Contribution to “Purnell Architecture spurs debate about style”

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


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From what I 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 haphazard 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 silver 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 axis — 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 cafeteria 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 even the round end of Purnell all forming a harmonious yet variegated ensemble. The round drum of the UC squares off nicely with the imposing facade of the CFA. There was a clear attempt by the architect Michael Dennis to learn from, borrow elements from, and coordinate the new architecture 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 in fact, as witnessed by the recent need to redo much of the caulking and pointing of the brickwork at the top of the UC because of 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 Krier is missing 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 a parking garage to symbolize the UC on the campus 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-Moogers create a festive and nicely 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 on to the field undoubtedly help facilitate the integration of sports into academia. The bleachers and rear facade of the parking garage are perhaps the first elements that remind of something “fascist”—the Zepplin Field bleachers at the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, to be precise. The vertical articulation, the abstract capitals on top of each pier, the repetitiveness of the piers, the overall horizontal alignment 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 borders on the very core of the definition of architecture and how it relates to issues of representation...
Debate continues over style of Purnell, University Center

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

View from Purnell Center over a bare Cat

Photo: Brian Connolly