into wide lounge areas. "The design tends to push people out of their own rooms into a communal setting; it avoids the locked door 'mine' feeling and creates a community. There is no real floor identity — you're part of the house," explains Dean

Phillips, '80, a four-year resident. "One stroke of genius — the traffic pattern was worked out so that everyone entering or leaving goes by the same area; it becomes a natural congregating point; a natural flow pattern is conducive to a social atmosphere," he adds.

The physical environment of Baker is indeed unique — and it has declined. Thirty years have taken their toll. Most of the original furniture designed by Aalto needs repair. Bricks need to be cleaned, walls redecaled, plumbing and wiring need improvements.

Last spring a concerted effort began to raise the money needed for renovations. "We felt it would be nice for people out in the real world to come back," says Phillips. So they entertained 300 Baker alumni and current residents at the house, to emphasize its architectural significance and raise money for repairs. The goal of the drive is \$250,000 over a three-year period.

Alumni walked around the building looking for their old rooms: "Who is living in my room now, what's it like?" Speakers (Harry Portnoy, Vice President Constantine Simeonides, '20) spoke about the architecture, the history of the design, and past experiences in the house. Uyu Sing Jung from the Jung/Brannen Assoc., Inc., talked about Baker House and Aalto.

"Many schools have definite identification with houses," explains Phillips. "We're trying to build up that sort of bond in this house. We want to avoid the phenomenon of spending four years here and then getting shut out in the cold. We're the first house to tempt alumni back; but we often do things first."

— M.L.

