



Welcome to the Machine (Wish You Were Here)

So what was that strange psychedelic day-glo contraption that was running around New Haven last week??? In short, a time travelling throwback from simpler times, but maybe also a harbinger of BRIGHTER DAYS to come.

Though this mad tale spans almost fifty years, for me it began in 1982, in the delapidated rust-belt city of Troy, NY.....as a college Freshman studying Mechanical Engineering at Rennselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Believe it or not, I joined one of those 'strange' and often misunderstood and maligned organizations known as a College Fraternity -- Phi Sigma Kappa, it was called. Gamma Tetarton Chapter. Our live-in brotherhood consisted of about 40 like-minded, but unique individuals, who helped me survive what would have otherwise been a miserable college experience.

Inside of our Chapter House, glowing out from an uncurtained second floor window, was a 'strange' place known as the Black Light Room. It was painted between 1970-71 by a Civil Engineering Student named Ned Cleland.

The room changed and evolved over the year's, but here is a photo of the original 'installation', circa 1973, which Dr. Ned recently dug out of his archives.....

Now, the Black Light Room no longer exists as a room, just as some old Art Facts awaiting a Magician's Touch.

Dr. Ned is currently a Phd. in Structural Engineering, with his own consulting firm in Winchester, VA. We have been actively corresponding and he has shared many secrets.



photo - Dave Scheffler '73

photo

Here is the Black Light Room in 1986, when I lived there.



photo -- Bill Saunders '86

Notice the evolution. In 1984, the left wall with the cloud was crumbling. The design was documented, updated and replicated by a Party of Brothers including Architecture Majors and current and former room 'denizens'.

The quote in the cloud was my friend Thom O'Malley's idea (BSME '83), who lived in the room when I was a freshman -- while you might think it is a direct reference to "The Wizard of Oz", it is actually a quote from a song by the 80's New Wave Band, EBN OZN, called AEIOU Sometimes Y. If it were a reference to the 'Wizard' it would read -- "I've a FEELING we're not in Kansas Anymore"

The Castle, Comets, Wizard, and assorted Mayhem on the door are my addition from '85. There were also several areas of the room that apparently had posters over them at one time, and were just empty white spaces that had remained untouched since Ned left the room. I filled in these blank areas with small murals, or continuations of the design, as appropriate, thus re-completing the room 13 years after it's 'Creator' had left the building. I remember Ned came to visit the room, after my additions. In fact, I know everybody who has had their 'hands' in this MAJOR piece of period OUTSIDER ART.

Curiously enough, this was the first time I ever picked up a paint brush, so my current restoration of the original room panels is a continuation of a 43 year collaboration between me, my Brotherhood and a Sacred Space.

The room remained active from 1970-2005. But in 2005, my Brotherhood ran into some troubles. One weekend, a freshman was party hopping between frat houses, including Phi Sig, after which he returned to his dorm and killed himself. My Fraternity was made an example of, thrown off campus, unable to live in our house (which our alumni association owned), or wear our letters on campus. Banished.

With no live-in Brothers our Fraternity had no income stream, we went underground. We ultimately decided to sell our two buildings to Rite-Aid Pharmacy for an unbelievable price of 1.5 Million Dollars.

What could be salvaged of the Black Light Room was put into storage for a later time, the rest documented through photographs. None of my original artwork survived this ordeal, though much of the 'design continuation' is still there from my time Michelangeloing the ceiling.

In 2011 Phi Sig's dream finally became a reality. We bought a 30,000 sq. ft Roman Catholic Church on the other side of town for 250k, renovated the Rectory as living space with some of the proceeds from the sale, and invested the rest.. I am proud of my brotherhood for overcoming these seemedly untenable obstacles. Vision and Perserverance ultimately paid off.

Of course there was much ballyhoo caused during this process, and many obstacles to overcome. Through public meetings, Phi Sig got the the new Pharmacy to be developed to resemble our Historic 1860 Chapter House , and the St. Frances de Sales Church was ultimately re-zoned as a fraternity, with a 'no alcohol' provision tacked on. This stuff got a lot of press, was a difficult and drawn out 'process' and makes me Damn Proud to be a Phi Sig..

<http://www.timesunion.com/local/article/Fraternity-right-at-home-in-church-1019113.php>

If anybody out there wonders where I get my anachronistic hippie spirit -- it all started here. In fact, my fraternities struggle to maintain its history, legacy, and communal spirit reminds me of me and Nancy Shea's struggle to do the same with our scrappy little community arts festival, Ideat Village.....

The similarities and synchronicities will be made apparent as this series continues and I bilocate between two different places and times.

TOTO, WE ARE DEFINITELY NOT IN NEW HAVEN ANYMORE.....



The "New 'Rite Aid Pharmacy"



The "New Phi Sigma Kappa"