

Good Bones Win Out

Bringing together two eras of design at Syracuse University's School of Architecture renews a Beaux Arts building and finds the hidden green virtues of its original design

By Richard Staub

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Syracuse University's Slocum Hall

Can you teach an old dog new tricks? In the case of Slocum Hall, the home of Syracuse University's School of Architecture, very much so. Or perhaps, as James Garrison, AIA, of Garrison Architects believes, it was simply a case of bringing back some moves the building could perform nicely all along.

Slocum Hall is a Beaux Arts brick and limestone pile designed by two School of Architecture professors, Frederick Revels and Earl Hallenbeck, which opened in 1919 as the home for the Schools of Agriculture, Engineering, Home Economics, and Architecture. It housed dairy cows in the basement and classrooms on the first three floors, and tucked away the architecture studios in the fourth floor's attic-like spaces. In 1939, when the Agriculture School closed, the School of Architecture gradually took over more of the building until it occupied the entire structure.

As often happens with buildings of a certain age, however, "improvements" were made. To gain more floor space, the university filled in the openings for the skylit atrium on each floor. It put up walls to create more private spaces, removed the lecture hall, introduced hung ceilings, and shut tight the over-the-door transoms. Garrison, an alum, remembers his first impression as a freshman was of a dense warren of small rooms – not what he'd expected from an architect-



The newly reopened atrium, looking up from the ground floor

ture school. When Syracuse University hired him in 1999 to renovate the 110,000-square-foot building, he knew what he was up against.

Garrison's brief was to help implement the School of Architecture's mandate to reflect the creative potential of architecture, make design visible on campus, reinforce collegiality and interdisciplinary study, and demonstrate to students the fundamental principles of form and construction. More specifically, the facility was to include a lecture hall, gallery, café, studios, research spaces, reading room, faculty and support offices, and review spaces.

With several decades of experience teaching architecture, and a fundamental commitment to sustainability, Garrison knew how the facility should ideally function and was also attuned to its hidden "green" virtues. Over 10 years of stops and starts, he had to convey his solution to two successive chancellors, three successive deans, the 34 architects who make up the faculty, the campus architect, a variety of other administration stakeholders, and, of course, the annually changing student body. But he had a convincing vision for the project, based on Slocum's good bones, and it was as much about subtraction as it was addition.

When Garrison describes the project, he begins with the building's thick walls and the inherent energy smarts of the original design. Built before air conditioning was in common use, the building circulated air naturally, drawing it in through the open windows and allowing it to pass through the open transoms and interiors, up the atrium, and out through the vents in the skylight. After careful testing, Garrison hypothesized that if he opened the atrium and the transoms and removed the previously inserted walls and hung ceilings, the natural flow of air would eliminate the need for air conditioning. He was right. Without air conditioning, the project cost went down 20%, and there is an anticipated annual fuel savings of \$150,000. The construction cost was \$114 per square foot.

"In reopening the atrium and removing walls, we were also reinforcing the physical connections that will support the school as a community," says Garrison. "It's easy to make connections between students and faculty, see what various classes are up to, and communicate. Energy flows through the building." And in the clarified, light-filled structure, what he did introduce has a quiet but distinct presence.

The most significant addition is the 135-seat auditorium, a very visible volume that hovers in the two-story exhibition space, supported by struts. Like most of the new components, it has pale, honey-colored bamboo plywood cladding. Also in bamboo are new bench seating on two floors at the edge of the atrium, equipment enclosures, and paneling on some corridor walls.

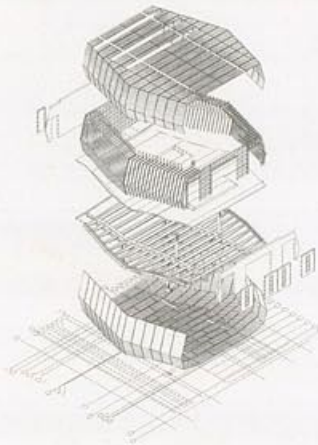
The facility, which opened in September 2008, is in effect teaching by example. When students and faculty experience Slocum Hall, they are discovering how two eras of design thinking can come together as a convincing whole. "Garrison made the logic of the design very apparent," says Mark Robbins, AIA, the school's dean, "and the juxtaposition of old and new reads right away."

Danton Spina, a fourth-year architecture student quoted in the university's newspaper *Daily Orange*, seemed to get it. "It's such a little thing, but to reopen the atrium and bring it back to its original architectural aesthetic, to have this open space and all these interactions with people yelling to their friends on different floors, means a lot. The amount of light is great and the quality of air is so much better," he said.



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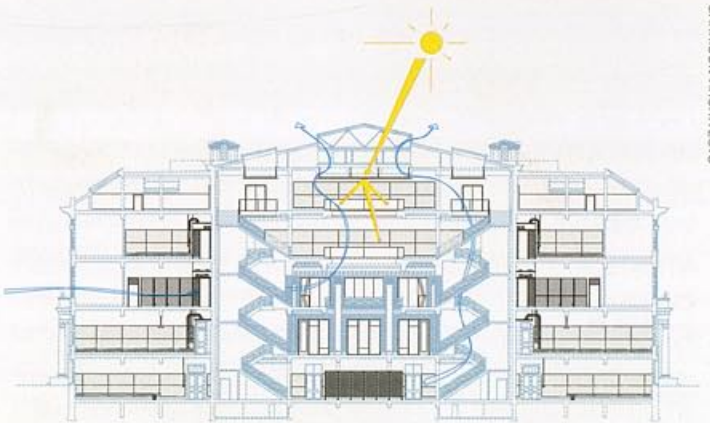
Above: The 135-seat auditorium Below left: Axonometric of auditorium Below right: The auditorium hovers in the two-story exhibition space



GARRISON ARCHITECTS



DAVID JOSEPH



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Section illustrates the flow of natural light and ventilation (blue = existing elements, black = new elements)

Richard Staub is a marketing consultant and writer who focuses on issues important to the design and building community.

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 Construction Manager: Hayner Hoyt Corporation
 Structural Engineer: Klepper, Hahn, & Hyatt
 MEPFP Engineer: J. R. Loring & Associates, Inc.
 Lighting Designer: Cline Bettridge Bernstein
 Sustainability and Acoustical Engineering: Arup Acoustics
 Code Consultants: Code Consultants, Inc