

A Crimsonian Tale of Two Halls: From the Standard Setting to an Evolving Edition in the Richardsonian Romanesque Style

Eugene Han

Seoul Foreign School

Abstract

Sever Hall and Austin Hall on the Harvard campus both exemplify the Richardsonian Romanesque style of the late 19th century, showcasing architect Henry Hobson Richardson's characteristic use of structure, ornamentation, and arches in the architecture of class-purposed halls. This essay examines how Richardson's style evolved between two key Harvard projects. Applying architectural principles of *utilitas* (utility), *firmitas* (structure), and *venustas* (beauty), I highlight Richardson's careful strategy with Sever Hall in particular to reconcile his newly American style with the dominantly British-influenced surroundings of the Harvard Yard. By using crimson-colored bricks, Richardson blended his structure well with the surroundings and expressed his distinctive style at the same time. Tucked away on the law school side, his second alma mater project, Austin Hall, standing alone as one of the first few structures in that area, did not face the same contextual constraints, emerging as an expression of Richardson's greater individuality in style.

Introduction

Although the thirteen American colonies declared independence from Great Britain in 1776 and severed their political ties, the Georgian style inherited from their British legacy still continued to

dominate Harvard's architectural landscape until after the Civil War ended. In the late 19th century, generous donations came in and new demands for educational space rose, leading to the commissioning of Sever Hall and subsequently Austin Hall.

Sever Hall was funded by the Sever family and

designed by architect Henry Hobson Richardson, who had previously completed Trinity Church in Boston. In his first alma mater project, the architect with a postgraduate study in France came to bring his distinctive architectural style to the Harvard Yard that was neither British nor French but rather an interesting reflection of the old Romanesque structure styled with Richardsonian authenticity, which became uniquely American. Austin Hall, Richardson's second Harvard building, came next on the relatively undeveloped law school on the growing rise of demand for law school education and thus classes.¹

In this essay, I examine the two projects with architectural virtues in light of utility, structure, and beauty (*utilitas*, *firmitas* and *venustas* in the original Latin). Done by the same architect, the two projects compare rather than contrast, both contributing to the RR style. What I pay attention to is the contextual setting and the ordering of the two projects in terms of risk. I focus on how each element contributed to taking care of such dimensions, blending his first project, Sever Hall, well in the yard while experimenting with his second project, Austin Hall, to voice a more independent and individualistic expression of Mr. Richardson's American authenticity.

Utilitas

Architecture begins with need, *Utilitas*. And to study architecture means to study the society that commissioned it.² The two halls by the same architect illustrate how different demands lead to different forms, and this point becomes clear by examining the intended use and the plan of the two each.

For use, Sever Hall was built by 1880 to serve academic classes. According to O'Garmon, "Sever forms the portal to Richardson's maturity, the years in which he gained full command of his resources. Sever was commissioned on a limited budget to be a basic barn of a building, housing class-rooms reached by a central hall, stair, and double-loaded corridors."³

The decision to build Sever Hall was based on votes by the President and Fellows.⁴ On the other hand, Austin Hall was built to replace the Dan Hall in the Yard, which became increasingly small for the Law School. Here instead of a committee, the benefactor Austin played a critical role in the design and construction of the building.

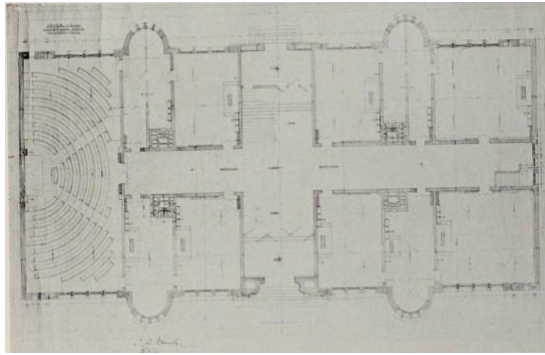
For plan, Sever Hall's interior is divided into plainly finished classrooms and recitation rooms. The interior has a cross hall plan on each floor. The focus here is on general academic use using adaptable spaces.

¹ Maureen Meister, *Austin Hall*, (Cambridge, SAH Archipedia, 2012)

² James F. O'Gorman, *ABC of Architecture*, (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p17

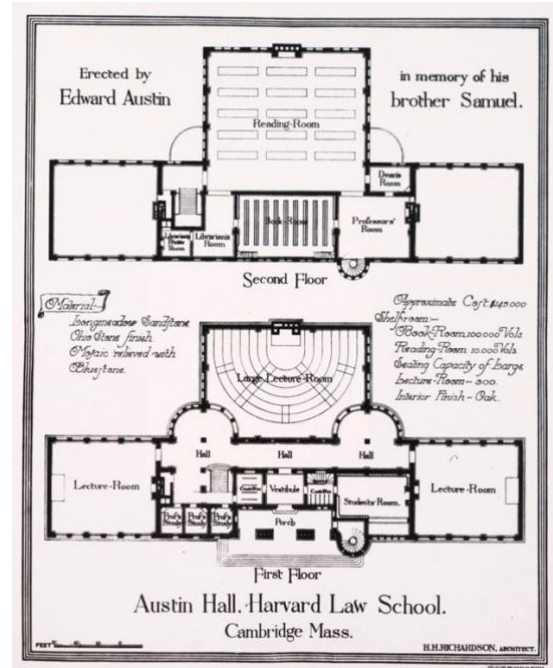
³ James F. O'Gorman, *H.H. Richardson: Architectural Forms for an American Society*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), p42

⁴ Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, *H.H. Richardson, Complete Architectural Works*. (MIT Press, 1982), p196



Source: Sever Hall, first floor plan; Houghton Library, Harvard University.⁵

Austin Hall was also to serve academic classes yet has three large classrooms. The building has a two-story section at the center that stretches back, with one-story wings on either side, forming a T shape. “This is designed to meet the needs of classrooms but also as an area representing authority in legal institutions. The two wings are simpler in design with a single strip of windows high on the facade. The rear of these wings is similar to the front. At the reentrant angle where the reading room wing projects from the main mass of the structure, Richardson introduced a quarter-circle wall which articulates the foyers of the main first floor lecture hall.”⁶



Source: Harvard Law Today⁷

In the Utilitas dimension, one can easily notice a difference behind these buildings and their designs; namely, the general vs. special demands within the classroom purpose. Sever Hall was proposed to create a more general and adaptable space for academic use, in order to meet undefined courses but still to be able to. Austin Hall on the other hand reflects a more specialized purpose, targeting the tailor-made needs of law school education where law school professors engage with the spectator students while other students read long hours in the reading room between classes.

Firmitas

Once the requirements of the building program have been set through Utilitas, the architect

⁵ Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, *H.H. Richardson, Complete Architectural Works*. (MIT Press, 1982), p198

⁶ Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, *H.H. Richardson, Complete*

Architectural Works. (MIT Press, 1982), p247

⁷ Linda Grant, *Then and Now: Austin Hall*, (Harvard Law Today, 2024)

found the structural and material means to fulfill their separate requirements. Here many choices may not have been available to Richardson under the budget constraint in his first project and he would have been constrained by materials and state of technology in the 19th century to express his authentic style the halls could shape.⁸

Material. While the RR style is known for the use of heavy stone, Sever Hall heavily used bricks including carved and molded bricks for ornamentation, as well as some use of Longmeadow Stone in the foundation and trimming. The windows come in different sizes and are also spaced in a lively, varied pattern. The roof got red-orange tiles.⁹

On the other hand, “Austin Hall is made of a polychromatic composition of granite with brownstone trim. The ashlar is of dark Longmeadow sandstone, the trimmings are of pale yellow Ohio and blue stone is introduced in mosaic patterns.”¹⁰ Additionally, “Austin Hall is the only stone academic building by Mr. Richardson. The polychromy is achieved by the use of light and dark Longmeadow sandstone. Yellow Ohio sandstone is used for the elaborately carved entry arches.”¹¹

Arches. The use of mechanical devices in the Richardsonian Romanesque style is characterized by “rounded arches atop short, squat

columns carved out of varying shades of rusticated stone.”¹² However, differences exist between the choices made for both works.

Sever Hall with its rectangular entrance on the East Side as well as pediments blends well with other Georgian buildings at the yard. But notice it has a semicircular Romanesque arch on the West side, revealing a distinction yet in a measured way.

Austin Hall makes his style very obvious, as reminded of his previous work on Trinity Church in Boston. It has an obviously complex entrance on the South side with the Romanesque triple arch frames, yet with an asymmetric stairway tower to its right that is also distinctive from the church.



Source: Arches of Austin Hall on the left (Harvard Law Today) & Trinity Church on the

⁸ James F. O’Gorman, . *ABC of Architecture*, (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p31

⁹ Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, *H.H. Richardson, Complete Architectural Works*. (MIT Press, 1982), p196

¹⁰ Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, *Henry Hobson*

Richardson and His Works. (Dover Publications, 2013)

¹¹ Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, *H.H. Richardson, Complete Architectural Works*. (MIT Press, 1982), p246

¹² Finn Macleod, *Spotlight: Henry Hobson Richardson*, ArchDaily (2017)

right (Taken during the site visit, 2024.7)

His choices in the Firmitas dimension help conclude that both works showcase innovations associated with the RR movement. However, the Sever Hall is a more constrained expression of Mr. Richardson's style. By using the camouflage of red bricks, Sever Hall chose not to stand out from the pre-dominantly Georgian surroundings at the yard but also made it clear its American authenticity, reconciling between harmony and style. With the use of complex arches with the use of polychromatic stone, Austin Hall voices a much stronger independent expression towards his original style.

Venustas

The final element of the architectural triad represents the design or artistic arrangement of those systems and materials. Light acting on shape and materials creates the image of the exterior of the building. Arguably, this node presents major contrasts in the choices made by Mr. Richardson for both Sever and Austin Hall.

According to Oschner in Sever Hall, *"The west (front) and east (rear) facades are each divided into three sections by two cylindrical towers capped with steep roofs. The windows are arranged in horizontal groups with flat arches and molded brick mullions. Carved brick is used for the belt courses at the second and third floors and for the cornice. The door of the central section of the west facade is beneath an arch of molded brick and above this is a slightly projecting bay. On the east facade the central door is beneath a*

*flat arch and above this is a slightly bulging broad bay supported on corbeled brick. Although the building was larger than many of the existing Harvard Yard structures, it did not overwhelm them. Today, with many more additions to the yard, Sever remains a fine example of Richardson's work, fitting his personal style to the context of a group of buildings of different periods and styles."*¹³

The facade of a structure can be compared to the face of a person. Just as a face is the most recognizable and expressive part of a person that may define the apparent identity of a person, the facade of Sever Hall was crafted in a way to harmonize with the surroundings at the yard. It served as a tool for Richardson to mask the massive size and distinctive style of Sever Hall to blend well. For Sever Hall, ornamentation was carved in brick rather than molded in terracotta which gives Sever sharpness and vitality. The doorway used roll moldings made of bricks cast specially for the purpose. The building's facade detailing, constructed of cut, carved, and molded red brick, represents Richardson's interpretation of the Romanesque style.

In Austin Hall, *"the main facade is dominated by the triple-arched entry porch and the adjacent circular stair tower. Other than this vertical element, the main emphasis of the facade is horizontal with the light bands of the continuous lintel and sill above and below the second-story windows and the wide horizontal band in checkerboard pattern."*¹⁴ From the facade, Richardson no longer hides that his style is very distinctive. Austin Hall's interior and exterior have striking details, like vivid

¹³ Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, *H.H. Richardson, Complete Architectural Works*. (MIT Press, 1982), p146

¹⁴ Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, *H.H. Richardson, Complete Architectural Works*. (MIT Press, 1982), p247

carved faces with rugged features and stone carvings of imaginary birds and beasts. English artist John Evans (1847-1923) created the building's French-inspired decorations. However, patterned brickwork and lots of sculpture were the preferred design choices. And while Austin Hall is mostly symmetrical, there is an asymmetrical tower to only one side of the front entrance to set up a spiral staircase up to the second floor to the library reading room, a stack area, the librarian's office, and the dean's office. This design choice cleverly creates utility to that side of the building, intended to invite less crowd for the serene purpose yet with convenient access right from the entrance.

Conclusion

Ochsner wrote, "Whereas in the design of Sever Hall Richardson had worked in the context of Harvard Yard, for Austin Hall he (Henry Hobson Richardson) had few contextual constraints. Perhaps for that reason an exceptional number of drawings for the project are found in the Richardson collection at Houghton Library. Their relationships are not fully clear. Although early sketches for Austin Hall resembled Sever, the design changed as Richardson progressed that the only overtly similar element is the projecting cylindrical tower."¹⁵ Perhaps the ordering of the commission mattered. Without the first success, the second project would have not come. In this regard, the first project had to be

a safer choice to invite the next project in his career.

According to James F 'O Gorman, "Sever forms the portal to Richardson's maturity, the years in which he gained full command of his resources. Sever was commissioned on a limited budget to be a basic barn of a building housing classrooms reached by a central hall, stair, and double-loaded corridors. What Richardson made of this restricted commission is extraordinary, recalling the old saw that the architect designs best who is limited most, for here he first fully disciplined the picturesque, here he first announced to the world that American culture had not only come of age (that he had accomplished at Trinity), but was capable of generating ideas independent of French, English, or German pressure."¹⁶ For me, it was patience rather than maturity that Richardson endured with his first project. The limited use of Romanesque features suggests that blending his measured style in the yard was an important constraint behind Sever Hall. It was not meant to stand out.

In this essay, I highlighted Richardson's careful strategy with Sever Hall in particular to reconcile his newly American style with the dominantly British-influenced surroundings of the Harvard Yard. By using crimson-colored bricks, Richardson blended his structure well with the surroundings and expressed his distinctive style at the same time. Tucked away on the law school side, his second alma mater project, Austin Hall, standing alone as one of

¹⁵ Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, *H.H. Richardson, Complete*

Architectural Works. (MIT Press, 1982), p246

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