

BEAUTY & THE BEAST ~ TOWERING OVER OLD MAIN

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The rededication of Old Main has sparked many fond memories of great classes, special relationships and student high jinks (*Old Main Memories*, pg. 24). It has also resurfaced one of the most frequently-asked questions by students, alumni and Western New York residents: “Why in the name of God did Canisius ever put that Churchill Academic Tower in front of Old Main?”

Standing tall and in stark contrast to Old Main’s classic beauty, the Churchill Tower has been derided by architects and preservation experts as a sore thumb in the middle of the Canisius campus. A “can of shaving cream” or a “stack of pancakes” are two of the more charitable descriptions of the building. Other less flattering terms include a reference to the anatomy of the Jesuit who led the planning process for the building, Rev. Edward B. Gillen, S.J.

The tower’s critics find it unfathomable that this 11-story building could have been placed in front of Old Main where it obscures the legendary golden dome, the symbol of Canisius.

Just how did this come to pass?

To answer the question, we have to take you back to 1967. Vietnam and civil rights grabbed the headlines. LBJ was our nation’s president. And Canisius was expanding at a rapid pace — 2500 students by 1971. That’s in contrast to the 4870 students of today. The student center, Bosch and Frisch were new buildings and plans were in the works for the Koessler Athletic Center.

As the student body and the campus grew, so did the faculty, which forced the creation of makeshift faculty offices spread in various locations around campus, as well as in homes in the surrounding community. In an effort to reclaim classroom space and establish private faculty offices, the college decided to build an academic office building.

The project group, lead by Father Gillen, assistant to the president for planning, selected a tower design by Leroy H. Welch to maximize the minimal space available on our landlocked campus. The plan was to build high, build round, build bold and someplace near Old Main, the academic center of campus. The planners hoped the tower’s location and floor plans would “bridge the communication gap” between faculty and students.

With Bagen Hall and the library on the sides of Old Main and a faculty parking lot behind it, the search focused on the area in front of Old Main. There is also some evidence that the center of the Quad and the corner of

Old Main near Hughes were considered but ultimately the decision was made to build on the least expensive site. Father Gillen is reported to have said the tower would “beautify our façade from Main Street.” He also predicted it would become a Buffalo landmark.

“The students were pretty much in favor of doing it,” recalls Stanton Hudson ’72, student government president at the time and now assistant professor of communication and director of the Organizational and Communication Development Program at Canisius. “I don’t recall that the student body was very well aware, although at the time the reporters for *The Griffin* were well-informed.”

Indeed they were. To this day, *The Griffin* coverage remains a big part of the archival history for the tower. It chronicled the objections of the faculty and staff who were not in favor of the project. According to *The Griffin*, Dr. John Kilbridge, a professor of education, was opposed to the tower’s placement in front of Old Main as well as its cost. Peter Laux, who was the director of the library, coined the term “Breck Tower” because of the building’s resemblance to a shampoo bottle. Laux also submitted his own alternate designs for expansion that included a four-story addition to the library.

But despite some protestations, Dr. David A. Lauerman, professor *emeritus* and director of the Western New York Writing Project, does not recall a groundswell of opinion against it. Back then, Lauerman had an office located in one of the two English houses on Eastwood Place.

“We liked the idea of an English House but some people who had that sort of affection for those houses were not as enthusiastic as I was about the tower,” said Lauerman. “If you don’t have your quotients of curmudgeons in faculty, then you have failed at something. And there was a certain amount of curmudgeon talk.”

In November 1967, the Canisius Board of Trustees voted to erect the academic tower as planned. With a price tag of \$2.3 million, the tower project was attainable because of federal grants and loans, and a generous \$500,000 gift from Dr. Clinton H. Churchill, the noted educator and broadcasting evangelist. By May of 1969, even the faculty senate stood behind the project with a resolution that “strongly approved the construction of the building with all due dispatch.”

Following long construction delays due to frozen federal funds, the tower was dedicated in October 1971 with very little campus fanfare. Lauerman, who spoke at the dedication as chair

of the faculty senate, remembers. “I was delighted by the prospect of the tower. And when we all moved in, it seemed like heaven on earth because the English Department was all on one floor.”

Ultimately, sentiments like Lauerman’s carried the day. So, how did the tower get built in front of Old Main? The simple answer is that those in charge wanted to do it that way and while there was some dissent, it never derailed the project. It seems that the need for faculty office space was so great that something had to happen. Father Gillen apparently considered only land that the college owned. In fairness, however, until Rev. Vincent M. Cooke, S.J., arrived at Canisius, the college had a tendency to think of the campus solely as the land bounded by Main Street, Hughes Avenue, Eastwood Place and Meech Street.

But criticism has followed the tower since its dedication. Its cylindrical design, a testament to the era, does not impress. Even a case history, produced in 1972 by Bethlehem Steel, was less than flattering with its description of the tower as “a steel-framed, circular faculty office tower shoe-horned into a limited site on the Canisius College campus in Buffalo, New York.” Clearly, it was a rather biting comment from the company that fabricated the tower’s 360-ton steel framework.

Today’s critics contend that the tower creates communication gaps because of its dark hallways, small pie-shaped offices and lack of common meeting or waiting areas. Hudson agrees with his present day colleagues who believe the tower just doesn’t do for interaction what it did 30 years ago. “The very fact that the number of students has grown so significantly puts more burden on its original purpose,” he notes.

But for all of its architectural shortcomings, the tower has always been a very functional building. The majority of the college’s full-time faculty is two minutes from classrooms in Old Main. The offices are conveniently located for students seeking meetings with faculty after class. Its upper floors offer great views of the city. It is filled to capacity and attempts to move faculty out of the tower are frequently met with strenuous objections. For these reasons, simply imploding the tower — as many alumni have suggested — is neither practical, nor desirable.

And for all the wrong reasons, Father Gillen’s prediction has come true. The Churchill Academic Tower has certainly become a Buffalo landmark. ■