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 of the renovated 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: CIA, 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 CIA. There was a clear attempt by the architect Michael Dennis to learn from, borrow elements from, and coordinate the new architectural forms 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 look as if they had been built by the town council, as if a chief writer of the new design (

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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 Wanzon! In one exhibit, a dozen students and a dozen faculty, working in groups of three, produced an artist's statement that criticized the museum's collection.

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, a student succeeded in sparking a discussion about the original 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 speed. What follows here is based on pages 2-5, and the pieces submitted by architecture professors Gero Akin, Diane Shaw, Utchi Fleming, Volker Harkort, and Kai Gutschow; art professors Elaine A. King; fine arts librarian Henry Piscotta; and architecture librarian and archivist Martin Aurand. The first piece is by Akin.

A public forum on the architecture was held on campus Oct. 18, too late for our deadline. Watch for coverage next month.

There is a controversy brewing concerning 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. 1980) 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 it.

The design of the UC has many precedents. The earliest of these are the two earlier designs developed by Dennis and Clark Associates (DCA), the winners 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 not one put together in a rush. Principal designers of DCA (and those would be Michael Dennis and Roger Clark) are meticulous in their designs for a long time and within several different contexts. Therefore, it is fair to say that what they created was 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 all those who are in the field do so.

It is to say that this claim is very rarely made by those outside the field. This is continued on page 4
Debate continues over style of Purnell, University Center

continued from page 5

tion. Is architecture a representational or comprehensive art like poetry, painting, or sculpture? Can architecture be mute and totally abstract? Or does it merely serve functions, a piece of engineering? Can it communicate specific (or) meanings? How much does one need to “understand” a specific architectural language to enjoy or relate to a monumental piece of architecture? How can a building be political? If another building looks the same but is built in a totally different temporal and political context does it still share the politics of the original? If a swastika, an ancient symbol used by the Nazis, that when become synonymous with Nazism, can a style of architecture do the same? Handfuls of architects, clinicians, government officials, philosophers, critics, semioticians, citizens and foreign visitors have been making incipient assertions almost non-stop for the last decade of a huge building boom in Berlin, and more generally for the last 50 years in all of the two Germanys. Many books, articles and editorials have taken up all sides of this difficult issue. Every building that gets built, especially if it is clad in stone, if it employs columns, or if conforms to the standard Berlin building height, gets scrutinized as to whether it is in Nazi in character. With the move of the national capital to Berlin the problem has only gotten worse, as many government institutions build new structures and reoccupy old government buildings, some built by the Nazis, some merely inhabited by the Nazis during their 12 years of terror but designed centuries earlier, others “unchanged.”

Fascist architecture in the contexts of Berlin or CMU is difficult to define — Is all architecture created in Germany from 1933-1945 fascist? Probably not, as many ordinary and very modern looking buildings were created that would imply a far more architecture than that drawing heat on “fascist.” Other “fascist” designs actually were created before Hitler’s rise to power.

Is it only those buildings paid for by official Nazi party funds and carving a swastika? This, too, is unsatisfactory. The Nazi air force paid for some beautiful modern hangars that don’t draw the epithet “fascist,” and there were clearly also buildings built without party funds that look fascist.

Is it only a small subset of purposefully imposing and monumental architecture meant to assert symbolic force built for the “1,000 Year Reich” in Munich, Berlin and Nuremberg? But every German city has buildings that could be labeled “fascist,” though the ones in the three cities just mentioned were among the most widely publicized by Goebbels’ publicity as emblematic of Nazi ideals.

Is it only those buildings designed by architects who were party members? What about those who were not? The architectural profession in Nazi Germany was hetrogeneous, composed of both party and non-party members of the trade, in which so-called “fascist” was, though the ones in the three cities just mentioned were among the most widely publicized by Goebbels’ publicity as emblematic of Nazi ideals.

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I could go on with objective attempts to categorize Nazi architecture. However, it must be a subjective, aesthetic, visual, or stylistic issue rather than any one objective characteristic. It is confusing about the classical look, the starkness, the severity and repetitiveness of it, the boldness of the granite used, that brings back images of Nazi architecture and perhaps by association ideas related to the Nazi regime and its severity, and by further extension their politics, oppression and genocide. There is, however, nothing inherently related between the architecture of the UC and the politics of Nazism. The connection is made ONLY by those people who have seen Nazi architecture or images of it. It is a “learned” cultural response, not a factual or physical thing. Opinions can vary, as we know, since Michael Dennis certainly could not have been trying to force Nazi architecture on the campus, and would likely not have tried to “say something” about the administration that was acting as his client. We can all agree on a few buildings that clearly deserve the “fascist” label in Germany, but it is difficult to be complete, and to define the boundaries, and to figure out if buildings such as the UC deserve them.

The main colofonies of the UC and Purnell draw labels as “fascist” because they remind us of certain buildings created by the Nazis. A sensibility of classical architecture—columns, capitals, entablatures, podiments architecture is used, without actually copying the details. The coloni- nas have an imposing, almost overbear- ing quality to them. The thick piers, the (relatively) narrow spaces between them, the forceful repetetive nature of the sequence of piers and spaces, the tallness of the openings in relation to their width, the narrow space behind the colonnade, the furry, brownish tones of the metal roof overhangs, the thin- ness of the space above the colonnade... These qualities are reinforced by the flat, empty courtyard between the UC and Purnell that tends to mirror, reflect and almost am- plify their aesthetic power. The little “play,” deviation or asymmetry that there is, such as in the small art tiles that were glued into the facade of the UC are too insignificant to alter this feeling. There is a classical aesthetic, a power, a forcefulness that reminds of similar elements in the Nazi “House of Art” in Munich, the stadiums in Nuremberg and Berlin.

Architects purposefully looked to some of the great ancient cultures of the past for inspiration on a monumental, imposing fit. It was that sense that could symbol- ize and work with their fantasies of a “1,000 Year Reich.” Hitler, himself a frustrated architect, was personally interested in these issues and was clearly involved in trying to find a suitable image for his regime. In the process, they permanently altered the image we have of classical architecture.

The confusion comes from the fact that many other cultures in the past have looked to these ancient classical precedents (for) to their architecture. If one looks through architectural history textbooks, however, one finds many other buildings that also look similar. The steus of ancient Greece and the forums of ancient Rome, for ex- ample, are very similar. Classical architec- ture, invented by the ancient Greeks and copied from them by the Romans, were clearly models. Similar classical vocabulary- was used in the Renaissance, during the Enlightenment, the industrialization of the 19th century, and even by the three major political rivals of the Nazis: Mussolini, Stalin and Roosevelt. Each used classical architecture to invoke their own particular political message.

A primary reason that Modern architecture, with its steel and glass walls, became so popular after WWI was precisely because it was opposed to and different from the stone classical architecture of the fascists. The “copying” continues to this day in buildings such as the recently completed Reagan Office Building in Washington, DC, or in countless suburban homes with their columns out front. In fact, the architecture, invented by the ancient Greeks and copied from them by the Romans, lies at the base of Western design, and the whole idea of proportion, symmetry, part-whole relationships, the expression of load and support perfected by the Greeks is still at the core of what most Western architects and people feel is proper architecture.

Classicism has a rich, confusing and multi- layered history, and is not necessarily the same as a building.

When I walk down the arcades of the University Center and the Purnell Center I choose to imagine that I am in ancient Greece, or in fascist Germany. But I prefer to imagine that I am in 16th century Florenc. 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

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