

Wilson Architects Completes New Biology and Chemistry Building at the University of Hartford

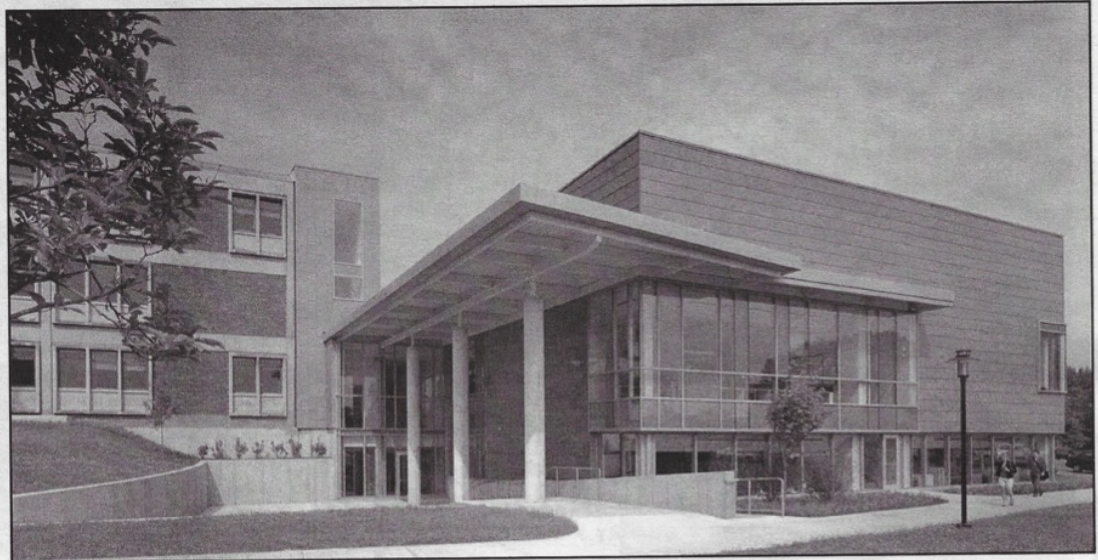
By James Moses, AIA

*Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.*

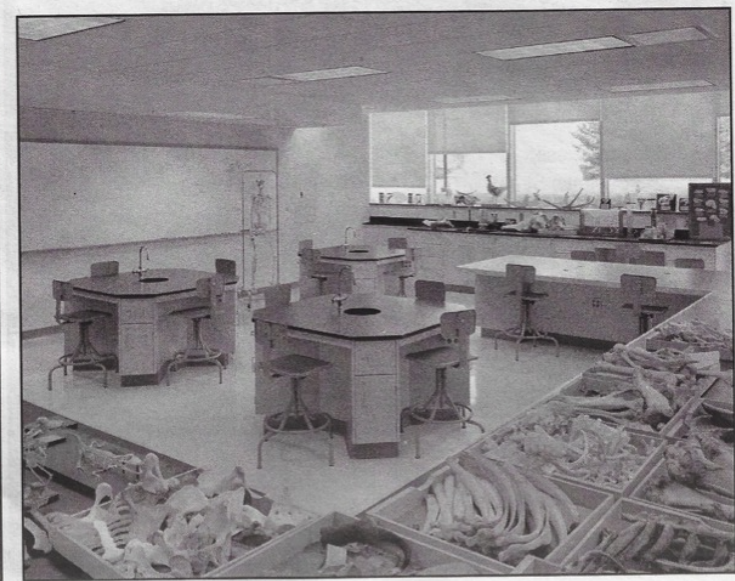
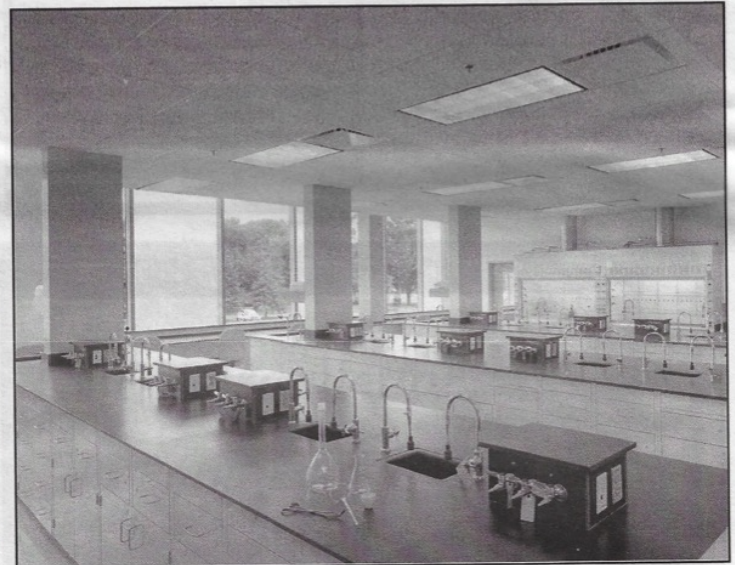
These words, the sixth of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", by the early twentieth century poet and Hartford insurance executive, Wallace Stevens, are an apt prelude to a description of the interior of the Biology and Chemistry Building at the University of Hartford, recently completed by William Wilson Associated Architects of Boston.

The campus of the University of Hartford, an institution founded in 1957 as the incorporation of three existing independent colleges (Hartford Art School, Hillyer College, and the Hart School of Music), consists of a collection of mid- to late-20th century buildings of decidedly 'functionalist' character. The pattern is one of low-slung, horizontally disposed, structurally rational, brick masonry buildings sited as individual objects on an open lawn. The University's first building Hillyer Hall was built in 1960, at the height of post-war mainstream modernism.

A discussion of the interior of the new Biology and Chemistry Building at the University of Hartford is, simultaneously, one of the exterior. There is an ongoing, healthy



debate in the discipline and, occasionally, the practice of architecture about its proper role in society: is it, or should it be, a reflection of an seemingly fragmented world, or a more ameliorative enterprise, whose actions intend to support and provide a gracious background for the more pragmatic, even prosaic, concerns of everyday life. The latter view could be characterized, in part, by its understanding of the interior of a



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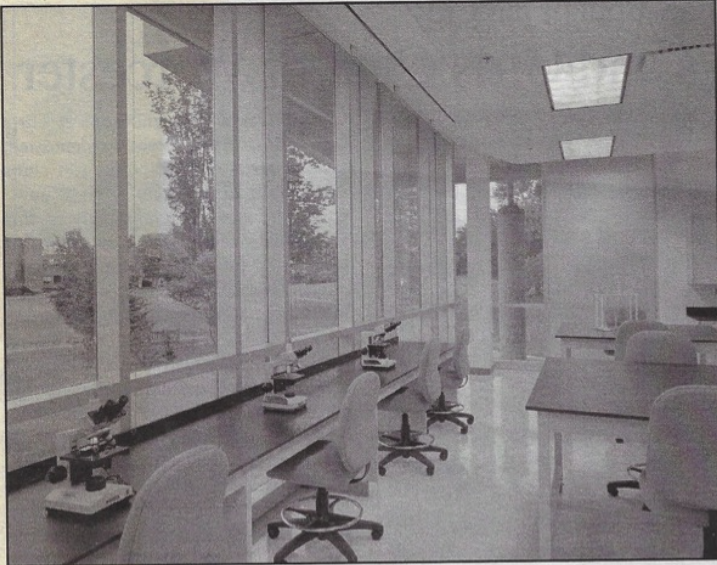
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building as part of the continuum of the exterior landscape or topography.

Connected to the existing Dana Hall (1965), which formerly housed the Biology and Chemistry departments, the building participates in a low-key, but forthright and memorable way, in the existing pattern on campus. It is memorable in the sense that it serves as a complimentary element, not a mimetic one. While it is low-slung and rectilinear, like its neighbors, it differs in its wall construction and intention of siting, facts which contribute to the quality and character of interior space.

A relatively modest budget, combined with the absolute necessity to renovate Dana Hall, led Wilson Architects to develop a relatively simple plan and limited palette of materials. The building envelope is composed of zinc panels, aluminum curtainwall, and glass. This is not the prevailing materiality of the buildings on campus. However,

an equally powerful fact of the place is the ever present open sky: a product of the campus's horizontality, low density, and relative youth of the tree canopy (the university is built on a former hog farm).

The interior of the building takes advantage of the open sky and large expanses of glass, which in many spaces extend from floor to ceiling, to flood the teaching and research labs with natural light. This strategy is effective even on the lower level of the building, which is partially below grade.

The color palette of the finishes and laboratory casework, is light in hue, intended to bounce daylight deep into the labs, which measure thirty feet from outside to corridor wall. The "teaching wall", always opposite the outside wall, of each lab is ochre, the only color other than white on the walls. This has the effect of highlighting the wall and indicating its importance in the functionality of the room. A similar approach was used with



great effect in the early modern architecture of northern Europe, where winter days are short and the available daylight limited.

The corridors walls have borrowed lights looking into the teaching labs, affording the two-fold advantage of bringing daylight and views of the labs and outside world into the corridors, allowing one to remain oriented both spatially and temporally.

It is fair to say that the Biology and Chemistry Building embodies the 'ameliorative' view of contemporary spatial practice - a view that is consistent with Wilson Architects' body of work, which in its conception and execution, is the product of significant and ongoing stakeholder input, and

strives to operate on a continuum with the traditions of the great American campuses on which the firm works. This building demonstrates that it is possible for architecture to be simultaneously grounded and aspiring to something new. To borrow the words of the president of the University of Hartford, Walter Harrison, "The sky, so beautiful and striking through those new windows, is the limit."

James Moses, AIA, is a LEED Accredited Professional and a Senior Architect at Wilson Architects. He was Project Architect for the University of Hartford ISET project. He is also a design faculty member at the Boston Architectural Center.

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