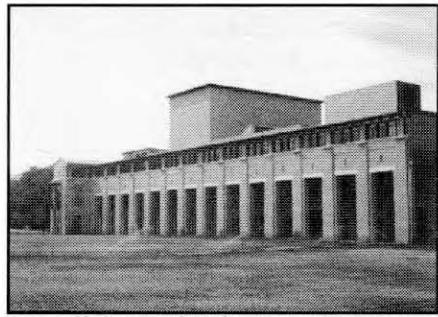
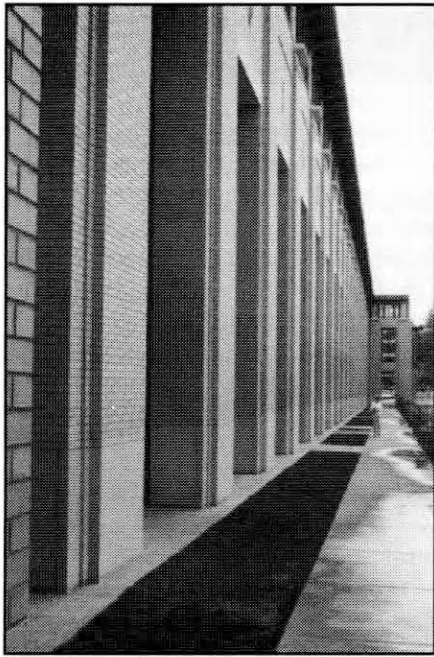
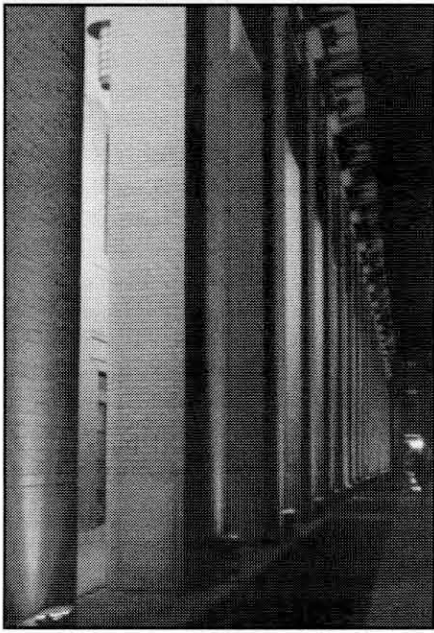


Neo-classical, Monumental, Fascist or one of a kind ... debating the style of Purnell and University Center



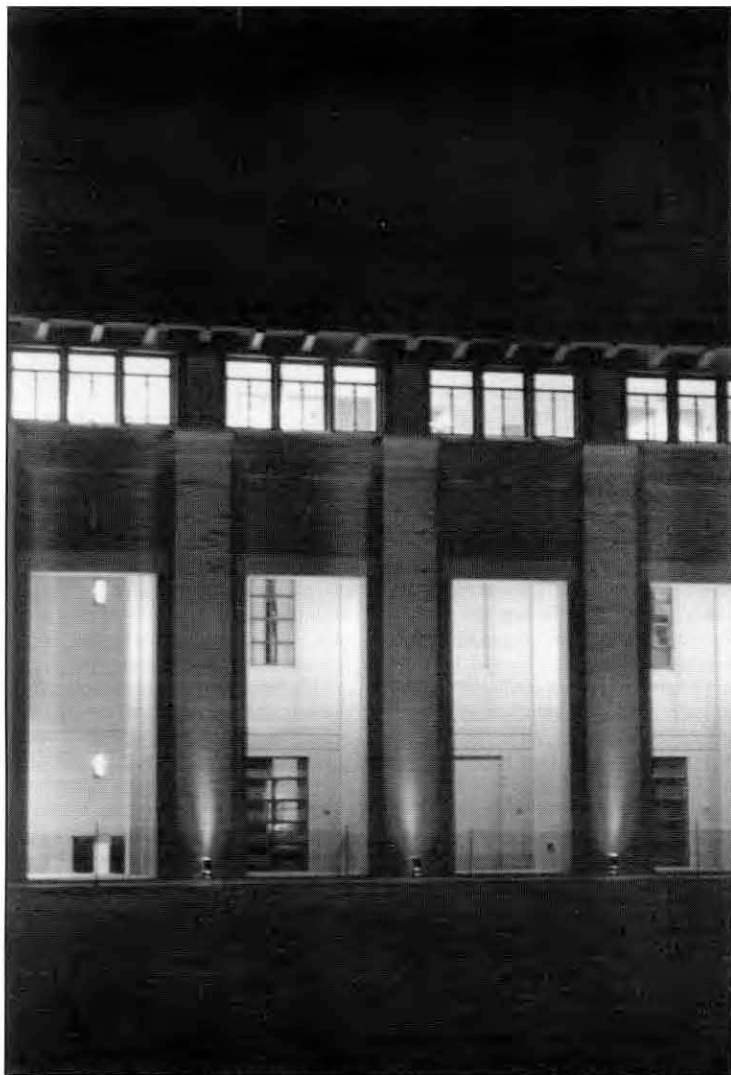
Purnell Center for the Arts



Top: UC portico. Below: exhibit lights.

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The University Center portico lit for the exhibit.

Photo: Jarrett Pelletier

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 Wats:on? 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 fact, the exhibit 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 speed. What follows here and on pages 4, 5, and 8 are the pieces submitted by architecture professors Omer Akin, Diane Shaw, Ulrich Fleming, Volker Hartkopf and Kai Gutschow; art professor Elaine A. King; fine arts librarian Henry Pisciotta; 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. 1990) 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 clearest of these are the two earlier designs developed by Dennis and Clark Associates (D&CA), 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 D&CA (and those would be Michael Dennis and Roger Clark) deliberated on 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 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

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

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 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. Hornbostel, the original campus architect, however. Some of the detailing is faulty, as witnessed by the recent need to redo much of the caulking and pointing of the brickwork at the top of the dorms 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 got 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 a parking garage to symbolize our proud 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-bleachers 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 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 capitals on top of each pier, the repetitive rhythm of the piers, 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 bores at the very core of the definition of architecture and how it relates to issues of representa-

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Debate continues over style of Purnell, University Center

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tion. Is architecture a representational or communicative art like poetry, painting or sculpture? Can architecture be mute and totally abstract? Or does it merely serve functions, like a piece of engineering? Can it communicate specific (!) 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 cultures all over the world, has become synonymous with Nazism, can a style of architecture do the same?

Hundreds of architects, clients, government officials, philosophers, critics, semioticians, citizens and foreign visitors have been asking themselves related questions 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 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 "uninfected."

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 implicate far more architecture than that drawing heat as "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 carrying a swastika? This, too, is unsatisfactory. The Nazi air force paid for some amazingly 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 serve symbolic function 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 fascist workers and sub-contractors? The architectural profession in Nazi Germany was heterogeneous, composed of both party and non-party members, some of whom built in a style we would label as Fascist, others did not.

— Is it only those buildings in massive granite? Then the brick UC and Purnell Center would not qualify.

— Only those using a "classical" vocabulary? Clearly that includes too many buildings ...

I could go on with objective attempts to categorize Fascist architecture. In the end, however, it must be a subjective, aesthetic, visual, or stylistic issue rather than any one objective characteristic. It is something about the classical look, the starkness, severity and repetitiveness of it, the solidity 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 archi-



View from Purnell Center over a bare Cut

Photo: Brian Connelly

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

ecture 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 too.

The main colonnades 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, pediments — architecture is used, without actually copying the details. The colonnades have an imposing, almost overbearing quality to them. The thick piers, the (relatively) narrow spaces between them, the forceful repetitive 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 furrowed brows of the metal roof overhangs, the thinness of the space above the colonnade These qualities are reinforced by the flat, empty courtyard between the UC and Purnell that tends to mirror, refract and almost amplify their aesthetic power. The little "play," deviation, asymmetry or freedom 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.

Nazi architects purposefully looked to some of the great ancient cultures of the past for inspiration on a monumental, imposing tradition of architecture that could symbolize 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 keys to their architecture. If one looks through architectural history textbooks, however, one finds many other buildings that also look similar. The stoas of ancient Greece and the forums of ancient Rome, for example, are very similar. Classical architecture, invented by the ancient Greeks and copied from them by the Romans, were clearly models. Similar classical vocabularies were used in the Renaissance, during the Enlightenment, the industrialization of the 19th century, and even by the three main 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 WWII 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, classical architecture, invented by the ancient Greeks and copied from them by the Romans, lies at the base of most Western architecture. The Greek ideas on proportion, symmetry, part-whole relationships, the expression of load-and-support perfected by the Greeks are STILL at the core of what most Western architects and people feel is proper architecture.

Classicism has a rich, confusing and multiple history, with no clear or singular meaning or association.

Clearly not all columns, classical buildings, stone architecture, not all buildings with stark colonnades should be by implication labeled as Nazi. Most, in fact, do not remind of the infamous Nazi buildings. Those that do have specific visual, formal elements and aesthetics that are similar to a few iconic buildings in Germany that those people "in the know" associate. Above all, I think, this is an issue of the "starkness" inhuman proportion and classical monumentality that can draw the Nazi label. But this is a matter of taste and opinion.

The UC and Purnell facades are "mere facades," stagefronts that hide and belie the very complex buildings, multi-functional buildings behind them. They are clearly not "needed." They do not correspond to the functions behind them, as identical facades cover two completely different buildings. They serve little purpose other than to create a dry or protected place to walk the length of the campus in the rain, snow or heat, AND to create a unified, regular space between them. They are, arguably, the weakest elements of the designs, notwithstanding the imposing imagery. They were added by the architect to make a statement.

This will to unity and regularity responded to and sought to fix the overly haphazard nature of the buildings that characterized this space before. Duplicating the facades, with nothing between them to interrupt their forceful imagery, only heightened the problem. The absence of any diagonal or irregular paths through the space that characterize most campus plans also contribute to the rigidity. The regularity is amplified by the fact that the void, or space between the buildings is the only strong image facing the busy Forbes Avenue—the "signpost" for CMU. Perhaps more care should have been taken to create an appropriate image.

Although related, the buildings and the student art project must be kept separate. The student project was a one-time statement by individual students who have a right to free speech and expression. The buildings are a permanent fixture of our campus than we can alter or add to as we see fit to make them palatable to all. If they remind us of Hitler we can change them so they no longer do. The imposed regularity of these facades is in my opinion too strong. As the lawn between them gets "lived in," full of people, frisbee games and conversation, the facades will lose some of their starkness. Trees in the courtyard, asymmetrically spaced, could also help. Large scale, possible colorful public art works would also help. A bandstand or tiny outdoor amphitheater for student meetings or readings created with a raised earth berm could also help loosen the rigidity of the space. Perhaps the Fence could be moved nearby, off center, so as not to add to the hierarchy and monumentality of it all. Magdalena Jetelova's recent underground installation "Translocation" nearby was a good start, but not visible enough above the ground, and not located in between the buildings to help on this particular matter.

KAI GUTSCHOW