Psychology Has a New Old Home at Georgia Tech

September 10, 2005

Most people — and all sports fans — know the Georgia Institute of Technology as Georgia Tech. Historically, our students referred to Tech as the North Avenue Trade School since it resides on North Avenue in Atlanta across the street from the world headquarters of Coca-Cola, and until recently, the mission of the school was almost entirely training practical engineers. About 20 years ago, an enlightened group of Tech leaders and administrators set the goal of making Tech a research university on par with the best science and technology universities in the nation. The mantra was “MIT with a football team.”

All of the non-engineering departments were viewed as essential to reaching this goal, particularly those in science, math, and computing. During a major reorganization of the academic departments in the institute, psychology was placed in the College of Sciences. The School of Psychology — and at Tech, all PhD granting units are called schools — has been awarding the BS degree since 1959 and the PhD since 1975. Even before becoming part of the College of Sciences, the School was known for the quantitative and scientific rigor of its training. Our undergraduates must complete a general core that includes three math classes beyond first year calculus, a year of biology, and a year of chemistry or physics. The school is small and highly focused with PhD programs in industrial/organizational psychology, engineering psychology, quantitative psychology, and experimental psychology with emphases in cognitive, cognitive aging, and animal behavior.

It was in this context that a new master plan for the campus specified a permanent home for the School of Psychology. It was to be a total renovation of the J.S. Coon Building, to include an 11,000 square foot addition for elevators and other modern conveniences. The Coon building is the oldest academic building on campus and sits directly across the street from the iconic Tech Tower. The building was built in 1912 and, in a Tech tradition until the mid 1950s, was designed by the head of the architecture department. It was originally called the New Shop Building which aptly describes its design and function. It housed the mechanical engineering department and shops and was later named after Tech’s first professor of engineering, John Saylor Coon, who alumni lovingly refer to as “Tech’s greatest professor” (See http://gtalumni.org/publications/magazine/spr98/coon.html).

At first, the building did not seem a good fit for psychology but a great team of programming and design architects worked to give us one of the classiest academic buildings you will see anywhere. Since we planned to have most of our classes in other locations, the primary concerns were offices and labs. The building is on the Register of Historic Buildings, so the exterior could not be modified; ultimately this worked to our advantage. We decided to place all faculty offices together on two floors overlooking a park-like corridor. This had several advantages. The building’s design meant that those two floors had a series of huge 15-foot high windows with pillars spaced 16 feet apart. State university guidelines specified faculty offices of 120 square feet, which would not work in this building because of the window configuration. Placing the offices to take advantage of those windows meant that we could legitimately have offices of 184 square feet and each office would have a huge window with a great

view. We then placed research labs in the core of the building where there are fewer windows.

The renovation revealed that the original interior of the building was brick and we preserved the exposed brick wherever possible, including the offices. This helps to connect the historic exterior with an interior that is classic but completely modern. We worked very hard to make the offices and common areas as comfortable and inviting as possible. Many of our research subjects are elderly individuals from the community so we wanted the building to welcome them to our department. In addition, the old building, really a collection of four buildings, has a quirky layout that makes navigating difficult. Therefore, we color coded each of the five floors with the designated color on the walls, furniture, and carpet to serve as a cue. Thus, we can tell someone to go the 'Purple Floor' waiting room to wait for their experimenter.

Offices for graduate students and part-time faculty always seem to be an afterthought in academic buildings but we made them a priority. The principle shop annex of the building was a story and a half high with exposed metal trusses, huge air ducts and clearstory windows that once provided light for Tech students learning their mechanical craft. We used a mezzanine design for this space with large labs on the bottom and offices for graduate students and part-time faculty in the mezzanine. The ceilings above the mezzanine are open which exposes the trusses and clearstory windows, providing an open and light-filled space. The large air ducts provide a useful level of white noise that dampens sound from adjacent offices.

The design team worked very hard to incorporate the historic nature of the building with the final product. The entry doors to the J.S. Coon Building are known to generations of Tech engineers and they were refinished but otherwise left intact. The stairway inside the entry is made of balusters and newel posts poured in the campus metal foundry that once trained Tech students in metal craft. Two large conference rooms, just inside the entry way, have exposed brick walls and large widows that extend to the 15 feet high ceiling. Nevertheless, they have state-of-the art technology for presentations and teleconferencing.

The renovation resulted in one of the most pleasing yet functional buildings on campus and it regularly draws visitors from other departments on campus as well as from psychology departments across the country planning their own building.