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## A school full of lessons about architecture: In an impoverished urban neighborhood, John Ronan's Christ the King does a lot with a little



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The thieves stole the “C” in “Christ” in the days before Easter. The brushed aluminum letter, quickly replaced, adorned the front of a no-frills but architecturally impressive new school in the troubled Austin neighborhood on Chicago’s West Side. It’s the same neighborhood where a 14-year-old boy was shot as he walked to another school last week.

The new building, called Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School and located at 5088 W. Jackson Blvd. (above), is touted as the first all-new Catholic high school on the West Side in more than 80 years. It may look too corporate, but its business-like image and its unrepentant sense of newness —a shock amid the tattered brick buildings around it — are both there by design, sending a message that the building marks a fresh start.

The architecture provides order amid urban chaos, as does an innovative work-study program that places students in clerical and entry-level jobs at law firms, banks, hospitals and other businesses. Both form a framework that is helping students like Larry Carr and Khadijah White to build a better life. Here is a reminder, after years in which designers were obsessed with flashy museums and concert halls, that the social promise of architecture still matters.

“I kind of envision it as a school of the future, not any old office building,” said Carr, a neatly dressed sophomore wearing a tie. “It’s a profession environment,” White added.

They are among 160 freshmen and sophomores at the new building, which opened in January and will gradually ramp up to its full capacity of 600 students. More than 80 percent of the students come from Austin, where boarded-up houses betray a recent wave of home foreclosures. Nearly all are African-American. Yet surprisingly, more than

90 percent are not Catholic, revealing how attractive a quality, values-based education is to the area's struggling families.



Designed by Chicago architect John Ronan, Christ the King is far simpler than Ronan's award-winning Gary Comer Youth Center (left) in the also-troubled Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood on the South Side. There is no scrolling LED sign atop an 80-foot tower, no powerfully sculpted cantilevers, no gym with mechanically operated bleachers that magically convert it into a theater. The per-square-foot budget for the \$27 million school was roughly half that of the elaborate youth center. The school still owes \$13 million on its zero-interest construction loan, said the Rev. Christopher Devron, its president.

Accordingly, at Christ the King, Ronan made every move count, beginning with an L-shaped plan that consists of a thin, steel-framed academic wing that

runs east-west along Jackson and a load-bearing, masonry-walled athletics wing, that runs north-south on South Leamington Avenue. The simple structure allowed the building to be erected quickly, a key move because the students were stuck in an old Catholic grammar school with overcrowded classrooms, where they used plastic tubs to store their stuff instead of lockers.



Ronan's plan benefits its environs, too. Christ the King is not set back from Jackson, as it would be in a suburban office park, but comes right out to the sidewalk, inviting passersby to gaze inside the floor-to-ceiling glass walls of its first-floor cafeteria. The message is clear: The school means to be an asset to the neighborhood, not a fortress. At the same time, the buildings safeguards students, joining with another L-shaped school on the same block, the Chicago Jesuit Academy, to form a protected, courtyard-like space.

thermal insulation, endows the boxy exterior with flashes of colors and a subtle sense of depth. In the most inventive exterior touch, reverse-image photographs of the Stations of the Cross are printed on cement panels that ring the courtyard (above). The pictures lend the outdoor space a sacred identity, though I wonder how they will bear up to Chicago's brutal climate.

Ronan animates his austere shapes with an outer layer of randomly arranged cement panels in dignified shades of blue and gray. This "rain screen" façade, which keeps out the rain while an inner layer provides



Inside, Ronan wisely emphasized the basics — good proportions, good light, and a thoughtfully arranged floor plan. Stairwells and classrooms are high-ceilinged and light-filled. Other spaces resemble lofts with exposed ductwork, precast concrete planking and polished concrete floors. And why not? "A loft," Ronan said, "is cool." Students have one complaint: Lockers are too small, forcing them to choose between carrying around their books or crumpling up their coats.

Ronan was able to let loose in one place: a stirring first-floor chapel, lined with glass-block walls and dramatized by a rectangular skylight that rises to the building's roof (above). The chapel epitomizes elegant simplicity, with a stainless-steel Holy Water font, a

maple altar and a cross formed of thin stainless-steel cable. Here, Ronan transforms the utilitarian aesthetic found elsewhere in the school to a higher, spiritual level.

Christ the King is not the architectural equal of Ronan's more striking Comer Youth Center, but it is a model exercise in making much out of little — and powerful evidence that architecture can have a profound impact, especially where you least expect to find it.

Postscript: Architect John Ronan is making news [on other fronts](#).

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