

Excerpt from *Gates of Harvard Yard*, edited with an introduction by Blair Kamin, published by Princeton Architectural Press (2016)

Entering to Grow in Wisdom and Delight

by Blair Kamin

All too often, the gates that herald the entrance to Harvard Yard are seen (if they are seen at all) as architectural afterthoughts. Harried students, professors, and visitors rush through these portals, treating them as mere passageways that lead to grand edifices, not carefully wrought constructions that direct human movement and uplift everyday experience. This guidebook urges a different view: Pause. Behold. And see these elegant, often magnificent, sentries with fresh eyes.

The twenty-five portals form a legacy that is rich in architectural artistry and the lore of a renowned university. Despite their aura of architectural permanence, they open a window onto Harvard's shifting aspirations and identity—from its origins as a tiny all-male training ground for Puritan ministers to a sprawling institution that percolates many of the world's great ideas and draws students from every strata of society. Yet the complete story of the gates has never been fully told. This book endeavors to fill that gap, revealing how remarkable architects, visionary patrons, and generous classes of alumni joined forces to transform Harvard Yard's perimeter and, with it, the university's architectural character.

Principally made of brick, stone, and wrought iron, the gates belong to a global phenomenon as old as time. From the imposing entrance to Beijing's Forbidden City to the triumphal passageway of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate to the glistening Gateway Arch in Saint Louis, human beings have been building gates for millennia. The reasons transcend geography and cultural differences. Gates control access and keep out those who are considered dangerous or undesirable. They are expressions of power and prestige as well as anxiety and conflict. They incite emotions ranging from awe to trepidation. That is because they often mark crucial transitions, from life to death, as at the entrances to cemeteries, or from ignorance to wisdom, as at the portals of universities. They have inspired artists who portray them as thresholds to transcendent realms (most famously, Lorenzo Ghiberti in the *Gates of Paradise* and Auguste Rodin in *The Gates of Hell*). Seen in this light, gates do not simply delineate space; they communicate ideals and serve as symbols of human aspiration, even divine order. Whatever motivates their construction, they are ubiquitous—so much so that it can be said without great exaggeration that there are three certainties in life: death, taxes, and gates. Like Janus, the Roman god of beginnings and transitions, gates are profoundly ambiguous and complex, rather like life itself. And if there is an afterlife, we will, as some believe, encounter gates there too.

Harvard Yard's gates have a story all their own. On a campus that will celebrate its four-hundredth anniversary in 2036, these proud portals are relative newcomers. Harvard began raising them in the late 1880s to replace a simple post-and-rail fence that had surrounded the Yard since colonial times. The first of the new passage-ways was the

majestic Johnston Gate of 1889 by architect Charles Follen McKim of McKim, Mead & White. It eschewed Victorian clutter and returned Harvard to its colonial-era, Georgian design roots. Following Johnston Gate's template of variegated "Harvard brick" and intricate webs of wrought iron, two subsequent building campaigns—one in the twentieth century's first decade and the other in 1936 when Harvard celebrated its three-hundredth anniversary, or Tercentenary—erected other gates and fences to form Harvard Yard's distinctive enclosure.

The new gates were at once protective and welcoming. On one hand, they cloistered the contemplative parklike Yard from the urban tumult exemplified by the trolleys that once rumbled through Harvard Square. In the same vein, they limited access to the Yard, a function that drew criticism in 2011 when Harvard used them to restrict entrance to people with university IDs because of security concerns prompted by the tent encampment of the Occupy Harvard movement. Yet with many Yard buildings turning inward to the campus rather than outward to the street, the gates became the face of Harvard, lending its imposing buildings a much-needed human scale. In keeping with urban planning's City Beautiful movement, they also concealed Harvard's architectural hodgepodge of clashing styles—Georgian, Federal, Victorian, and Beaux-Arts—behind a unifying neo-Georgian scrim.

While several of the gates were chiefly sponsored by individual patrons—ambassadors, captains of industry, and titans of Wall Street—most were funded by classes of Harvard alumni. This continued a tradition of class-based giving that began with the stained-glass windows in Memorial Hall, the university's High Victorian Gothic tribute to the Harvard men who fought on the Union side in the Civil War. The myriad mysterious numbers that adorn the gates and their adjoining fences are actually tributes to the classes that raised money for the passageways. In current dollars, their total cost is conservatively estimated at nearly \$3.5 million. Their architectural and urban design value, however, is priceless—enough to counter the often-voiced criticism that they form an intimidating barrier between town and gown.

Unlike Yale's walled Collegiate Gothic quadrangles, Harvard Yard's enclosure strikes an alluring balance between the opposing traditions of the fortified enclosure and the open New England common. Spear-tip finials and a virtual menagerie of aggressive animals rendered in stone—eagles, lions, and rams—express the martial impulse. Nature is celebrated in an array of wrought-iron leaves and flowers that echo the gnarly branches and stark tracery of the Yard's elm trees. At the same time, the see-through quality of the adjoining fences allows passersby to enjoy the Yard's pastoral presence. The gates, in short, are both militaristic and naturalistic. They don't simply enclose the Yard. They engage it. And their influence reaches far beyond the heart of Harvard's campus, an impact evident in the neo-Georgian architecture of such prominent buildings as the cupola-topped dormitories along the Charles River. All have their own impressive gates.

Even so, as a team of Harvard students discovered during the 2013 Wintersession class that led to this book, some of the Harvard Yard gates are victims of neglect. A few are needlessly locked. Others are being allowed to fall apart. Still others are marred by third-rate landscaping. Many are improperly referred to on campus maps and in media

accounts—not by their donors' names, but by the names of nearby buildings. It's as though the gates are viewed as marginal because they delineate the spaces leading to such monumental buildings as the Beaux-Arts Widener Library.

In reality, as the following pages show, understanding Harvard Yard's overlooked edge is essential to grasping its celebrated center. While many other American universities boast proud gates, Harvard's ensemble is preeminent. To pause and behold the gates of Harvard Yard is to see them through a new prism, one that frames a richer, deeper view of Harvard's history, identity, and beauty.