

## Barry Svigals '66: Bringing Humanity, History, and Humor to his Architecture

BY BRENDA UNDERWOOD



*Billowing out like the sails of a stately Spanish*

*galleon bound for distant shores, the façade of the*

*John S. Martinez School in New Haven, Connecticut*

*immediately captures the viewer's attention.*



At the Beecher School, also in New Haven, an ornamental frieze of dancing children, more than 400 feet long, wraps the school. The work is positioned to give the illusion of movement among the 300-plus dancers as the daily arc of the sun reflects the moods of the sky and the nearby hills. At Boston College the renovated facade of a neo-Gothic building incorporates sculptures of biblical figures in the architecture, following in the tradition of the earliest architecture of the College.

These stunning designs by contemporary architect and sculptor Barry Svigals '66 pay tribute to the long-held tradition of integrating sculpture with architecture. Around the world familiar examples abound of the use of sculptural symbolism incorporated into architecture – the Parthenon of Athens, the Sagrada Familia of Barcelona, and the temples of the Mayas. Last year, Svigals was elected to the American Institute of Architects College of Fellows; the prestigious award was given for his significant contribution to the profession of architecture and specifically for his work in reawakening the tradition of integrating hand-made sculptural artwork with architecture.

“Classical architecture rich with figurative

OPPOSITE:  
Barry Svigals with  
statue of St. Albert  
the Great, which he  
designed for Albertus  
Magnus College  
Center for Science,  
Art and Technology

RIGHT: 18-foot-high  
caryatid supporting  
the main entrance to  
the Beecher Pre-K-8  
School in New Haven

BELOW RIGHT:  
30-inch high frieze  
depicting more  
than 300 dancing  
children, Beecher  
Pre-K-8 School



art and ornamental design has taught us that sculpture can tell a story,” says Svigals, the founder and managing partner of Svigals + Partners architectural design and master planning firm in New Haven. And while they may sound fanciful or avant-garde, this synergy of art and architecture has, in fact, been around for millennia.

Svigals notes that although it has not been widely practiced for the past 60 or 70 years, “the use of figurative art in architecture is a centuries-old tradition and goes back almost 30,000 years to the cave paintings of prehistoric man. A recent book by a neuroscientist\* about what makes our species unique proposes that art and its importance to humans is what distinguishes us from other animals. Art is not the frosting but the baking soda. It is a way in which we understand reality and appreciate our place in it. The distinguishing characteristic may be that it gives us a consciousness of ourselves and others. And it

may offer a clue as to why we are here.

“Sculpture in architecture offers an extraordinary opportunity in our frenetic world for people to pause, appreciate and experience the architectural narrative,” Svigals says.

“Architecture is ultimately an expression of the human spirit, offering people a connection to their environments which can enhance their appreciation of the world. The inclusion of sculpture invites another dimension of this relationship to the architecture, deeply imbedded in our sensibilities as human beings.”

A graduate of Yale College and Yale School of Architecture, Svigals studied sculpture first at Yale University and later in Paris at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, where he experienced the power of sculpture in architecture. “I became fascinated by sculpture in buildings and began drawing sculpture of all kinds including a series of gargoyles from the streets of Paris.



“Seeing those faces was very moving,” said Svigals. “These were faces that had seen life in Paris for centuries – the whole flow of humanity – and in witnessing them, I could participate in that history through their eyes. Seeing figurative sculpture in architecture [from many centuries earlier] is seeing the continuum of humanity, of our human condition over millennia. Not surprisingly it touches our feelings.”

One recent project that harkens back to history is the Columbus School in New Haven,

# ALUMNI

## *names and faces*



where both inside and outside the building the sculpture forms part of the architecture and invites interaction. The façade of the school comprises a tapestry of brick panels, a design inspired by Alvar Aalto, into which eleven monumental sculptural panels are set; they serve as allegorical symbols of Columbus's voyage to the New World.

Svigals has taken his view of Columbus from the forces that shaped him – the ocean currents and the winds – and his panels are symbolic representations of the currents of the world and the winds of change. On the panels, each of the winds is represented by puffy cheeked faces, reminiscent of the winds in old maps, blowing down or up on each of the facades. “The panels also include representations of Columbus's ships,” says the architect, “but not as they are typically represented but rather from the perspective of the fish in the sea and the birds in the air. The other images are also seen at atypical perspectives, suggesting a new way to look at the world. Teachers can use this opportunity to invite students to re-conceptualize both history and their relationship to the natural world.

“Recent studies show a direct correlation between students' physical surroundings and their scholastic performance levels,” said Svigals. “A creatively designed environment encourages pupils, be they pre-K or college

OPPOSITE TOP:  
*John S. Martinez  
Pre-K-8 School in  
New Haven*

OPPOSITE BELOW:  
*Atrium at Wallace E.  
Carroll School of  
Management at  
Boston College*

RIGHT: *University of  
Connecticut Neag  
School of Education*

BELOW RIGHT:  
*Sculptural panels on  
the façade of the  
UConn Center for  
Undergraduate  
Education*



freshmen, to be more creative themselves.

“We have found artwork to be a compelling vehicle for expanding the territory of educational opportunity,” said Svigals, “and use it to engage students of all ages, to inspire and delight the imagination. Also, integrating sculpture and figurative art with architecture can give poetic voice to a school or college’s mission while providing evidence of the human touch largely absent in contemporary architecture. The presence of figurative elements engages people at another level of appreciation; it invites them in. This aspect of inclusion and connectedness is even more important today to remind us of our collective humanity.”

It also parallels the interdisciplinary approach to education. “Whether in new construction or renovation, a symbiotic relationship between architecture and art can yield a school that teaches on multiple levels,” said Svigals, “touching the minds and spirits of students of all ages.”

Of his years at Hotchkiss, Svigals recalls, “I was very gregarious and lucky to be in a very open and friendly class. I loved being at Hotchkiss.” Not surprisingly, he loved art and remembers with affection the influence

of Mr. Robert Burrer, art teacher, “a great teacher with a great sense of humor.”

A class agent, Svigals has stayed in touch with the School and with other alumni. “I am very impressed with the campus; the School has extraordinary facilities and has, I’m happy to say, some wonderful sculpture.”

Svigals is a lecturer and visiting critic and a member of the faculty of the Yale School of Architecture.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HIS WORK,  
VISIT [WWW.SVIGALS.COM](http://WWW.SVIGALS.COM).

*\*Human: The Science behind What Makes Us Unique by Michael S. Gazzaniga*

