

Architects honor Jesuit house



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Home can mean many things to different people: Security, prestige, freedom. At some times, it is alive with the bustle of family and friends, while at others it is a peaceful retreat from the world. For the Jesuit community of Fairfield University — a family in its own right — home is a shining example of everything the Christian order stands for: scholarship, spirituality, and the communal responsibility that comes when those two meet.

Dubbed one of the top 10 houses of 2012 by the American Institute of Architects (AIA), the new Fairfield Jesuit Community Center reflects a growing campus movement built on the importance of environmental stewardship.

"The community and the simplicity of it and the way you can be inside but that you're still connected to the outside — it is a beautiful iteration of a modern center," wrote the jury, made up of AIA fellows from Chicago. "The chapel and the way it is set up for a service allows for beautiful interaction."

Perched on a sloping hillside with views of Long Island Sound to the south and the City of Bridgeport to the east, the 20,000-square-foot facility was built with recycled structural steel, reclaimed wood, reconditioned carpets, and sustainable materials such as bamboo floors and cypress doors.

Natural light floods through the floor-to-ceiling windows, reducing the need for electricity and promoting cross-ventilation in many areas.

Dark concrete floors absorb energy from the sun and radiate it throughout the building.

On the green roof, a crown of grasses and sedum plants reduces heat loss, absorbs rainwater, and protects the membrane from harsh ultraviolet light.



There seems to be something at every turn in the Jesuit Community Center that straddles the divide between sustainable building and modern living. But the feature of which the university seems most proud can't be seen by the naked eye.

"There are 15 wells that go 450 feet beneath the parking lot," David Frassinelli, associate vice president of facilities management, said to describe the closed loop geothermal heating system that keeps the center cool in summer and warm in winter. "There is no heating in the building and there is no air conditioning in the building, at all."

Instead, Frassinelli explained, these wells "extract the coolness" out of the ground and use it for air conditioning. In the winter, they do the same thing with heat. The system provides energy without using fossil fuels, reducing carbon dioxide emissions and saving money on energy costs.

The Rev. Paul Fitzgerald, senior vice president for academic affairs, was enjoying the effects of this system last week, when the outside temperature read 91 degrees.

"It's nice and cool in the summer and yet we don't feel guilty at all," he told The Sun from the center's "breakfast room," where residents gather in the mornings to make toast, read the paper, and catch up.

Fitzgerald is one of 12 Jesuits who live in the building, which he described as having three zones. The front, he said, houses the business offices — treasurer, rector, bookkeeper, and so on. The back residences, facing the quieter western skies, mark the private area. And the middle, with huge great room windows that stare out over campus, is where the community gathers to eat, read, talk and worship.

"It's like we have this front door in the center of campus," he said, crediting the facility with bringing the community closer — Jesuits, faculty and students alike. "Everyone is much happier and much more connected and much more engaged with each other because of the building."

Before the \$10.5-million building was unveiled in 2009, Fitzgerald and his peers lived in a wooden structure near the southerly wetlands. The distance was not conducive to informal interaction with faculty and students, another reason for the move.

Unlike their former "cold and dark" residence, Fitzgerald compared the new digs to a treehouse. Much of that has to do with the cantilevered floor that overhangs its foundations, thereby protecting a grove of centennial beech trees that provide valuable shade in the summer. The trees date back to the Lashar family, former owners of the 1921

estate house now known as Bellamine Hall.

At a time when clearing a site seems to be standard practice, Alan Organschi of Gray Organschi Architecture took particular pride in leaving the grove as intact as possible.

"The first example of good stewardship was protecting the resources they had on the site and making the site better than it was," he said.

It was also in this grove that Organschi found his symbol for the entire project: A 70-foot decaying beech that had to be taken down. Rather than chip it, however, he worked with the university to save the tree. Over the course of several years, he said, they cut it, seasoned it, stripped away the rot, and eventually "found this beautiful center part of the tree."



Coming together to save a piece of nature that "most people saw as garbage" sent an important message, Organschi said. "That was a kind of collaboration that's so rare in architecture."

Today, that tree lives on as a sliding wall in the great room, and as the altar, ambo and cross in the chapel. The chapel, which the AIA called the building's "spiritual heart," also houses altar stones from several past university chapels. Perched above the cross (linking the Jesuits' spiritual and environmental missions in a way that leans toward poetic) a skylight shaped like the wing of a bird looks to the sky and surrounding, safeguarded treetops.

When the Connecticut AIA chapter honored the center back in 2010, with a "Building Award" and an "Encompassing Art" award, jurors took particular interest in this room.

"The center reflects an intuitive connection between the mission of calm, meditative, and community spirit," they wrote, "with a plan that reflects spatial balance between individual and community life."

The Rev. Gilbert Sunghera, a Jesuit and architectural designer who consulted on the project, praised the university that year for "allowing a new architectural vocabulary to emerge" and for not "playing it safe."

"In a lot of ways the house is a big symbol in the middle of the campus of all kinds of other things we're trying to do," said Fitzgerald. "(It teaches that) you can build a residence or office building or classroom building and it can be very beautiful and very humane, but it can also be very efficient and very forward thinking."

If the Jesuit Center is a rallying symbol behind a battle to guard God's planet, then Fairfield's co-generation facility is

the secret weapon and its Campus Sustainability Committee (CSC) is in command.

Chaired by Frassinelli, the committee was formed in 2007 as part of an initiative to reduce the school's greenhouse gas emissions, which it did, by 7%, in fiscal year 2009-10. Much of this progress is due to the university's combined heat and power plant, which generates almost all of the campus electricity and uses the waste to cool and heat all buildings connected to the main campus loop. According to Fairfield's Climate Action Plan, the university hopes this figure will rise to 20% by 2020, and 85% by 2050. The baseline year for comparison is 2005.

In an effort to involve the entire campus in its mission, the school's "Energy Dashboard" allows anyone to track energy consumption in real time — not just by building, but by room.

"Now we can have competitions between apartments in a building on air conditioning usage," said Frassinelli, adding that the dashboard also allows them to see the direct impact of any efficiency upgrade. Fairfield University's Energy Dashboard may be accessed by visiting fairfield.edu/dashboard.

In addition to the co-generation facility and the Jesuit Center's geothermal heating system, the committee has overseen many green initiatives, including hybrid transportation; car- and bike-sharing programs; a campus garden; composting; switching incandescent bulbs in dormitories for spiral fluorescents and outfitting outdoor lighting fixtures with LEDs; installing water-conserving plumbing across campus; and using pervious pavement in the new Quick Center parking lot.

Back in the breakfast room, watching the afternoon sunlight filter through the trees, Fitzgerald reflected on what his new home can teach students both on and off the Fairfield University campus. "It's OK for students to see that you don't have to figure out climate change all at once," he said. "You can just figure out little pieces of it."

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