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BEHIND THE COVER

"When we asked designers to tackle the impromptu office, we had no idea what their final concepts would be. So for the cover we approached the husband-and-wife team Yentus & Boer, says Ungai Manguthoben, Metropolis's art director. "As designers for Pappas and Knopf, Helen Yentus and Jason Boer are used to visualizing abstract ideas. They came up with several clever solutions for us. One was inspired by the daughter, Sade, jumping into a cardboard box. The final cover shows Helen and Jason themselves in different work poses. We felt it was a great way to illustrate the loose, conceptual feel of our cover story on ad-hoc work spaces."



Stephen Zucko

URBAN INTERVENTION

The Syracuse Center of Excellence helps lay the foundation for the revitalization of a struggling Rust Belt city. **62** / *



MARKET RESEARCH

In retail design, tight budgets can be curiously liberating, inspiring innovation and creativity.

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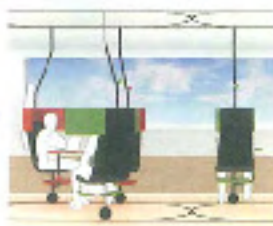


Martin C. Pedersen

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Designers envision new solutions for the impromptu office.

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The ramped green roof of the Syracuse Center of Excellence responds to the crisscross of nearby highways. With an anticipated LEED Platinum rating, the building is a research center for indoor environmental building systems.



by
**Stephen
Zacks**

The Syracuse Center
of Excellence helps
lay the foundation for
the revitalization of a
struggling Rust Belt city.

Photos by
**Magda
Biernat**

URBAN INTERVENTION

The recently completed Syracuse Center of Excellence, designed by the former Harvard Graduate School of Design dean Toshiko Mori with the local firm Ashley McGraw Architects, is located at the confluence of two elevated highways trampling through the center of Syracuse, New York. The building's double-height ground floor pivots from a five-story structure and swerves around onto a ramped green roof like a verdant freeway interchange.

From the highway, the CoE stands out as a visual landmark in a fairly blighted landscape. Syracuse suffers from the depopulation and deindustrialization that has been symptomatic of declining American cities since the 1970s, especially manufacturing centers in the Rust Belt. The project is part of a series of initiatives led by Syracuse University's architecture dean, Mark Robbins, to apply the best ideas currently available to spur revitalization.

From the street, the transparency of the building's facade uncannily bares the movements of the people inside, who appear like toy figures in a preschooler's parking-garage play set. Inside, the offices are at the same level as the freeway, giving workers a hypnotic view of the cars and trucks rattling by. "They were very aware that this was a visible place in the city, and they wanted to make a place that the public would respond to and recognize," says Mori's project architect, Josh Uhl. "Like a new icon for renewal," Mori adds, "but it's symbolic that in Syracuse it's about energy and environment. It will be the future."

Mori's building is part of a series of initiatives led by the Syracuse University architecture dean, Mark Robbins, to apply the best ideas available to spur revitalization.

Paid for by state grants along with local universities and corporate sponsors, the \$11 million project combines educational thinking with an urban theory for Syracuse. Its main purpose is to test human responses to indoor air quality for Syracuse University's engineering school (in collaboration with Carrier, the air conditioning manufacturer formerly based in the city). There are laboratories on each floor, and a wing for research on advanced biofuels produced from woody biomass. The facade also has a small test bay where experimental building-envelope systems can be plugged in.



Below: A lounge outside the third-floor offices features Haworth couches and a mix of green and gray carpet tiles by Interface FLOOR. The overhead fluorescent lighting employs dimmable ballasts and sensors that adjust to daylight levels. The radiant-heating and -cooling ceiling panels are manufactured by Twa.



There's space for Syracuse University's planned \$4.3 billion intermodal-transportation center (right), now in design development, by Erdy McHenry Architecture.



Left: A laboratory overlooks an interstitial space beneath the Carrier Total Indoor Environmental Quality Lab. Each set of pipes links to a personal environmental unit that heats and cools the cubicle above it.

Above: The third-floor glass corridor (which includes a lounge area furnished with Haworth chairs) is not fully temperature controlled since it has no full-time occupants.

Rendering: 01in/02out/03
Syracuse University

Right: A patch of green on the brown-field site indicates how the building fits into a plan connecting the university to downtown Syracuse.



The building deploys a multitude of environmental systems and architectural strategies to reduce energy use, increase comfort, and monitor its own performance.

It's currently occupied by the Center for Architecture Science and Ecology's dynamic solar facade, developed by Anna Dyson, which uses an array of pyramidal windows to track sunlight and magnify it onto photovoltaic cells.

The building itself deploys a multitude of environmental systems and architectural strategies to reduce energy use, increase comfort, and monitor its own performance. Radiant ceiling panels flowing with hot or cold water—not widely used in North America but commercially available in Europe—keep the temperature comfortable. Ed Bogucz, the CoE's director, says, "There are some elements of the building that for me are simply mysterious and give me this profound intellectual and spiritual joy, and the radiant ceiling is one of them. There's this very gentle air fall, a curtain of air. It's a different sensation. It creates an environment that is very pleasing and also mysterious, because they're really forces of nature at work."

Other technologies, such as Carrier's geothermal pumps and heat exchangers, photovoltaic panels, underfloor displacement ventilation, rainwater recycling, and automatic shading and lighting systems, are integrated with more traditional features like solar orientation, insulation, and material choices. Matthias Schuler, of Transsolar, Morr's colleague at Harvard, helped model the environmental engineering.

It's all excellent as ecological architecture, but it would be perfectly ordinary as urbanism if it were an isolated project. What's exceptional is the extent to which the building anchors a larger vision for the city and the neighborhood, as put forth by Robbins, who led the architect-selection process. As soon as the highway-interchange lot was chosen—a brownfield that once had a Smith Corona typewriter factory on it—the CoE became absorbed in rhizomatic urban strategies connecting it to other initiatives. "It's thinking on multiple fronts," Robbins says. "It's not like green is going to be the saving grace, and it's a little bit simplistic to think that either

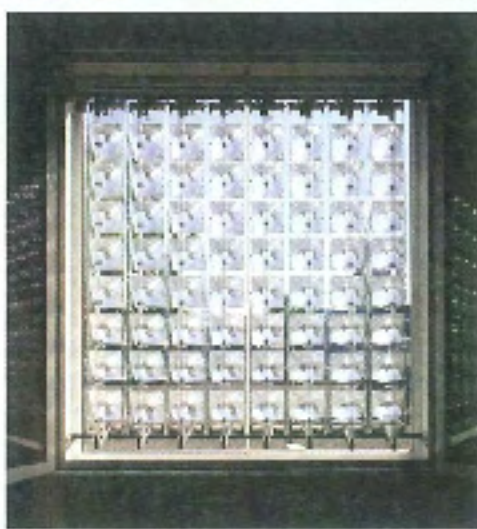
ACTIVE RESEARCH

A bay inside the laboratory wing tests future building-envelope and window systems. Developed by Anne Dyson of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the Integrated Concentrating Solar Facade System—installed by HeliOptix and Island External

Fabricators—produces electricity with a PV cell, captures the remaining solar energy for domestic hot-water and space heating, blocks solar heat gain, and allows daylight to filter through, reducing the need for artificial light.



The green roof is just one of the building's many environmental features. The CoE calls the structure a "living laboratory."



Left: A view of the Solar Facade System from inside the building.

"One needs to work simultaneously on the schools, housing, basic infrastructure, culture, and arts," Robbins says. "It always requires multiple linked things to drive things forward."



a single building or a single constellation of businesses will single-handedly change the city. One needs to work simultaneously on the schools, housing, basic infrastructure, culture, and arts. It always requires multiple linked things to drive things forward."

A New York native and part of the generation

of architecture graduates who passed through Peter Eisenman's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies and became absorbed in the downtown scene of the early 1980s, Robbins is an idiosyncratic figure in the field of architecture. He is a practicing artist and an energetic freethinker who intuitively collects the best



ideas from everywhere and applies them as new opportunities present themselves. Formerly the curator of architecture at the Wexner Center, in Columbus, Ohio, and the onetime design director at the National Endowment for the Arts, he has taken lessons from the rebirths of Columbus and New York and,

URBAN CONTEXT

The center, which is adjacent to a freeway interchange and an exit ramp, uses its location to measure the highway's effect on indoor air quality. The building is part of a series of initiatives that link the Syracuse University campus to downtown (to the left).



Mark Robbins, dean of the architecture school in the living room of his renovated Beaux Arts loft in downtown Syracuse

since his 2004 appointment as dean, applied them in Syracuse on a different magnitude.

One of his strategies has been to aggressively position Syracuse University as the setting for creative collaborations with some of the smartest people in the regional design scene, including prominent alumni. He uses the promise of work as an incentive to get high-profile studio instructors and applies their ingenuity to projects he initiates himself. Among his collaborators are New York architects—Mori, Rick Cook, Richard Gluckman, Suzannah Drake, Jared Della Valle—and emerging and established Philadelphia firms like Onion Flats and Olin. Robbins calls it “opportunistic urbanism”: recognizing existing assets and using them to the greatest advantage. “It’s looking at the ways in which more strategic interventions can begin to drive larger moves within cities. I don’t know that any one of the strategies in and of themselves is unique or hasn’t been done elsewhere. It’s trying to get them all to happen in one place and to use a city that’s as small as Syracuse as a test bed for these things.”

In a great stroke of luck, the same year that Robbins landed in Syracuse, Nancy Cantor became the university’s chancellor. Cantor has advocated a pragmatic educational theory that

Richard Gluckman’s 2005 conversion of the Warehouse into university classrooms, studios, offices, and a gallery has brought student life downtown.



CONNECTIVE CORRIDOR

Below: Starting construction next spring, Olin and Barton & Leguicide’s redesign of Ferman Park (two blocks south of the center) features planted mounds, café seating, and a bike bodega.



she calls “scholarship in action.” It bridges the gap between academia and society through community engagement and applied research. With her support, Robbins has also been able to use the architecture school to amplify the impact of new investments by the university. “There’s a real multiplicative effect of combining these substantive areas—environmental sustainability, green tech, art and design, education, and entrepreneurship,” Cantor says. “Those all positively influence each other. Projects overlap, neighborhoods overlap, and there’s a chance for a much bigger impact.”

Cantor even created a new title for Robbins: senior adviser on architecture and urban initiatives. Together, these initiatives begin to add up to something significant on the scale of a small-to-medium-size city. When he arrived

“I don’t know that any one of the strategies is unique or hasn’t been tried elsewhere,” Robbins says. “It’s trying to get them all to happen in one place.”

in 2004, Robbins set an example by buying a Beaux Arts-revival building downtown and renovating it into a modern loft with gigantic arched windows, a vaulted ceiling, and a large living room where he hosts events for the school. The architecture school needed to rehabilitate its classrooms and studios, so in 2006 he found an empty warehouse downtown and hired Gluckman, a Syracuse alum, to adapt it into a temporary industrial-modern home for

Mark Robbins portrait, courtesy Stewart Cairns; rendering, Olin/courtesy Syracuse University



The three winning projects of Syracuse University's 2008 From the Ground Up green-home design competition, by ARO and Della Valle Bernheimer; Onion Flats (left); and Cook + Fox (above), were recently completed in the Near Westside.



the school. It's now a permanent building for the College of Visual and Performing Arts and the School of Architecture. That year he also created Upstate, a real estate-development and urban-research nonprofit hosted by the architecture school. It focuses on Rust Belt cities so the students can become actively involved in researching and building in Syracuse.

Then, in 2008, Robbins partnered Upstate with a local community developer, Home Headquarters, to organize a green-home design competition, From the Ground Up. Three passive-energy infill projects, by Cook + Fox with Terrapin Bright Green; ARO with Della Valle Bernheimer; and Onion Flats, were selected as the winners. The homes were recently completed in the Near Westside, a poor neighborhood where Upstate is also updating several

warehouses in conjunction with local galleries and businesses to create a live/work arts district. "Everything we do is about pushing this idea that design innovation and experimentation is able to leverage positive change in these cities," says Joe Sisko, assistant director of Upstate and a graduate of the Syracuse master's program. "That's kind of our shtick—that design can matter. Design and experimentation can produce an effect that changes things, not just aesthetically but socially and economically and politically."

The real core of the entire series of urban interventions, though, is an extensive urban-design and streetscape project by Richard Newton, of Ohio, with the local firm Barten & Loguidice. In 2006, Robbins organized public discussions to gather ideas. **continued on page 67**

The Connective Corridor in tie-die (above) would link the Syracuse University campus to the Center of Excellence and the arts district of the Near Westside.

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