The Spirit of Cavanaugh Hall: Reflections on Its 40th Anniversary

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We have come together to celebrate the anniversary of an important building, and thereby the beginning of a school that has been the home for most of us for many years—and some very few of us for the whole forty years. Like a home, Cavanaugh Hall has become both comfortable and familiar. And it still retains a certain venerability, even as by comparison with some of its bright, new neighbors, it has become a little shabby. But it is ours, and it will always have a special place in our minds and hearts because so much has happened here, as always is the case in any home, where there are births and losses, disputes and celebrations, remodeling and regrets.

While many of us used to take comfort in knowing that no matter how dowdy Cavanaugh might have become, it was still much better than the Mary Cable Building, where some of our less fortunate colleagues—and most of our part-time faculty—had their offices. Some of us taught there. It was always Mark Grove’s custom to assign me a classroom in the Mary Cable Building—even for an eight o’clock morning class—until I politely would ask for a reassignment to Cavanaugh. He was always glad to accommodate since there were plenty of empty rooms at that hour, but he liked to remind me that not all parts of campus were as splendid as Cavanaugh. And so like many of you, I came to see Cavanaugh as a pretty good place. Later on, when I moved over to the temporary Quonset hut known as the AO Building, I also appreciated that Cavanaugh was a much better place to be in the event of a tornado—or even a good storm. At least in Cavanaugh there was little danger of windows blowing in.

Given the role of Cavanaugh in the birth of IUPUI, it has also become a symbol as well as a solid place of refuge in a storm. It was with special fanfare that university administrators from IU gathered with Mayor Lugar, city leaders, and a few faculty to break ground for what was intended to become Indianapolis’ key to a new and better future. Even before IUPUI was official, Joe Taylor was there—flanked by faculty like Miriam Langsam and Ralph Gray or Erv Boschmann—with a clear vision as to the role that the liberal arts—and sciences—would play in creating this new future. It was 1968, and IU and Purdue were not yet married. But that did not matter to those who knew that something very special was happening on the Westside of Indianapolis—and it was more than a couple of new buildings.

Twenty years later, in 1988, when we all collectively prepared the first development plan for IUPUI, we reached back to the physical beginnings of the campus for an inspiration. We talked about the connection of the university with the community it served. The development plan also connected IUPUI’s formation with John Henry Newman’s famous essay on “The Idea of a
University.” We recognized that in the establishment of this building, and its two companion structures, there was a vision for the future of the city and the community of people the new university would serve. Speaking for our time and our university as well as his own, Newman said:

A University is a place of concourse, with students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge. You cannot have the best of every kind everywhere; you must go to some great city or emporium for it. There you have all the choicest productions of nature and art all together, which you find each in its own separate place Elsewhere . . . In the nature of things, unity and greatness go together; excellence implies a centre. And such . . . is a University.

And such was Cavanaugh Hall. It was a place where IUPUI came together. Faculty from different disciplines shared not only the space but also the idea of forming something new, a new kind of university for a city that needed a new future. Chemistry, English, mathematics, history, geology, painting, philosophy and dozens more departments (some with no more than two or three faculty) were all together in one place—not only bringing unity and greatness in disciplines but also becoming the place where IU and Purdue found their common ground as well. Some who were here for those heady days may well believe that they indeed had the “choicest productions of nature and art all together.”

Cavanaugh Hall thus became the symbol of IUPUI’s connection to the community, and the building itself laid the foundation for what has become our distinguishing characteristic as one of the nation’s most civically engaged universities. The early pioneers of the new IUPUI recognized in each other that unity and greatness do, indeed, go together. Just as the liberal arts and sciences are the foundation of a university’s intellectual building, so too are the collaboration and common purpose of people thrown together who must create a future by design and by their own effort without the benefit of decades or centuries of organic and incremental growth. Cavanaugh Hall became the seedbed—some would even say the hotbed—for new ideas for what the new IUPUI should become.

From the outset, then, the liberal arts took on a practical nature. While honoring the intellect and respecting the value of a perspective removed from immediacy, the liberal arts nonetheless were always interested in how they could be applied and be used to help solve or address human issues. In the larger concerns facing the nation and world, faculty in Cavanaugh Hall found in their own community issues aplenty for both research and the application of knowledge. Unlike the universities of Newman’s time, IUPUI would find a middle way, new metaphors to replace the walls and the towers of ivory and mud that isolated learning from its purpose—instead, IUPUI would help make Indianapolis and central Indiana one of the best places to live, to work and to learn in the nation if not the world.

Faculty based in Cavanaugh Hall played critical roles in helping the city through difficult times as the civil rights movement, the escalating war in Vietnam, and rapid economic changes following declines in traditional manufacturing left the city wondering about its future. There were
resources, talent, expertise, and a genuine commitment to place that made IUPUI and its community true partners. Faculty started the program of public commentary known as “Consider This,” first on radio and then on cable television, where it continues today—and may have evolved into Facebook or Twitter by now (I am “Linked In” but I don’t “Tweet”). Students created the aptly named Genesis as a student run and produced magazine of the creative arts—a tradition that has also endured. The Sagamore had its origins in the basement of Cavanaugh as did a number of student organizations that have waxed and waned, grown and disappeared, or persisted to provide a continuity of student engagement and involvement, organizations such as the Black Student Union that had its first demonstration in 1971 and that has been a conscience and consciousness for the community uninterrupted over the past 40 years. Centers focused on survey research, economics education, or the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce found a way to advance knowledge while using it for the very place where we all live.

With a shared sense of purpose, faculty in Cavanaugh quickly learned to rely on each other as small departments reached out to colleagues across the hall as well as across departments to form committees, develop plans, recruit students, and create all manner of new policies, procedures and processes. While there were some tensions as student services moved into Cavanaugh, absorbing any sense of having plenty of room, there was also a growing recognition of unity of purpose as both faculty and staff worked together to help students with their education and their future, including the many adults who needed to come back to school in order to re-start their lives following some of the social displacements of the times.

Nothing captured this better, perhaps, than the chaos and excitement of registration, when lines of students wound through halls, up and down stairs, and out the doors onto the street as the whole university, it seemed, was trying to be in Cavanaugh Hall all at once. This culture of cooperation, interdisciplinarity, tolerance, and common purpose created one of IUPUI’s most important and enduring legacies—a tradition which persists to this day despite the huge expansion in the number of schools, facilities, and people. We may be celebrating the anniversary of a building, but we are also celebrating the incubation of an ideal that exceeded what Cardinal Newman imagined over a century ago.

As departments and programs grew into their own certainty and their own intellectual spaces, they left Cavanaugh for new buildings designed for science, engineering, technology, social work, business, journalism, education, art, and eventually programs like public affairs that looked a lot like metropolitan affairs or informatics that had its origins in telecommunications. But because of the common origins, the shared space, and the recognition of an opportunity to create an intentional future, all of these departments, centers, and schools have retained the spirit of Cavanaugh and retained a sense of unity and greatness that pervades the campus still and will, I hope, shape its future.

One of the most important developments to originate in Cavanaugh Hall was the creation of graduate programs—a breakthrough for our school but a change in the stature of the whole campus. While many faculty harbored a desire—as all faculty everywhere—to have graduate
programs, the impetus for their creation really came from the community. Even when IU’s own Trustees could not perceive the value of graduate degrees in the humanities and social sciences, Indianapolis’ leaders did since they knew that future growth depended on an intellectual capital that would not be capped by degree levels. Sandra Borns, who was one of the first members of our community board of advisors—and with her husband was developing Union Station—would carry with her into meetings throughout the city a huge, five-foot tall poster board showing the nation’s 30 largest cities and the number of public university graduate degrees in the liberal arts each had available to its citizens. Indianapolis was at the bottom with zero, while the likes of Louisville, Memphis, Saint Louis, and Columbus had dozens. It did not take long until we had our first of many graduate degrees—in history, with an emphasis on public history but open to all areas of study.

I don’t mean to suggest that all was peace and harmony in those early years—no more than it is now. There were intense debates about what future to create and what paths to take toward shared goals. Some of these were sufficiently intense that some of you may recall when the fourth floor elevator lobby was painted a rosy pink. You may have thought this was merely the architect office’s whim, but it was actually a color picked deliberately because the psychology department said that this color would have the greatest calming effect on people. It was my hope that as unhappy faculty—and even students—passed through the lobby on the way to the dean’s office that the pink would work its magic and grievants would arrive calm and cooperative. I regret to say that it did not always work, but it did begin a trend toward making Cavanaugh a little less dreary.

The trend has continued with the continued improvements in the atmosphere of Cavanaugh, with new furniture in the lounges and the access to computers that continue to make the building a hub of discourse and interaction—virtually as well as humanely. Nothing has been as important, however, as the connector between the campus center and Cavanaugh, creating a practical bridge for continued linkage of the liberal arts with the whole campus but also serving as a physical reminder of connectivity. Even if IUPUI is the home of the Internet 2 Networking Center and even if our University Library remains one of the most electronically advanced, the physical interaction of people is the hallmark of the liberal arts, and with this bridge another aspect of IUPUI’s founding spirit has been preserved. As you walked to dinner this evening across the bridge, I hope some of you paused for a moment to reflect on what it has meant for the liberal arts to be connected to the rest of IUPUI—from medicine in the West (with programs like medical humanities or health communications) to law and philanthropy and informatics to the East.

Although I am now away from campus with no real knowledge of events, I understand that some of these conversations about unity and greatness are taking a fresh look at the past. Discussions are underway that might return journalism to liberal arts, or re-unite the sciences and liberal arts; other combinations might be contemplated as well. While the growth of these programs will never allow them all to be returned to Cavanaugh Hall, there is something satisfying in knowing that the possibility of connection continues. I have no prediction about the results of these discussions, but I do believe that the spirit of Cavanaugh will influence the
outcome and, once again out of a period of creativity and common purpose, the new vision for IUPUI will retain its founding principles of unity and greatness. Excellence in the center, in Cavanaugh, in the liberal arts.

Thank you for this opportunity to share a few recollections of Cavanaugh Hall. As Winston Churchill famously said, we shape our buildings and our buildings shape us. Thanks to Cavanaugh Hall and the School of Liberal Arts, we have been well shaped.