

STANDING TALL

No building better defines the Oakland cityscape than the Cathedral of Learning.



The Cathedral of Learning as seen from Schenley Plaza. At 535 feet, Pitt's signature structure combines the medieval ornamentation of Britain's ancient universities with the soaring height of a modern skyscraper.

Chancellor John G. Bowman, who commissioned the ambitious project in 1921, the first year of his tenure at Pitt.



Historic Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Library System

BY MARY GILBERT

The Cathedral of Learning, the University of Pittsburgh's monumental symbol of education and aspiration, has always aimed high. Pitt Chancellor John Gabbert Bowman commissioned the majestic tower in 1921, early in his tenure. Years later, he wrote:

The building was to be more than a schoolhouse; it was to be a symbol of the life that Pittsburgh through the years had wanted to live. It was to make visible something of the spirit that was in the hearts of pioneers as, long ago, they sat in their log cabins and thought by candlelight of the great city that would sometime spread out beyond their three rivers.

Because of budgetary and topographical concerns, the university already had shelved a nascent plan to construct a neoclassical acropolis rising up the hill that divides the campus into upper and lower sections—a steep incline affectionately known today as Cardiac Hill. Instead, school officials selected architect Charles Klauder's lofty design, at once vision-

ary and controversial, merging a Late Gothic Revival style with the sleekness and elevation of a 20th-century skyscraper. Although unorthodox for a university structure, going vertical fit Bowman's concept for his brainchild: it would address space and distance concerns brought on by growing student enrollment, illustrate that education resulted from



Cathy, as the tower is affectionately known, has several grand entrances, including this imposing one on the west face, along Bigelow Boulevard.

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University of Pittsburgh Historic Photographs



Construction, which began in 1926, persisted throughout the 1930s, despite the Great Depression.

University of Pittsburgh Historic Photographs



Workmen install blocks of Indiana limestone on the top floors of the tower.



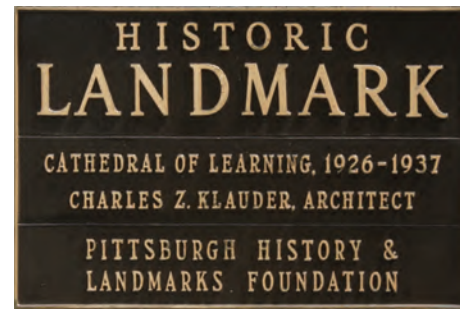
The ground floor Commons Room, rising four stories to groin vaults, captures all the gloom and grandeur associated with Gothic architecture.

aspiring to great heights, and be seen from multiple vistas as a virtual compass point. Nevertheless, wary community and university officials feared it would be too tall for their city. At 535 feet, it was nearly twice the height of the tallest structures downtown.

Undaunted, Bowman launched an ambitious \$10 million fundraising campaign to finance construction, which began in 1926. Businesses, organizations and individuals stepped up—including more than 97,000 children who each contributed a dime to “buy a brick.”

Despite further setbacks that included the stock market crash of 1929, Bowman persisted, and the Cathedral of Learning opened its doors to its first class in 1931, while still under construction, and was officially dedicated in 1937, during the depths of the Great Depression. A time capsule from the Class of '37 is hidden within the cornerstone, with instructions not to open for an astonishing 500 years—a solid vote of confidence in the future and the tower's ability to endure.

Today, the iconic edifice is the university's primary classroom and administrative center, housing offices for the chancellor, provost, and board of trustees; the Honors College; and most of the School of Arts and Sciences departments, along with libraries, computer labs, a food court, and the Richard E. Rauh Studio Theatre.

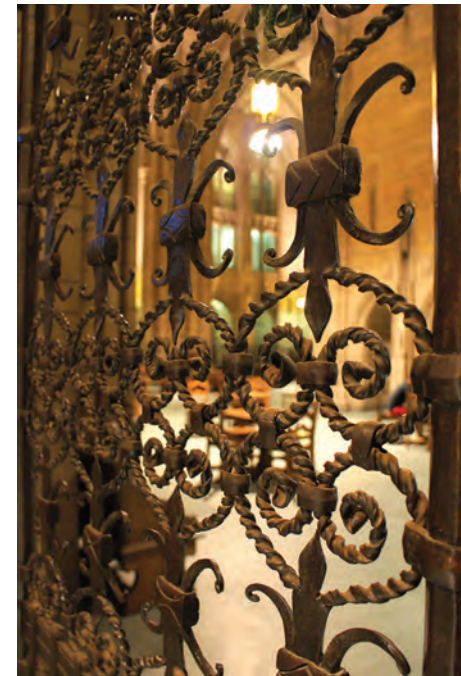


The structure was designated a local historic landmark in 1973. It is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Fashioned from Pittsburgh steel, Indiana limestone, and Vermont slate, the tower is a National Historic Landmark, distinguished as the tallest education building in the Western Hemisphere and the second tallest university building in the world. (Moscow State University's Main Building is 787 feet tall.)

Rising 42 stories, the Cathedral of Learning contains over half a million square feet of interior space, more than 2,000 rooms, and 2,529 windows. Affectionately nicknamed “Cathy,” it possesses a timeless quality that transcends generations.

“The Cathedral of Learning has the same grandeur, character, and quality as when it was originally built,” notes University Architect Canard Grigsby Jr. “It stands as a testament, a beacon, and sends a clear message that we see education as a keystone fundamental to community-building and economic stability.”



Master blacksmith and metal designer Samuel Yellin was responsible for these ornamental gates in the Commons Room.

Entering the magnificent lobby, called the Commons Room, is both awe-inspiring and humbling. Four stories high and nearly half an acre in size, it provides an uncommon setting for study, contemplation, and special events. Here, students, faculty, staff, and visitors alike take in such traditional Gothic features as soaring arches, vaulted ceilings, massive fireplaces, and colorful stained glass. Master artisan Samuel Yellin crafted the room's wrought-iron railings and lanterns. His imposing, 18-foot ornamental gates include this line from poet Robert Bridges: “Here is eternal spring; for you the very stars of heaven are new.”

The renowned Nationality Rooms are an assemblage of 30 classrooms designed by members of Pittsburgh's ethnic communities to represent their countries of origin and

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Above: The Korean room is one of the newest additions to the ever-expanding collection of Nationality Rooms, having opened in 2016.

honor their Old World heritage. German, Russian, Scottish, and Swedish rooms were the first to open in 1938. Rooms representing the Philippines, Iran, and Finland are on the drawing board. “The rooms’ style must precede 1787, the year of the university’s founding,” explains Maxine Bruhns, director of the Nationality Rooms and Intercultural Exchange programs. The only exception is the French room, which reflects the Empire style of the early 19th century.

Artist Felix de la Concha interpreted the building’s exterior beauty in his 1997 collection of paintings titled *One a Day: 365 Views of the Cathedral of Learning*, showing the land-



A *Life* magazine photographer famously captured cheering fans atop the Cathedral of Learning as the Pirates won the 1960 World Series at Forbes Field below. That image is mounted on a wall in Pitt’s Posvar Hall, framed with a letter from game-winning home-run-hitter Bill Mazeroski.

mark from various vantage points throughout the city. The collection is permanently displayed in Pitt’s Alumni Hall.

The Cathedral of Learning is revered in the world of sports for its aerial view of long-demolished Forbes Field. During game 7 of the 1960 World Series, students atop the building had a bird’s-eye view of Pittsburgh Pirate Bill Mazeroski’s miracle home run for the win against the favored New York Yankees. *Life* magazine’s George Silk captured the moment from on high in a celebrated photograph.

Athletes of lesser fame test their fitness by running up and down the tower’s nearly 1,000 stairs, inattentive to signs advising that they are for emergency use rather than exercise.

Since 2002, peregrine falcons have scored true birds-eye views of the city from a custom-made nesting box on the 40th floor, safe from public view and access. According to Tony Bledsoe, lecturer in Pitt’s Department of Biological Sciences, the presence of raptors is thanks to the region’s Peregrine Falcon Program to reintroduce, protect, and perpetuate this endangered species. To date, various pairings have resulted in 47 fledglings launched from that nest.

Another pairing took place atop the Cathedral of Learning last September, when Pitt alumnus Matthew Vendeville surprised alumna Kimberly Ciotti with a rose petal-strewn proposal that included a panoramic view from outside the 38th floor. The couple is the first ever to become engaged at the pinnacle of the tower. The university facilitated the happy event.



Peregrine falcons like this one inhabit the 40th floor, where they enjoy custom-built nesting boxes intended to encourage repopulation of the species.

“The meaning and history of that building is amazing and is part of the heart of every single Pitt student,” Vendeville says. “Being the first in the history books and having the honor to be engaged as high as you can go is super special.”

Eighty-one years into its history, Bowman’s words about the Cathedral of Learning continue to ring true: “They shall find wisdom here and faith—in steel and stone, in character and thought—they shall find beauty, adventure, and moments of high victory.” SA

MAJ Photography



Matthew Vendeville proposing to Kimberly Ciotti atop the Cathedral of Learning last September. Both are Pitt alumni. She said yes, making them the first couple to become engaged there.