

RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGERY

Giving Harvard Medical School
the graphics it never had

BY LYNN BAXTER



A stonecarver adds four 20-ft. inscriptions — one on each side of two entries to the quadrangle — that alumni now swear “were here 50 years ago.” Before, the campus had no identification. First-time visitors and people attending public events got lost.

graphics at work

Harvard Medical School, Boston
Jon Roll and Associates, Cambridge, MA

GETTING THROUGH HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL has never been easy — in any sense of the word. Without so much as a sign to announce the entrance to campus, the Medical School seemed to say, “If you need us, you’ll find us.”

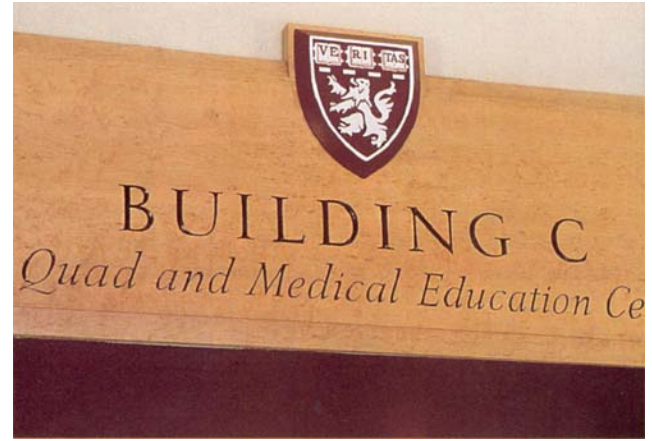
With today’s education economics and the need for grant monies, however, even the Harvard Medical School is finding it necessary to promote its presence and to increase the public use of its meeting spaces. As part of its renovation and building program, it has tried to give a visible face to some of its amorphous classrooms and has added some of the architectural graphics the campus should have had all along.

But no more than that, and maybe even less, says designer Jon Roll of the Cambridge-based Jon Roll & Associates, who has been working on the graphics, as buildings have been added or remodeled, since 1986. Usually, he says, the need to create — or keep — the image of the school supersedes the direction-giving and even identity needs of the buildings’ signage.

It’s all a part of preserving the mysticism of the place, says Roll, who cites the use of school shields, carved inscriptions, and recreated iron grillwork as the touches that create a “graphic memory.” “It doesn’t come out and hit you in the face,” he says. “In many cases, it’s not the most legible stuff in the world, but it feels right.”

Roll is perversely satisfied when he knows that visitors don’t realize how much work has been done. A complaint like “So what did you do? This stuff was here when the building was built” tells him he’s on the right track keeping the signage appropriate and understated.

He began his work when a new education center by architects Ellenzweig Associates, Cambridge, was added to the original quadrangle built in 1906. He continued as a research center was remodeled by Tsoi/Kobus Architects, also of Cambridge, and as Ellenzweig renovated Vanderbilt Hall dormitory this year. His office is now at work on an underground research facility



designed by David Brody of New York, and the remodeling of yet another hall by Tsoi/Kobus.

Roll devised a campus plan the administration approves, but getting the program installed systematically has not been easy. Because the administration has never centralized the signage program, he must educate each university project manager and each architectural firm he works with, demonstrate what his plan has accomplished so far, and enlist them in his graphic effort. Harvard senior project manager Fay De Avignon, noting the lack of upper-level administrative guidance on the graphics package, credits Roll's office with having provided this continuity almost in spite of them. But because he must work building by building, his campus directory kiosks with their colored, one-point perspective maps that the administration promised to install, have not yet been put up. (His hopes for them now center on the renovation of the landscaping to the original Olmstead design as part of the underground building program now in progress.)

He did manage to identify the school, however. De Avignon was committed to providing a sign to tell visitors they had indeed entered the school's quadrangle. When Roll began his work on the campus, the only identification was an inscription carved in the lintel of the administration building, the campus centerpiece located at the far end of the quad. He adapted that typeface and had the name of the school handcarved in 6-in.

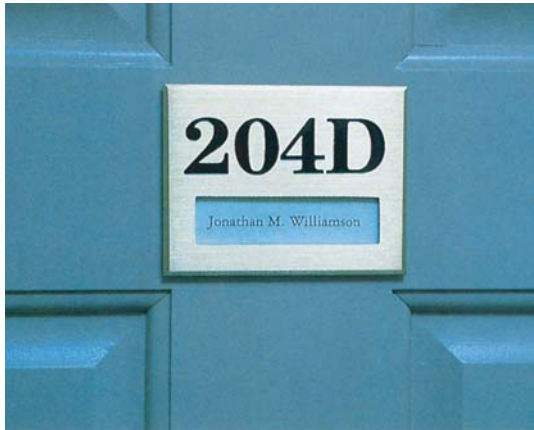
Above left: The Greek cross, adapted from the campus original Greek Revival buildings, adds textures to doors of the 1987 medical education center. Above them, Roll added the school shield "because it belongs there." Above right: The school shield, cast in aluminum, and hand-carved letters identify a passage between two early 1900s buildings. The shield also decorates atriums and auditoriums, which are increasingly used for public events.

letters across 20 ft. of the curved marble gateway at the opposite end of the quad. Now alumni swear the inscription was always there, where "it should have been." according to Roll.

Roll pulled out the Medical School shield, a version of the Harvard University's "Veritas" shield, to identify building entries and public spaces because, he says, "you expect it in academic buildings." Etched in bronze over a building entry or carved in wood and mounted on auditorium doors and even lecterns, the shield plays on the school mysticism. "You don't have to know what its symbolism means," Roll says. "It's the shield, it's always been that way, and maybe some day, if you're a student, you'll go through a book of heraldry and find out what it is, but it's deliberately academic.

In their new building, Ellenzweig pointedly referred to the original campus's Greek Revival architecture. To continue the reference, Roll extracted the Greek cross prevalent as a decorative element in the original buildings and used it to add texture etched on glass doorways. He also used it, subtly screen-printed as a background, to customize the stock signage system that makes up the bread-and-butter sign package inside all the buildings.

All, that is, except the residence hall, where even small rooms need more than a customized stock sign. Vanderbilt Hall's 325 dorm rooms have etched bronze number plaques, nicer than most hotel rooms receive,



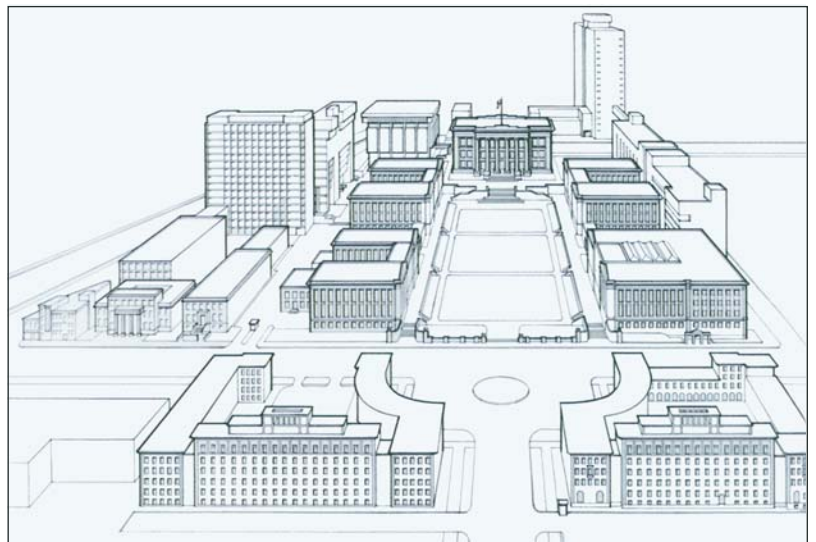
that hold laser-printed name cards.

Normally, says Roll, he would avoid such a plaque “like the plague” because of the upkeep. Here, however, where the residents are graduate students, vandalism is of little concern. And maintenance is worth its cost, because these signs pay for themselves, or more, as alumni fundraising tools, according to De Avignon. Alumni are fond of revisiting their old rooms — and even staying in them — during reunions. So adamant is the university about preserving the history of these rooms that they prohibited Roll’s office from renumbering them in a more logical sequence.

But the building’s various facilities, which are entered from a central court, were a different matter. Here Roll renumbered — or relettered — the entrances to key them as subtle reminders to their functions, so that entrance E leads to elevators, and C to Club Dining. His office restored or recreated the iron grilles over the doors and worked in custom, cast-iron plaques and shields. Hand-cutting the iron letters for a curved surface brings out the best in their gold leaf, which reflects light best from sculpted surfaces.

Projects have bronze door plaques and gilded letters when they have supportive project managers. “People think you can just go down the road and get some thing a lot less expensive in a plastic door plaque,” De Avignon says. “That’s because they don’t have a real sensitivity to that sort of tiling.”

For Roll, it’s more than sensitivity. “It’s a labor of love,” he says. Unlike a shopping mall, where the environmental graphic designer has to create something uniquely new, these buildings have a historic anchor that he is trying to preserve. “There are so many graphics people don’t need, pushing products that people don’t need. This is visceral, the sort of work people have done since time immemorial, that becomes part of the place.” ■



PROJECT/CLIENT

Harvard Medical School,
Boston

ARCHITECTURE

Ellenzweig Associates, Cambridge; Tsoi/Kobus Architects, Cambridge

ENVIRONMENTAL GRAPHICS

Jon Roll & Associates, Cambridge; Jon Roll, principal; Sharon Stafford, project manager

FABRICATION

Design Communications, Boston; APCO, Atlanta

Top: Dorm rooms each receive an etched bronze plaque and laser-printed name cord. The administration views these plaques not as maintenance problems, but as fundraising tools, as alumni often visit rooms they once lived in. Above: For entrances to facilities within a renovated dormitory, iron grillwork was repaired and/or recast, then augmented with cast iron plaques and shields. Lettering was hand-finished for a rounded surface that accentuates the brilliance of gold leaf.