

Master Hall & Private Dorms

March 31, 2021

BY MICHAEL BRIDGEMAN

Master Hall caught my eye not long after I moved to Madison in the early 1980s. I was struck by its sculptural presence, the most modern building on a quiet, one-way stretch of Gilman Street between University Avenue and State Street. Nearly forty years, later I still like Master Hall. It's both a reminder of its period and a point of reference for what has happened since it was built.



Master Hall at 415 W. Gilman St. was built as a "private dormitory" and opened in 1965. (Photograph: Michael Bridgeman)

A brief item in the June 20, 1964, *Capital Times* reported: "A seven-story dormitory which will house 240 university students will be built at 413-415 W. Gilman St. by Master Hall, Inc., owned by a group of Milwaukee men..." The building permit was issued in January 1965.

The architect, Jordan Miller, is much better known in Milwaukee where his practice was based. While he did a number of homes in the city's north shore suburbs, Miller's firm—which grew into Miller Meier Kenyon Cooper Architects and Engineers Inc.—became known for big projects like Milwaukee's Main Post Office (1968), [which was sold for private redevelopment in 2015](#), and a terminal expansion at Mitchell International Airport (1985).

Master Hall appeals to me for its cubic form suggesting stacked boxes (or Jenga blocks) that create an alternating pattern on the sides and project more boldly on the Gilman Street façade. Master Hall combines reinforced concrete, brick and glass, so some might call it Brutalist, though the concrete is smooth and painted off-white, which softens the visual impact.



The ground level is recessed and the six residential floors above rest on short, concrete piers. (Photo: Michael Bridgeman)

Madison architect James Potter described Master Hall as an International Style building in the *Wisconsin State Journal*, writing that it “reflects an outward construction that emphasizes its interior uses.” That use was a private dormitory for single men, two descriptions that may ring as positively quaint to modern ears.

The new Master Hall “for single men” was announced in this 1965 newspaper ad. (Image: Capital Times, Oct. 10, 1965; from Newspapers.com)

Your Entrance
To Convenient
Living

OPEN

12:00 - 5:00
Saturday and
Sunday

415 W. Gilman



Master Hall

For Single Men — Every Personal Convenience



- private shower
- maid service
- linens
- air conditioned
- kitchen privileges
- T.V., lounge
- laundry room
- canteen
- starts at \$65

Immediate occupancy for single working men
or students.

238-6700



Property Management and Rentals
Donald P. Tollefson, Mgr.

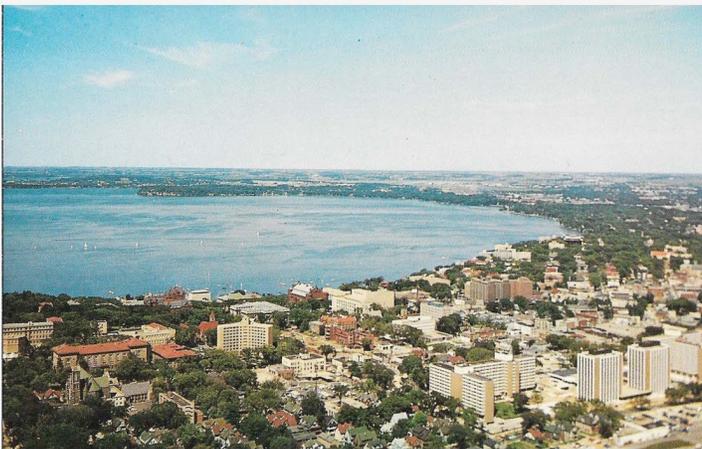


MAIN POST OFFICE BUILDING - FACING EAST ON ST. PAUL AVENUE

A large Brutalist building, the former Main Post Office in Milwaukee was designed by Jordan Miller and George Waltz and opened in 1968. (Image: Milwaukee Industrial Museum Presentation, [Image](#) and [Presentation](#))

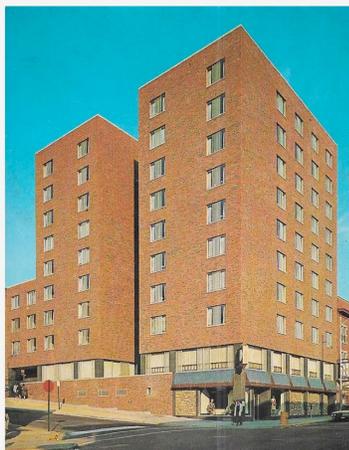
When Master Hall opened in 1965, private dormitories, segregated by sex as were the on-campus dorms, were an established and rapidly expanding part of the housing scene in neighborhoods near UW-Madison. The university provided a certain amount of housing, especially for freshmen and sophomores, while developers saw business potential in building private sector accommodations. “[The] private market wants a tight market and the University a loose market,” said Newell Smith, director of student housing for the university before State Assembly committee in 1968. There were developers, and some legislators, who argued that the private sector could better meet student housing demand and decried “indirect subsidies” that kept campus dormitory costs below market rates.

The demand for housing was undeniable. Campuses across the country felt the post-war Baby Boom as the first wave reached college age in 1964. Enrollments at UW-Madison skyrocketed from 13,740 undergraduates and total enrollment of 18,811 in the fall of 1960 to 24,392 undergraduates and total enrollment of 34,388 in the fall of 1970.

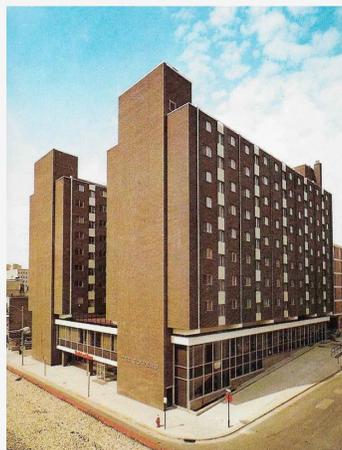


The early '60s brought three new dormitories to West Johnson Street, seen in the lower right: Sellery Hall (1963), the two square towers of Ogg Hall (1965), and part of Witte Hall (1964). For an unofficial, interactive timeline of UW-Madison's dorms [click here](#). (Image: Postcard published by Fagan; author's collection)

The decade brought three new university dorms to the southeast campus and a host of private sector dorms including Master Hall. Private, off-campus accommodations have always been needed to house UW-Madison students, whether single rooms, rooming houses, fraternities/sororities, apartments, coops, or private dorms. “Independent” dormitories like [Ann Emery Hall](#) were initially available for women only. It wasn't until 1962 that the *Capital Times* reported plans for “what was believed to be the first large private hall for men students” on Langdon Street.



Allen Hall
residence for
University of Wisconsin Women
MADISON 3, WISCONSIN



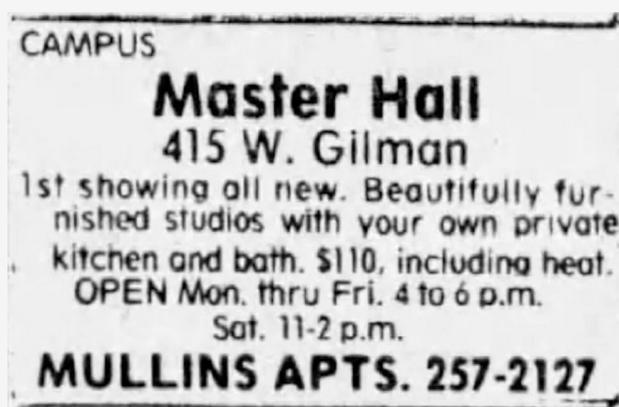
the TOWERS
Contemporary Living for University Women
502 North Frances Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53705

Above images: Among the many private dorms built in the 1960s were Allen Hall and The Towers, positioned across from each other where Frances Street meets State Street. Both opened in 1964 and still operate as apartment buildings (Allen Hall is now The Statesider). On the Allen Hall postcard above, mailed in 1964, the correspondent declared, “This gem of a dorm is air conditioned, no less—with telephones in every room.” (Images: Postcards published by Fagan, author’s collection)

A Student Tenant Union representative told the *Wisconsin State Journal* in 1967. “We don’t need fancy carpeting and swimming pools... . All we need is private 12-by-12 rooms, good heat, sound-proofing, and the basic facilities.” The same article reported room-only units in a private dorm for men rented for \$61 for double rooms and \$50 for a single room. Women living in private dorms that included meal service paid from \$108 per month at The Towers to \$175 at Lowell Hall [1], which, in fact, had a swimming pool.

At the same time, college students across the country were demanding more autonomy and in 1968 a UW-Madison faculty committee recommended “an end to regulation of [students’] off-campus personal lives.” They further recommended that all students age 20 and older—not just seniors and grad students—“be regarded as adult with respect to their choice of housing.” That brought about the end of sex-specific housing and by the 1970s some residence halls at UW-Madison were going co-ed. The same was true in private dorms.

In 1974, Master Hall was remodeled as studio apartments available to men and women. (Image: Wisconsin state Journal, Jan. 21, 1974; from Newspapers.com)



What was true 60 years ago is true today. UW-Madison has grown to 31,185 undergraduates and total enrollment of 45,317 (as of the fall of 2019). Student housing—public and private—continues to sprout. Brendon Dybdahl, director of marketing and communications for UW-Madison University Housing, told me, “Our priority has been to accommodate all first-year students who want to live on campus (UW-Madison has no on-campus housing requirements), which was a main reason for the [new residence halls that were built between 2006 and 2012](#) (Smith, Ogg, Dejope, Leopold), to add capacity.”

As the university adds housing capacity, so does the private sector with buildings that seem bigger and flashier than ever. Among them is [The James, \(2016\) at Gorham and Bassett Streets](#), which has a roof-top pool and hot tub.

Through the decades Master Hall has updated [its 108 cozy studio apartments](#). On the outside it hasn’t changed much since it opened 56 years ago, maintaining its distinctive character and still catching my eye.



A low winter sun casts shadows that emphasize the geometry of Master Hall. The concrete extends beyond the windows to become a brise soleil or “sun breaker,” a feature popularized by the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier. (Photo: Michael Bridgeman)

[1] Lowell Hall at 610 Langdon St. now serves as a UW-Madison Conference Center.