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Faith and reason

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For many visitors and certainly for our alumni, Saint John's has a special sense of place. It is a rare combination of the natural setting of woods, lakes and prairie and the built spaces of handmade red bricks and brilliant Marcel Breuer architecture all interacting with the of people who live in Collegetown—the timeless stability of the monastic community, our deeply committed faculty and staff, and the youthful energy of each generation of students. This magical mix makes so many Johnnies call Collegetown “home” long after they have graduated. It is also a blend that we are careful not to tamper with.

This sense of place was certainly foremost in the mind of architect Gregory Friesen as he was tasked with renovating the iconic Alcuin Library as part of the library and learning commons project at Saint John's. While he certainly felt a strong obligation to preserve the spirit and design of Marcel Breuer, he also was aware of the need to have the renovated Alcuin and new Br. Dietrich Reinhart Learning Commons fit into the sense of place that is so central to Saint John's. To achieve this nuanced charge while also making the academic space thoroughly 21st century, Friesen went back to Breuer's original conception which was tied directly to Benedictine and Catholic history. The University's central space and focal point is Abbey Plaza, where the Abbey and University Church stands on the south side of the mall and Alcuin Library on the north, with open green space in between. Faith and reason are represented together and in conversation with each other, as has been central to Catholic teaching and preserved by the Benedictines for centuries. There is no more succinct and beautiful manifestation of the mission of a Catholic, Benedictine university. And Friesen is making it even better.

Anyone who has visited Alcuin Library knows it is a beautiful and innovative structure, with the two massive, concrete trees of knowledge gracing and supporting the building on the upper level. There is certainly natural light in that space, but the need to have load bearing concrete walls required the windows to be relatively small and near the ceiling. Fifty years of construction innovation gave Friesen options that Breuer did not have, and the outcome will be stunning. The new design will open up the interior space as most of the books move to compact shelving in the lower levels, but most striking will be the natural light that will illuminate the interior, as concrete walls are



Church across the mall.

replaced with glass. A big part of the south wall will now be glass and allow visitors and students to look out at the Abbey and University

As the pictures show, even in the midst of construction, the interior has a very different look and feel that is completely in keeping with Breuer's vision and that of the monks who bravely commissioned this dream over fifty years ago.

The renovated Alcuin and new Learning Commons (which will offer similar views of the Church), will daily remind every visitor and our students that Saint John's University is a place where faith and reason not only coexist but actively enhance on another as learning and the search for meaning are inextricably intertwined in a great liberal arts education.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | July 22nd, 2016 | Categories: [Alumni](#), [Kudos](#) | [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](#).