

NEW GENERATIONS OF GLASS AND STONE

Three University of Chicago projects evolve Collegiate Neo-Gothic in subtle ways

BY ZACH MORTICE

All adaptive reuse projects have to confront how you represent and revise architecture of two distinct time periods. But in an adaptive reuse project where the original building was done in a historicist style, the problem is more complex: How do you draw attention and tasteful contrast between the new, the old and allusions to the ancient?

That's the conundrum presented by three renovation and adaptive reuse projects on the University of Chicago's Neo-Gothic campus. Its Saieh Hall for Economics, Neubauer Collegium, and renovation and expansion of the University of Chicago Laboratory School are all exercises in subtle evolution that continue the aesthetic principals of Neo-Gothic architecture, if not its exact material traditions. The projects' architects maintained the sense of continuity on one of the nation's oldest Neo-Gothic campuses, highlighting the "Neo" in Neo-Gothic in a few cases, but mostly using material cues to distinguish between old and new. These buildings were originally designed to look ancient, but their current configurations are just now ending their useful life, making them early case studies on how architects can handle the three temporal masters they need to serve in the adaptive reuse of historicist buildings.

When the University of Chicago opened in

1892, founder William Rainey Harper famously declared there would be no opening celebrations. The school was to appear as if it had always been there, as ancient as the nearby lake, or at least as ancient as Oxford and Cambridge. Current campus architect Steve Wiesenthal, FAIA, describes what Harper was looking for as "instant credibility," and Harper largely got it, as the university became the defining institution in its part of the city, and an icon of scholarship for the entire Midwest.



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Several seminaries were attracted to the campus, lured by proximity to the University of Chicago Divinity School. Built in 1930, the Meadville Seminary is being renovated by New York-based Kliment Halsband Architects. It will become the Neubauer Collegium, where humanities and social science professors from all over the world will work in multidisciplinary teams, applying research models more often seen in the physical sciences. The \$13 million project, to be completed this spring, leaves the exterior virtually untouched, but inside there is a radical shift in program that is accomplished in subtle ways. What was once a place for solitary contemplation of divinity will become a place for scholarship based on intense collaboration.

The architects blew out walls to create nearly every type of social space imaginable: lecture halls, event spaces, galleries, and small and large

meeting rooms. Kliment Halsband's Frances Halsband, FAIA, likens these to social incubator hangout spaces more often seen in tech firms like Google. "We're putting a very modern view of how people work into a super-traditional building," she says. Some wood-paneled walls are being restored, but the most intense interventions, as in the lobby, are defined by panels of laser-cut steel. Glass plays a key role here, as it's used to divide individual offices for researchers, keeping them visually connected to the hive of activity around them. "It's all about seeing what's happening right outside of your door," says Halsband.

Saieh Hall for Economics covers one wing's former exterior in a glass-walled corridor, preserving its rich red brick in a building-scale vitrine; one example of the way Ann Beha Architects (ABA) used transparency to let the

ABOVE The exterior of the Neubauer Collegium remains mostly untouched.

OPPOSITE PAGE Laser-cut steel panels will define the renovated lobby, one of the project's most dramatically transformed spaces.



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TOP Saieh Hall is composed primarily of red brick (a rarity for the University of Chicago campus), with limestone detailing. **LOWER** One wing of Saieh Hall is encased in glass, preserving the red brick and creating a new glass-walled colonnade around it.

patina of the original brick and limestone detailing shine through. Completed in three phases in the 1920s and designed by H.H. Riddell, it was originally the Chicago Theological Seminary. The \$105 million renovation, completed last fall, converts soaring ecclesiastical space into secular, though hardly prosaic, classrooms and lecture halls. Much of the explicit spiritual iconography, such as the stained glass windows, was removed, but some religious masonry remains. In the largest chapel, five massive circular light fixtures hang down from a vaulted oak ceiling, over the former site of the altar; this chapel is now a graduate study lounge. Their contemporary sculptural presence dominates the room, and rebrands its field of study from one fundamental measure of humanity to another. The visual symbolism of the circular lights creates a sense of continuity as well. “Why not halos over the altar?” Wiesenthal says.

The building has its share of quirks and eccentricities—Tudor detailing, mannerist stonework in the cloisters, a completely functionless bell tower—that made it a richer composition than a paint-by-numbers effort at Gothic recycling. “The mixtures of styles and the level of craft give this building its unique identity,” says ABA’s Philip Chen, AIA.

None of the renovation projects take many opportunities to reference being built closer to the first stock market crash than the first appearance of the Black Plague, but Saieh’s graduate student offices in the building’s attic are a smart exception. Formerly obscured by fireproofing, ABA’s plan exposed the steel trusses that run through the attic, offering a sure sign you’re not in medieval France.

Because of its jewel-like contrast to mortar and masonry, glass is a signature material for Gothic architecture. It’s also a signature material for Valerio Dewalt Train’s (VDT) \$44 million Gordon Parks Arts Hall for the University of Chicago Laboratory School for quite a different reason. The building largely consists of a glass curtain-walled atrium that collects the school’s arts programs: visual arts studios, a black box theater, music rehearsal space and an assembly hall. This fall, it will take the place of a previous arts wing and renovate two adjacent Neo-Gothic classroom towers. Here, glass is the rule, not the exception. Four solar chimneys rise out of the north façade like Gothic buttresses, and limestone A-frames replicate the massing of the adjacent Neo-Gothic buildings. Since the project required new construction, VDT chose a hybridized, contemporary style that draws on formal principles of Gothic architecture (the use

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— RANDY MATTHEIS, AIA, OF VDT

PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM ROSSITER



of glass, light and verticality), if not its material ratios. "We're trying to recognize what is powerful about the architecture that's on campus, and use the principles that we find to build something appropriate for the current moment," says Randy Mattheis, AIA, of VDT.

The inversion of primary materials here celebrates advances in building science, and more of this progression can be seen as the building dematerializes from its north to south

elevations. Concrete A-frames with limestone cladding mark the north façade, but moving south, these same structural frames are repeated and composed of just steel and glass, with a few exceptions. "You could imagine 'Miesian Gothic' if there ever was such a thing," Wiesenthal says. The A-frame gables at the south end have the same proportions as the pure Neo-Gothic gables next door, maintaining formal continuity with material ingenuity.

TOP Steel trusses are exposed in the graduate office attic, making it clear that though it's meant to look hundreds of years old, Saieh Hall is predated by the Bauhaus school. **BELOW** Gordon Parks Arts Hall maintains the same massing and proportions as the adjacent Neo-Gothic buildings, but uses glass in place of masonry as a primary material.



RENDERINGS BY VISUALIZED CONCEPTS, COURTESY OF VDTAR.



RENDERINGS BY VISUALIZED CONCEPTS, COURTESY OF VOTAR

The Arts Hall collects the Lab School's arts program in a glass-walled atrium.

Marriage of material and shape didn't come easily. "This was probably scheme No. 45," Wiesenthal says. "We went through so many iterations of trying to find the right balance between not mimicking, in the sense of being literal, but [instead] thinking about the spirit of Gothic [architecture.]"

Adaptive reuse of original Gothic-era architecture is understandably rare, but when it does happen, designers often choose a palette of extreme contrast that's instructively opposed to the approaches taken by the University of Chicago. The Champollion Museum in France (a museum of world script and writing) reuses a four-story medieval building, preserving its rough-hewn façade and placing a laminated glass wall with perforated copper spelling out hieroglyphics and other international writing behind it, visible through window openings. The glowing wall turns the original façade into an inverse jewelry box, isolating and preserving it as a precious artifact. The perforated copper displays scripts replicated with machine-milled detail that would have been impossible at the time of

construction, all contrasting with the building's irregular masonry and decaying frescos.

This intense opposition arises out of the massive gulf of time between its construction and renovation—a response to the need to reflect each age of architecture. But in the University of Chicago projects, it's an evolutionary exchange that's been going on for less than 100 years, and the results are appropriately restrained. "We're building in the context of continuing conversation, and so we're joining that conversation not in dramatic juxtaposition, but rather in a continuation of the dialogue," says Wiesenthal.

Just as important are the neighbors the building is in conversation with. Any surviving Gothic building today is likely to be surrounded by structures built hundreds of years later that have little stylistic continuity with the late Middle Ages, but the University of Chicago is all about continuity, first with a pre-Renaissance golden age, and then later with its own Neo-Gothic litany. As such, there's a communal responsibility to make sure renovations complement the closely-related brothers and sisters surrounding them. **CA**

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