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More Than Bricks and Mortar

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DEAN'S COLUMN

How we put together bricks and mortar can enliven the intellectual life of an academic department and brighten the educational experience of students.

Architects tell us there is an intimate relationship between the contours and quality of a space and how people inhabit it. This is only too true for the spaces where the SAS faculty teach and study.

As an English professor, I taught for many years in the building that was, until this year, called Bennett Hall. When the helicopter atop Penn's medical center revved up or swarms of leaf blowers assaulted the campus in the fall, I often had to stop talking — or start shouting. The building's walls and windows were poor barriers against the racket of urban life. Over years of deferred maintenance, the structure had become dated and more than a little shabby.

With the renovation and reopening of the new Fisher-Bennett Hall this spring, all of that has changed. We now have a building that is soundproof, bright, technologically sophisticated and versatile. Next to restored or new classrooms and lecture halls, we have added lounges and studies, which allow students to continue the exchange of ideas begun in class. When faculty gather in these community spaces, they often share teaching strategies, confer about students and discuss research — activities crucial to university life.

In transforming the old structure to better support teaching and learning, we have built into Fisher-

Bennett state-of-the-art instructional technology, which has become an integral part of the modern classroom. Some spaces were reconfigured to bring in more light, but we have also taken care to preserve the loveliest old features, like the grand staircase. The refurbished building, home to the English department and music teaching-and-performance spaces, tells everyone how highly the School of Arts and Sciences esteems the humanities. We cherish our links with the past, and we strive to understand our connection with those traditions.

As for the other half of the “arts and sciences,” we have also made progress in raising the caliber of space for science. The Carolyn Lynch Laboratory also opened this spring. It's not the same old biology lab with petri dishes and microscopes. In addition to offering technologically advanced facilities, the Lynch Laboratory features the kind of interdisciplinary workspace essential for research in the life sciences today. Its flexible research modules can be reconfigured to accommodate cross-disciplinary collaborations and can adapt to unseen directions that advancing sciences will take in the future. The second phase of our life-sciences construction project, which will bring together our biology and psychology faculty, will extend that creative approach to space to teaching and learning.

Opening up and bringing light into Fisher-Bennett Hall is the perfect metaphor to capture how the School's mission for teaching and research guides the building of new structures and the refurbishing of old ones. How we put together bricks and mortar can enliven the intellectual life of an academic department and brighten the educational experience of students. You can see the same effect in the other new spaces created this academic year: the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the David B. Weigle Information Commons. Both are inviting places meant to enhance a lively academic community.

English department chair, Jim English, observes that faculty are spending more time in Fisher-Bennett Hall. “Every now and then we pause and just soak up the sunlight and the quiet,” he reports. “The improvement fosters better intellectual community, drawing us together into the building and making us more available to our students.” What more could you ask of a place? We have many challenges ahead in achieving the same kind of transformation of spaces for music, the life sciences and nanoscience, but we know that the effort is worth it. ■

See more about new SAS spaces on pages 18 and 31.