

“A Sense of Unified Purpose”



Hyde Park Center architect **Rafael Viñoly** talks to *Chicago GSB* about respecting the building next door, creating a space that fosters ideas, and uniting the GSB under the roof he designed. **By Anthony Ruth**

What excited you about designing the Chicago GSB Hyde Park Center?

It's an incredibly important building that replaced Woodward Court by Eero Saarinen [and J. Lee Jones]. And it's located just across the street from one of the icons of American architecture, the Robie House. It's an extraordinarily difficult problem. Also, because the GSB had grown to such an extent over the years, it needed to recapture a sense of unified purpose. This was an opportunity to contribute to the identity of the school as one institution that houses not only a very prestigious faculty, but also students who are the brightest in America.

Let's talk about the building's location. It's an architectural hot spot, facing Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House and Rockefeller Memorial Chapel. Does that kind of challenge make it more fun? More difficult?

It was clear that architectural considerations were as important as the ingenuity it would take to deal with a very diffi-

cult set of requirements. There was a park in front of Robie when it was built. Then came the dormitory by Saarinen, which was blocky and made it more difficult to see the house because you couldn't get enough distance. With the new building, we freed up the perspective of the Robie House, generating the chance of seeing the façade comprehensively by creating the terrace, which essentially pays homage to Wright. So, how do you plan a building that is very large, and then modulate it in a way that respects the residential scale and the much more institutional scale of Rockefeller Chapel? And how do these things relate to the street and to the Lab Schools and so on? It's a series of comprehensive moves that try to address all these different conditions. Manipulating the scale and making gestures to have the building reflect both the tradition and the forward-looking aspects of Chicago were really exciting to work on.

What else inspired you in the design? How did it evolve?

From the original scheme, of course, it evolved in many ways, but conceptually it was always the same *parti*, the same approach to the problem. The university is known for its extraordinary series of quads, and somehow the building had to provide not just another quad, but a covered area that would function year round, that could be the center of the school in terms of identity, and could be a place where people get together.

Many of your buildings bring people together in public spaces. What draws you to that kind of design?

One of the most interesting aspects of living in an urban environment is interacting with people in real space. The

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information-gathering mechanisms that exist today, like the Internet, are a result of planned strategies. You need to know what you’re seeking. In public space, the randomness and the chance of meeting people that you weren’t necessarily planning to meet—that’s the nature of urban life. I think that buildings of this scale and with this function need to capture that type of environment. If you stress the notion that we are related only through routine interaction, you lose the sense of a collective purpose and of living in a community. For that, you need a physical representation—not symbolic, but practical. So the building has a clear dimension of publicness, a place where people feel that they’re exposed to each other, because out of those things come the best ideas and the best sense of participation. And that space is less planned—you would have a hard time defining it by any single function. It’s not an atrium, it’s not the entrance, it’s not a garden, it’s not a winter garden—it’s all those things together.

Do you approach designing an educational facility any differently than you would, say, a commercial building or a museum?

Architecture is a completely specific practice; you are there as an architect because there’s a need, there’s a function, there’s someone who pays for it. To me, that does not limit architectural expression, but supports it. I think the difficulty in architecture is that the objectives of personal expression need to be intersected with the real origin of

the work. The truth is that very few architects create ingenious and intelligent spaces for their intended purpose, but I think purpose is completely central to the topic. I think the best part of architecture is that you can carry a structure’s purpose through the building, as opposed to forgetting it and then sticking it in later.

Has the building turned out as you envisioned it?

The building has turned out better than I expected in many ways. The university and the GSB made the project a real priority that wasn’t compromised in moments of fighting over budgets or other concerns. They elevated the significance of the building in complete concert with the incredible architectural tradition of the city. That was totally remarkable. And I think the building is very effective in addressing things that were significantly faulty in the prior structure of the school, like the separation of classrooms and the lack of state-of-the-art facilities for students. It also addresses more sociological aspects—how the faculty relate to the student body while maintaining the high quality of their research, which I think requires privacy, and how this whole thing propels the image of Chicago GSB. These things will become more obvious when we see how the building works.

What part of the building are you most proud of?

I couldn’t tell you a part that I’m most proud of or particularly happy with. Obviously, there’s going to be a lot of talk about the winter garden. But to me the most important aspect of the building is the manipulation of scales: how you go from a relatively small room to a larger space, how those sequences occur in the same way, and how the building relates to all the contextual influences. Those things, for me personally, are very successful. You look at the building, as huge as it is, and it is a good neighbor—relates well to Ida Noyes, makes a major gesture to the tower of Rockefeller Chapel, creates this platform to the Robie House. It has this gentle way of dealing with the sidewalk on the perceived scales, and at the same time it has very spectacular glass offices—offices that are relatively small, as they have always been for the kind of work that people do, and at the same time are spacious and luminous and offering a view of the context, which I think is so remarkable. So it’s a very interesting building from that perspective, for me. People may not see those things, and that’s actually good. ■