

Piece Title: (re)Envisioning Eliot's Entryways

Approximate Word Count (must be fewer than 850): 742

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Perhaps no other home within Harvard College's residential "House" system has been as radically transformed by the passage of nearly a century than Eliot House. Opening in 1931 as one of the seven original Houses, the student residence at 101 Dunster Street has historically carried an exclusive reputation as a "prep" home for the undergraduate population's [so-called](#) "social elite." Although today in 2025, Harvard's housing process is ostensibly conducted via random lottery, vestiges of an old guard remain visible throughout Eliot House if one carefully parses through its walls, rooms, and entryways.

Given this hidden history, we—the Eliotite team members of an exhibition titled *"(re)Envisioning Eliot's Entryways"*—have endeavored to more forcefully bring Eliot House's nuanced past and present to light. Our exhibition kicked off this academic year with ten (10) museum-style labels, newly installed throughout Eliot House. Drawing some inspiration from a "ReFrame" initiative recently launched by the [Harvard Art Museums](#) that aims to highlight "previously untold narratives," each one of our labels draws upon both 20th-century University archival/historical material and 21st-century personal anecdote in order to help answer one critical question: "What did it mean to be an Eliotite *then*, and what does it mean to be an Eliotite *now*?"

These labels run the gamut in history, theme, and argument. The one inside the Eliot Grille, for example, informs viewers that U.S. Navy shipmen temporarily quartered in that very same basement during World War II; reading this label, one can't help but be reminded of the

long-lasting ties between Harvard and public service both then and now. Another label near Eliot's Steinway piano pays homage to Leonard Bernstein '39, a Domus alum, and encourages us to envision Eliot House as an enduring place of joy, entertainment, and refuge amidst an oft-uncertain world. (After all, we are home to "Fête," the best Harvard formal of the year, and that long-standing annual tradition shows no signs of stopping anytime soon!)

But the most powerful *(re)Envisioning Eliot's Entryways* labels open up the opportunity for complex conversations that transcend time. Take the label installed in the Junior Common Room, for example; this one is particularly relevant today because it quotes a comment that then-House Master Lino Pertile made in [2009 to the Harvard Crimson](#), regarding the then-newly announced House Renewal Project. That year, Pertile stated, "[architectural renovations] will affect House spirit negatively... the distinctive nature of various Houses has to do with the design of the House, [and] the more you flatten out this distinctiveness, the more difficult it is to have House spirit."

Our label responds firstly by acknowledging that Eliot House Master Pertile's concerns are indeed sometimes echoed by others in the Harvard community, even today. For example, just a few days ago, [one Eliotite penned an op-ed for this very same newspaper, titled "Don't Renovate Away Harvard's House Community."](#) Back in March of this year, another Eliotite similarly penned a profound introspective piece contemplating [the ephemeral nature of Eliot House's basement mural tradition](#). However, in response to these (often well-founded) concerns about the renovation process, we argue that "it also remains true that people, places, and institutions always evolve and accommodate new visions for shared spaces, even in the face of seemingly immutable architecture and design."

Since 2009, when House Master Pertile made his aforementioned comment to the Harvard Crimson, Lowell, Dunster, Leverett, and Adams Houses have all undergone significant architectural renovation. [Eliot House will itself begin the renewal process this year, in 2025.](#) Excitingly, there are currently talks with the architectural team overseeing the renovation process to include and install permanent, museum-grade versions of our *(re)Envisioning Eliot's Entryways* labels within Eliot House post-renovation. We hope that in the future, all Harvard community members with a valid university ID will be able to check out these permanently installed labels for themselves—perhaps also picking up a complimentary "*(re)Envisioning Eliot's Entryways*" self-guided walking tour brochure from the House manager at the building's entrance along the way.

Ultimately, it is our desire that *(re)Envisioning Eliot's Entryways* will serve as not only a twentieth-century retrospective, but also an early twenty-first century snapshot in time for use by future generations of Eliotites that walk through its doors.

What does it mean to be an Eliotite? A Harvard community member? An engaged citizen? At a global moment filled with so much discord, I hope that our "*(re)Envisioning Eliot's Entryways*" labels help move us towards some semblance of an answer.

Aldo Aragon '24, a History concentrator from Eliot House, was the student curator of "(re)Envisioning Eliot's Entryways*."*