


[News Home Page](#)
[News Digest](#)
[Nation](#)
[World](#)
[Metro](#)
[Schools](#)
[Crime](#)
[Government](#)
[Traffic](#)
[Lottery](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Religion](#)
[Columnists](#)
[The District](#)
[- Schools](#)
[- Crime](#)
[- Government](#)
[Maryland](#)
[Virginia](#)
[Community Groups](#)
[Special Reports](#)
[Photo Galleries](#)
[Live Online](#)
[Metro Index](#)
[Business](#)
[Washtech](#)
[Sports](#)
[Style](#)
[Education](#)
[Travel](#)
[Health](#)
[Home & Garden](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Weather](#)
[Weekly Sections](#)
[Classifieds](#)
[Print Edition](#)
[Archives](#)
[Site Index](#)
[Help](#)
**Cityscape**

## Two For the Books

Howard University's New Libraries Are Studies in Excellence

By Benjamin Forgey

Washington Post Staff Writer

Saturday, June 2, 2001; Page C01


[E-Mail This Article](#)

[Printer-Friendly Version](#)

[Subscribe to The Post](#)

As repositories of knowledge and as places to learn, libraries are central to a university's mission. Thus, to build a new library is an important step, literally and symbolically.

To build two libraries at once is of course a bigger, more ambitious deal. And to create in today's world two buildings of genuine architectural distinction -- well, that is an achievement that defies ordinary odds.

This is, nonetheless, exactly what Howard University has done with the Louis Stokes Health Sciences Library on the main campus close to downtown and its law library in a more bucolic setting near Van Ness Street and Connecticut Avenue NW.

The libraries were designed by different architects for dissimilar sites, and each possesses its own distinct character -- the health library's willful exuberance poles away from the law library's seemingly effortless serenity. But each helps to strengthen the university's identity, and each emphatically contributes to a sense of place in its particular location.

Named for the civil rights advocate and former Ohio congressman, and paid for largely with federal funds (as was the law library), the \$26.5 million Stokes Library stands on what used to be a surface parking lot on the southern edge of campus, between W and Bryant streets at Fifth Street NW.

Thanks entirely to the new library, that scar in the cityscape has been transformed into a classic campus green, a handsomely planted quadrangle with crisscrossing walkways.

"What has been lacking in the southern part of the campus is a public space, a public reference," noted Howard President H. Patrick Swygert during a visit to the site. "We placed this building so that folk down here could finally have their own version of the upper quad."

Creating such visual and symbolic connections to the older, northern part of the Howard campus was one of three main goals motivating the design of the new building. The others were to improve research and study facilities for 2,000 students in medicine and health-related fields, and to provide for them a communal focus that has long been lacking.

Designed by the Princeton, N.J.-based Hillier Group, in association with the Baltimore firm of Amos Bailey + Arnold Associates, the building splendidly

**SEARCH:**
[Search Options](#)

Partner:

[BRITANNICA.COM](#)

achieves these aims.

When finally occupied (books are being moved in soon), this library will be a wonderful place to study. There are more than 600 seats at computer-wired desks and tables in the building, some of them beautifully squirreled away in the stacks. Several classrooms are equipped with "distance-learning" video and audio hookups. And distinctive special-purpose rooms for meetings, medical memorabilia and rare books are scattered here and there.

The architectural expression is a complex mixture of elements -- a bit stressed, perhaps, but basically successful. The building is rectangular, with its long sides aligned on a north-south axis. Facing the quad is a long red-brick colonnade that terminates in a vertical cylinder set off by a plane of transparent glass and topped with a dramatic, hexagonal cupola.

"Howard grads get it right away," said Swygert, himself the holder of two degrees from the university (a 1968 law degree and a 1965 bachelor of arts). "This building says 'Howard University' to them."

Swygert is citing elements that refer to older buildings up on the crest of the hill. While the deep red color of the bricks, for instance, contrasts pugnaciously with the salmon tints of nearby buildings, it echoes the hues of the upper campus. Above all, there is the zinc-and-glass-sheathed cupola, which recalls the prominent cupola atop Founders Library, designed seven decades ago by Albert I. Cassell and his associate, Louis E. Fry Sr.

That cupola, based -- like much else in Founders Library -- on Philadelphia's Independence Hall, is indeed a powerful symbol. In a segregationist period, Cassell and Fry adapted the architectural language of the Revolutionary era as a profound means of legitimizing the achievements and ambitions of this primarily African American institution.

They succeeded in their architectural mission for two reasons. They anchored the buildings to Cassell's visionary master plan for the entire campus, establishing a strong place-shaping role for architecture. And they adapted, but did not copy, the Philadelphia icon.

The architecture of the new health-sciences library succeeds on very much the same terms. It is anchored to an identifiable place, and it catches the spirit of Howard's architectural tradition without imitating details.

Clearly, however, the architects of the new library cast a wider net for references. Different parts of the building recall not only Cassell's neo-Georgian style but also the high-Victorian pomp of the recently restored home of Gen. Oliver Otis Howard, a founder of the university; the stripped classicism of a 1930s building directly across the new quad; and the modern architecture that has dominated the Howard campus for more than half a century.

Amazingly, this rather weird assortment holds together. The architects got the basics right, and they also maintained a low-key sense of humor. Facets of the design that cause a smile include the really, really heavy brick cornice; the curve of the vaulted zinc-paneled roof, which produces an optical illusion of a dip in the roofline; and, above all, the helmeted hexagonal cupola, at once funny and forceful.

Designed by the distinguished Boston firm of Kallmann McKinnell and Wood, collaborating with the Washington firm of Baker Cooper & Associates, the \$25.8 million law library is simple where the health sciences building is complex. Harmoniously, elegantly simple.

The contexts for the two buildings could hardly be more different. Howard purchased the Northwest site in 1974, 19 acres and five buildings (used mainly as a Catholic girls' school) between Upton and Van Ness streets about 200 yards to the east of Connecticut Avenue.

It is a strange site, an almost invisible retreat close by one of the city's busiest boulevards. The existing, rather attractive buildings (with the solitary exception of the 1960s library) are lined up on a high ridge facing Upton Street but are largely hidden from street view by walls and high trees.

Yet most students and teachers approach the complex by car or foot from the Van Ness Street side. For a quarter century, in other words, the front has been the back and vice versa. In addition to providing the law school with a much-needed, high-quality library, the architects of the new building had to try to make some sense of this topsy-turvy condition.

Wisely, they did not play any stylistic games. Rather, they adopted local coloring in the orange-blond bricks of their new building and then proceeded to address all other major issues with one bold move -- the sweeping, concave curve of the primary facade.

Facing the backs of the old school buildings, this curving facade, with its overhanging metal roof and regular rhythm of narrow brick piers and wide, high windows, does indeed shape a new public space. Newly defined and newly planted, the space between the new and old buildings becomes, in effect, a long-missing campus quad for the law school. (Lots of work remains to be done before this side of the campus becomes a memorable entryway to the school, but that is another story.)

Behind this estimable facade, in addition to a few classrooms and offices, is a fine, spacious reading room. Three stories high, filled with natural light and splendidly appointed with wooden tables and chairs, it is a worthy addition to the city's short list of distinguished reading rooms.

Lots of universities these days are spending money on dramatic, "signature" buildings by famous architects -- a good idea when the architect's signature is appropriate, a bad notion when it is not. Though designed by well-known out-of-town firms, these excellent new libraries don't fit the dramatic mold. Polite but not overly deferential, they both fit in and stand out -- a brilliant result for a venerable institution.

© 2001 The Washington Post Company

---

### Related Links

#### District News

[What Go-Goes Around . . .](#) (The Washington Post, 6/3/01)

[\*\*Late-Night Drive on Scofflaws\*\*](#) (The Washington Post, 6/2/01)

[\*\*Two For the Books\*\*](#) (The Washington Post, 6/2/01)

[\*\*More District News\*\*](#)