PLANNING STORY

Stokes Hall at Boston College
Planning a New Home for Humanities
by David M. Owens

The team designed and constructed a new humanities building that creates a sense of ‘there’ that can be found nowhere else.

PROJECT STATEMENT

In 2008, during a time of national financial turmoil and uncertainty, Boston College (BC) began to realize its historic Middle Campus master plan, beginning with the development of Stokes Hall, a new humanities building (figure 1). Such confident support for the study of the humanities was especially significant during a time when many institutions would have questioned this investment and dismissed its importance. The decision to build underscored BC’s commitment to its Jesuit mission: to give students the richest possible humanities-based education, one that serves as the foundation for the development of generous, thoughtful, and inquisitive community members. David Quigley, dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, summarized the building’s goals best. He stated: “Stokes Hall embodies Boston College’s enduring commitment to the liberal arts, which is a cornerstone of Jesuit education and the heart of our identity. Humanities in particular form the core of our undergraduate requirements, which enables us to integrate the academic, social, and spiritual development of our students as they study here. This building is intentionally designed to support that liberal arts commitment and to foster student formation through enhanced student-faculty interaction.”

Situated on the undulating terrain of Chestnut Hill, Boston College is divided between Lower, Middle, and Upper Campus plateaus. Stokes Hall is located on the Middle Campus, the university’s original plateau identifiable by its Collegiate Gothic design and traditional campus quadrangles. This plateau supports the majority of the academic buildings. The Middle Campus also forms the aesthetic identity at the core of the school. The project team developed Stokes Hall in response to the long-term goals of the master plan specific to the Middle Campus plateau. The Lower Campus supports dining, dormitories, and administration buildings in a more modern architectural style, and the Upper Campus is home to underclassmen dormitories.

The university leadership, most notably the president, demonstrated a strong conviction in early planning discussions for Stokes Hall that matching or exceeding the quality of the surrounding campus context was paramount to the new facility’s success (figure 2). The size of the site was limited, and land on the Middle Campus, as a general...
resource, is finite. Any decisions made for this site, including the building program, needed to be balanced between the building's capacity, its potential impact on any future development, and the overall image of the BC community.

Housing the humanities program or a new food service facility were the two uses originally considered for the site. While the program needs of the two uses differed widely, the general design parameters and planning goals remained the same: to fulfill the university’s mission with great efficiency, express its identity with clarity, and provide the level of building performance and efficiency expected. The project was made possible through fund-raising and a generous gift by university trustee Patrick T. Stokes ’64 and his wife Anna-Kristin “Aja” Stokes, P’91, ’94, ’97. All project teams worked extremely closely together and communicated with university leadership to successfully keep the project under the construction budget of $62 million.

Early planning and program explorations were extremely informative. A primary design driver was the school’s commitment to a form of the Collegiate Gothic aesthetic unique to Boston College. However, this design goal needed to be met without sacrificing other building efficiencies. The team began work by first delving into the school's own story and history as a basis for understanding how this style would inform the planning process.

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**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

When Boston College relocated from Boston’s South End to the village of Chestnut Hill in the early 1900s, Collegiate Gothic was just evolving as the style of choice on American campuses as a response to the architectural styles of Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom. These schools were hailed as the iconic architectural models of what hallowed places of disciplined higher learning were supposed to look and feel like. In 1909, a competition for the Boston College master plan was announced, and the Boston firm of Maginnis & Walsh was awarded the commission. Maginnis responded to the current American enthusiasm for the Collegiate Gothic style with his own interpretation, one that while still English in attitude was more Ecclesiastical and highly appropriate in supporting BC’s Jesuit mission. This style represented a clear synergy between the heritage of Oxford and Cambridge (connotations of excellence in education) and the tradition of the Gothic style as a predominantly religious architectural form. Proportions are more vertical in this interpretation, reflecting a style aligned with pre-Reformation English architecture (figure 3).

Figure 2 Aerial View of Stokes North and South in the Middle Campus Context

When the question of style was first posed in early design meetings for Stokes Hall, the university mission and unifying Collegiate Gothic Middle Campus context emerged
as keystones for planning. The project team examined the aesthetics and construction techniques of the existing campus buildings and the history and stories behind these forms as well as how they have evolved over time and how they speak to each other and are utilized today. Efforts were aimed at reinforcing the bonds of campus community and planning for opportunities for collaboration and social interaction through the building program and form. It was also important to plan for pedestrian pathways and accessible outdoor spaces (figure 4).

The goals for the building design and program served as a strong metaphor for the Jesuit mission of shared knowledge and positive social interaction in the service of community. Executive leadership felt strongly that to design in a style other than Collegiate Gothic would do a disservice to the university’s Middle Campus history and the goal of creating community connections and a sense of historic place through familiar, iconic built forms. Therefore, Stokes Hall was conceived as a freestanding object, yet one tightly woven into the fabric and context of the Middle Campus.

**DESIGN CONCEPT AND PLANNING SOLUTIONS**

At 183,000 square feet, Stokes Hall is the largest academic building constructed on campus since Gasson Hall in 1913. The building site is situated along the southwest corner of the Middle Campus in an area fondly known as the “Dustbowl” because of its long history as the site of the former football

Figure 4 View to McNeil Family Garden through Connecting Arcade

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Figure 3 Early Elevation Study
field. It is now a highly trafficked path for student travel that links the Lower, Middle, and Upper Campus plateaus. As the team studied the building capacity of the site, it considered a number of campuswide design issues as part of the evolving Middle Campus master plan. The design principles gleaned from this study as well as the constraints and opportunities found were later integrated into project planning. The team explored issues of massing and scale, campus axes, interrelation of open spaces, student and service circulation, site topography, and sustainability and methods of construction in addition to program and building style.

As a result of this exploration a number of choices were made. Stokes Hall was built to appear as two separate buildings (figure 5). If formed as a single freestanding structure, as would have been required by its alternate use as a food service building, the large mass would have dominated all other forms on campus, disrupting the Middle Campus hierarchy. Each wing (North and South) is of a size and shape similar to the other buildings around it. In keeping with its context, the wings are placed at 90 degrees to each other to form an “L” shape and are linked by a second-floor “bridge” connector. The building is designed along an existing campus axis that connects to the college’s original historic quadrangle, creating direct sight lines and pedestrian paths to important campus markers and resources such as the O’Neill Library Plaza and Gasson Hall.

The North Wing is home to the Philosophy and Theology Departments as well as BC’s combination of these two academic disciplines and a community service component: the Pulse Program. The South Wing houses the First-Year Experience Program, the Academic Advising Center, the Arts & Sciences Honors Program, and the Classics, History, and English Departments. At the heart of the project is Stokes Commons. This two-story sun-lit gathering and café space is poised between both wings adjacent to the McNeil Family Garden (figure 6). Just off Stokes Commons is an 85-seat auditorium classroom available for lectures during the day and performances during evenings and weekends.

The choices of site and massing form a new assemblage of well-defined open spaces or “outdoor rooms,” each with their own differing character. The treatment of building mass and fenestration responds to the spaces overlooked. An internal campus quadrangle is shaped to the east. Here, the defining walls of the South and North Wings are of a more

Figure 5 View of Stokes Hall from College Road

Figure 6 Typical Public Circulation Dwelling Space
formal and ornate design, reflecting the importance of the site. To the west along College Road sits the outdoor terraced natural amphitheater (figure 7). Building forms on this side were planned on a smaller scale to respect the dimensions of the adjacent residential neighborhood. The central McNeil Family Garden is situated between the two wings and serves as a setting for celebrations and impromptu gatherings. The second-floor connecting bridge between the two wings hovers above the McNeil Family Garden, and a ground-level arcade below the bridge acts as a gateway into the quiet, smaller court.

Vertically proportioned windows in the Gothic tradition help to focus exterior views while bringing in ample natural light. The building’s massing was planned to allow occupants at most vantage points throughout the facility to look outside and experience a view that either reflects back on the building itself or on another Gothic form on campus, creating a constant reminder of community and place (figure 8).

Successful planning in an academic setting is not possible without effective decision making and a commitment of time from the project team and university leadership. An ideal planning process is one in which the design team provides thoughtful, viable options and opportunities for meeting short-term needs as well as long-term goals. A university’s key project stakeholders then have the tools and knowledge needed to make the best possible decisions to ensure longevity, cost containment, and positive visibility for their institution. Boston College leadership was intimately involved in all decisions and approached even the interior design choices (lights, color palette, circulation) with a very singular vision to ensure that the overall effect blended with the historic, enduring context of the campus. Classic, clean, and simple finishes ensure that the interior aesthetic will not age into obsolescence (figures 9 and 10).

**REINFORCING COMMUNITY THROUGH CONSTRUCTION METHODOLOGY**

As the design and planning progressed, it became more evident that a crucial component of the Boston College Middle Campus master plan was the creation of community and sense of place. While a difficult, if not impossible, programmatic element to measure and quantify, community must still be planned for and included in the process. For the project team and key stakeholders, both the genuineness of the Collegiate Gothic design and the authenticity of the construction methodology were central in furthering the goal of strengthening community. These elements provided helpful, if not wide, targets to ensure that the construction process itself reflected the importance of community. Unparalleled craftsmanship, clear composition, and longevity of the built form were all necessary factors in successfully achieving this goal of the overarching master plan.

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**Figure 7 Terraced Amphitheater West Lawn**

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**Figure 8 Stokes North and South Overlooking Campus Green**

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Within the stringent guidelines of the Gothic style, the design aesthetics and construction process are intertwined. The talent of the individual craftsman is an important component in the building’s authorship. With most modern construction methods, the laborer’s role is limited, and an honest reliance on the strength of materials is secondary to technology. In a modern process, building components are often factory made, pre-fabricated and assembled in the field, and hung as pre-cast panels on a structural frame. Technology can sometimes eclipse the importance of an individual laborer's contribution to the building’s design and construction success.

In a Collegiate Gothic building, however, the construction methodology becomes an essential element in the story of how a facility contributes to building a strong sense of community. The exterior stone walls of Stokes Hall, in accordance with traditional Gothic construction methodology, are self-supporting. The full weight of the wall is carried continuously from its base to its top—there are no relieving angles that are liable to corrode and collapse. Similar to other Gothic buildings, its proportion of wall to window openings and its overall composition are tied directly to the strength and durability of the materials and the skill of the builder (figure 11). The process celebrates each individual’s contribution of time and skill in carving and laying each stone, ensuring that every component contributes strength and beauty to the overall result.

Longevity is also an important ingredient in successful design and planning. It is an issue of sustainability as well as aesthetics. Stokes Hall has been designed and constructed to facilitate active use well beyond the next century. The approach to layout, with wide structural bays and high floor-to-floor dimensions, provides flexibility for future program adjustments. Through careful planning and solid construction, Stokes Hall will stand up to the test of time.

**PLANNING CHALLENGES**

The process of learning, planning, and adjusting to the situation at hand occurred throughout the duration of the Stokes Hall project. The methodologies that were so useful in the early stages of the project in evaluating and understanding the site’s potential and planning challenges were just as important at the end. Indeed, while there was less of a need to build consensus among team members during the construction phase, ensuring the quality of the
materials and workmanship throughout the project time line required strict attention to design intent.

The project team chose individual granite blocks at the quarry by cutting into each stone to judge it for color and texture. The sourcing of the granite was also complex. The team worked with several local New England quarries to ensure that the granite was the right character for BC’s campus context. A quarry in Maine was finally located that could supply the right amount and quality of stone needed to complete the building. Halfway through construction, a land dispute arose between the quarry owner and a neighbor, temporarily halting excavation and delivery of the stone.

This delay necessitated reevaluation of the project schedule and adjustments to meet deadlines. This lesson served as a reminder that the planning and design process does not end with the final drawing set; it continues well past the day of completion through to post-occupancy evaluations and ongoing long-term relationships (figure 12). There should be as many resources in place during construction administration as there are during the design phase, including time committed by senior architecture staff and university administration to address and move past unforeseen challenges.

In addition, the architecture and construction project teams worked with college administrators to ensure that construction activities caused minimal disruption to the learning environment and campus experience. Noise vibration and mitigation techniques were implemented to reduce disruption to surrounding buildings, and construction was phased to support increased progress during off-hours and campus breaks.

The result underscores the rigor of a planning process that considers the importance of every detail. The parts and pieces, materials and shapes, that comprise Stokes Hall are all gleaned from the campus context. The quality of all materials is central to the integrity of the design, and
ensuring that quality consumed a great deal of the planning time. The design and construction process celebrates the role of the artisan and the capacity of the human hand to help shape a positive outcome. Designing and building successfully in the Collegiate Gothic style requires a focus on planning for community by involving a community of university leadership, project team members, and skilled laborers; this fact relates nicely to the function of Stokes Hall in the service of the study of the humanities.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS: REALIZING THE VISION AND BUILDING ON A LEGACY**

Choosing to undertake the design of a new facility in the Collegiate Gothic style on a historic campus is not something that can be closely echoed at all academic institutions. While building in the Gothic style may not be applicable on all campuses, a planning process that includes focus on the university mission, support from key stakeholders, strategies to overcome inevitable project challenges, and goals focused on creating community may be relevant. When planning goals are rooted in a university’s mission and its existing campus context, a team must work hard to realize a facility that is exclusive to that site. Certainly, all the components and principles of Gothic design can and have been imagined on campuses and even in commercial architecture across the United States. However, to pick up the specific pieces of Stokes Hall and transfer them to another institution or location would do a disservice to that institution’s mission and campus, denying the uniqueness of that place and community. In the case of Stokes Hall, the team designed and constructed a new humanities building that creates a sense of “there” that can be found nowhere else. Patrick Keating, executive vice president, observes that “Stokes Hall provides the ideal facility to enhance the educational and formational experiences of our students in a way that honors our institutional commitment to the liberal arts and to student formation. It is an exciting time for the university” (figure 13).

On a basic level, all outstanding buildings serve their users well. They are reliable with strong bones and adaptable spaces. They are highly durable and efficient in their use of resources. They are beautiful, and they convey something important about their users. The great university building, however, should do more. It needs to articulate the academic values of the college. It should add a strong positive voice to the intellectual legacy and culture of the institution. Its built forms should express the university’s core mission.

When sited in a place of exceptional historic beauty, such as Boston College, a building should speak to its culture and heritage with confidence and conviction. Planning efforts should aim to create successful building spaces (inside and out) that facilitate a deep personal connection to place. A successful academic building should realize its ability to engage in a rich and thoughtful dialogue with its surroundings. It should play an important role in influencing the highest standards for future buildings and students alike.

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**Figure 13 Twilight on College Road—Stokes Hall West Façade**
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

DAVID M. OWENS, AIA, principal of Tsoi/Kobus & Associates, has been with the firm since its inception. He has been responsible for a variety of projects from initial programming through design and construction. A thoughtful architect and creative designer, he has designed many of TK&A's award-winning buildings. He possesses the design insight and technical capabilities required to design complex building types. His current design work incorporates 3-D Studio, Revit, and other similar computer design applications.