

Editor's Column

Humanists as Builders

FOR LAURA MCGRANE IT WAS ONE PARTICULAR BUILDING: THE Old Gym, a three-story stone structure at the heart of campus, dating from 1900. It had been largely empty since the opening, in 2005, of the new, 100,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art Douglas B. Gardner Integrated Athletic Center, one of the key attractions of Haverford College.

How to adapt the Old Gym for the twenty-first century? And how might humanists contribute to its remaking? McGrane, an associate professor of English, saw it as a special challenge. An eighteenth-century scholar with an equal commitment to print culture and digital media, McGrane had long integrated coding and online interface into book history, leading collaborative Mellon workshops such as *The (New) Digital Archivalism* (2009) and running the Tri-Co Digital Humanities initiative with colleagues from Swarthmore and Bryn Mawr Colleges. Renovating the old is second nature to her, as is the art of teamwork.

Things took a decisive turn in 2012, when McGrane became director of the Hurford Center for the Arts and Humanities and, through campus-wide forums on the future direction of Haverford, emerged with a compelling action plan. Working with the college's capital campaign, *Lives That Speak*, she helped raise a record 12.4 million dollars to transform the Old Gym into a building called VCAM (Visual Culture, Arts, and Media [fig. 1]). The new home for the Hurford Center and the interdisciplinary visual studies minor it had been championing since the late 1990s, the building now also houses three other programs: the Philadelphia Area Creative Collaboratives (PACC),¹ the Haverford Innovations Program, and the Summer DocuLab, all sharing a community kitchen and a space called Maker Arts, equipped with cutting-edge digital tools.



FIG. 1

Interior view of the VCAM building at Haverford College. Photograph by Lara Swimmer Photography, courtesy of Haverford College.

MSR Design, a Minneapolis firm specializing in adaptive reuse, was hired in 2013 to undertake the renovations, partly because the architects “had fallen in love with the Old Gym—with the tracks, the trusses, the floors, and the materials throughout,” said James Weissinger, associate director of the Hurford Center (qtd. in Zigler). When VCAM opened in September 2017, McGrane, in her role as inaugural director, took special pride in the feats of recycling: “Looking around the space, you may note subtle pieces of the old that have been brought into the new—a revitalized track, stair balustrades that become a base for a farm table, a gym floor reused for office and lab ceilings, old squash court glass used for wall boards” (“VCAM Welcome”). This creative integration of the past was not lost on students. Saket Sekhsaria, class of 2020, gushing over the Blackmagic camera now available for checkout, was equally impressed by the checkout counters themselves, made from recycled lockers—a tangible embodiment of the building’s teaching philosophy (Raber, “New Space”).

“VCAM represents an intersection of the physical and the curricular,” McGrane said, an intersection that turns the building itself

into a pedagogical tool (“VCAM Welcome”). This object lesson also had far-reaching practical consequences: there is no better tribute to the vitality and versatility of the humanities. The building’s simple furnishings, moveable walls, and flexible schedules allow the space to serve many needs. The availability of 3-D printers, CNC routers, and laser cutters means that environmental studies, neuroscience, and computer science classes can be taught here, as well as classes in anthropology, religion, East Asian languages and cultures, and Romantic poetry. This all-purpose, 24/7 building is now Haverford’s incubator, hub, and “campus living room” (Zigler), the prime meeting spot for interdisciplinary gatherings.

To turn the cavernous former gym into a conversation-rich “living room,” sound-absorptive material had to be installed to cut down on the echoes and reverberations. In particular, the high-fidelity screening room, media-production classroom, and editing studio required special levels of acoustic insulation—to control sound-reflection patterns and to enhance audio playback, critical listening, and open mic recordings. The Chicago firm Threshold Acoustics, hired for this task, added resilient materials such as neoprene and coiled metal springs at critical locations to create optimal sonic environments and to separate adjacent spaces acoustically (McGrane, e-mail message [18 Apr. 2018]).

Backed by these recycling-minded architects and listening-friendly sound engineers, VCAM is now an inspiration for the entire college. Playing host to all disciplines, it proclaims to the world what is special about Haverford, a liberal arts college that, centered on the humanities and with a humanist (Kim Benston) as president, has achieved a stunning synergy of the arts and sciences. With

an enrollment once below three hundred (boosted to 1,290 since the 1970s), Haverford was the first educational institution to offer a class in laboratory biology. Its culture of “talking, reading, writing, and making” has produced three Nobel laureates in physics and chemistry, along with twenty Rhodes Scholars and six recipients of the Pulitzer Prize (Zigler). The only member of the National Academy of Sciences to teach at a liberal arts college still holds an emeritus position in the physics department at Haverford.

This synergy of the arts and sciences allows for a form of education—and a form of life—at once visionary and workmanlike, forward-looking and past-cherishing, based on “ethical engagement locally and globally,” McGrane notes. World citizenship here is rooted in a responsibility for specific environments. Historical consciousness goes hand in hand with the wherewithal to make things happen. Remaking an old gym and “remaking the world” are both on its agenda (McGrane, “VCAM Welcome”).

Two events this year—Beyond the Grassroots: Participatory Ecology and Political Praxis, the Mellon symposium hosted by the Hurford Center, and Dizhsa Nabani: Living Language, the 2018 Summer DocuLab—vividly demonstrate what education looks like when the science of making is integrated with the art of talking, reading, and writing. The symposium, organized by the crop scientist Rafter Sass Ferguson, is part of a long-term effort to strengthen local food cooperatives through the power of networking—specifically, through shared scientific research, shared knowledge, and shared capitalization. Among the talks at the symposium were “Afroecology as a Social Methodology,” by Kirtrina Baxter, from Soil Generation; “Addressing Social Inequalities at Multiple Scales: Farmer Participatory Research in Malawi,” by Rachel Bezner-Kerr from Cornell University; and “Can Farming Save the Future? (Or, How to Revolutionize Agriculture to Fight Cli-

mate Change),” by Nathan Kleinman, from the Experimental Farm Network (“Beyond the Grassroots”). All the spaces throughout VCAM were put to good use during the symposium, not least the community kitchen.

The Summer DocuLab, designed this year by Vicky Funari, a filmmaker, and Brook Lillehaugen, an assistant professor in the Tri-College Department of Linguistics, will take five students to spend eight weeks in Oaxaca, Mexico, to create a documentary about Zapotec, an endangered indigenous language. Collaborating with the Zapotec activist Moisés García Guzmán, the filmmakers will explore the ways this language is organic to the livelihood of this indigenous community, articulating a body of knowledge based on traditional farming, the classification and uses of local plants, and the integration of food, cooking techniques, and communal health. Learning about this living language on-site, faculty members and students will then return to Haverford for two final weeks of postproduction, honing their craft in VCAM’s high-tech editing studio (“Summer DocuLab”).

“Even after watching the project evolve from idea to drawing to construction, I’m actually amazed,” President Benston said. “I’m taking it all in just like everyone else. . . . The energy and cross-pollination that will take place in the building across disciplines and media, sensibilities, and points of view, all of that speaks to Haverford’s ethos in a contemporary mode that is very exciting” (qtd. in Raber, “New Space”). This experiment, at once tech-supported and bearing the “accreted character of past uses and past times,” is able to act locally and globally with purpose and efficacy, enriching the educational experience at Haverford even as it helps protect endangered languages in other parts of the world (McGrane, “VCAM Project Narrative”). The past, present, and future of the arts and sciences are all gathered here in this hybrid structure, at once physical and curricular, with long memories and a long life ahead. In April 2018, the

American Institute of Architects, after evaluating over one hundred projects internationally, selected VCAM as a winner of the Education Facility Design Award of Excellence for the “spatial richness” that comes from “inserting a new series of program spaces within a historic building” (Raber, “VCAM Building”).

McGrane is not the only humanist to score points on both physical and curricular fronts. If VCAM is any indication, the future of the humanities might rest on its ability to be similarly versatile, hybridizing itself to fill different needs, embracing the science of making the better to talk, read, and write. Building infrastructures useful to colleagues in other fields, and bringing hands-on knowledge to bear on memories and objects collectively created and preserved, such a hybrid humanities would turn the current, exclusive focus on STEM into a broad-based, campus-wide STEAM. It would be the heart and soul of any educational institution, at once communal lab and community kitchen, the “living room” where intellectual currents far and near are brought into a live synthesis.

Just how widespread is this hybrid humanities? Three other STEAM pioneers—presidents of major universities—have experimented with this hybrid form in ways that speak to the particular needs of their institutions, while collectively demonstrating the energies of making fueled by talking, reading, and writing, integrating these into an educational platform implementable at different scales.

Carol Christ, a Victorianist and the new chancellor at the University of California, Berkeley, is the first woman to hold that position. Since joining the Berkeley faculty in 1970, Christ has regularly taken on major administrative roles, serving as executive vice chancellor and provost from 1994 until 2000 and again from May 2016 until July 2017, when she became Berkeley's eleventh chancellor.

Christ came with a long list of building projects completed while she was president

of Smith College, from 2002 to 2013. These included the renovation of the Brown Fine Arts Center, Lyman Conservatory, Olin Fitness Center, the Poetry Center, the Mwangi Cultural Center, and Lilly Hall, home of the School for Social Work. New constructions included the dramatic Campus Center, as well as Conway House, an apartment building for older college students with children. Ford Hall, a 140,000-square-foot complex with labs, classrooms, and reading lounges, opened in fall 2009, home to the Picker Engineering Program and the departments of molecular biology, chemistry, biochemistry, and computer science.

Ford Hall is meant to be a “compelling, visible statement of Smith's public identity as a women's college with the strongest programs in science and engineering” (*Ford Hall*). That public identity has been forty years in the making. Smith alumnae include the first woman elected to the National Academy of Sciences, the first woman computer scientist at IBM, and the first woman on the faculty of the Johns Hopkins Medical School. Overall, thirty percent of students at Smith are science majors, making it one of the most effective institutions for sending women to PhD programs in the sciences (“Facts”). Smith was the first women's college to offer an engineering major; from an entering class of twenty, in 2000, the program had grown to some one hundred majors and intended majors by 2008.

This stunning track record is celebrated in an agenda-setting physical structure, a challenge to other women's colleges and to higher education in general. At the same time, Ford Hall is meant as a campus-wide resource, designed to “blur the boundaries between traditional disciplines.” Towers | Golde, the landscape architects who drew up the site plans, noted that “[t]echnologically it is state of the art; aesthetically, it is a 21st century facility that is highly sympathetic to its largely Victorian context” (“Ford Hall”). Making a special effort to “accommodate

complex circulation patterns and complement the original Olmstedian campus design," Ford Hall honors the past even as it looks to the future, "the first phase in a far-reaching vision to develop a new campus precinct that interweaves institutional and neighborhood character." The "building itself will function as a teaching tool," said Thomas Litwin, director of the Clark Science Center (qtd. in "Sustainability").

Toward that end, Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, a firm with multiple environmental awards from the American Institute of Architects and noted for its sensitivity to "human, technical, and economic circumstances," was asked to come up with a building that could serve as a "learning lab," a public-facing classroom offering daily lessons in energy efficiency and responsible citizenship ("About"). Citing recent statistics that the operation of large buildings accounts for thirty-six percent of total energy consumption and thirty percent of greenhouse-gas emissions in the United States, the design guidelines emphasized the installation of LED lighting; the use of passive energy "such as maximum daylight exposure through optimum window and glass placement, heat recovery, and innovative insulation"; the use of recycled or recyclable material in construction and waste management; and a reduction of water consumption "through low-flow fixtures and high-tech monitoring" ("Sustainability"). Cutting-edge science here makes for a practice-rich pedagogy. Vivian Loftness, an architecture professor at Carnegie Mellon University and a consultant for the project, describes Ford Hall as "a unique, demonstration-quality building in which a new kind of education takes place. The building won't simply house research but will, itself, become part of the instruments" (qtd. in "Sustainability").

The final report on the construction of Ford Hall noted that ninety-six percent of the waste generated, including the preexisting buildings that were removed to clear the

site, was recycled, an extraordinary feat for a structure this size ("William A. Berry Construction and Demolition"). This precedent helps Smith make further commitments to environmental sustainability in its curriculum and campus operations, including a cogeneration power plant, which achieved independence from the electric grid in 2013 ("Smith Cogeneration Plant"), and the MacLeish Field Station, which opened in 2012 as a hands-on classroom for the practice of forest ecology, experimental hydrology, and environmental monitoring ("Ada and Archibald MacLeish Field Station").

Christ's track record at Smith bodes well for her new role as chancellor at Berkeley. Still, the hybrid humanities at Smith—and its counterpart at Haverford—might not be generalizable for larger universities. Can liberal arts colleges, leading the way in STEAM, serve as a template for higher education as a whole?²

Steven Knapp, a Romanticist just stepping down as president of George Washington University (GWU), offers a striking example of what a STEAM platform can accomplish at a university with 25,000 students. Just a few blocks west of the White House, GWU has traditionally been known for its strength in public policy, law, business, and international studies. Knapp made it his first priority to add science to the list. "To aspire to be a great university, you have to aspire to be a comprehensive university," he said. "We have to be strong in the sciences and credible in the sciences" (qtd. in Anderson, "GW"). Among his accomplishments are a 500,000-square-foot science and engineering hall and major additions to the Virginia Science and Technology Campus, including a new school of nursing and more than 71,000 square feet of new lab space for chemistry, physics, mechanical engineering, and the health sciences ("Steven Knapp").

These massive investments in the sciences did not come at the expense of the arts and

humanities. Equally important to Knapp was the acquisition of a beaux arts building on 17th Street NW, former home of the Corcoran Gallery, and the absorption of the Corcoran College of Art and Design into GWU (Anderson, "Knapp"). Taking advantage of the university's proximity to important libraries, museums, and civic organizations, Knapp made institutional collaboration the centerpiece of his presidency, including a three-year partnership with the Phillips Collection, an expansion of the one-hundred-year partnership with the Smithsonian, a partnership with *Politico* to conduct the *Politico*-George Washington University Battleground Poll, and an award-winning partnership with the Greater Washington Urban League to support the league's efforts to educate future leaders, create local jobs, and address unequal access to health care among different ethnic groups ("Steven Knapp"). To extend higher education to low-income students, GWU dropped SAT and ACT test scores for college admission in 2015 (Southall).

A STEAM platform developed under humanist auspices has broad consequences for the arts and sciences both. Bringing a human scale to bear on scientific research, it makes questions of race, class, and culture meaningful to science, even as it harnesses the power of science to give physical forms to humanist aspirations. Knapp's leadership at GWU is worth highlighting given the number of humanists currently in major administrative positions. Among these are Ian Baucom, dean of arts and sciences at the University of Virginia (UVA); Sara Blair, vice provost for academic and faculty affairs at the University of Michigan; Ralph Hexter, provost and executive vice chancellor at the University of California, Davis; Katherine Rowe, incoming president of the College of William and Mary; and Valerie Smith, president of Swarthmore College. For these five, and for many others, the synergy between the arts and sciences will be a key determinant for

their institutions and for higher education as a collectively designed undertaking, its twenty-first-century form yet to be decided.

Early results are already in and could not be more promising. Baucom is a case in point. Since arriving at UVA in the summer of 2014, Baucom has launched a series of campus-wide initiatives, culminating in a grant from the Mellon Foundation to create an interdisciplinary program devoted to the study of the global South. Focusing on the "connected histories and cultures of Africa, Latin America, South and East Asia, and other world regions," the program will create ten new tenure-track jobs by 2020. It will bring the Schools of Architecture, Medicine, and Nursing into the orbit of the College of Arts and Sciences, supporting ten "Humanities Laboratories" that will introduce students to "collaborative, discovery-driven and experimental work" and model a "multi-scalar agenda for curriculum development and advanced research" ("Mellon Global South Initiative"). Connections across the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans; global health; climate change; and food security will all be part of this integrated program, along with mediascapes and cultural flow, digital access and inequities, and literary and language worlds.

"Computation and data are transforming everything," Baucom said. To make sure that students can navigate "a world grounded in statistical and quantitative fact" while cultivating the equally important art of "the articulation of thought," writing and the humanities will be integrated with science and mathematics in the core curriculum. Baucom envisions "philosophers co-teaching with biologists, historians with mathematicians" (qtd. in Bacon). Coming at a pivotal time of faculty turnover and curriculum reform, this integration of the arts and sciences will give impetus to the new undergraduate curriculum, revised for the first time in four decades. It will suggest new pedagogical and research missions for the graduate school. And it will

bring to the University of Virginia “upwards of 200 new tenured and tenure-track faculty,” a new generation of humanists and scientists at home in “collaborative, discovery-driven and experimental work” and as skilled in making as in talking, reading, and writing (“Ian Baucom”). STEAM, already flourishing in liberal arts colleges, bids fair here to become a prototype for all universities.

Still, a straight path to success is unlikely. Budget cuts from state legislatures and push-back from science-denying administrations are to be expected, not to mention glitches in all the experimental programs. Given the adversities ahead, the long memories of the humanities serve a key function. For this discipline, perhaps more than any other, knows about the vicissitudes of fortune and the impermanence of built environments. Schooled in human ruination across several millennia and taking this for granted, it has developed an emotional hardihood, a resilience in the face of unavoidable reversals. Richard H. Brodhead, an Americanist just stepping down as president of Duke University, is particularly illuminating on what humanists bring to catastrophes large and small.

Like Christ and Knapp, Brodhead has many building projects to his credit. Indeed, “the second-largest physical transformation” in the history of Duke happened during his thirteen years at the university (Brodhead, “Faculty Address: Leadership” 187). The Rubenstein Library, the Baldwin Auditorium, and the Nasher Museum were all renovated, and impressive new structures went up, including the Duke Cancer Institute, the Trent Semans Center for Health Education, and new homes for the School of Nursing, the Nicholas School of the Environment, and the Sanford School of Public Policy.

“Building a building can never be the goal of a university,” Brodhead said in his 2014 faculty address. “Buildings are means, not ends. A university should have a strong presumption against investing resources in

physical entities unless there is a strong case that the things that are our real ends—research, teaching, the work of knowledge creation and education broadly considered—can be reached only with the help of a physical structure” (“Faculty Address: Leadership” 188). In this case, the physical structures are crucial to the educational mission of a university known for its medical school, its school of the environment (currently ranked sixth in the world, tied with Oxford University’s), and its commitment to health education broadly disseminated. Integrating these already complementary units through the physical transformation of the campus, Brodhead launched two signature projects that allowed him to build in a different way, creating outreach mechanisms that “translate research findings to address health-care inequities” (“President Richard Brodhead”): DukeEngage, an eight-week civic-engagement program for students that began in 2008 (Burness and Perkins), and the Duke Global Health Institute, which opened in 2006 (Harvey).

What distinguishes the Duke Global Health Institute, Brodhead said during a visit to India, is that it is a “university-wide initiative, a space for biomedical researchers, nursing professors specializing in innovative care delivery and caregiver training,” and “health sociologists and health economists” to work together, “inspired by what they can learn from those who don’t share their expertise” (“Duke President Richard Brodhead”). Creating a knowledge base out of a bottom-up ethics of care, and making it the basis for a Duke education, the Global Health Institute is physical and curricular on scales at once macro and micro: an experiment in grassroots initiatives and an experiment in alternative globalization. Humanists are crucial to both.

Addressing the faculty one year after the earthquake in Haiti, Brodhead singled out the contributions of the humanities to the relief effort, a global health initiative spearheaded by a new entity called the Haitian Lab. The “lead

creators of the Haitian Lab are Laurant Dubois and Deborah Jenson, professors of history and romance studies, meaning that Duke's research and relief efforts were grounded in the understanding of Kreyol history, Kreyol language, and culture; the Franklin Humanities Institute served as host for the lab" (Brodhead, "Faculty Address: Budgets" 111).

And humanists are on the front lines in another sense, being the first (and sometimes only) respondents equipped to stare total devastation in the eye without becoming unhinged and without giving up. This acquired resilience is a direct result of the long memories constitutive of the discipline, archives of hope amid despair built up over thousands of years. Destruction of cities, Brodhead said in the context of Hurricane Katrina,

made me think of Vergil's *Aeneid*, the great poem about refugees and displaced persons and a specifically civic form of disaster, the special victimization entailed in the destruction of a city. Remember the amazing words spoken at the moment of the fall of Troy? "Fumus Troes," we *were* Trojans: we used to tell people who we are by telling them the name of our city, but that city has now been killed, so we can only speak that identity in the past sense. ("Founders' Day Address" 42–43)

Ruination is nothing new as far as humanists are concerned. Toughened by readings that have long exposed them to worst-case scenarios, they have a kind of disciplinary tolerance for such scenarios. And, since the *Aeneid*, like so many other works of literature, is about a second try (in fact, building an empire), humanists also tend to take it for granted that some sort of recycling is in order, while knowing full well that nothing is destined to last. Building from scratch might be a science they have yet to master, but building from ruins is an art they are well acquainted with, one that they practice perhaps more in the abstract, which is their traditional strength. Now that they are beginning to team up with scientists,

the buildings that bear their signatures are those that bear the signature of humankind as a whole, at once precarious and tenacious, disaster-prone but surviving thus far.

NOTES

1. PACC is designed to "bring together artists, faculty, students, nonprofits, and other community members for collaborations that blend scholarship, social change, and the arts" ("Philadelphia Area Creative Collaboratives Program").

2. Elsewhere, I give a brief account of the STEAM experiments at Bard College.

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