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CAPPER FOR A CAMPUS | Art Institute gets upgrade

Copper, glass and lots of class

A new \$7 million structure spans new and old — and helps connect the school to the neighborhood.

By KEVIN COLLISON
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“You wouldn’t know the whole thing wasn’t all a new building. The integration came off better than expected.”

Kathleen Collins, president of the Kansas City Art Institute

The **Kansas City Art Institute** is dedicating the new home for its painting program today, a crisply contemporary building that also heralds a fresh outlook toward its neighborhood.

The \$7 million **Lawrence and Kristina Dodge Painting Building** at 4446 Oak St. is a blend of new and old, and replaces the **Epperson House**, a converted 1909 residence that had long outlived its usefulness. The new building was made possible with a \$5 million donation from former Kansas Citian Larry Dodge and his wife, Kristina, who now live in Monarch Beach, Calif.

The building, being dedicated at 9 a.m. today, also completes the second phase of a master plan for the 15-acre campus. This phase included removing an old iron fence and brick columns along Oak Street that had contributed to the sense of the school being an isolated enclave, detached from the **Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art** across the street and from the **Southmoreland** neighborhood.

With the opening of the new building, more than \$27 million has been spent on capital improvements at the Art Institute over the past nine years.

“We’re rethinking the campus,” said Kathleen Collins, president of the 120-year-old school. “We want to integrate it with the community at large and invite the community in ... We want people to come on campus and watch young people doing art.”

The new Dodge building features a dynamic juxtaposition of copper- and glass-clad cubes on the east side where it fronts the Nelson-Atkins Museum, and embraces the campus green behind it with a plaza flanked by two renovated wings from the previous painting complex.

Collins praised the work of Kirk Gastinger of **Gastinger Walker Harden Architects**, saying the 34,000-square-foot building was a seamless blend of new and old.

“Kirk and his firm did a brilliant job,” she said. “You wouldn’t know the whole thing wasn’t all a new building. The integration came off better than expected.”

While Epperson had a funky, endearing reputation with students, it was not the best place to teach and paint, Collins said. The three-story brick house had been chopped up over the years into a warren of poorly lit rooms, including the basement, and the ventilation was awful.

The new structure is open and bright, with its north exterior entirely sheathed in glass to allow in the spectrum of natural light coveted by painters. Gastinger interviewed students and faculty to learn about their needs before presenting his ideas to the school. His firm was one of four applying for the job.

“It’s all about composition and collage,” he said. “It evolved from the collage of programmatic needs, the collage of space needs

and the collage of building materials.”

He compared removing the old house and keeping the **Atha** and **Kemper** wings, which date to 1970, to a knee replacement.

“You have two good bones and one in the middle that doesn’t work,” he said. “It was a challenge to distinguish that and determine how it would fit together.”

The materials include copper and zinc supplied by **A. Zahner Co.** of Kansas City, along with glass, steel and concrete. The building includes five studios, two drawing rooms, two classrooms, a technology room, faculty offices and a combination gallery and lounge.

The contractor was **McCownGordon Construction**.

Collins said the school did not begin the process assuming the Epperson House would be razed, but a building inspection determined it was “irretrievable.”

The new Dodge building offers flexibility and space that will significantly improve the students’ learning environment.

Painting remains the most popular major at the Art Institute, with 90 students enrolled this year. Overall, the school is entering the academic year with one of its larger enrollments, 660 students as opposed to the usual 580 or so.

Attorney Herb Kohn, chairman of the Art Institute board of trustees, said the Dodge donation came at an ideal time to help the school meet the needs of its increasing enrollment.

Dodge is president and CEO of **American Sterling Bank** and **American Sterling Insurance Services**, both of which have Kansas City area locations.

Other major donors include the **Hall Family Foundation**, which recently gave \$2 million to the college building fund, and the **William T. Kemper Foundation-Commerce Bank** trust, which donated \$1 million.

“It’s not very often when everything falls into place perfectly,” Kohn said. “In this case, all of the ingredients came together at the same time:

“The Dodges’ desire to do something special in Kansas City ... our need for a building that happened to fit their desire; even the opportunity to use the resources of one of our trustees, Bill Zahner, whose firm was responsible for the beautiful copper on the building.”

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