

# The Soul of a Structure

THE DRAMATIC RENOVATION OF HAYES HALL MATCHES  
THE SPIRIT OF AN ARCHITECTURE SCHOOL ON THE RISE

By Robert L. Kaiser

**C** LIMBING ONE FINAL FLIGHT of stairs to a fourth-floor space that for decades was Hayes Hall's dark and forgotten attic, UB School of Architecture and Planning alumnus Michael Tunkey (BPS '00) looked into the rafters and his face lit up. Construction crews restoring the almost 150-year-old building had installed a skylight to illuminate what figures to be a spectacular loft-style studio for architecture and planning students when Hayes reopens in 2016, and the sun streaming in splashed Tunkey's angular features, bringing a smile to his upturned face. There, through the skylight, he saw it: the bell tower and the south face of its clock. Rearing up against a fragile December sky rather than gracing a recruitment brochure, the iconic tower felt breathtakingly real and large.

When [Tunkey](#), now a principal at global design firm CannonDesign, was an architecture student at UB, winding the clock was his job for a time. "You kind of had to go up the normal stairs," he recalls, "and then, almost like in that movie 'Being John Malkovich,' where there was an elevator stop at 8½ floors, you had to crawl through this weird little door and then go through a hole." On this early afternoon in December 2014, as UB officials gave Tunkey a tour of the site, the clock's hands were stopped at 10:32. Gutted from basement to rafters and surrounded by the high but sagging chain-link fences common to construction sites, Hayes might have looked to passersby like a place where time had come to a standstill. And yet a walk through the building's interior revealed it to be intensely alive and buzzing with activity.

FOR DEAN [ROBERT SHIBLEY](#), the rebirth of Hayes Hall affords UB a golden opportunity to raise the school's profile. By most measures, it already ranks among the nation's elite. Based on fundamental data provided by Academic Analytics, an independent research firm that focuses on higher education, both the architecture and the urban planning program consistently rank in the top 10 in research generation when compared to the other 23 architecture and planning schools in the American Association of Universities with accredited programs. The top-10 rankings put the school and its research enterprise in the company of some of the nation's best institutions, including Harvard University, UC Berkeley and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Moreover, says Shibley, firms employing UB grads invariably report that they are every bit as prepared for the work as graduates from the top-tier institutions.

Shibley is determined to see that information like this ultimately positions UB's School of Architecture and Planning prominently on the national playing field, and he believes the renovation of Hayes Hall is a key part of that process. "[This restoration] will be our statement to the world about our school's commitment to sustainability, historic preservation, community, and state-of-the-art facilities for education in architecture and planning," he says.

Shibley, himself an accomplished and highly regarded architect, is by turns or all at once cerebral and passionate and poetic when discussing architecture and urban planning—particularly when talking about UB’s School of Architecture and Planning. He doesn’t believe Hayes Hall is haunted, as some people claim. But he believes there’s something there: a spirit, if you will; the soul of a structure; that which makes a thing architecture and not just a building. “The essential conceit embedded in the idea of architecture is that it is a cultural production,” he says. “So it carries political, critical, spiritual, aesthetic and heritage-based power. All of those are narratives that fold one into the other. You’re in Ethiopia and you come up over the next dune and you see the remnants of a Roman coliseum and you are awed by its presence on the landscape. That’s not about its functional program, or its technology or construction; that’s the political intent of the Romans to represent a presence of power. These are not things you say about just buildings. These are things you say about architecture.”

HAYES HARDLY SEEMED HAUNTED the day UB officials gave Tunkey a tour of its interior. Sunlight streamed into the newly airy building. The light was fragile and pale, the light of a Buffalo sky on the eve of winter, but it was sunlight nonetheless. Its presence in the rafters on the fourth floor marked a dramatic change from the days when Tunkey the student used to shimmy through the building’s dark and claustrophobic heights to wind the mechanism in the bell tower that runs the four faces of Hayes Hall’s clock.

On this day, Hayes itself seemed to symbolize a new beginning. The building’s old, familiar exterior, its public face, masked a gutted interior filled with sawdust and the cacophony of drills. Construction workers were putting up drywall. Already in place were two layers of backer board and rough electrical and plumbing. Two workers had a tape measure rolled out from floor to ceiling.

In what will be Shibley’s office there sat a stack of wooden studs and an idled “fluffer-blower”—an odd-looking little machine, with an even odder name, that’s used to spray insulation on steel beams.

Tunkey asked questions and made comments along the way—Are you using foam shims on those mounts? Those are some serious LVLs! Near the end of the tour, when he saw the clock tower through the new skylight in what used to be Hayes Hall’s attic, he pulled out his smartphone and held it up high to shoot a photo through the glass.

That the clock’s hands were stopped was not for lack of a winder; for years now the clock has wound itself, automatically, once or twice daily. It was because the mechanism had been removed and taken to a Lockport, N.Y., shop specializing in the restoration of historical tower and street clocks. (The same shop also has renovated the Independence Hall Tower clock in Philadelphia, and America’s oldest working tower clock, in Hillsborough, N.C.)

The mechanism will be back and the clock running again by the time Hayes Hall reopens. Meanwhile, there’s only the wind to turn the new 23-karat, gold leaf-on-aluminum, powder-coated hands that replaced the clock’s rotted wooden hands in October.

No matter. Time at this building never has been measured by the hands of a clock, not really. Glimpses into the past and future require something else: Faith. Hope. Vision. A good blueprint. Back outside at the end of his tour, Tunkey turned to look at the building one last time. “That’s something to look forward to,” he said to no one in particular, removing his red hard hat and running a hand through his hair.

Then he plunked the hard hat on his head again, as if ready to go right back in.