

Daniel Brook, *Old School*, published in *Metropolis*, June 2003

Across the street from Butler College, a 1960s Modernist dormitory on the Princeton University campus, walls of load-bearing masonry will soon rise on a bed of poured concrete. Princeton students, whose architectural tastes seem pretty traditional (their nickname for Butler College is "the Butt"), should be relieved to know the structure will soon be covered with a rubble wall of hand-cut stone, fitting stylistically with the school's 1920s-era Gothic dormitories. Whitman College, which will house 500 students when it opens in 2006, is named after Princeton trustee and eBay president Meg Whitman, who pledged \$30 million of the \$100 million budget and championed its neo-Gothic style. The dorm's architect, Demetri Porphyrios, is a Princeton alum and one of the world's leading traditional-style architects. His projects at Oxford and Cambridge universities are virtually indistinguishable from the centuries-old buildings that surround them.

But not everyone at Princeton is excited about the neo-Gothic dorm. Visiting architecture professor Peter Eisenman—a committed avant-gardist whose latest major commission, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, is currently under construction in Berlin—has taken on the role of the project's critic-in-chief.

Eisenman objects to building collegiate Gothic anywhere today but is particularly troubled by the decision to do it at Princeton—and not just because he teaches there. Princeton's original Gothic dormitories were designed by Ralph Adams Cram, the university's first supervising architect, who served from 1907 to 1929. In a 1921 lecture at Harvard, Cram described the Gothic style he used as a symbol of "vital and pervasive Christianity functioning through the races of Northern blood and in Northern latitudes."

Though Eisenman finds such sentiments repugnant, he accepts as a historical fact that the exclusively white male Princeton of the 1920s was imbued with this type of attitude. Thus, he says, collegiate Gothic was "perfectly reflective of what was happening here. It fit."

But it does not fit at today's Princeton, which Eisenman calls "a very radical institution," citing the diverse student body and left-wing faculty. To him building Gothic today is a nonsensical attempt to turn back the clock. "What is appalling to me is, I'm teaching something very different here," he says before class in the Frist Campus Center cafeteria. "It's like, say, creationism. I mean, they don't teach creationism here, right? This is akin to teaching creationism."

Eisenman has his own theory about why the university would want to hark back to the Princeton of the 1920s. "To pacify its alumni, I believe [Princeton's administration] uses architecture to suggest to the Old Tigers that nothing has changed," he says. "And whether cynical, clever, or unconscious, there is a policy at Princeton not to do anything that would rock the boat architecturally."

Porphyrios, interviewed via telephone from his London office, responded to Eisenman's critique by attempting to turn it on its head. It is not Gothic architecture that is conservative, Porphyrios argues, but Eisenman's own Modernist outlook. "You could have actually talked about Modernist architecture back in the twenties as being radical, but by now it is the most conservative [of all styles]," he says. Because it is inexpensive to build, Modernist "cardboard architecture," as he calls it, has been embraced by developers eager to boost their bottom line at the expense of aesthetics and sense of place.

To the charge that Gothic architecture is inherently elitist, Porphyrios responds that his firm has built not just elite university

buildings in the Gothic style but affordable housing as well. Contemporary society is not, in his words, "monovalent," and therefore must embrace numerous styles of architecture. Rather than being the architecture of a hierarchical past, collegiate Gothic can be a part of the multicultural present; rather than being an indictment of today's diverse society, building in varied styles can be a testament to it.

Insisting that all buildings designed today transcend the traditions of the past would be "like saying, 'Well, you cannot eat bread any longer because bread was actually used, I don't know, five hundred years ago and now we've actually moved into sustaining ourselves through some sort of synthetic pills,'" Porphyrios says. "Well, that's fine. It may be that certain people sustain themselves through synthetic pills, and there are some people who actually sustain themselves through bread." (Even Eisenman seems devoted to traditional cuisine. During our interview he downed a cup of New England clam chowder topped with a mess of crushed saltines.)

Although Eisenman has not made any formal protest to the Princeton administration over the building, he has not hesitated to express his outrage on and off campus. Despite Eisenman's objections, the project is going up. But the visiting professor could get his revenge: taking a cue from his students, Eisenman could think up a derisive nickname for Whitman College and hope it catches on as well as "the Butt." "White Man College" would work perfectly.