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Breuer and the monastic vision

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Quad 136

Breuer and the Monastic Vision

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Breuer and the Monastic Vision



Marcel Breuer, architect Photo: Lee A. Hanley via CSB/SJU Archives

I grew up in a medium-sized Midwestern city that was not particularly striking or noteworthy, the kind of place most Americans grow up. A great place to live and raise a family, but not the kind of place you would visit as a vacation destination unless you had family or friends there. My exposure to the physical world tended to focus on nature. I spent some time on grandparents' farms, I enjoyed the outdoors through Boy Scouts, and family vacations tended to focus on nature: cabins, lakes, road trips in the Midwest. Travel in general in that era before cheap airfares tended to be limited to places one could drive.

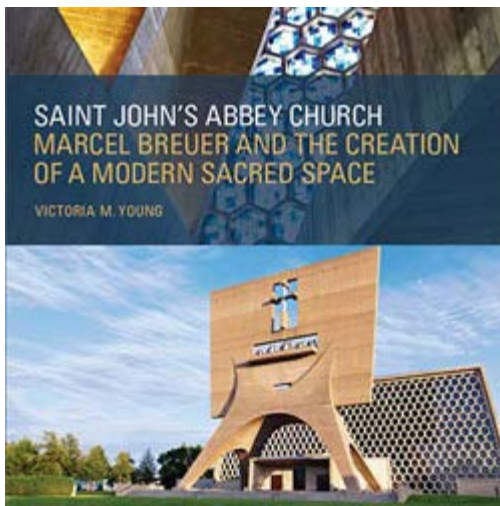
I had relatively little exposure to or interest in the built world. So it is not at all surprising that what moved me on my first visit to Collegeville was the natural beauty of the campus: the woods, the lakes and the prairie.

I vividly recall the first time I started to pay more attention to the architectural beauty in Collegeville. Early in the fall of my first year, a friend, who was studying architecture at Iowa State, sent me a letter in which he wrote, "I saw your church in my architecture class today." Clearly the architectural world believed the Abbey Church had a significance that I was unaware of as I walked by the building every day

as a freshman.

I learned more about Marcel Breuer and the importance of Saint John's during the rest of my undergraduate days, and came to appreciate the vision of the monastic community that engaged the world famous architect to design the campus in early 1960s.

I was reminded of my early naïveté about the importance of our campus this past weekend when nearly 200 fans of contemporary architecture spent Saturday at Saint John's admiring Breuer's work. The International Committee for the Documentation and Preservation of the Buildings, Sites and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement (**DOCOMOMO**) is an organization devoted to studying and preserving contemporary architecture around the



world. They hold annual conferences at important architectural sites around the world. The US Symposium was held in Minnesota this past week and one of the three days was spent at Saint John's. According to one of the participants, when the New York organizer learned Minnesota was the site for this year's US symposium, he said, "I don't care what else we do, but we're spending a day at Saint John's."

The visitors came from literally all over the world, including France, the Netherlands and Brazil. There were a number of presentations during the day, but the highlight was touring the Breuer buildings on campus. Members of the monastic community generously gave their time to provide hospitality and tours for the guests, who were wowed by our campus. One called it a "**blockbuster day.**"

The day concluded with a panel on the design and building of the Abbey Church. The panel included architectural historian Victoria Young, a University of St. Thomas professor who has written a **recent book** on the Abbey Church, Larry McGough of McGough Construction, the firm that built the church, and Fr. Hilary Thimmesh, who was integral to the Abbey's team that worked on the project.

The day was a powerful reminder of the uniqueness of Saint John's. The monks have been creative and visionary from their earliest days and that has been a gift not just to students but to the whole world, as our visitors this weekend acknowledged. Those of us who live and work in Collegeville probably take **this gift** for granted too often.

By **Michael Hemesath** | June 8th, 2015 | Categories: **Uncategorized** | **0 Comments**

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] **PrezHemesath**.