



*Image Credit:
Martin Schwartz*

Modern Languages Building

812 WASHINGTON STREET

ARCHITECT:

Albert Kahn Associates, 1965

Kaleena Quinn

It is not a building I remember fondly, for its austere and cold exterior. I always felt as if I was swimming upstream, consistently finding myself on the exact opposite side of the building from the classroom, going against the flow of exiting students. However, there is one secret special space, magical for its oddities and the work that takes place inside its walls.

I first met the Modern Languages Building (MLB) as a student, trying to remember French conjugation and gendered terms in the basement, a windowless classroom. So, when I was told I would be learning the language of architectural drawing in this same building, it seemed somewhat cruel. However, this room was the exact opposite of my other MLB experiences, it was the magical room of the basement. Its location was ideal, conveniently located at the end of the corridor, at the bottom of the stairs, almost like having a private entrance for toting a gigantic portfolio of drawings. The double-height space opened to tall clerestory windows at grade, bringing much-needed daylighting into the classroom from the north.

The room was filled with tall wooden desks, creaky and old, covered in mint green drawing covers. Each drawer was adorned with a lock for storing supplies, architectural scale, pointer, graphite, adjustable triangles, French curves, and erasers. The storage rooms at either end of the room lacked a ceiling, which proved beneficial for exiting due to accidental locking, as well as for hanging T-squares to guard over the works in progress by night. Two nooks opposite the clerestory windows housed shelves for cleaning supplies, the occasional models and books, and served as instructional zone and snack zone after-hours. [As you wouldn't want to munch over a drawing you spend so much careful time on.] A chalkboard took up most of one nook:

this is where I first learned to construct drawings, and later taught others the magic of space through drawing and orthographic projection (with an imprecise piece of chalk).

The magic of the space has something to do with both the ideas generated and knowledge shared across the mint green drawing tables as well as those odd clerestory windows. The windows are held back from the sidewalk behind a railing and a sloped roof. Occasionally, this allowed for much-needed mental breaks from the drawing board and task at hand, to people-watch or to see what was happening with the weather. At night, as the building was open after hours as a studio space for drawing. It became a beacon: suddenly able to see into this space from above, raucous party goers would stop and wave as they moved off to their next party. The clerestory also became a substitute doorbell of sorts, as day turned to evening and the classroom was turned over to students. The exterior door was often locked or the broken concrete block prop removed, so someone could scramble over the railing, ungracefully slide and side step down the slope to stand at the glass, knock, and offer a trade for being let in to join in the collective creative hum of learning through making. Desk-critiques, moldy orange peels, perspectival projection, idea exchange, and midnight conversations all hang within the air of this strange space. Clerestories, daylighted double-height spaces, and the odd vantage point of viewing the movement of campus from below instilled conversation and built a strong studio culture. ■

Kaleena Quinn is an architect who has taught architecture courses at Lawrence Technological University and the University of Michigan.