

What Is It About West Hall?

At dusk, in the days around Halloween, the sky above West Hall pulses erratically with migrating crows. The scavengers crowd the skeletal tops of the changed maples and oaks that line 8th Street as well, filling the crisp air with their arguments and waiting, watchfully, perhaps for the red-tailed hawks that have called the building home for the last several years. Three church steeples in downtown Troy reach high enough to pierce the red streaks deepening to indigo over the Hudson, and it's easy, as the night comes on, to stare back at the scaffolding that now shrouds West Hall and imagine that the ghost of a homicidal, 19th Century nurse might wander its hallways, as one old Rensselaer legend warns.

Inside West Hall, at first, it seems almost as creepy as outside. Its floors are a labyrinth of cluttered corridors, idiosyncratic studios, and shadowy, dead-ended offices. There are strange sounds, like the insistent, staccato buzzing of a stairwell light that illuminates a grated, semi-circular window, or the moaning heat pipes, or the relentless gurgling of an aquarium that stands across from a line of photographs (photocopied from a Troy Hospital album compiled in 1893) pasted and captioned haphazardly over geologic maps of the United States and the Finger Lakes region of New York State from the early 1970s. These old photos -- of the Male Surgical Ward, the Chapel, the Laundry, the Female Medical Ward, the Kitchen, the Old Ladies Ward, and others -- show parquet floors and high ceilings, tall windows designed to provide adequate ventilation, Sisters of Charity in their strange uniforms, faces of long-dead patients, and all of them, you realize, were here, in the building where you're standing. You compare the floor to the one in the photo, or check the windows to see if they're the same, or place a hand on the wall. Behind you, there's laughter, and several art students with portfolios walk down the stairs, and then a professor digitizing music in his office pokes his head out and says hello. A monitor above the aquarium shows clips from a new documentary, and posters on the bulletin board advertise upcoming iEar events. Though the technological present mixes incongruously with the architectural past in this

place, at the very least you have to admit this isn't a stage set for urban legends: this old building has been adopted once again.

"I've been here since 2002, and people are still saying to me, 'Oh, there's an arts department at RPI?'" muses Kathy High, the Chair of the Art Department. Her office, Room 113, is a huge, front-corner space on the 1st floor of West Hall that affords her a panoramic view. Her department, which has added six new hires and doubled in size over the last three years, currently utilizes the basement and the first three floors of the building, and Kathy is trying to move the department's editing facilities and production studio, which are still in the Darrin Communications Center, down to join them. "First of all, it's really a good idea for us to have both our studios and our classrooms and our research facilities in the same area," Kathy explains, "because of our whole pedagogical approach of combining practice and theory."

Apart from that, the unique, diverse nature of the art department just fits with the eccentric layout of West Hall, and Kathy believes being situated on the edge of the campus articulates the department's relationship with the University right now as well: "We sort of sit slightly outside of what has traditionally been the pedagogical approach of the University, which has been primarily an engineering and science-based university. That's changing. It's one of Dr. Jackson's mandates -- to expand that and to include more humanities. This building has a lot of character, a lot of presence, and I love it for that."

If West Hall has anything, it would certainly be presence. Thousands of medical and mental patients, soldiers being trained for WWI, Catholic high school students, and generations of RPI students and faculty have walked its corridors, worked in its rooms, and lived or died inside its walls during its eventful, 136-year history. And with every new group that arrived came new needs and expectations, as well as the resulting deletions, additions, or renovations to the structure, so it should come as no surprise that in many spots it shows its age. An assessment report submitted by John G. Waite Associates, Architects PLLC, the firm retained for the renovation of the exterior, while stating that West Hall "is generally in better condition than it

would first appear," also warns that "portions of the building have reached an advanced state of deterioration which will require that they be addressed as soon as possible."

Rich Montena, Project Manager for West Hall and Planner with Rensselaer's Campus Planning and Facilities Design, a person who knows the limitations of the building as well as anyone on campus, is realistic about the challenges it presents. Noting that it was built with soft brick that should never have gone unsealed for so long, Rich says, "Unfortunately, this building has been taken for granted, and therefore it has reached this state of repair . . . If you were to do a cost-benefits analysis, there are probably other, less expensive things we could do than maintain it, in terms of the realities of the world."

So why not simply demolish the oldest, least cost-efficient buildings like West Hall and construct state-of-the-art structures like the new Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) that will inhabit the other corner of Rensselaer's projected arts corridor on 8th Street? Because it's a terrible waste of resources, for one thing, Rich Montena counters, and because West Hall is "part of the face of the University -- a face that you see, that you recognize, that you connect with RPI, even though we haven't always owned it."

In an age of tight budgets, every college and university that owns and uses historic buildings must factor in these same kinds of escalating maintenance and/or restoration costs and, ultimately, must decide on whether they should preserve their historic buildings or abandon them. Jack Waite '65, who heads John G. Waite Associates and who has been an ardent devotee of historic preservation since his student days at Rensselaer, doesn't see the wisdom of abandoning a significant building like West Hall. "It's not an either/or thing," Waite points out. "You go to universities where there are great new buildings and there are also great old buildings: the two complement each other. A university should have that kind of diversity. It should have good old buildings, and good middle-aged buildings, and good new buildings, and if it's missing any one of those ingredients, it's not going to be as rich as it could be. RPI really needs that sort of cultural background -- they need the old buildings as well as the new ones. RPI has a

wonderful history and it doesn't have an awful lot of buildings that are so saturated with that history."

A plaque on the southwest corner of West Hall reads as follows:

THE CORNER STONE OF THE
TROY HOSPITAL
WAS LAID ON THE 28TH OF JUNE 1868
BY THE
RIGHT REV. BISHOP CONROY

West Hall was actually the second incarnation of the Troy Hospital. The first one had been started by a Dutch priest, Peter Havermans, and the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in 1850 to provide medical care mostly for poor Irish Catholics, and it was the first hospital established north of New York City. But proximity to the clanging, filthy tracks of the Union Railroad, as well as fires in 1856 and 1859 within the hospital, inspired the Sisters of Charity and their Board of Governors to search for a better location. By 1866, they had located a piece of property near the center of the city, yet elevated and away from the river, located at the head of Fulton Street on the east side of 8th Street, and belonging to Ebenezer Prescott. They purchased it for \$18,000, and then commissioned the well-respected Troy architect, Marcus F. Cummings, not only to draw up plans and specifications for the new hospital building but also to see that the contracts were properly fulfilled by the builders, all for the modest sum of \$450.

Begun in 1868, and built of brick and Nova Scotia sandstone in the Second Empire Style, which had its origins in France with the additions to the Louvre from 1852-1857, and with tall, pyramidal roofs in the manner of the 17th Century French architect Francois Mansart for its dominant central pavilion and two spacious wings, the new Troy Hospital loudly proclaimed its intention to be equal with not only the prestigious Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and St. Joseph's Seminary buildings but also with its wealthy, anti-Catholic neighbors who lived on the heights to avoid the rude clamor of Troy down below. From its opening in 1871 until it re-located to Oakwood Avenue in 1914, the Troy Hospital and its Sisters of Charity took in

all comers -- the shanty Irish dying of consumption, the wealthier Protestants with smallpox or influenza, soldiers still raving from the Civil War, young women hurt in the shirt factories or their men scalded in Henry Burden's iron factories, the babies no one wanted -- but after that, the Troy Hospital assumed a silence so profound that the City of Troy removed it from their maps.

By the Spring of 1918, when Rensselaer signed a contract with the War department to participate in its Student Army Training Corps program, the now old Troy Hospital had turned into a wreck. Thieves had ripped out its plumbing and vandals had stolen other valuable building materials and sold them for scrap. Rain poured through huge holes in the roof. The parquet floors buckled. But even in its diminished state, it remained a large, empty building, and that was exactly what the War Department needed. The Institute spearheaded an intensive restoration effort and transformed the neglected structure into a barracks and training facility for 450 student-officers-in-training in just five weeks, and it quickly became a model training camp. Six months later, however, the armistice to end the war with Germany was signed and the building was abandoned again. But without the war, and the sizable restoration project that converted it to military use, the old Troy Hospital building might have continued its decline until demolition was the only option.

Two surges in population saved it. In the early 1920s, individual Catholic parish schools in Troy and Watervliet were so crowded that many students stopped attending. The Albany diocese proposed a plan to provide a central school location, and they purchased the old Troy Hospital in 1923 for \$30,000. Then they contributed \$250,000 more for repair and improvements to the building: they tore down the chapel, replaced it with a four-story addition that contained a gymnasium, a cafeteria, and a spacious auditorium, and built separate, enclosed "boys" and "girls" staircases on the western façade. The Catholic Central High School, when it was completed in 1925, contained 50,000 square feet of floor space and served 536 students. Within 25 years, though, attendance had swelled to over 1,500 students and, in 1952, Catholic High elected to move north to a larger space in Lansingburgh.

Rensselaer was experiencing its own population surge in the late 1940s, aided by the GI bill and the increasing demand for engineers by giant industrial firms. Enrollment shot up from 932 students in 1940 to 4,485 students by 1948, so when representatives from the diocese approached the University about buying Catholic High, its trustees seized upon the opportunity to relieve the overcrowding that existed in several departments. Officially re-named West Hall in 1953, the building expanded Rensselaer's academic facilities by 12 percent and became one of the major projects in the campus-wide renovation program that began that year. When it was finished, it provided thirty-four offices, twenty classrooms, ten laboratories, and nine additional rooms for other uses.

Things change, of course. What appears as a savior one year is often vilified the next. Within a decade, West Hall and many other older buildings on the campus were being referred to as antiquated facilities that jeopardized Rensselaer's academic programs and, until 1991, each new academic facilities plan for the campus seemed to place West Hall on a list of buildings to be removed from academic use. Every new multi-million dollar fundraising effort postponed major restoration there to construct newer, more exciting buildings. Periodically, there were small, specialized renovations and upgrades to the building, but West Hall was no longer considered for any significant role. Lots of reasons were given: Inefficient heating loops, a poor exterior physical condition, (many of West Hall's exterior windows had last been painted when the building was purchased in 1953), code violations, major cracks due to settlement, considerable deflections in the floors, a proliferation of ivy, sagging interior partitions, and other various problems.

In 1991, though, an 11 million dollar project to repair all the masonry, roofs, windows, and dormers at West Hall was proposed. The architectural firm of Mesick, Cohen & Waite was commissioned to oversee the first phase of roof and masonry restoration, but after \$850,000 was spent, the scope of the original project seemed far too ambitious. For the rest of the 1990s, major restoration efforts were abandoned again, and the building slid into another decade of regrettable but familiar neglect.

But a lot has changed in the last few months. A four-phase project to clean and repair the building was approved last July by the Troy Planning Board, and the work will continue through next July. Claude Rounds, Vice President for Administration in charge of all facilities on campus, stated recently that “West Hall will become a prominent and important location for the Institute’s vision to establish an arts corridor on 8th Street , and this is the highest priority deferred maintenance project on the campus. This one is our top priority.” And Vice President Rounds also revealed that they’re moving forward with the construction of a black box theater in West Hall as well. Why, all of a sudden, is West Hall getting so much attention?

One probable reason is the \$150,000 Campus Heritage Initiative Grant that was awarded last year to Rensselaer’s School of Architecture by the Getty Grant Program to develop the first detailed studies of the 18 buildings that comprise the historic core of the University’s campus. Under the direction of Building Conservation Program Director Fred Cawley, faculty members Steve Bedford, Bill Foulkes and others recruited graduate students and began their work with an extensive study of the building with the most complex history – West Hall. “This is the only building that Rensselaer owns that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places,” Steve Bedford explains, so it was a natural place to start.

West Hall is also the building that seems most visually and physically connected with downtown, and it has served as a familiar link between the City and the Institute for more than fifty years, not only for the citizens of Troy but for all the students and faculty who walked its halls and learned together in its classrooms. Perhaps, for many people, West Hall is more than just an old building in need of repair. “There is a reason human beings long for a sense of permanence, “ James Howard Kunstler writes in *The Geography of Nowhere*. “We know not where we come from, still less where we are going, and to keep from going crazy while we are here, we want to feel that we truly belong to a specific part of the world.” How many have received that sense of place, that gift of permanence, from West Hall? Maybe that’s why it’s worth the trouble it will take to preserve it.