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Plan opens Cleveland State University campus to city

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Cleveland State University has been saddled for decades with a harsh, defensive, inward-turning campus that treats the city like hostile territory. Now it's about to make its biggest stride yet toward openness, transparency and architectural distinction.

A proposed new \$50 million student center, designed by New York architect Charles Gwathmey, should give Cleveland State something it has never had - a strong, assertive, memorable building open to the city and campus on all sides.

It's too soon to give the project a total thumbs-up because the plans are only at the schematic stage, or about one-third finished. Major issues are still unresolved, including the building's interiors, the surrounding landscaping, the final choice of materials and the all-important fine details that will be resolved as the design evolves.

But Gwathmey, a founding partner of the venerable firm of Gwathmey Siegel & Associates, is off to a strong start. His design strikes a balance between transparency, spatial flow and massive, sculptural form.

On Thursday and Friday, respectively, Cleveland's Design Review Committee and City Planning Commission approved the concept and also voted in favor of letting Cleveland State demolish its existing, five-story University Center to make way for Gwathmey's building.

The four-story, 120,000-square-foot student center, scheduled for construction from 2008 to 2010, will be an assemblage of distinct, interlocking shapes that come together in a compact, powerful mass at the important corner of Euclid Avenue and East 21st Street.

It will house student organizations and services, a new campus bookstore, a variety of eateries, plus a 6,000-square-foot ballroom - the largest single assembly space on campus.

Despite the almost rugged, sculptural look of the design, the building will be sliced open on every side with expansive areas of glass that will make interiors visible from outside by day, and turn the structure into a beacon at night.

One weakness is that the building's north facade, despite recent revisions by the architect, has a flatness and severity that makes it weaker than the other sides. Gwathmey has to make the north facade, which will face a major campus plaza, as important as the Euclid facade.

But for now, on paper at least, the building looks like it will give the university something it very much needs - a vibrant new heart along the city's once and future main street.

Despite its many strengths, some Clevelanders probably will object that the project, intended to be a new civic icon, isn't flashy enough to compete with headline-grabbing designs by Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind and other star architects.

Others will say Cleveland State shouldn't demolish the existing University Center. Some local architects consider the older building, designed by former Cleveland architect Don Hisaka and built in 1974, a classic of its time.

CSU wants

to start anew

The university says renovating the older building wouldn't save money and makes no physical sense in terms of the campus layout. I'd argue, in addition, that Gwathmey's design is a strong example of his work and a serious response to the challenge of adding a building to a campus filled with hulking classroom blocks built largely in the 1970s in the aptly named Brutalist style.

Gwathmey's design is far more sophisticated than Hisaka's building, which has an awful entry shaped like a five-story, V-shaped canyon of concrete, and a five-story glass atrium that feels gloomy and closed off from surrounding plazas.

Gwathmey's building will look and feel more connected to Euclid and the campus plazas that flank it to the north and east. It will have dramatic sight lines that cut through the entire interior from front to back.

That said, Gwathmey is neither an aggressive innovator, like Gehry and Libeskind, nor a postmodernist who quotes historical styles from the past, like Michael Graves or Robert A.M. Stern.

Gwathmey's basic architectural language - freestanding columns, ribbon windows, flat roofs - comes straight out of the Bauhaus or the architecture of Le Corbusier. But Gwathmey has extended this basic language, adding a richness, flexibility and subtlety that are identifiably his own. His best work is comparable to that of Richard Meier, architect of the Getty Center in Los Angeles, who also has spent his entire career working with the classic elements of Modernism.

Gwathmey's expansion of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, for example, is a restrained vertical slab of concrete that acts as a quiet and subtle foil to Frank Lloyd Wright's famous spiral ramp.

In Ohio, Gwathmey recently designed a vibrant renovation of Tangeman University Center at the University of Cincinnati by gutting a neo-Georgian campus center and turning the interior into a series of soaring, white, skylighted spaces. He also designed the gemlike McDonough Museum of Art at Youngstown State University and the recent expansion of the Akron-Summit County Public Library.

Stack up

the parts

In renderings, Gwathmey's Cleveland State building resembles a collection of discrete parts stacked together like child's blocks. In a phone interview last week, he said he hopes the forms invite exploration.

"There's a tremendous amount of animation in this building, which makes it a lot more socially integrated and more interesting for the students to be in," he said.

A stair tower at the corner of Euclid Avenue and East 21st Street takes the shape of a giant cylinder. A ballroom and conference area is enclosed in a large, outward-tilting shape capped with a roof that resembles part of a roll-top desk.

Within these bulky shapes, Gwathmey carved vast, glassy openings as if he were a sculptor chiseling a large block of wood to achieve a precise balance between solids and hollows. The design is a nuanced and fluent interpretation of Modernism, filled with wit and dynamism.

As Cleveland State grows in the future, it will have additional opportunities to build something more aggressively contemporary, and it most definitely should.

Gwathmey's building, in the meantime, marks a definite upswing in the university's architectural patronage. With strong follow-through on the rest of the design, the building will be an excellent addition to the university and the city.

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