

## **A great university is an ongoing conversation**

The antipathy that has surfaced with the proposed destruction of the Memorial Library has a tonality to it unbecoming and unfair to the university, as well as to both sides of the argument. Let me therefore, concentrate my arguments for keeping the Memorial Library on those aspects of its destruction which I believe will diminish the University's and its President's honourable quest to have it continue to lead.

Mount Allison is a great university, and much greater than the positive annual declarations of magazines and 'national newspapers'. There is a conversation here that has gone on for almost 150 years. I'm sure Grace Lockhart; the first woman to graduate from a British Commonwealth university in 1875 felt this intrinsic nuanced feeling (perhaps a daringness too). This ongoing conversation is more than the pleasant elements of memory, the Swan Pond, Mel's, argument, laughter, discovery, love, critical thinking and need for challenge. Mount Allison is a nuanced, precious place. There is a magic in the stone, the rolling bed of its buildings, the way light moves across it. You can't buy this magic and stick it on your university, tart it up with sheets of tinted glass and type 316 stainless rod or summon it to appear. You have to listen to its conversation and keep it going, adding your ideas with respect. To do less is to weaken the university's persona, and at great cost.

Administrations everywhere, and especially university administrations today, live in danger of focusing only on the physical aspects of management, dismissing the hard core, emotional stuff that's there, like wisps, feelings, things carried individually to others. Conversations.

University administrations, always faced with difficult financial aspects, may have little time for these elements, which they can see as touchy-feely and emotional.

And there is the irony. For life itself is touchy-feely, and emotions form a large part of faculty curricula at universities. We discuss these things, life itself, the effect of change in perception, all elements of life and challenge, argue them, measure them, categorize their existence in dissertations, poetry, books. Although Harold Innis called universities very conservative, they are as emotional as Hell, and he used emotion to fight their conservatism. Among other things, the Memorial Library is part of the Mount Allison conversation because it was bought and paid for in the blood of its own students and in some part literally paid for by their parents' own funding.

As well, it is an architecturally rich offering from a renowned architect, one of the few buildings on the campus that is solid stone, yet elegant, warm and comforting. The destruction of this building is going to be much, much more than a boardroom decision followed by a slap-up lunch. It's going to be a mistake; a voice and conversation lost. Ironically, it has happened before at Mount Allison. In the '60's, with another administrative decision made, a tasteless grid-styled building fashioned in the conceit of the day was appended to the Memorial Library. It was like welding an F-150 pick-up truck to a Maserati Bi-Turbo. Could the mediocre aspects of this mutant add-on be a reason for the present administration's apparent lack of respect for the library *in toto* and the desire to be rid of it? Is it why photographs at the Fine and Performing Arts announcement showed the add-on as the building itself?

If so, the removal of the add-on building (which takes enormous space and says nothing) would ensure the re-emergence of the library building as the valuable entity that it is, available to influence the continuation of the university's conversation within the Performing Arts/Fine Arts context. With this aspect open for reflection, a decision can be made with the enhancement of the Mount Allison conversation rather than discordance and the possibility of building yet another structure in the architectural conceit of the day. Are not a great university's critical choices worthy of further reflection? Especially with the opportunity for outstanding architectural creativity to emerge? These are hallmarks of the critical thinking the university's academic conversation has instilled so successfully within its young people.

To add emphasis to the fallacy of ignoring the whisperings that great universities make and which account for much of their greatness, I attach two photographs of the Memorial Library's plaque with the name of students killed in WW1. These were taken mid-week in December, 2010. This plaque, with others, was moved to the new Student Centre. An honest and sincere move. But I wish to remind the administration that the Memorial Library *itself* was the memorial, not the plaque. And that the plaque, so poignant, bearing the names of the dead, at various times of the year is hidden behind the coat racks of people enjoying holiday lunches. Here, the university's conversation, already muted, died.

The President of Mount Allison has himself as much as acknowledged the existence of a conversation to be vitally important to the university's future, in announcing an extensive re-branding program, with the Toronto polling firm The Strategic Counsel. In his announcement he made certain to warn the community of the dangers of using local marketing and communications.

“To this end, the University has engaged in a brand positioning project that will help us to define and articulate that which differentiates us from our peers and our competitors. For this exercise to be a success, it must reflect the true heart, soul, and reality of Mount Allison through the engagement of all those who comprise our community and its experiences. Marketing is no longer an activity that is solely generated by a Marketing and Communications Office. *Clever designs and compelling words and phrases may not accurately reflect the underlying reality of our University – and these would actually work to negative effect*” (Italics mine).

I add that one thing that seems to differentiate Dr. Campbell’s vision with those of his university competitors and adds to a negative effect is a seeming lack of respect by his administration for, first, the value of the Memorial Library as a priceless part of Mount Allison’s heritage, and second, the indifferent treatment afforded the memorial plaques taken from the library itself to the Student Centre, as a sop to the memory of students youngly killed in a world war.

An article (attached) from the Globe and Mail of January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011, celebrates Jack Diamond of Diamond & Schmidt, the architectural firm which had assessed the whole campus and highly recommended that the Memorial Library by itself be included in future plans for a new Fine Arts and Performing Arts Centre. The G&M article demonstrates Diamond’s creativity in incorporating new ideas into an existing 18<sup>th</sup> century heritage situation with the New Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia, another continuation of a conversation. He is doing the same thing in Montréal for the new Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal. Yet Jack diamond’s advice was rejected. It begs the question as to why the Zeidler Partnership was chosen, their consideration being to destroy the Memorial Library, otherwise attaching a five million dollar price tag to its inclusion, this mystical number perhaps the most creative offering they have made to date.

And finally, why must the best undergraduate university in Canada, so carefully constructed of tradition, critical thinking, conversation and open-mindedness, be subject to the destruction of one of its precious assets without proper reflection? Please help save the Memorial Library and continue the Mount Allison conversation.

With respect,

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