Steve Solnick

What's in a name?

What do John Thompson Dorrance, George Eastman and Vannevar Bush have in common? If you guessed that they all have MIT buildings named after them, you're absolutely right. How many of you guessed that, though, is another thing. Perhaps if I asked what 16, 13 and 52 have in common, the answer would be worse. The answer would be the same.

MIT has been grappling for some time with the problem of what to call its new buildings. Those not financed by any large single gift, so they can't be named after the beloved benefactor. The biggest in this class of problems was posed by the new undergraduate dorm -- a preliminary study for the new dormitory directed to IAP's ago was entitled Next House. It was a cute gag at the time, but when the principal enabling gift of $2 million came in anonymously, the name just stuck.

Much to the chagrin of Paul Gray, I should add.

Gray saw what happened when MIT housed itself and MIT, hoping to get a name later. As Vice-President for Operations William Dickson '56 put it to me, if the building isn't named while it's being built it's awfully tough to get people to change their memory image.

Well, Stoddard and Gray saw this happening with Next House and became concerned about the trend in building names that would be set by a New House/Next House pair. What would they be? It was all getting a bit sickening, in a subtle sort of way.

Then someone had a brainstorm. The building would need a street number anyway, so why not give it a nice easy one like 500, one that people could remember?

Just what we need, another numbered building, huh?

Horse, 500 Memorial Drive was christened, for the time being at least. If they ever do give it a name, Dickson says, they figure it will be easier to abandon 500 Mem. Drive for the new name than it would be to abandon a name with more character, like Next House.

There was a hitch, of course, as there always is when an administration tries to be subtle and low-key to avoid looking petty. The new version of the Institute map came out last July, about the time the decision was made, listing simply... Next House, sitting right next to Next House. It also imaginatively christened the new athletic center as "Next Center,"

What to do? Well, Dickson was certainly thinking on his feet as we spoke since he quickly suggested that the Next House label would be "potted off" the next edition of the MIT map.

That's all and good, and, in fact, shows a sensitivity to the symbolic value of building names which has been sorely lacking in recent years.

Some years ago, The Tech urged the Registrar to begin identifying buildings by their names instead of their numbers in the Class Schedule book. The plea went largely unnoticed. Dickson explained that the numbers "probably wouldn't work" largely because MIT buildings are almost all interconnected and transitions between them are largely blurred.

But, I'm afraid it's time to open the old can of worms again. A week from today, Paul Gray '54 will be inaugurated as MIT's 14th President. I think of Gray's fundamental purpose and unifying principle.

Fourteen trips into history.

Some other people have taken trips into history from MIT are: Vannevar Bush, the coordinator of all war research during World War Two, George Eastman, who never went here but donated $6 million of his capital to finance MIT's original Cambridge campus, and John Dorrance, who went out, with an MIT degree, to found the Campbell Soup Company.

This is all history which passes, literally, over our heads as we walk between buildings 1.5 and 6.6.

But history is and has this place virtually nobody's history. I'm not asking us to abandon numbers, I'm merely suggesting we use names.

If that suggestion doesn't take hold, perhaps President Gray should think about the time, fifty years distant, when Tech freshmen walk into the newly dedicated Gray computer center and think how nice Building 187 is.

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