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Tom Eblen: Architecture of UK's modernist buildings not for everyone — but they're worth saving anyway

Published: April 27, 2013



The University of Kentucky built the Kirwan-Blanding residence hall complex 1967-1968 on the south end of campus on Woodland Avenue. It consists of two 264-foot-tall, 23-story towers and surrounding lower buildings in a park-like setting connected by tall canopies. Photo by Tom Eblen | teblen@herald-leader.com

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By Tom Eblen — Herald-Leader columnist

When local architects started emailing me about preliminary plans to demolish several Modernist-style buildings on the University of Kentucky campus, my first reaction was to roll my eyes.

Like many people, I have always struggled to appreciate, much less like, a lot of mid-20th century architecture. It seems so plain, boxy, cold and, in the hands of some architects, just plain ugly.

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To try to understand why so many professionals consider these buildings important and worth saving, I decided to take a closer look and learn more about them.

Nearly 30 percent of UK's structures date from the 1950s and 1960s, and many academic buildings and residence halls have been neglected for years. To his credit, UK President Eli Capilouto is trying to catch up, initiating construction and renovation projects all over campus.

Initial plans included demolishing as many as seven of the 13 campus buildings designed between the 1930s and 1950s by noted Lexington architect Ernst V. Johnson: Jewell (1938), Holmes (1956) and Donovan (1955) residence halls, the Engineering Quadrangle (1938), the Wenner-Gren Aeronautical Research Laboratory (1941), the Funkhouser Biological Science Building (1942) and the Mineral Industries Building (1951).

The wrecking ball may also be aimed at the Kirwan-Blanding residential complex (1967), designed by Edward Durrell Stone. He was one of America's best-known and most prolific Modernist architects, and his work has always been widely loved — and hated.

"It's easy to see why most people don't turn on to it," said Graham Pohl, a Lexington architect with Pohl Rosa Pohl.

Modernism was the first architectural style in centuries that didn't reference the past. Modernism began in Europe nearly a century ago, but didn't catch on in this country until after World War II. Then it was everywhere.

"People felt free to be expressive and experiment with forms and new materials that felt right to them," Pohl said. "It was a product of economic growth and national optimism about the future."

But Pohl acknowledges that the style was widely abused. When so-called Urban Renewal reshaped America's cities into concrete jungles built around the automobile, it included a lot of slap-dash architecture that was called "modern."

"One of the reasons people don't like Modernism is that it has been used as an excuse to do shoddy work," Pohl said. "It's more difficult to do good Modernism than good traditional work."

Pohl said most of the buildings UK has considered tearing down are anything but shoddy. As an example, he cited Holmes Hall, an International-style building with an elegant stone and concrete stair-step canopy and interesting brick work.

Johnson's buildings all have elegant brick work, perhaps because he was the son of a Swedish mason and worked his way through Yale as a union bricklayer.

"It's more than decorative," Pohl said of Johnson's brick patterns on Holmes Hall. "It speaks to aspects of the building and the relationship between walls and openings. There's a lot about that building that suggests someone thought deeply about it."

Pohl also likes Stone's Kirwan-Blanding complex, with its 23-story towers surrounded by smaller buildings arranged in a park-like setting. He likes the relationship of the vertical towers to the "incredibly elegant" horizontal canopies that connect the buildings.

"A lot of people see those forms as being part of their parents' generation and they intentionally don't want to relate to them," said Pohl, adding that these buildings have much more architectural merit than anything that is likely to replace them in this era of budget-cutting austerity.

I grew up around the corner from Holmes Hall, on the block where UK is now building a massive dormitory complex. I have always admired Holmes Hall's stair-step canopy, if not the rest of the building.

But I never liked Kirwan-Blanding — until, that is, I went to photograph it for this column on a beautiful evening last week. The moon was rising between the towers, which were bathed in the glow of the setting sun. Students were

all around the buildings, studying among the trees and flowers or throwing Frisbees and footballs. I appreciated those buildings for the first time.

Architecture, like art, is often subjective, said Sarah Tate, an architect and founder of the Lexington firm Tate Hill Jacobs. She greatly admires Johnson's work, for example, yet has never liked Stone's. But that is not the point, she emphasized.

"Architecture is a reflection of history and culture, and that campus is a little museum of modern architecture," Tate said. "Johnson's buildings give us an architectural handbook of the influences that got us from the late 19th century to the late 20th century. I don't think (UK officials) know what they have here.

"These mid-century buildings are part of our DNA," she added. "You don't want to take them all away. They are important links in our history and culture."

Sasaki Associates, the Boston planning firm that UK hired to develop a new campus master plan, recently recommended as its first scenario renovating and reusing these historic Modernist buildings. UK officials should take that advice.

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