

Eliot House

*Building a life in letters
from the past*

Robert Boucheron

In September 1970, I entered Harvard College. My parents and I drove from Schenectady, New York to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where thirty years earlier my father had attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and they delivered me to Pennypacker Hall. I fetched linen per the orientation checklist, and I made my bed on the creaky metal frame as my mother instructed. We did a little sightseeing in the stifling heat. We ate dinner at the Wursthau, a cheap restaurant in Harvard Square, which had several at the time.

A seedy place clogged with traffic and buses, Harvard Square was a terminus of the Red Line, part of Boston's subway system. Facing the subway kiosk was a campus bookstore and general emporium called The Coop, while shops like Leavitt & Peirce, a venerable tobacconist with a museum of pipes and smoking gear in back, lined Massachusetts Avenue. Someone was always passing out political leaflets, while Hare Krishnas wrapped in saffron-tinted sheets chanted and chimed their finger cymbals. The raucous sound of the place, with the smell of diesel exhaust from the buses, merged in my mind with the taste of freedom.

Whatever pride or misgivings they may have felt, Mom and Dad left the next morning with scarcely a word, or so it seemed. A thin, nervous boy who wore glasses and permanent press shirts, I was too excited to notice. I had gotten my wish to attend a prestigious university in a big city. Harvard was then affordable for the family of a mid-level executive, and it offered a monthly billing plan. My parents would pay the bill for tuition, room and board, and I would cover all other expenses—books, travel, clothes, and whatnot. I earned money from part-time work and summer jobs.

The proctor in Pennypacker gave the most memorable talk of the week, a practical guide for what to do when caught in a riot. In April 1969, Harvard students had occupied University Hall, the main administration building, built of pale gray granite in 1813 and

elegantly designed by Charles Bulfinch. The Vietnam War was at issue, and students at campuses across the United States felt that universities were complicit. Cambridge police raided the building at dawn, and students boycotted classes for a week in protest. A graduate student, the proctor had witnessed the events. “If the police come after you,” he said, “don’t ask questions or try to defend yourself. Just turn and run.”

My roommates in the two-bedroom suite were Andy and Fred. Like me, they came from public high schools. Andy, a lively, gregarious joker, was from Wilmington, Delaware. Fred, a quiet, almost morose young man, was from White Plains, New York. Andy arrived first, so he claimed the best bedroom. Fred and I shared a narrow cell, and we all shared a living room that faced north on an alley. Pennypacker was an old apartment building from which the kitchens had been removed. Each student was provided with a bed, desk and dresser.

I wrote letters from Harvard to my parents and to my older sister Charlotte, who saved them and later returned them. Here is one from October 5, 1970:

There is a girl living in Stoughton Hall. This is perfectly alright—the parietal rules state that we may entertain young women in our rooms at any time. But Stacy is an unusual girl. She is 22, a college graduate, sings beautifully, is quite attractive, and has a Great Dane named Bridget. She is also, in the words of Ralph, totally liberated. She undresses at the slightest provocation. We found her in Room 46, lying naked in a sleeping bag on a couch. I petted Bridget. The proctor in Stoughton says that Stacy can be seen as a “dorm mother.” She says that she is looking for a job and an apartment.

Ralph was a new friend who lived in Stoughton.

Roughly one third of students came from elite private schools, it was rumored, and a smaller fraction from foreign countries. The preppies, with their air of entitlement, set the social tone. But my

plebeian peers and I felt lucky to be in this exalted realm and eager to make the most of it. Harvard was full of famous names like John Kenneth Galbraith, and some professors made their lectures into a performance. Students hissed or applauded—another Harvard custom, and one that visitors found disconcerting. That first year I took a heavy course load that included a survey of Greek literature, taught by John H. Finley, Jr., a patrician in a gray suit, and a gifted lecturer who spoke extempore. Once, as he strutted across the stage, Finley thrust his briar pipe into a jacket pocket, then batted the air distractedly as a veil of smoke rose around him. We tittered. Realizing at last that he had set himself on fire, Finley extracted the pipe to a burst of applause.

Many of my classmates called themselves “pre-med,” meaning they would go to graduate school in medicine. If we had less political fervor than the students of the 1960s, there was a genuine interest in doing something with our lives to benefit society. In a lukewarm way, I too said I was pre-med, but in truth I lacked direction. Thrown among hundreds of fiercely bright students, each from the top of his or her class, I did not consider the competition. Nor did I foresee that my indiscriminate thirst for knowledge would be a handicap. My grades suffered, and all four years I stayed in the second rank.

Apart from studies, the Harvard Band was an absorbing activity. I rose quickly to become the first chair soloist on clarinet, the concertmaster. Contacts with musicians led to invitations to perform in orchestras for musical shows, which Harvard produced in abundance. In my five years in Cambridge, I played several Broadway musicals, including *She Loves Me* and *Most Happy Fella*. I substituted in the Hasty Pudding Theatricals orchestra, where I managed a little flute and saxophone. At Radcliffe, I played all of the Gilbert & Sullivan operettas. Always subject to stage fright, I was shocked when another clarinetist told me: “When you play a solo, I can relax, knowing that you won’t blow it.”

At the start of sophomore year, students were asked to declare a major or “field of concentration.” Toward the end of freshman year, therefore, academic departments conducted question-and-answer sessions, and they vied for talent. With a blithe disregard for the future, I did not consider any of the sciences. Nor did I think of art or music, though archaeology had a romantic appeal. Instead, I weighed English, History, and Classics, which meant Latin and Greek. The Department of English and American Language and Literature offered a better deal in terms of personal instruction—the famed tutorial system—so I picked that.

Also in the spring of 1971, we had to choose where to live. In the 1920s, Yale and Harvard had adopted a residential system modeled on the English universities of Oxford and Cambridge, where each student lives in a College. The Harvard Houses were named for Harvard presidents dating back to the school’s foundation: Dudley, Lowell, Mather, Winthrop, and so on. Including existing buildings and Radcliffe dormitories which had been absorbed into the system, there were thirteen Houses, mostly arranged as suites with two to four bedrooms, a private bath, a living room, and often a wood-burning fireplace. The Houses varied in prestige and popularity. Students formed groups, filled out applications, went to interviews, and anxiously waited to see if they got in. The process was much like applying to college all over again—it was later replaced by a lottery.

Feeling shortchanged by Pennypacker Hall, I was determined to live in one of the better Houses. Andy and Fred had made other plans, so I roped together three friends, two of whom were in the Harvard Band. Leigh was tall and thin, much like me in appearance, and he played drums. Alex, the son of a Harvard geology professor, was a solid sort with a crewcut, very unfashionable at the time, and he played trumpet. Karl had a compact build and a sardonic wit; though we never became close, he was always up for a prank.

We four got into Eliot House, one of several red brick buildings built in the 1920s and 1930s in a Neo-Georgian style. With slate roofs punctuated by dormers, chimneys and white-painted steeples,

they had green courtyards and endless variety. From *Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge*, a 1973 report by Bainbridge Bunting and Robert H. Nylander, here is a description:

With the munificent assistance of Edward S. Harkness . . . Lowell returned to the early Harvard concept of “cohabiting for scholastic communication,” an attitude which produced great efforts to house students and faculty so they could live and study together. The Houses along the river form one of Greater Boston’s majestic sights. Looking more like palatial residences than college dormitories, the structures are set among trees . . . Because there is so little evidence of monotonous repetition, it is hard to imagine that all were designed by one architectural firm within a sixteen-year period.

The survey of American literature was taught by Alan Heimert, an expert on Herman Melville. My paper on *Moby-Dick* caught his attention. Heimert was also the Master of Eliot House, which allowed some casual encounters. Seeing a copy of *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini* in my hand, he asked: “Are you reading it for a course?” “No,” I said, “for the hell of it.” He shook his head. From then on, I was “a person who reads books for the hell of it.”

Our suite in Eliot House, just below the House library, overlooked the busy intersection of Memorial Drive along the Charles River and Boylston Street, now called John F. Kennedy Street. A transit railroad yard called the “car barn” lay across the street, since replaced by the Kennedy School of Government. Poised between campus and city, between the lovely architectural park and the gritty industrial landscape, I was moved to explore. Alone, or, rarely, with a friend, I took the subway into Boston to different stations, got out, and walked. I also walked from Harvard along the river, through Cambridge, across bridges, and around the deserted downtown. Although I started with no agenda, these walks became a self-education in architecture and city planning.

The Government Center project had cleared a swath of old buildings in the 1960s. New construction was in a concrete Brutal-

ist style and along great, sweeping curves. Boston City Hall, built in 1968 and designed by Kallmann McKinnell & Knowles, was controversial. A kind of inverted pyramid, it was either ultra-modern or extremely ugly. The vast brick plaza was still under construction. At the time, I thought the design was an aggressive attack on Boston's sense of style and history, and that some of the paved area should be planted as green space.

Nearby, the State House, Faneuil Hall, Quincy Market, and Custom House were historic and monumental. I followed the Freedom Trail into the North End, where Paul Revere's house stands, and saw Colonial churches. I walked through Boston Common and the Public Garden, and on through the Back Bay, a masterpiece of urban design. Beacon Hill was a marvel, a preserved enclave of nineteenth-century brick rowhouses. Other expeditions took me to Trinity Church, the Boston Public Library, and the Prudential Center, where the tower was completed in 1964. At 52 stories, it was the tallest building in Boston. The Christian Science complex, which married the dumpy "Mother Church" and its huge Renaissance "Annex" with the sleek modern lines of I. M. Pei, was then under construction. Several times, I visited the Museum of Fine Arts, a huge, granite, neoclassical structure built 1907-1915, and, nearby in the Fens, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, inspired by the Palazzo Barbaro in Venice. To me, the buildings were as interesting as the art they contained.

On a stair landing in Harvard's Widener Library, one of the great national libraries, I found scale models of Cambridge as it appeared in the 1700s and 1800s. The twenty-two acres of Harvard Yard were assembled over centuries, and the precinct is now a prime example of a "superblock." Around 1901, a wrought-iron fence and monumental gates defined the perimeter. Twice during my years there, the gates were locked due to riots—the fence was for more than show.

In addition to walking, I bought and read books on cities and urbanism. Two that made a lasting impression were *Town and*

Square: From the Agora to the Village Green, by Paul Zucker, and *Boston: A Topographical History*, by Walter Muir Whitehill. The Boston book informed what I saw on the ground with a wealth of facts related to land, water, building, development, and how the face of the city had changed. The idea of “topographical history,” encapsulated in the phrase “cutting down the hills to fill the coves,” was a revelation. The city itself was a text that could be read.

Though I cannot locate the exact moment in time, I can picture myself standing in the main reference room of Widener. I had emerged from the stacks, a dim labyrinth that seemed to organize and enshrine all human knowledge. In a flash, I felt that I had learned enough to be able to tackle any research topic, pursue any question, even to the point of learning that there was no answer. I had reached a threshold of information, or more importantly, of intellectual skill. True or false, the belief stayed with me.

As an experiment, a few women moved into the Houses, just as a few men braved ridicule by moving to Radcliffe. The most audible woman in Eliot House was Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the President of Pakistan. Colorful and vivacious, she was known as Pinkie, a common nickname from her part of the world. Pinkie had a passion for the books of Yukio Mishima and a poster of him in her room. In the dining hall, she made a dramatic entrance, and her voice carried easily over the chatter. She was said to be partial to jocks, and since Eliot was the closest dormitory to Soldiers Field, it was a magnet for them. Among the student athletes, Pinkie was madly popular.

A university boathouse faced the courtyard of Eliot House. Crews practiced on the river in narrow, eight-man shells that rode low in the water, as a coxswain at one end chanted “stroke, stroke” through a megaphone. I tried rowing a wherry, a small single boat, one cloudy afternoon. With no experience, and with no one at the boathouse to tell me how, it was a struggle. I also tried running along the river, on a paved path. I did not know enough to stretch or pace myself, and I was quickly winded. Blisters and sore muscles

brought an end to this exercise. Swimming laps in the Indoor Athletic Building pool did not last, either, though I passed the swim test required of all students. Walking was my thing.

The fall of 1972, our junior year, Leigh and I moved to a double suite, as Alex and Karl paired off with others. In September, however, administrators told us that due to overcrowding, Leigh and I would have a third roommate, a man from Haiti named Philippe. I was the last to arrive in Cambridge that fall, and Philippe was already installed in the living room of the suite. I suggested that we toss a coin for the two bedrooms, but Philippe, a genial soul, the son of a physician, insisted that he didn't mind the lack of privacy. Leigh and I thought nothing of the arrangement, but others looked at us askance. Harvard was making an effort to boost the number of black students, but interracial mingling was rare. In January, Philippe moved to a double with a friend.

At age twenty, I fell in love for the first time. The object of my affection was Smitty, a year behind me, also in English and in Eliot House. A white boy from Compton, a downtrodden part of Los Angeles, Smitty smoked cigarettes, played guitar, wore a mustache, and had an easy social manner. I felt confused. He did not return the sentiment, which made matters worse. I groped in the dark of a depression, skipped classes, and tried to avoid him. One evening, in the archway entrance, he cornered me: "What is your problem?" I forget what I said, but we remained friends. The only scholarship student I got to know, he gave me a glimpse of Harvard from the working-class point of view.

My broken heart healed, apparently. The letters record a game of whiffle ball in the courtyard, playing with a Frisbee—"Leigh perfected the behind-the-back catch"—and a fire one night in Eliot House.

Leigh, Yolanda and I watched from my window. No fewer than five fire trucks came, complete with firemen, hoses, ladder, axes, and bullhorn. The fire was in a third floor suite. I lit a cigar that happened to be lying around and blew smoke out the window, hoping to

confuse watchers below. Leigh brought his pipe, and Yolanda tried that and the cigar. But the wind was against us.

To satisfy the last of my pre-med requirements, I studied organic chemistry, but found the lectures on organic chemistry dull, the reading and homework taxing, and the laboratory assignments impossible. On February 26, 1973, I wrote:

I am definitely not going to medical school. I don't think I'd like it there any more than I have liked the science departments here. I also am sure, but less so, that I don't want to go to any sort of graduate school. I am fed up with academics, the fantasy world of rewards and punishments. I may graduate just in time to avoid dropping out. I want to get a job after graduation.

For the rest of my time at Harvard, I followed scattered interests. One of these was writing poetry. The English department offered a seminar, limited by application to ten students, and I was accepted, one of a few undergraduates. Incredibly, this is what I wrote:

Elizabeth Bishop's poetry course is very disappointing. I haven't learned anything, and it's almost over. She is definitely an old woman, repeats herself. One oft-heard remark: "If you can find a new rhyme for love, you'll win the Nobel Prize." I don't think she likes to teach. She conducts the class listlessly and saves herself work by not assigning it. Few really good poems have come out—we read each other's during class—and those that do are no thanks to her. Maybe you can't teach poetry.

To her credit, Bishop used tact and kindness with us. Then aged 62, she was a soft-spoken, stout figure with coiffed gray hair. She insisted that we read aloud in a natural voice, and her critiques were common sense. At the end of the semester, she gave each student a

personal interview. She dodged my question “Do I have talent?” and suggested I move beyond traditional forms.

The summer of 1973, between my junior and senior years, I returned to Schenectady as usual. I got a job at a nearby K-Mart unpacking clothes, putting them on the sales floor, and packing unsold clothes to ship out. Midway through the summer, my aunt Dorothy and her daughter visited, fresh from a trip to Europe. I came downstairs the next morning and announced that I wanted to travel. From a business stay in Paris, my parents had brought home a large map, a bird’s eye view from the early twentieth century, showing the Seine, the *Île de la Cité*, major buildings, streets and trees in minute detail. I had spent hours gazing at this map, tracing the boulevards, and memorizing the layout. My grandfather had been born in Paris. I had enough money saved to pay for a few weeks, and my parents agreed I could go.

My father’s office arranged a plane ticket, and I managed to get a passport in days. I flew to Orly airport and spent two blissful weeks in Paris—in August. I stayed in a cheap hotel near the Père Lachaise Cemetery, walked and rode the Métro all over the city, and made a side trip to Versailles. Somewhere, I picked up a bad cold. Exhausted, I lay on the grass in the Bois de Boulogne one hot afternoon and fell asleep. I decided to move on to London. Arriving by overnight train and boat, I felt sicker, so I took a train to Oxford. There I recuperated for a week in a bed-and-breakfast and strolled to take in the tourist sights. A few more days in the English country, then a few in London, where I walked diligently to see art, architecture and history, and it was time to return. I sent postcards, and from Paris an *aérogramme* which included this:

Most of the historic buildings are crumbling and grimy, often divorced from their original setting—the *Sainte Chapelle*, for example. Restoration is going on in the *Place des Vosges*, and nearby is a masterpiece, the *Hôtel de Sully*. I stumbled into it, as into so many places. Entrance was free to students that day.

Senior year began strong. In letters dated October 3 and 10,

1973, I listed my courses: ancient Greek, Victorian literature, a survey of Western art, a history of Japan taught by Edwin Reischauer, the East Asian expert and former ambassador, and this:

Senior tutorial, for which I write a thesis, which is necessary for honors, which are necessary for who knows what. I will heap some 40-odd pages on the Ode to Psyche by Keats. One of the foremost Keats scholars, Walter Jackson Bate, lives in Eliot House, and I have eaten a few meals with him. His table manners are deplorable. It's likely he will read my thesis, so I should get to know him better.

The previous year I had won a university prize for an English translation of an ode of Horace, a few hundred dollars. I used the money to buy Leigh's old stereo, as he bought a new one. He let me borrow his records, and I began to buy some, starting with symphonies by Beethoven and Brahms. My bank account was dwindling, so I took part-time jobs. I delivered newspapers to dorm rooms, which meant dashing up and down flights of stairs. I graded physics papers for the course I had taken. And I did lettering or calligraphy, posters for concerts and small custom jobs.

The depression returned. I disliked my assigned tutor and dropped the senior tutorial. I dropped out of the Harvard Band, though I continued to play clarinet in orchestras for shows, including *Kiss Me, Kate* at the Loeb Drama Center. Ancient Greek proved to be as difficult as people said, and I stopped at the first half. By the final semester, I was taking only three courses, as I had accumulated extra credits toward graduation. I read novels by Flaubert. I read Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, "which has expanded my conceptions of literature and life and art and stupid jokes." I walked in the gloomy winter weather. I worried about what to do after college. In my bedroom, "I built a cathedral out of 3x5 index cards and Elmer's glue, 13 inches long, 10 inches high, complete with nave, transept, choir, crossing tower and flying buttresses," and

a hexagonal baptistery of stiff paper.

The bright spot that spring was a course taught by James Ackerman on the history of urban design. I devoured books by Lewis Mumford and Steen Eiler Rasmussen, learned how Venice coalesced from a group of swampy islands, and admired the Baroque achievement in Rome. I wrote a paper based on what I had seen in Oxford, and I drew a hypothetical plan of the earliest city, founded in the tenth century. I had doodled imaginary maps and city plans for years.

In May 1974, I pursued job leads in publishing, teaching in private schools, and a project in the Harvard University Development Office, the fund-raising coordinator for the college and graduate schools. I filled out applications, got letters of reference, and went to interviews. I looked for a place to live in Cambridge. High rents in the Boston area meant that I would have to find a share in an apartment. I interviewed with a group who said they wanted someone who could sing bass in their madrigal ensemble. Another group was strictly vegetarian.

Leigh was admitted to Johns Hopkins Medical School. I read more novels, played clarinet, and fretted. At the last minute, the Development Office came through—my job would start July 1. My parents returned to Cambridge for Commencement in the middle of June. The next day they helped move my belongings to Dana Street, just east of Harvard Yard, where I would share an apartment with graduate students.

The Development Office was then located in Holyoke Center, a 1950s ten-story modernist block by Josep Lluís Sert that loomed over Harvard Square. My assignment was to continue a project that began a year or two before, a series of reports on foundations and charitable trusts, especially those that had given to Harvard in the past, and those with Harvard alumni on their boards. The young man who was leaving trained me in his research methods, handed over his notes, and introduced me to the dozen or more people in

the office. The one I worked with most closely was a librarian named Vickie, who wore the same severe outfit every day. From August 20, 1974:

She is a good soul, very helpful, patient and alert. But she asks personal questions when I least expect: “Do you do your own cooking? Are you going home for Labor Day?” She volunteers advice that I need but would prefer to ask for. She has an odd, gasping, little-girlish laugh. She is about 50 and unmarried. There are two more just like her in the office.

The sources I used were newspaper clippings, *New York Times* obituaries, Standard & Poor’s directory of companies, the Martindale-Hubbell directory of lawyers, the *Social Register*, books on America’s wealthy families, and the *Harvard College Class Reports*, a series of books compiled from notes sent in by alumni and published at five-year intervals. The job amounted to an in-depth look at America’s upper class, how they got their money, and what they liked to do with it. For some large and complex families, I drew charts to show several generations, their marriages and children. In a book on the Commonwealth Fund, which was founded by the same Harkness family that helped pay for the Harvard Houses, I found pages on my grandfather Lester Evans, who worked for the Fund for years to improve health care and medical education.

In July, I bought a bicycle. Over the next year, I rode it all over Boston, to the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plan, to Revere Beach, and out to Lexington and Concord. I saw the redevelopment of Commercial Wharf, Lewis Wharf and Long Wharf: “the whole area is looking brighter thanks to efforts to fix up downtown Boston for the Bicentennial.” I kept up with Smitty, who lived in Eliot House that summer and worked for Buildings and Grounds. On August 9, 1974, we watched the Nixon resignation on television in a basement lounge. I still got calls to play clarinet for Gilbert & Sullivan and other shows. My year in Cambridge working for Harvard prolonged

undergraduate life. But where was I headed?

Strangely enough, inspiration came from the Development Office. From a letter of October 10, 1974:

I no longer remember why I decided that architecture is “it,” but I can explain how I feel by a comparison. My present job is dull, in spite of the nice office, and I mope. By contrast, the librarian Vickie, committed to her old maidenhood, bustles all day long. Although she occasionally lets fall a quavery “damn,” she obviously enjoys her work. In fact, she never stops, for lunch or weekends. Her work coincides with her life’s interest, and this coincidence is the source of great satisfaction. Now, it’s clear that my interest in life is to build—in the sand, with cards, and on paper. If a job is the key to happiness, more than income or living conditions, then it should be in construction.

I had no course credit or training in design, so this career choice would mean three years of graduate school. I knew nothing about academic programs or architectural practice, and I did not know any architects personally. The field never came up for discussion during my four years in college. So far as I know, only one of my classmates went into architecture or any sort of design. Law, medicine, business and finance claimed the majority of souls.

To apply to architecture schools, I scraped together a portfolio of doodles, calligraphy, and photos of sand castles. I carried my paper models to a photographer’s studio in Harvard Square and paid for a professional, black-and-white portrait. The following April, two schools offered a place. Yale’s offer was conditional—I had to take a drawing course. I made a quick visit to Yale by train and decided that it would do. I completed the series of Development Office reports and left at the end of May. I signed up for a summer term class in life drawing.

That summer, I continued to read books and ride my bicycle. The life drawing class went well, as an exercise in observing closely

and letting the hand move freely. The class was in Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. The only building by Le Corbusier in the United States, it was completed in 1962. Curved forms and raw concrete posed a stark contrast to the traditional brick boxes around it. A wag called it "two grand pianos copulating."

For the month of August, I house-sat for a neighbor family on Dana Street who went on vacation. Sleeping in an attic bedroom in an empty house was strange, but the yard was lovely. I browsed their books and listened to their records. I was waiting. It was an awkward, lazy time, but at last I had a destination: architecture at Yale.