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Biting into the Concrete Shell, to Discover the Soft Inside

September 8th, Haigis Mall—The Whitmore Administration Building (commonly known as Whitmore Hall) appears deserted. The all-encompassing impenetrable concrete walls and manmade mounds of earth (with steep **grades**) do not help; as the inner-workings of the ‘concrete giant’ are obscured. Whitmore Hall is located in Amherst, Massachusetts; on the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass Amherst) campus—near a major plaza and **greenway** called Haigis Mall.¹ The building was designed by Campbell & Aldrich, and was constructed between 1966 and 1967.² It is just one example of the modern, brutalist, concrete architecture found all over the UMass Amherst campus. Whitmore Hall represented UMass Amherst’s goal of making the college progressive. Constructing the ‘modern’ building was an attempt to update/rejuvenate the campus—along with construction of the Lincoln Campus Center and Hotel UMass (in 1970); and the Fine Arts Center (in 1975) (See **Image 1**).³ The building draws heavily from Le Corbusier’s architectural teachings; which are reflected in its composition and character. While it is easy to dismiss Whitmore Hall as ‘just another’ hostile, brutalist building; it quickly becomes apparent that it is friendlier, than it lets on.

From the three-story **facade**, Whitmore Hall appears, aggressive, stark, inorganic, industrial, and chilly—with its chunky, cloudy-grey, **béton-brut** exterior.⁴ The tough outside appearance contrasts with the brightly-colored flower-beds, and the perfectly manicured lawn, of Haigis Mall. The building’s defining feature is its wide, straight, sixty-five-foot-long, red-brick ramp, which leads to the **landing** and **foyer** of the second floor (see **Image 2**). The dim lights that illuminate the ramp at night, **under-light** the second-floor entrance of the building, and exaggerate the looming shadows of the Corbusier-inspired forms; making the exterior of the building eerier.

From the outside, the building resembles Corbusier’s Unite D’Habitation with its sharpness, ‘barred’ windows, heaviness, and rectilinear shape.⁵ The dense concrete **mullions**, that frame a majority of the windows (on both buildings), shade some of the interior spaces, and create deep voids. The building resembles another Corbusier building; the 1963 Carpenter Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Carpenter Center features a ramp that leads to a second floor entrance, similar to the ramp at Whitmore Hall.⁶ The building fits-in with the other brutalist buildings on the UMass Amherst campus. The monumental concrete **massing** that makes-up Whitmore can be seen on: the Fine Arts Center (a minute walk from Whitmore); Herter Hall (also a minute walk from Whitmore); and the towering Lincoln Campus Center (commonly

¹ UMass Amherst Libraries, UMass Amherst Libraries: Special Collections & University Archives, “Whitmore Hall.”

² UMass Amherst Libraries, “Whitmore Hall.”

³ Campus Beautification Committee, *Three Architectural Tours: Selected Buildings on the Campus of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst* (Amherst: UMass Arts Council and the University Gallery, 2000), 10.; UMass Amherst Libraries, “Campus Center.”; William Marlin, “Fine Arts Center for the University of Massachusetts, Amherst,” *Architectural Record*, vol. 157 (May 1975), 100.; Marla R. Miller and Max Page, 46.

⁴ Ingersoll, Richard, and Spiro Kostof. “1940-1970.” In *World Architecture: A Cross-Cultural History*, 782-833. (New York, US: Oxford University Press, 2013), 835.

⁵ Ingersoll, Richard, and Spiro Kostof. “1920-1940.” In *World Architecture: A Cross-Cultural History*, 782-833. (New York, US: Oxford University Press, 2013), 801.; Ingersoll, Richard, and Kostof, Spiro, 799.

⁶ Kroll, Andrew. “AD Classics: Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts / Le Corbusier.”

known as the Campus Center) and Hotel UMass (See **Image 1**). Unlike the aforementioned buildings, the character of the building has been shaped and hardened by harsh past events.

Before one enters Whitmore, one can feel the burden, dreariness, and weight (literally and metaphorically) from all that the building has endured, over-the-years. The fortress-like appearance of the building is somewhat ironic, as it has been a place of many protests; against what some may deem as a ‘cruel’ and ‘indifferent’ administration. The first major protest at Whitmore Hall began during the Vietnam War, with “75 students” choosing to do a sit-in at Whitmore; in an attempt to prevent the DOW chemical company from hiring UMass Amherst graduates.⁷ Last year, “UMass Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaign” demonstrators protested for four days, to get the UMass Administration to stop investing in coal. The demonstrators did the protest/sit-in at Whitmore, with a large crowd choosing to gather on the ramp (since it has a large **holding capacity**).⁸ Clearly, Whitmore has the ‘emotional baggage’ of the various student groups that protested there (and the protest related arrests). As a result, Whitmore, has become a symbol of oppression—a possible explanation for why it always appears to be ‘dead’ on the outside (with minimal signs of human life). The building’s reputation and outside demeanor scares away many students, which is unfortunate, since the interior makes it an inviting space.

Without the cozy foyers and inner courtyards, the interior of Whitmore Hall would be a dark, oppressive, and grim space—like the interiors of other brutalist architecture, on the UMass Amherst campus (e.g. the Fine Arts Center; Herter Hall; and the Campus Center and Hotel UMass). The foyers use warm-lighting, earth tones, and the same unpretentious, red-brick used on the ramp. These interior design choices produce comfy waiting areas, that pang-off human instincts/recollections (evoking memories of a ski-lodge with a crackling hearth, and the brick sidewalks in Boston). The courtyards also make the interior spaces feel comfortable, habitable, and welcoming. Whitmore has two courtyards that are integral to the design of building (See **Image 2**). Both bathe the corridors of the building with bursts of golden, dusty light. The windows that line the courtyards, provide views into the courtyards. In addition, the windows (around the courtyards) give inhabitants an opportunity to gaze across the courtyards—to see people walking through the other corridors—creating the feeling of openness and freedom. The larger courtyard adds to the feeling of airiness; as it is microcosm of nature. The smell of fresh mulch and tree pitch drifts through the air; leaves rustle; a pool of water (right-out-of a Japanese, Zen, rock garden) babbles; students and faculty members murmur among themselves; and a frog gloats incessantly. The sounds create a calming white noise, making the courtyard (and thereby Whitmore Hall) a place of refuge, quiet consultation, and contemplation. Despite having extraordinary interior spaces, Whitmore Hall gets ‘a bad rap’, because of its tortured and distressed outward-appearance, which repels people away from it. If Whitmore Hall is to avoid the fate of the Campus Center and Hotel UMass (which are scheduled to be replaced within the next ten years), the building will need to get renovated, to expose the life and gentleness contained inside.

⁷ Costello, JoElla. “Mass Action Outside Memorial I.” In *Takeover! Students U.S.A. Mobilize for the 90's*, edited by Terisa Turner and Timothy Belknap. 90.; Radical UMass, Smash ROTC at UMass. Radical UMass.

⁸ Deady, Brendan. “Hundreds turn out for fourth day”, The Massachusetts Daily Collegian.

Appendix

Image 1, pg. 6

Image 2, pg. 7

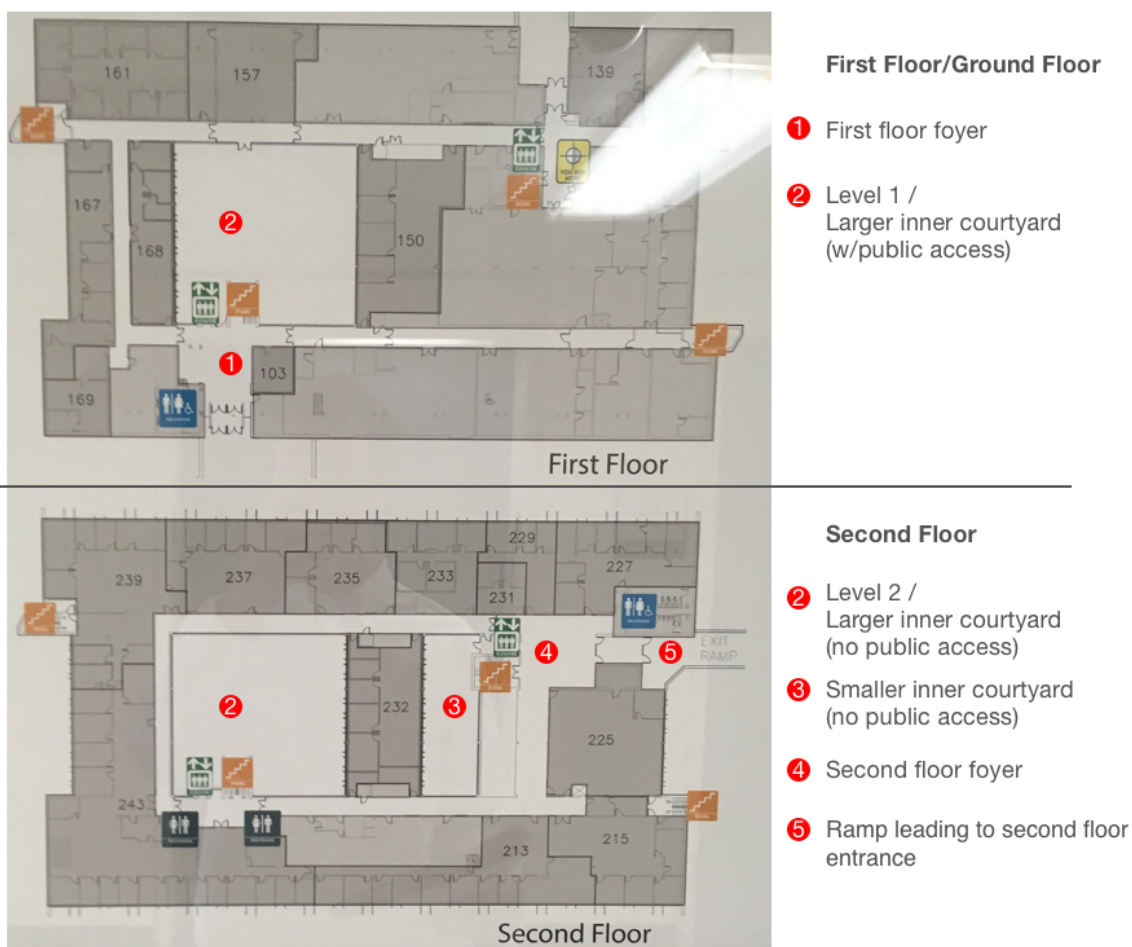


Image 2. Whitmore Hall First and Second Floor Plans *Edited*—showing referenced spaces¹⁰

¹⁰ University of Massachusetts Amherst, Whitmore Hall, First and Second Floor Plans.

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