

Sterling Library: Architecture of Storytelling

Anthony Riccio, who retired in 2020 after 23 years managing the Sterling Memorial Library bookstacks, died unexpectedly on Jan. 16. He frequently photographed and led tours of Sterling Library, which he described in an email invitation to library staff on May 5, 2019:

Sterling Memorial Library is one of the world's most important libraries. It is a magnificent landmark of learning whose Gothic architecture inspires us to seek higher levels of knowledge.

The Sterling Library tour begins at the facade of the library on High Street, at the very epicenter of the Yale campus. Here we will discuss the library's architect James Gamble Rogers and his momentous decision to employ Collegiate Gothic over the contemporary Modernism in the early 1930s. As a follower of the City Beautiful Movement, Rogers believed in the role of architecture as a civilizing presence; his architectural style at Sterling combined the act of composition with the act of conversation, of storytelling through the imagery of his secular cathedral.

We will note the inscriptions carved into the facade from various cultures through the ages that place Sterling Library within the history of recorded knowledge. One inscription from the ancient Egyptians in the 19th century B.C. is the story of a father telling his son to become a scribe so that "You will learn to love books more than your own mother." Now in Rogers' embrace in the courtyard, inscriptions to the right and left begin a conversation with the patron before we walk into the building that remind us, "The Library is the Heart of the University" and "The Library is a Summons to Scholarship."

Crossing the threshold into the church-like building, we enter into the nave, into the warm light of Rogers' cathedral of knowledge, with his interior architecture of sequential unfolding spaces purposely designed to be walked through and experienced. We will visit the Linonia and Brothers Reading Room, the Starr Reading Room and see where we discovered the hidden workmen signatures from the 1930s, and the 1710 room. We'll view and discuss some of the episodes of Yale history depicted in the glass plates of the bay windows of the nave and in sculptural friezes from the 18th century; we'll take note of the many wall inscriptions advising us, "If I must be a prisoner, I would desire to have no other prison than that library."

Perhaps James Gamble Rogers' genius to inspire generations of students was best described by the great writer and historian of American history, David McCullough. As an undergraduate at Yale in the 1950s, he found his inspiration to become a writer at Sterling Library. In 2011, he returned for the 75th anniversary of Sterling Memorial Library to give a speech in which he described the sense of inspiration he felt being at the library:

I was so happy! I loved it. There I was with nobody bothering me, all these books and papers all around me, making notes. And I thought: I wonder if this might be a way that I could do this all my life. It was sort of a thought I had, and so I feel in many ways I began my vocation in the Sterling Library. And it was from there a great deal happened, much of it connected to Yale.

But Sterling Memorial Library is more than bricks and mortar. Its success in extending its intellectual resources to the world is based on the great people who work in its many departments – its curators, catalogers, work leaders and student workers, to name just a few.