

# City College

BY VERNON MAYS

Since 2004, Columbia College Chicago has leveraged design to accentuate the standout qualities of its urban campus—a remarkable transformation that’s been accomplished with a true economy of means.

This article appeared originally in *Dialogue* 17. ©2009.  
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Photography by Michelle Litvin.



While “college campus” conjures images of Gothic buildings and lawn-covered quadrangles, the demand for higher education in cities today is changing how students view the college experience. Columbia College Chicago, founded in 1890, is one of a number of urban institutions—NYU, started in 1831, is another—that use the city itself as their campus. Originally a “school of oratory,” Columbia College Chicago took off in the 1990s. Today, its campus consists of 22 downtown buildings—2.5 million square feet—used for classrooms, offices, and dorms.

The “campus” is a work in progress, but the college is making strides. It has an updated master plan that gives top priority to the task of making its disparate buildings suitable settings for academic life. “The challenge has been to create an identity that reflects our innovative, fresh, and colorful college,” says Alicia Berg, vice president, Office of Campus Environment. “We’re a school of arts and media spread out across the South Loop in buildings acquired over time. The challenge was to create a sense of continuity, inside and out.” Led by David Broz, an education practice leader in Chicago and Minneapolis, Gensler has done over 80 projects for the college in the past five years.

## That Campus Feeling

“How do you create a campus environment when the fabric that stitches the buildings together is actually the city streets? You don’t have control over it, as with a conventional campus.” That was Broz’s dilemma. What Columbia College Chicago did control, he notes, were the corridors of the buildings—all 120,000 square feet of them. Before 2004, the college just bought buildings and put them into service. “There was no shared design language and no real integration between floors.”

To give the buildings some common ground, Gensler took the college's Office of Campus Environment through a visualization exercise that provided the basis for an early design intervention. The corridors now have a two-tone color scheme that gives them an art gallery–like atmosphere. To orient people in the zigzag hallways that sometimes plague older buildings, Gensler inserted bold swaths of color in the elevator lobbies, and used supergraphics to mark faculty offices, stairways, and restrooms. “We also hung several hundred reproductions of student artwork on the walls,” says Broz. “It feels like you’re at an exhibit.”

Each building has its own color scheme. The seven-story 33 East Congress Building features a bright orange motif that's selectively expressed in the carpets, walls, and ceilings—right down to the ground-floor security desk. “You turn the corner and you see this burst of orange 100 feet down the corridor,” Broz explains. “That tells you where to exit the building.” Gensler went on to redesign the college's public lobbies and first-floor spaces—a strategy aimed at embracing the South Loop, an area that's in a major transition socially and economically. It was a crucial step for the college. “Traditional campuses are about monumental buildings and the spaces they enclose,” Broz says. “Columbia College Chicago is about how city buildings interact with downtown streets. The ground floors are where life happens.”



### Less Learns to Do More

Despite its longevity and recent growth, Columbia College Chicago has to reconcile its ambitions with a modest capital budget. Gensler focused on design moves that, for relatively little money, would have an outsize impact on the quality of student life. Take the lobbies. Some were in bad shape, and others were badly “modernized” by the previous building owner. Gensler took them back to basics.

Historic columns with plaster capitals were uncovered, and simple light fixtures and clean graphics were added. At the 623 South Wabash Building, dishlike yellow chairs lend a fitting informality to the lobby lounge. A wedge-shaped orange ceiling conceals new warm air ducts, creating a temperate space that students are glad to frequent during Chicago's notoriously freezing winters. Upstairs, students were often spread out on different floors, which can be isolating. To counter this, Gensler mixed in a lot of communal spaces to encourage people to congregate—a strategy also applied to other college buildings.

Reworking the ground floors suggested the possibility of treating the building exteriors as a canvas that could cement ties with the community outside. When Gensler renovated the second floor of 33 East Congress for the journalism department, the word Columbia was spelled out in bold letters across the windows facing the elevated trains that run by the building day and night. This one low-cost move gives the college a public visibility that's the envy of other universities in the Loop. “It's seen as the gorilla in the neighborhood now because it has such an amazing presence,” Broz says.

Another connection to the city takes place at Anchor Graphics, a not-for-profit fine art print shop affiliated with the college. Two large bay windows in the second-floor studio face Wabash Avenue, and Broz wanted to bring daylight into the space without allowing too much of the sun's heat in as well. The solution was handmade curtains that use sheer fabric as a base. Joining forces with the Office of Campus Environment, the designers created patterns with reflective sequins that resist the sun and flutter as heat rises.

Not all the effort has gone into academic buildings. In the old Lakeside Press Building, now a residence hall, Gensler exposed the barrel arch ceiling at the entry and created a gathering place with pool and foosball tables. On the opposite side of the first floor, a new workout room caters to the fit. There's a small stage nearby for impromptu performances and poetry slams. “The students are artists, actors, and musicians,” Broz explains. “They want to show what they can do.”



### Issues of an Urban Campus

One challenge at Columbia College Chicago is the need to adapt former department stores and banks, some of them a century old, to entirely new uses. Another challenge is the Loop itself, not the quietest place on the planet. The elevated train line that adjoins the journalism department is pretty noisy. “We knew that we couldn’t put anyone along that façade who would find the trains disruptive,” Broz notes. “What fits perfectly is the department’s newsroom. For reporters, the train is just background noise.”

The journalism department’s program includes a converged newsroom where students adapt writing and reporting to the latest media platforms. Gensler put this specialized facility in the center, wrapped in corrugated metal. Inside are a video production set and a mixing lab. “Everyone has to walk around it,” Broz says. “What could have been a big, amorphous space has a heart—a unifying element.”

This raises another issue—how to integrate technology. The college makes heavy use of computers in its programs and wants students to feel they have constant access to them. In one building, computers were set up in five adjoining classrooms, each with someone being paid to monitor their use. However, the students imagined that the computers could only be used in class. To change their perception, Gensler suggested getting rid of dividing walls to create an open-plan environment. The classroom floor now has three wall-less classrooms, set apart by visual cues—lower ceilings, different carpets, and special acoustical treatment. Computer workstations fill out the space in between. “Despite initial concerns about noise levels, it’s actually pretty quiet,” Broz says. “Students can see that computers are available, so they gravitate there between classes and start working.”

### Finding a Wider Audience

One problem for an urban campus is to identify a “way in” for prospective students and their parents. To provide one for Columbia College Chicago, Gensler helped it convert a ground-floor space along Harrison Street as an Admissions Tour Center. Naturally, since creative types make up the student body, the college needed to differentiate itself visually from more buttoned-down alternatives. Floor-to-ceiling transparency is what greets students and parents. “It’s important to recruiting,” Alicia Berg says. “Students judge our credentials as an arts and media school by the image we convey. We also want to make people aware of the Columbia College brand in Chicago. These projects make a civic statement about our place in the community.”

This is an urban campus. Its roots are every bit as ancient—actually, slightly more so—as the traditional campuses that appear in most university and college catalogues. Those institutions may have their ivy-covered courts, but Columbia College Chicago has a world-class city at its doorstep. Culture, urbanity, and the pure energy of real life are as much a part of its curriculum as its formidable range of courses.

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