

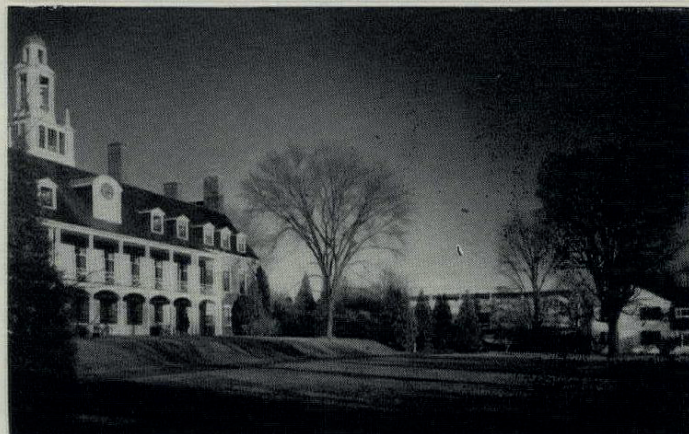
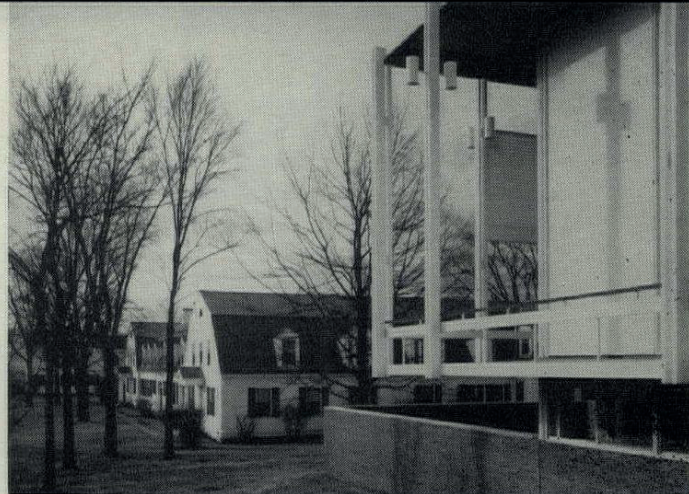
Bennington's trim new library suggests that modern architecture can be made to fit comfortably into a traditional New England setting.

Continuity without compromise

When Bennington's intimate little campus was built in 1932, it was felt that both the New England setting and the historical associations of the area called for a traditional, axial, colonial scheme. The decision may have been sound for its time; after all, there was not very much good modern architecture around to offer a convincing alternative. In any case, Bennington College became a sort of tiny "University of Virginia"—largely rendered in white clapboard: an imposing, central commons building at one end, and a series of small-scale dormitory houses extending symmetrically outward from the commons to form a U-shaped campus (see site plan, opposite). These delightful little houses were grouped around small courts that, in turn, created a sort of college community rather than an "educational plant."

Since that time, Bennington's campus has grown very little. Some converted farm structures outside the central quadrangle were put to use, and a few subsidiary buildings sprang up here and there. Then, three years ago, Bennington found it possible to move its makeshift library from a converted barn into a new building. At once, certain fundamental decisions had to be made concerning the site and the character of the new library structure, decisions typical of those faced by many an established college today.

The first decision Bennington made was that the building must be a good example of modern rather than colonial architecture. Both the character of the college and the growth of the modern movement in architecture made the trustees reject any more fake-colonial structures. The second decision was to make the building a part of the central quadrangle, rather than quarantine it on the outer fringes of the campus where it might clash less violently with its



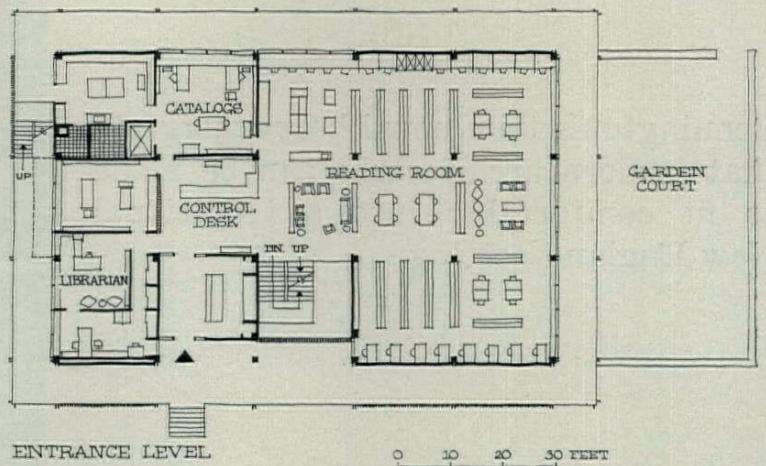
PHOTOS: © EZRA STOLLER

surroundings. The decision called for faith in the architects—Pietro Belluschi and Carl Koch & Associates—and in their ability to produce a design that would be both modern and in harmony with the existing clapboard campus. When the Edward Clark Crossett Library was completed, virtually all Benningtonians agreed that this faith had been justified.

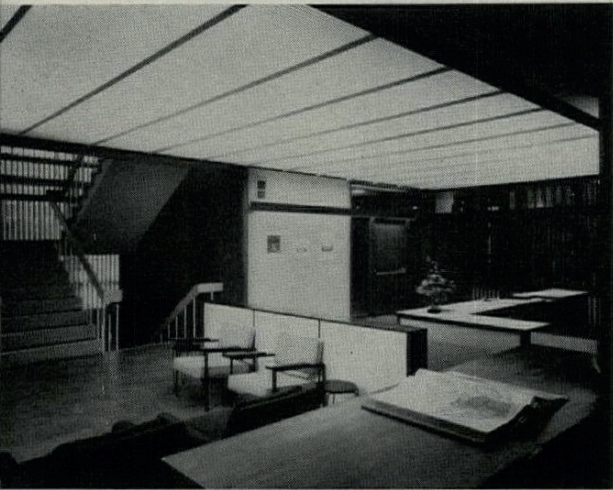
In trying to bring the library into harmony with its colonial surroundings, the architects used three devices: first, they sited the building so that it fitted naturally into the pattern of rectangular spaces formed by the existing dormitories and was approached almost axially by way of an existing cross-walk that passes in front of the central commons. Second, they used materials and details that recalled those of existing structures—white painted wood siding, horizontal wood louvers that relate to the clapboard patterns on the campus, vertical fins around the porch that recall colonial pilasters, brick and stone walls and paving that resemble similar details in neighboring structures. And, finally, the architects kept down the scale of the library so as to make it conform to the scale of the dormitories. This was done, partly, by sinking most of the bottom floor into the ground and making the building seem only two stories high, and partly by refining the details of wood trim and siding to maintain interest when the building is seen at close quarters. Bennington's President William Fels said of the new library: "This is a warm, pleasant building. It doesn't intrude. The campus has gathered around it." This was high praise indeed, but a leading library expert matched it, saying flatly that "this is the best undergraduate library of its size in the country." The facilities that make it "the best" are described on the next four pages.



Entrance to library is at second but main floor level, shown also in plan (below). Control desk is visible beyond the main door.



Main floor contains the single, controlled entrance to the library proper. Immediately next to the entrance is an elegant stair leading to upper and lower levels. On this floor are a reading room, a reference library, and facilities for periodicals, biographies, and catalogue files. Beyond the control desk are the librarians' offices, a catalogue room, and a shipping room. The latter is served by a freight elevator (see plan).



Assistant librarians' office is located behind the wooden screen, thus helps to control the main entrance to the building. Many interior finishes are natural wood (some of it walnut) with occasional bright color accents.



Typical study area on the main floor is an alcove created by shelving. The capacity of the library is 75,000 volumes, distributed over three floors. Here, as elsewhere in the building, the luminous ceiling hung above the reading areas is of a corrugated plastic with good sound-absorbing qualities.

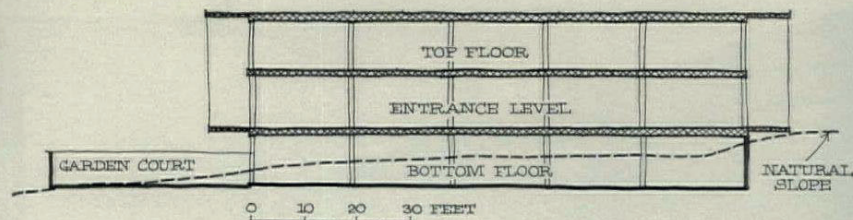


Soundproofed booths are used throughout the library to give a high degree of privacy without taking up too much space. To drown out distracting noises in study areas, the acoustical consultants let the air-conditioning system emit a low hum. The resulting backdrop of sound helps students to concentrate.

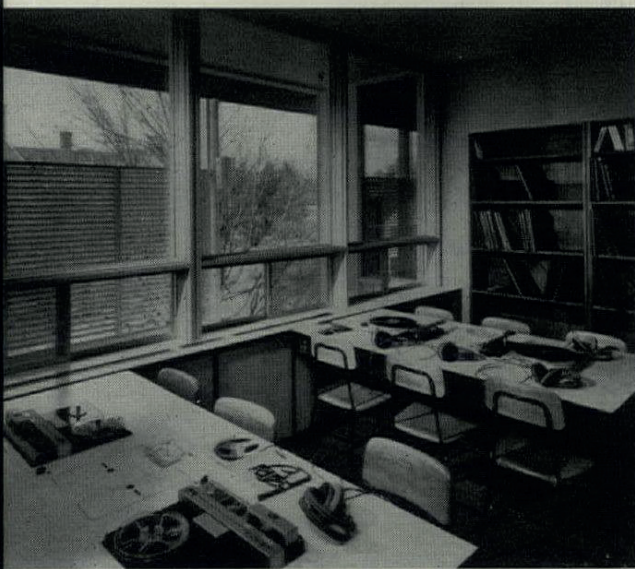




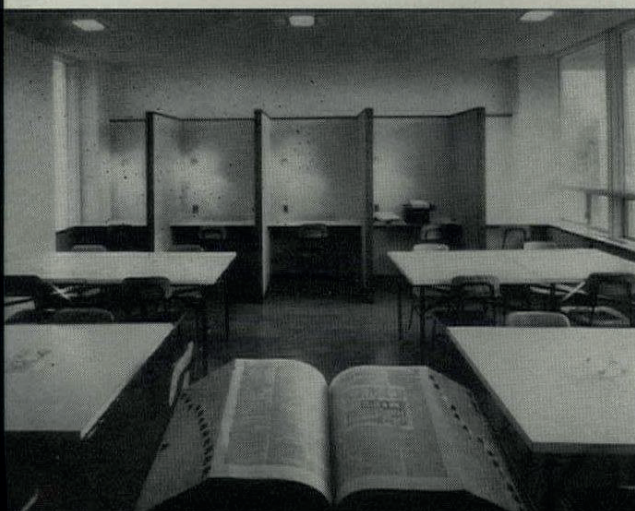
Sunken court at the south end of the building is an extension of the bottom library floor. This floor has shelves for more than 30,000 volumes, also contains a general storage area, mechanical equipment room, and toilets. Sliding glass doors (photo left) open the library to the court.



South-north section through the library shows how the architects took advantage of contours by sinking most of the bottom floor into the ground, thus lowering the silhouette of the building.



Top floor of the library contains special facilities such as the listening room (shown at left). The tables are specially designed for equipment to provide monaural, binaural, and stereo sound from both tapes and records for groups of up to 14 students, using earphones. Elsewhere in this room are three soundproofed booths for language training.



Typing room, likewise on the top floor, is equipped with soundproofed booths and has ceilings treated with acoustic tile. This room is directly accessible by means of an outside stair so that it can be used in the evenings when the rest of the library is closed. All windows in the building are double-glazed, and all spaces are fully air conditioned.

ARCHITECTS: Pietro Belluschi and Carl Koch & Associates; Frederic L. Day Jr., associate in charge; Warren Peterson, assistant in charge of project. LIBRARY CONSULTANT: Keyes D. Metcalf. LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS: Sasaki, Walker & Associates. STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS: Nisso T. Aladjem and Edward K. True. MECHANICAL & ELECTRICAL ENGINEERS: Fred S. Dubin Associates. ACOUSTICAL ENGINEERS: Bolt, Beranek & Newman. GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Gordon & Sutton.

Porch 8 feet wide circles the entire building at the main floor level. Louvers for sun control, inserted into the exterior framework of the porch, give variety and depth to all façades. Although exterior finishes and trim are largely wood, the structural frame of the building is reinforced concrete. Cost of library was \$420,000.

