
Neo-classical, Monumental, Fascist or one of a kind ... debuting the style of Purnell and University Center

FOCUS ON THE ISSUES

Purnell architecture spurs debate about style

[Editor's note: A real-life public debate about art broke out at Carnegie Mellon last month during the Wacos! In one exhibit, conceived and executed by a group of undergraduates working with grant money, scenes from the Third Reich were projected onto a piece of blank facade atop the new Purnell Center for the Arts.

The exhibit was widely misconstrued, partly because of an unfortunate Pittsburgh Post-Gazette headline ("Outdoor art project at CMU includes Hitler, draws protest") with overtones suggesting neo-Nazi activity on campus. In the exhibit, Building 8 succeeded in sparking discussion about the iconic meaning of Purnell, the facing 3-year-old University Center and the open space between them on the Cut.

FOCUS asked about 20 Carnegie Mellon faculty and staff members to comment on the architecture and/or the controversy. About half responded, and with unusual agreement. What follows here on pages 4-5, and the piece submitted by architecture professors Omer Akin, Diane Shaw, Ulrich Fleischer, Volker Hartkopf and Kai Gutschow, are professor in architecture and art historian Elaine A. King, fine arts librarian Henry Piscotta; and architecture librarian and archivist Martin Arrand.

FOCUS on the art forum was held on campus Oct. 18, too late for our deadline. Watch for coverage next month.]

There is a controversy brewing considering the architectural style of the University Center (UC), due to a recent student installation. The apparent motivation of the installation is the stylistic expression of the UC, which has been around since the construction of the building (c. 1992) if not since its initial design (1986) or even earlier. The only reason we are discussing this outside of a few classes offered on campus (such as 48-4000, 48-510) is because the installation was publicly offensive to some. It is important to distinguish the two events from one another: (1) the design of the UC and (2) the installation about its style.

The design of the UC has many precedents. The closest are the two earlier designs developed by Dennis and Clark Associates (DCA), a winner of the East Campus competition in 1987. One of these is their project for the University of California, Santa Barbara Art Museum, which bears uncanny resemblance to the UC. It is clear that the architectural expression of the UC is mode together in a rush. Principal designers of DCA (and those who would be Michael Dennis and Roger Clark) were detailed in their designs for a long time and within several different contexts. Therefore, it is fair to say that the meaning of the UC is carefully considered, deliberate and intentional. It is not an accident that the UC looks the way it does.

Well, what does the UC really look like? Some claim it looks like the Fascist architecture. Those who do, generally are people in the field of architecture. This is not to say that most students are in the field do so. It is to say that this claim is very rarely made by those outside the field. This is

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The University Center portico fit for the exhibit. Photo: Jarrett Pelletier

Kai Gutschow is an architect, a historian of 20th century German architecture and a visiting assistant professor in Architecture.

From a what can tell the campus plan has certainly changed for the better with the addition of the UC and the Purnell! We have more space, better specialized facilities to work out of, and a more organized and more coherent campus plan. It's a great improvement over the hapazard addition of buildings that characterized the previous decades.

From my office window in Margaret Morrison I see the rear facade of this old building, the back of the new dorms facing the stadium, a tiny sliver of the reoriented field, and a sliver of the parking garage. The ensemble of new and old forms a unified whole, with similar building heights, a wonderfully crafted Flemish bond brick work, and pleasing proportions and aesthetics. It works: it has all the feelings of a typical campus ensemble of buildings.

The new arch — inspired by the modern classicist architect Leon Krier, rumor has it — that goes from the round end of Purnell past the pool and alongside the dorms to the student center provides a strong, much needed cross-axis to the campus that helps connect the main academic quad to this end of campus. It will be stronger if the planned dorms behind Margaret Morrison are ever built.

The views around the Cut and the tennis courts are similarly pleasing: CFA, Margaret Morrison, the pool and main entry court of the UC, and the round end of Purnell all forming a harmonious yet varied ensemble. The round drum of the UC squares off nicely with the imposing facade of CFA. There was a clear attempt by the architect Michael Dennis to learn from, borrow elements from, and coordinate the new architectural vocabulary with the old, without actually copying or creating pseudo-historic buildings. (Dennis could even have learned more from Mr. Hombostel, the original campus architect, however. Some of the buildings are faulty, as witnessed by the recent need to redo much of the painting and pointing of the brickwork at the top of the arch due to early water damage caused by faulty design details.)

The Forbes Avenue side of the new UC leaves a lot to be desired. The fact that one of the original elements of the original competition-winning project by Dennis and Clark is left off is clearly evident. The building is missing a front door, a main facade or strong building element on the main traffic artery that connects the campus to the rest of the city. We’re left with the “Flash Cube” (Warner Hall), a bus shelter, a service entry and parking garage to symbolize the connection of the campus on the street. Hopefully some day Warner Hall will be fronted by a better looking building.

Also satisfactory is the space around the reoriented athletic field. The UC, with its large gym wall and small octagonal pavilion that mirrors the one on Margaret Morrison, the dorms, and the garage-cum-pavilions create a festive and neatly contained space for the enactment of small-college sports events. The proximity of the gym and the cafeteria to the fields, as well as the dorms that face onto to the field undoubtedly help facilitate the integration of sports into academics.

The bleachers and rear facade of the parking garage are perhaps the first elements that remind of something "fascist"—the Zeppelin Field bleachers at the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, to be precise. The vertical articulation, the abstract caps atop the eaves, the repetition of the stairs, the overall horizontal massing all remind of Nuremberg.

The other "fascist" aspect of the campus plan is the two colonnades of the UC and Purnell and the space in between. What makes them or any other building fascist? This is a difficult question that goes to the very core of the definition of architecture and how it relates to issues of representative.... continued on page 8
When I walk down the arcades of the University Center and the Purnell Center I could choose to imagine that I am in ancient Greece, or in fascist Germany. But I prefer to imagine that I am in 16th century Florence. One association is as plausible as the other. When the sun is out, I can (almost) do it.

Martin Aurand