Hill town on Long Island
A new college campus in Old Westbury

By Stanley Abercrombie

A pervasive idea among architects in the last decade has been that the modern movement fostered sterile buildings and that our reaction must be a return to the free, the loose, and the picturesque—an idea not only pervasive but dangerous, as is demonstrated as seldom before in a new college campus by Victor Christ-Janer, John Johansen and Alexander Kouzmanoff. These architects deserve our appreciation for having provided us with such an uncompromising realization of the picturesque idea. And now that we have seen it, perhaps we should admit that the idea is faulty, that Mediterranean hill towns, beautiful as they are, do not travel well, and that we should at once confiscate from Messrs. Christ-Janer, Johansen and Kouzmanoff their copies of Camillo Sitte. It is one thing to admire medieval town plans; it is quite something else to reproduce them on Long Island.

The school's full name is State University of New York College at Old Westbury. It is forty minutes from Manhattan, two minutes from the Long Island Expressway, and no time at all from the comfortable suburb of Old Westbury, New York. The site is the former Ambrose Clark estate, 600 acres forested with 75-foot-high oaks. In the mid-1960s the State University of New York acquired this site for its expansion, and also another one in Purchase, New York (for which Edward Larrabee Barnes has designed a campus characterized by symmetry, dignity and clarity—a campus, in short, exactly the opposite of Old Westbury). In 1965 Christ-Janer, Johansen and Kouzmanoff were asked to form a joint venture for the design of the Old Westbury campus. Together with the staffs of the University and of the State University Construction Fund, the architects began work on a campus master plan in 1965; the result called for five "cluster colleges" dispersed around the edges of the site, with some shared facilities in a central core. In 1966 the master plan was accepted, and the architects turned to the design of the present campus, intended as the first of the proposed "cluster colleges."
A view from the edge of the central plaza. The three angled concrete forms contain skylights for an art studio below, and beyond them is the top of the tower housing the Communicative and Creative Arts division. Opposite page, another view of the concrete roof decks, the central plaza at the right.
Design suggestions also came at this time from Dr. Harris Wofford, chosen to be the first president of Old Westbury. Described by a faculty member as "a liberal in the grand tradition," Wofford enlisted the advice of radical student planners who were fiercely anti-establishment. Experimental pilot programs of teaching were begun in the staid grandeur of the Clark mansion, and, when (perhaps from the sheer humiliation of it all) it burned to the ground in 1968, the programs were moved to a group of geodesic domes at a state-owned arboretum north of the campus.

In this heady atmosphere, Christ-Janer, Johansen, and Kouzmanoff, weighted with the ballast of a somewhat more conservative State University administration, designed Old Westbury. Construction began in July, 1969, and was sufficiently completed for occupancy in October, 1972. But by 1970 the ballast had come to outweigh the ebullience: after a flurry of sit-ins, demonstrations and general confusion, Wofford resigned and was replaced by the current president, John Maguire. The experimental pilot programs stopped. Whereas the key word during the Wofford administration was "revolution," the key phrase under Maguire (who has a Doctor of Divinity degree) is "human justice."

Because of this modification of goals, and because of a student body that is not what was originally expected (there are fewer students than anticipated who live on campus, more who commute from urban ghetto areas), the school's function is different from that for which it was so painstakingly designed.

Although Old Westbury already has a full complement of over a thousand students, the campus housing is far from being fully occupied. The original plan for student dining was one central cafeteria supplemented by three smaller ones close to the housing; one of these smaller ones has become a student-operated rathskellar, another has become a book store. Old Westbury also finds that it needs fewer small classrooms than planned, but more large
The roofs of the campus buildings are paved decks accessible for circulation, and these upper levels are animated with unexpected juxtapositions of the concrete building elements. Top left, a view toward the central cafeteria. Top right, a pedestrian bridge spans one of the stairs meandering down to the "village street." Below left, the central plaza with the library beyond. Below right, two academic towers (for American Studies and for Politics, Economics, and Society) are seen over the three art studio skylights.

...
chore as a "village street," it is also a drive-
way for service vehicles and the campus
security patrol. Overhead, there are con-
crete bridges from the housing to the inner
campus, some bridges narrow and some
wide enough for a row of dormitory rooms
along one side.

Bounded by the wandering path of this
village street is the heart of the campus,
a cluster of the vertical "institutes" already
mentioned and the great concrete mass
these "institutes" penetrate. The roof of
this mass, on many different levels, is ac-
cessible from a variety of ramps, stairs,
bridges and towers, and can accommodate,
in good weather, any number of student
comings and goings.

The central and most important of these
roof decks has an opening to the level be-
low, the main circulation level in bad
weather. As a focus for the campus, the
upper level seems bleak and amorphous, the
sunken portion rather small and mean.
Down below, borrowing light from this
sunken area, are entrances to the central
cafe, the large lecture rooms and the
library, which has the most dramatic in-
terior space of all. Dramatic spaces, how-
ever, are a dime a dozen on this campus;
at every turn—and there are a great many
turns—there is a surprise. These are not
surprises that come from the accretion,
through time, of changing uses, nor are
they the natural consequences of function.
Just surprises.

And everywhere there is concrete—36,-
000 cubic yards, we are told, and we believe
it. The architects initially intended that the
exterior paving be brick, which would have
been a welcome change of color and tex-
ture, but, in an economy measure, the
brick was eliminated.

Although this article, at its beginning,
suggested that Westbury had value as a
completely built example of a current taste
for the picturesque, it is clear that Christ-
Joner, Johansen and Kouzmanoff have
had a more serious intention than just giv-
ing us that. They intended a response to
a complex educational program, of course,
Top, the approach to the campus from the parking area. The sculpture partly seen on the right is by student Ernie Smith, and the entrance ramp is seen directly beyond it. Below left, the entrance ramp as it approaches the plaza level. The central cafeteria is on the left, the library building on the right. Below right, one of the stairs down from the plaza, by the Communicative and Creative Arts building.
and to the rebellious spirit of the '60s. We may infer a further intention from the context of their other buildings and writings, particularly those of Johansen, for, of the three, he has been the most flamboyantly experimental. His 1969 Goddard Library at Clark University, for example, was an absolutely stupefying assemblage of diverse brick and concrete elements, with an intentionally complicated façade which has something in common with Old Westbury's intentionally complicated plan. Two years later he carried the use of unexpected juxtapositions even further in his delightfully happy tinkertoy, the Mummers Theater in Oklahoma City.

Johansen has also been an impressively articulate theoretician, and his theory is that such messiness is not only medieval but also very modern. In the summer of 1966, just when Old Westbury was being designed, he wrote an article for The American Scholar titled "An Architecture for the Electronic Age." He observed that "a rigid deterministic world has given over to one of contingency and organic incompleteness and probability," and that "the images of the electronic world are continuous, simultaneous." He called for architecture sympathetic to, and influenced by, these scientific developments, architecture, "direct, . . . unedited, unrehearsed."

Johansen knows, of course, that buildings are far too cumbersome and tedious of accomplishment ever to be built "unrehearsed," and that only the most carefully edited building can be made to seem "unedited." What is more important is that Johansen considered unedited, chaotic effects desirable in 1966 partly because they would be attuned to what the physicists were learning about nature. The disagreeable part of this scientism is that it ignores man, who is, after all, part of nature and a rather important part. What has always characterized man—and not only back in the dull old days when Newton's time flowed "equally, without regard to anything external"—is his ability to discern, appreciate, and create order. An architec-
Opposite page, two views from the main level interiors into the central sunken courtyard, and one of the dramatic (but sometimes puzzling) spaces of the circulation system. On this page, a view into the school's most handsome and impressive space, the central well of the library building.
ture of disorder may be picturesquely photogenic (as it is, for the most part, at Old Westbury), and it may even be a witty allusion to the dance of the electrons, but, carried to its extreme, it is inhuman.

One of the two authorities most often quoted in Johansen's American Scholar article was Norbert Wiener; the other was Marshall McLuhan. Wiener, at least, can also serve as a witness for the prosecution. So let us close with a long quotation (our own italics) from his book, The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society (Doubleday, 1954):

"The first great revolution of twentieth century physics... has had the effect that physics now no longer claims to deal with what will always happen, but rather with what will happen with an overwhelming probability."

"This random element, this organic incompleteness, is one... we may consider evil; the negative evil which St. Augustine characterizes as incompleteness..."

"The universe, and all closed systems in the universe, tend naturally to deteriorate... from a state of organization... to a state of chaos... Order is least probable, chaos most probable. But while the universe as a whole, if indeed there is a whole universe, tends to run down, there are local enclaves whose direction seems opposed to that of the universe at large and in which there is a limited and temporary tendency for organization to increase. Life finds its home in some of these enclaves."

And so does architecture.

Facts and Figures
Under one of the bridges linking the perimeter ring of dormitories to the central cluster, a view of the "village street" circling the campus, and of more housing units beyond.