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CAMPUS SPACES

# A Beaux-Arts Landmark Gets a New Mission (and 50 New Toilets)

By *Lawrence Biemiller* | NOVEMBER 20, 2019

You're reading the latest issue of Campus Spaces, a monthly newsletter on how colleges are using their buildings and grounds to advance their missions. Sign up here to get the newsletter delivered to your inbox.

**Welcome to the November 2019 issue of our newsletter about buildings, grounds, and more.**

In Washington, the landmark building was called simply “the Corcoran” when it housed both a beloved museum and an art school. Now an intricate makeover has turned former galleries into classrooms and the old coal bunker into a woodworking shop.

**Also this month:**

- A dining hall free from the “Big 8” allergens.
- A survey finds that campus social spaces have a big impact.
- A science complex's winter garden has “12 modes of operation.”

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Enjoy!

# A Landmark From 1897 Gets Updates Both Inventive and Invisible

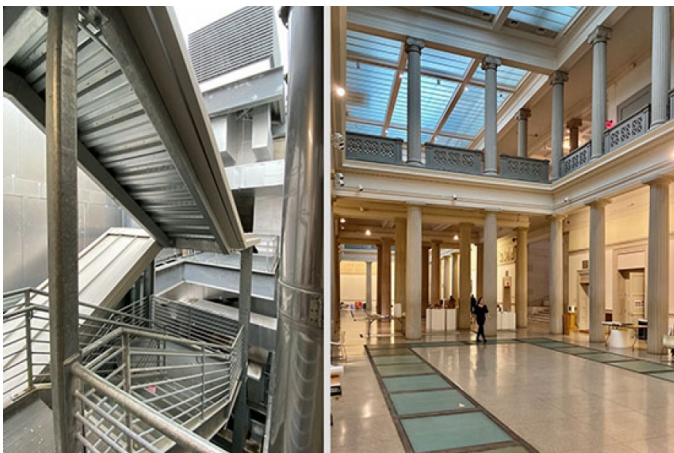


Chronicle photograph by Lawrence Biemiller

Now owned by George Washington U., the building housing the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design dates to 1897. It was designed by Ernest Flagg and is included on the National Register of Historic Places.

Corcoran School of the Arts and Design.

“What we did in that courtyard was incredibly difficult,” says Timothy J. Duffy, vice president and director of technical services at the architecture firm Leo A Daly, which has overseen extensive — and essential — renovations to the art school’s home. **“You come to embrace these challenges.”**



Chronicle photographs by Lawrence Biemiller

A light well that architects referred to as “the courtyard” (left) was the key to a variety of upgrades in infrastructure

Often the most complicated parts of a campus project go unseen by all but a handful of facilities staffers allowed behind locked doors and into attics and basements. So let’s take a moment to **celebrate the newest architectural triumph in Washington that almost no one will ever visit:** a four-story, three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle of structural steel, modern air-handling units, ductwork, and emergency stairs, all shoehorned into a modest light well between the 1897 and 1928 wings of the

The project, which began in 2016, has offered more than its fair share of challenges. When the Corcoran Gallery and College of Art + Design was dissolved, in 2014, after years of financial struggles, the outdated buildings and the lively art school were taken over by George Washington U. The plan was to **consolidate the art school,**

and safety, including an emergency-exit stairway. The stone columns in the grand atrium (right) are supported on cast-iron columns in the basement.

then spread out among seven locations, in the Corcoran buildings, while also retaining the most magnificent of the former museum's galleries for use by the National

Gallery of Art, which inherited the lion's share of the Corcoran's collections.

The 138,000-square-foot project had to be done on a tight budget — it was **value-engineered from \$80 million down to \$53 million** — and the classrooms had to be kept open for use. To complicate matters, the site is in the crowded heart of downtown Washington, just two blocks from the White House. And the main building, designed by Ernest Flagg, is on the National Register of Historic Places and is protected by District of Columbia preservation rules. “To put one nail in a wall, we had to get three reviews,” says Jess Kim, senior project architect for Leo A Daly.

The 1897 main building and the 1928 addition were “radically different” in construction, Duffy says, and the older part had several unusual aspects, including “Metropolitan slab” floors — **gypsum and wood chips reinforced with piano wires**. “We had to do some due diligence,” he says, to be certain that the floors were safe. Also, the stone columns in the main atrium rest on basement-level cast-iron columns fireproofed with plaster. Engineers determined that they were sound, but that no additional load could be added.

The two buildings had clearly gone decades without infrastructure upgrades, but complete plans existed for neither. The basement, Duffy says, contained “**a gaggle of pipes and flues, much of which no one knew whether it was live or not.**” Electrical gear, fire-suppression equipment, and plumbing were all inadequate or worse. Americans With Disabilities Act compliance was scanty, he says, adding that the Department of Justice had a Corcoran file with “dozens of ADA citations.”

The Leo A Daly team began by fitting academic needs to spaces, while working around issues like load-bearing walls and a floor plan in which each gallery opened into the next — fine for a museum but not for classrooms. Then the team sorted through the infrastructure needs and **worked out how to do the necessary construction while keeping classrooms open** for use during the academic year. “We developed a pretty complicated phasing,” Duffy says.



Chronicle photograph by Lawrence Biemiller

A sub-basement that once held coal-fired boilers now houses woodworking and metalworking studios.

for special events.

To make circulation work upstairs, **glass walls were added to divide several of the former galleries into rooms and hallways** without compromising the original design or appearing to be part of it. “Anything we do in here has to be reversible,” says Duffy, involving only the “most minimal touching of the structure.”



Chronicle photograph by Lawrence Biemiller

Partial-height glass walls (left) allow circulation through former museum galleries on the second floor without disturbing classes. Partial ceilings within the newly enclosed spaces support drop-down electric and data connections. A rotunda (right) will remain as a gallery space.

Kim notes that the team tried to keep noisy activities away from quieter ones, so that woodworking and metalworking ended up in the sub-basement; ceramics, lithography, and painting in the basement; and design programs on the second floor. Classrooms, computer labs, and studio and lounge spaces are scattered throughout. One lounge has an imposing medieval fireplace that was built into the 1928 addition; nearby the Salon Doré — an elaborate room created in 1770 for a Parisian mansion — is available

Yet to open are the imposing second-floor spaces that will be used by the National Gallery. These too presented challenges: They had to be designed to the art museum’s exacting temperature-and-humidity standards — but **the original exterior wall was uninsulated.** Insulation and a new interior wall were added, though only the closest inspection reveals that the galleries’ dimensions have changed ever so slightly.

University officials describe the work completed so far as the first phase of renovations. Overhauls of the exterior stonework and of the extensive skylights will happen sometime in the future. In the meantime, visitors can enjoy the Corcoran's renovated spaces and 50-plus new toilets. If they know where to look, **they can even catch a glimpse of the four-story jigsaw puzzle in the light well** from a window in the first-floor student lounge.



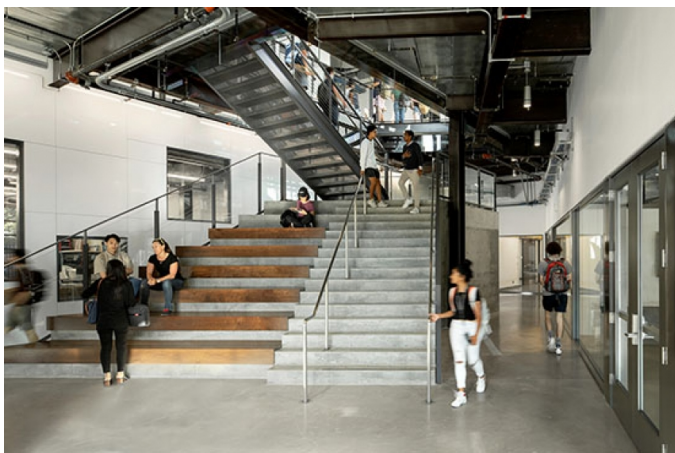
Chronicle photograph by Lawrence Biemiller

## On Campuses and Beyond

**Shenandoah U.** has finished installing 1,337 solar panels on three buildings, and it expects the panels to produce about 675,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity a year. The university anticipates saving \$3.1 million in energy costs over 35 years. [Read more.](#)

"Milk, eggs, fish, peanuts, shellfish, soy, tree nuts, or wheat (plus barley & rye) will never be used in our kitchen": The **U. of North Texas** has opened what it says is only the second campus dining hall in the U.S. that is free from the "Big 8" allergens. [Read more.](#)

At the Society for College and University Planning conference this past summer, the design and construction firm **Mortenson** surveyed attendees and found that, among other things, they think campus social spaces "have the biggest impact on attracting new students." [Survey results are here.](#)



The Iovine and Young Academy, at the **U. of Southern California**, was established in 2013 to "nurture critical thinking and unbridled creativity" at the intersection of arts and design, engineering and computer science, business and venture management, and communication. It now has a new 40,000-square-foot building by Frederick

Fisher Partners, with a central staircase (above) located where two city grids intersect. [Read more.](#)

Teams from 55 colleges have entered the Department of Energy's 2020 **Solar Decathlon Design Challenge**, in which they design structures but don't build them. Meanwhile, 11 teams will build houses to bring to the National Mall next summer. [Read more.](#)

"The new lobby is brighter and more streamlined, and it puts you face-to-face with the museum's prized possession: a 13-ton Egyptian sphinx, the largest of the stone beasts owned by an American museum": The **U. of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology** shows off its renovations. [Read more](#)



Wayne State U.

**Wayne State U.** has completed an 841-bed apartment complex as part of a partnership with the housing developer Corvias, which will manage all of the university's housing. The new facility's retail space includes 1000 Degrees Pizza, Uncle Joe's Chicken Fingers, Beyond Juice, Tubby's Sub Shop, Just Baked Cupcakes, Leo's Coney Island, Warriors Pharmacy, and a 7-Eleven "that doesn't sell alcohol or tobacco." [Read more.](#)

In Alberta, the **U. of Lethbridge** opened a 413,000-square-foot cross-disciplinary Science Commons. Architects for the project were KPMB and Stantec. Sustainability features include a winter garden on the south face that alone has "12 modes of operation." [Read more.](#)

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Chronicle photograph by Lawrence Biemiller  
Not long before the old Corcoran Gallery closed, in 2014, staff members assembled many of its best-known pieces in a 19th-century-style exhibit in a gallery off the atrium. At left is Samuel F.B. Morse's 1822 painting "The House of Representatives," and at right, Rembrandt Peale's "Washington Before Yorktown," from 1824.

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