

# DePaul University's new theater building breaks from routine

By **Blair Kamin**

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**F**or decades now, new buildings at [DePaul University](#) have seemed to be performing acts of architectural penance.

Invariably faced in brick and trimmed in stone or some imitation of it, these buildings politely fit their leafy Lincoln Park environs, but aspired to little else. It was as though DePaul, the nation's largest Catholic university, was repenting for the sins it committed during the 1960s, when it erected such fortresses of Brutalist concrete as the Arthur J. Schmitt Academic Center.

The new DePaul Theatre School, which was dedicated Thursday and anchors the southwest corner of Fullerton and Racine avenues, represents a worthy break from this run of architectural meekness.

As a conservatory that prepares students for careers in the theater, the \$73 million building houses a 250-seat thrust-stage theater, a 120-seat black box theater and an abundance of training rooms where aspiring theater types already are learning how to act, dance, sew costumes, compose soundscapes, design lighting and build sets.

But it would be wrong to say that the building merely shelters these activities. Its principal strength is that it showcases them, transforming the design into a kind of performance art, one notably free of such theater-design cliches as blazing marquees or the masks of tragedy and comedy.

It is, by and large, a compelling performance, orchestrated by the building's chief architect, Cesar Pelli, and his associate, Mitchell Hirsch, of the New Haven, Conn., firm Pelli Clarke Pelli. Along with the project's local architects, the Chicago office of Cannon Design, Pelli has turned what might have been a massive, city-deadening box into a boldly sculpted landmark that has charmed students — at least the ones I talked to.

Compared with the school's former home, a beaten-down converted Catholic school at 2135 N. Kenmore Ave., the five-story, mostly steel-framed building is a Taj Mahal. The students praised everything from its soundproofing — the pounding of scene-shop hammers no longer disrupts rehearsals — to the drop-dead, panoramic skyline view offered by its main conference room. When that room is empty, one student divulged, she uses it as a mellow-out space where she can "get into character."

Pelli, whose previous Chicago credits include an exuberant, mast-supported gym at the University of Chicago and a restrained office building at 181 W. Madison St. that is an homage to Eliel Saarinen's second-prize entry in the 1922 Tribune Tower competition, was challenged by the need to cram the theater school's

myriad uses onto a rectangular site where planning regulations restricted the building's height to less than 90 feet.

His solution plays a clever game of recession and projection, sculpting the building's mass as though it were a piece of clay.

At the crucial Racine-Fullerton corner, for example, the black box theater juts outward like an oversized desktop computer, perhaps too bluntly. Whatever one thinks of it, the gesture boldly announces DePaul's presence to those approaching from the west and offers a 21st century answer to the graceful, twin-towered St. Vincent de Paul Church, an 1897 Romanesque Revival gem at DePaul's southern edge. On the ground floor, recessed glass walls accentuate the black box's outward thrust and open the corner to an inviting plaza.

The bold stroke grew from a daring decision to place the black box theater on the fourth floor, where it is reachable by elevators, rather than the ground floor, where it would have consumed too much space. Such tight fits between form and function are evident throughout.

In another step that skillfully breaks up the building's mass, a glass-sheathed vertical shaft in the middle of the Racine facade presents a veiled peek at students traversing an articulated steel stair painted a lovely Kodak yellow. Such transparency, which also reveals the ground-floor student lobby and the various scenery shops (complete with welders and flying sparks), has been a hit with passers-by. They seem captivated by the celebration of backstage activities and the way it puts these things, typically shoved out of view, onto a public stage.

Details enrich and enliven the exterior, dispelling the impression that the big white building exhibits a bureaucratic, Pennsylvania Avenue stodginess. They include a precisely honed facade of white Turkish limestone, which is said to be more durable than Indiana limestone. Vertical slit windows are deliberately arranged in an idiosyncratic pattern rather than a conventional grid, reflecting the energy inside.

"They like the idea of a dynamic, controlled chaos," Pelli said of DePaul.

John Culbert, the school's thoughtful dean, said the Pelli firm won the job because it conceived of the building as a way to promote interaction within the theater school's cadre of about 300 undergraduate students, 36 graduate students, 27 full-time faculty and 70 part-time faculty.

Colleges and universities are always trying to arrange such serendipitous meetings, but this attempt might work because the various training rooms are mixed, not segregated by function. The architects have also created plenty of nooks for socializing, including a "skylight lounge," topped by three circular skylights, where, as Hirsch puts it, students might "sleep on a couch" after an all-nighter or two.

There's more playfulness in a small, second-floor pedestrian bridge that spans a first-floor corridor. It's actually a drawbridge that parts in the middle, allowing tall scenery to pass from the paint shop to the thrust-stage theater.

The two intimate theaters are industrial-strength, two-story spaces with small balconies and spatial drama. When its sequined curtain is open, the black box offers fine views of an old warehouse (now a U-Haul moving storage facility) across Fullerton. The thrust stage, with its raked, C-shaped seating bowl, promises to draw audiences into the instant community that forms when strangers watch a play.

Hidden to the eye are the structural heroics that make these spaces possible: 10-foot-deep steel trusses span nearly 80 feet over the column-free thrust stage, transferring loads from the floors above to the thick concrete walls around the stage. With the height cap severely limiting the space typically available for ducts and pipes, computer-aided design was used to precisely thread the mechanical equipment through openings in the steel beams.

"We called it the Swiss watch," said Carol Post, a principal at the Chicago office of Thornton Tomasetti, the building's structural engineer.

Architecture, like theater, can succeed only with such teamwork. While the DePaul Theatre School doesn't pack the same conceptual punch as [Rem Koolhaas'](#) edgy McCormick Tribune Campus Center at the Illinois Institute of Technology, it is nonetheless a striking, commodious, neighborhood-friendly building, one that successfully walks the tightrope between creating a campus icon and making a sense of place.

That's what can happen when universities break free from aesthetic lockstep.

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