

ARCHITECTURE HERE AND THERE BLOG

Column: New PC hall sings of the humanities

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By David Brussat



The new Ruane Center, at Providence College

PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

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Rendering of design for Ruane Center

At Saturday's dedication of the Ruane Center for the Humanities at Providence College -- named for philanthropists Michael and Elizabeth Ruane -- historian David McCullough delivered a passionate keynote address that set the building amid the context of the liberal arts, of which the humanities occupy center stage.

"I feel to the depths of my being that this emblematic new building is not only a step in the right direction for Providence College, but for our country," said McCullough. "We need to be reminded about who we are and how we got to be who we are."

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PHOTO BY DAVID BRUSSAT

Ruane Center during dedication ceremony

The building's Collegiate Gothic style is particularly appropriate for a college centered on the teachings of Catholicism, or at least the moral ethic it is meant to embody.

Gothic as applied to architecture began as a derogatory term denoting the vandalism of the Goths who sacked ancient Rome. For centuries, the great divide in architecture was between the Gothic styles of Roman Catholicism and the classicism rediscovered during the Renaissance that came to stand in, loosely, for the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment.

Advocates of either side often took Gothic's pointed arches, rib vaults and flying buttresses very much to heart, as totems to venerate or to abominate. Neoclassicism's proponents opposed Gothic architecture for daring to scratch at the scabs of the schisms of society. Much of that animus, if not always its substance, can be seen today in modernism's war on tradition.

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PHOTO BY DAVID BRUSSAT

Historian David McCullough delivers keynote

The word inquisition might here creep into the thoughts of some readers, but modernism, in the twin guise of fascism and communism, has committed far greater crimes than Torquemada could possibly have imagined. Yet the totalitarian impulse has not gone away.

Many at Saturday's event probably felt more at ease with the building's look than they are used to feeling at similar events, at PC and elsewhere. Several speakers alluded to this.

The Ruane Center is not the cathedral of Notre Dame, of course. But its Gothic detailing is vivid enough to set the heart beating with joy. Its windows and doorways have pointed arches, and Gothic's massive flying buttresses are hinted at most elegantly in the pilasters on the corners of the central tower -- crenellated in the style of a Gothic castle's battlements.

The subtle reflections of ancient Gothic style on display here, designed by the S/L/A/M Collaborative and Sullivan and Buckingham Architects, represent the wary efforts of tradition struggling to emerge in a modern world where tradition has been suppressed in art, architecture and almost every other realm. Peeking its gentle visage above the parapet of public discourse is the Golden Rule of reciprocal generosity. It should be the preferred template for behavior in public and private life.



PHOTO BY DAVID BRUSSAT

Arch and plaster on Ruane tower

But not in today's society, which grows ever more debased, from the princes of the corporate boardroom down to the rigidly scheduled lives of kids dodging bullies in school. The shy buttresses of the Ruane Center's tower suggest how goodness must tug on its forelock when venturing out into the modern world.

Today's coarser, more egotistical ethos rarely blushes on the way to the bank. Modern architecture represents the hubris of success as currently defined, and feels no call to apologize for the ugliness and sterility it has inflicted, by now, on almost every corner of the globe, degrading the human condition wherever it arises. If modern architecture were more literally fatal, its makers would stand accused of crimes against humanity, and rightly so.

The Ruane Center is part of a growing resistance to all of this.



PHOTO BY DAVID BRUSSAT

Detail of Ruane main entry arch

The humanities, and all they represent, have been under siege for more than half a century. Now they are trying to rise up again and work their way back into the world. I hope and trust that Providence College is proud to be part of this ongoing hard labor. It's a good thing the architects of the Ruane Center did not forget to top it off with battlements!

Tour of downtown

This Saturday, the Providence Preservation Society and the New England chapter of the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art offer a tour of the most splendid and historical banking and mercantile palaces of downtown Providence. The tour will display several buildings recently in the news, such as the darkened Industrial Trust ("Superman") Building, the soon-to-reopen Providence Arcade and buildings of the Providence G, downtown's latest project.

[Because the Arcade will not be open by the date of the tour, the planned visit inside, it turns out, cannot be accommodated.]

The day will begin at 1 p.m. with a tour of the John Brown House on Benefit Street and end at 4:30 with a reception at the Dorrance, in the ornate banking lobby of the Union Trust Building. Reservations are \$25 for members of PPS and the ICAA (\$35 for nonmembers), and may be obtained via a link at www.ppsri.org.



PHOTO BY DAVID BRUSSAT

Main reception hall right of main entry



PHOTO BY DAVID BRUS SAT

Vaulted hallway just beyond entry foyer



PHOTO BY DAVID BRUSSAT

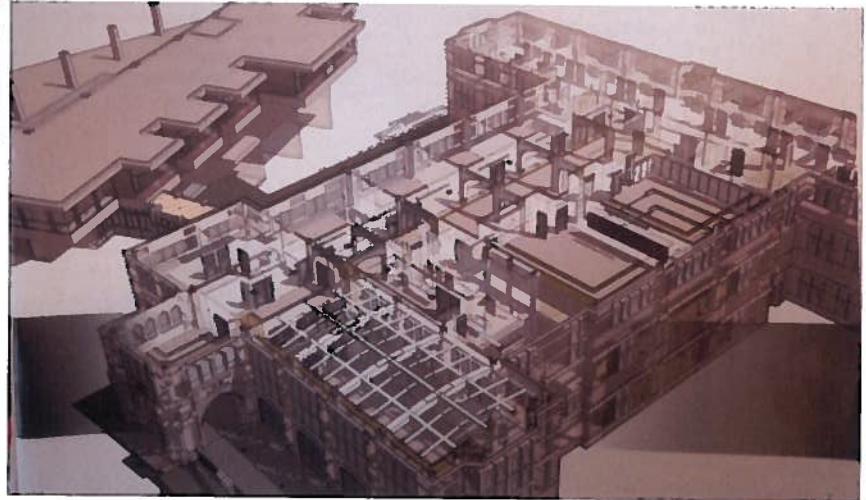
Upstairs conference room at Ruane Center



PHOTO BY DAVID BRUSSAT

Ruane Center at dusk prior to dedication

David Brussat is on The Journal's editorial board (dbrussat@providencejournal.com). This column, with more illustrations, is on his blog Architecture Here and There at providencejournal.com.



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Axonometric rendering of interior spaces of Ruane Center
