

Evaluating Michigan State's Stewardship: A Look at Morrill Hall

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Abstract

As an intern with the Campus Archaeology Program, I was asked to research Morrill Hall, one of the oldest buildings still standing on the MSU campus. It is one of Michigan State University's most culturally and historically rich buildings but the University has plans to demolish the structure. I used the MSU archives to research Morrill Hall's past as well as investigate the reasons for its proposed demolition by collecting and synthesizing all the available information. It was my objective to obtain a full understanding of Morrill Hall's cultural and historic significance as well as understand the circumstances of Morrill Hall's demolition, replacement, and future treatment of the site. I also spoke directly with the director of Campus Parks and Planning at MSU, Jeff Kacos, about the university's plans concerning Morrill Hall. Morrill Hall, once called the Women's Building, is significant not only to MSU's past but also to the history of women's higher education in the United States. When it was no longer a women's building, it became Morrill Hall representing MSU's connection to the land grant heritage of U.S. higher education. The building's significance requires consideration of alternatives to demolition such as adaptive reuse and LEED certification. By adapting and preserving Morrill Hall, MSU would not just preserve the immense cultural and historic significance of the building, but would demonstrate its leadership in sustainability and stewardship.

As an intern for the Campus Archaeology Program at Michigan State I have been researching Morrill Hall, one of the oldest buildings still standing on the MSU campus. As part of Campus Archaeology's goal to protect Michigan State's cultural heritage I have been gathering all the available information on the cultural and historical significance of Morrill Hall which is to be demolished in 2012. [NEXT] Most of my investigation into Morrill Hall's past took place in the University's archives. I also gathered information from the notes and correspondence of Dr. Anne Meyering, interviews with MSU staff, and histories about MSU. I began this project under the impression that there was no alternative to demolition however, in the course of my research it became apparent that there was a potential alternative to demolishing this culturally and historically rich building. [NEXT]

Morrill Hall was built in 1900 on the campus of the State Agricultural College to serve as the Women's Building. It was the largest building on campus and was built to draw in more female students for the Women's Course that had been established in 1896, one of the first in the country. The intent of the women's course was to give women a practical and scientifically based education tailored to a women's place in society as well as increase enrollment overall, boost moral integrity, and make the college more modern by accommodating to female students. The first years of the women's course were so successful there was a need for more female housing and in 1899 95,000 dollars was appropriated to build a women's building that could house and ensure the safety and morality of the women enrolled at the college. [Next]

The new building housed up to 120 female students in furnished dorm rooms and had living areas for the Dean of Women and a majority of the female faculty. The building was a

self contained women's college with the most modern of amenities such as wood floors, electricity and steam heating and had classrooms, parlors, music rooms, kitchens, dining rooms, laundry rooms, and even a two story gymnasium. The living environment for the women at Michigan Agricultural College was remarkably different from students living on MSU's campus today. Female students and their professors lived and dined in the same building. It was a time of dirt roads and a horse and wagon that brought the women's trunks from the railway station. [NEXT] Also, there were many regulations such as no guests without permission from the Dean, no walking with men after supper outside of certain limits, and designated times for quiet hours, party hours, and hours for callers. Bells would be rung throughout the day summoning women to meals and announcing study and rising times. [NEXT]

In 1937 the building was converted into the liberal arts building as it had become a fire hazard as a dormitory. At this time the name was changed to Morrill Hall to honor Senator Justin Morrill and his efforts in passing the Morrill Act of 1862. This act appropriated land in every state for the creation of agricultural colleges across the country. Most universities with their roots in the land grant tradition have commemorated the work of Senator Morrill by naming one of their first buildings in honor of him and Morrill Halls can be found on college campuses all across the country. [NEXT]

Morrill Hall has remained an academic building for the last 73 years. Today it houses the English, History, and Religious Studies departments but unfortunately since the 1990's many issues have arisen concerning the safety and stability of the building. In 1991 the basement ceiling collapsed and it was becoming clear that maintenance projects were being deferred due to lack of funding. In 2008 the building was deemed beyond repair and demolition plans became official. The building is to be demolished in 2012, the 150th year anniversary of the signing of

the Morrill Act. There is to be a 36 million dollar replacement project in the form of an addition to Wells Hall and eventually some sort of memorial will be placed at the former location of Morrill Hall. [NEXT]

There has been much concern about losing such a historically and culturally significant building. One person in particular, a former history professor at MSU, Dr. Anne Meyering, put an enormous effort into collecting Morrill Hall's history prior to her retirement. We were in correspondence throughout my research and in her words "I really do not see how MSU can be so disrespectful of its history in planning to demolish Morrill Hall. It was originally the Women's Building, constructed to attract female students to MAC. It is the architectural pendant on Circle Drive to Ag Hall, which was built later." She felt very connected to the building and was focused on doing what she could to save the building and its history. [NEXT]

As Dr. Meyering alluded to, Morrill Hall has a certain architectural significance to the campus of Michigan State University. Morrill Hall is located along West Circle Drive that encircles the area known as the sacred space. It is an area of a natural oak opening in which College Hall, the first building on campus, and the other most historic buildings were built around. An education of the land grant tradition fostered a particular kind of environment that usually meant a park like setting, smaller irregularly placed buildings, and the integration of domestic life and nature which can still be felt today in the sacred space and historic center of the MSU campus. When Morrill Hall is torn down the Grand River parking ramp will instead be the focal point in that direction from the sacred space. [NEXT]

The built environment of a university is meant to reflect its ideals, its culture, and its people. Morrill Hall is a representation of the university's past desire to be one of the first

colleges to strongly support women's higher education as well as being a tribute to Senator Morrill. According to Richard Dober, author of Campus Heritage, "The campus landscape gives visibility to a college's unique identity and tradition, enabling it to stand out from a host of similar institutions (Dober, 53)." Morrill Hall should continue to be part of MSU's unique identity and traditions. According to a State News article from 2007, Morrill Hall is sometimes referred to as "Mr. Crumbly" by the student body. Few people realize that there was significant student labor used in Morrill Hall's construction since at the time it was part of a male student's duty to work as a laborer for projects on campus. Also few think about the red brick of the exterior as being Lake Superior sandstone chosen specifically because it was both beautiful and a relatively local material. It is unfortunate but MSU's decision to demolish Morrill Hall, a part of the built environment that could continue to reflect MSU's past ideals, instead seems to show a disregard to MSU's past. [NEXT]

It has been assessed that Morrill Hall is beyond repair and renovation would be too costly. In my interview with Jeff Kacos, the director of Campus Parks and Planning at MSU, we discussed why the building was being demolished. He said that the goals of MSU campus planning could be achieved with or without Morrill Hall. Also, the building is simply not a good working environment. The floors sag, temperature regulation is difficult, and there are numerous maintenance projects to be undergone. The newspaper articles that discuss the future demolition claim that the wood frame is deteriorating, there are problems with the foundation, and there are cracks in the brick which make renovation almost impossible and certainly costly. A few years back an architect from Lord, Aeck & Sargent, the company responsible for the restoration of Marshall-Adams Hall, did a walk through in Morrill Hall and said that it was a good candidate

for preservation. Despite what problems there may be it seems it is possible to preserve Morrill Hall rather than demolish it. [NEXT]

In 2007 Iowa State University completed the renovation of Morrill Hall built in 1891, one of the earliest buildings on their campus. It was renovated with numerous sustainability goals in order to become a LEED certified building. LEED certification is granted when a building demonstrates excellence in sustainability, water savings, energy efficiency, material selection, and indoor environmental quality. Inside the building and also available online is a GreenTouchscreen® kiosk that is an easy and interactive way for visitors to learn about both the history and Green features of the building. Marshall-Adams Hall, one of the Laboratory Row buildings at MSU built in 1902, was successfully rehabilitated and this could be done again with Morrill Hall but making it LEED certified as well. [NEXT]

Adaptively reusing an historic building at MSU could strengthen the University's environmental stewardship and lead the way for even more universities to do the same. According to the Be Spartan Green website, "As we grow, we're redesigning buildings to be environmentally friendly and meeting green leadership in energy and environmental design standards for new construction." The renovation of Morrill Hall should be considered if MSU is to abide by its environmental stewardship goals. At the least MSU should figure out how much it would cost to make Morrill Hall a LEED certified remodeled structure, which has not been done, before pursuing a 36 million dollar replacement and demolition project. [NEXT]

Morrill Hall saw 37 years of female students going in and out of its doors enriched by their experiences from their time at the university. The building itself is named in honor of the Senator that gave rise to land grant institutions that have served the American people from the beginning and helped progress research to its limits. It is located proudly on the limits of the

sacred space facing the commemorative Beaumont Tower. The needs of those at MSU have changed and the building is outdated. It is true that something drastic needs to be done to the building but rather than tear down this structure that is such an integral part of MSU's past and present it could be adapted to today's use in a sustainable way. MSU owes its past an investigation into the option of preservation rather than settling on demolition. Preserving Morrill Hall would be an opportunity to share the unique past of MSU as well as promote Michigan State's place as a leader in going Green. [NEXT]