


Company of the Month

ENGAGED BY MONROE COLLEGE TO DESIGN PLANS FOR DORMITORIES, ALSO WORKED WITH BID AND CPC Susan Doban Architect, PC has developed a master plan to revitalize and enliven New Rochelle's Main St. corridor

BROOKLYN, NY Several years ago, the west end of Main St. in the New York City suburb of New Rochelle



Susan Doban

was just beginning to experience a revival, thanks to the conversion of the former Bloomingdale's building and Lillian Vernon site into housing.

Development on the east end, however, was lagging behind. Librett's Hardware Store, built in 1939, had been vacant for years, and next to it, a 10 ft. high dirt hill hid a secluded parking lot that served as a magnet for illicit activities.

But the fate of the neglected commercial strip began to change when Monroe College engaged Susan Doban Architect, PC, to develop a master architectural plan that would create a gateway to the college's east campus, integrate Monroe into the community, and enliven the commercial district. It also was the first of more than ten projects for the architectural firm on New Rochelle's Main St. corridor, including several for Monroe College, and others for the New Rochelle Business Improvement District (BID) and local businesses.

The firm first took the Librett's building, gutted it, and created Milavec Hall, a 22,000 s/f administration building featuring classrooms and offices. The building opened in September 2003.

"The Milavec Hall project was rewarding because it enabled us to build on our strengths—designing constructive solutions for educational facilities, and revitalizing commercial strips by restoring facades and creating commercial spaces," said Susan Doban, president of Susan Doban Architect, PC. "In this case we created an office space for the college that also invigorated the downtown area."

The next phase of the Monroe master plan was Allison Hall, a six-story, 45,000 s/f dormitory with a fitness center and tech lounge that replaced the unsavory parking lot. Allison Hall, which opened in September 2004, accommodates 200 students in 50 two-bedroom suites.

"A lot of the design ideas for Allison Hall came from an understanding of the site and where it was on Main St. and a desire to project a strong image of the college in the community," Doban

said. "It also was important that the dormitory design complement Milavec Hall and be integrated into a complex that will allow for a second dormitory, Harrison Hall, which will begin construction next year."

Ensuring that Allison Hall was open, accessible, and inviting to the community was a central goal of the project and presented the greatest architectural challenge for the firm because the property site consisted of a 10 ft. high dirt hill behind a retaining wall. The firm's solution was to dig the building into the side of the hill, bringing the first floor down to street level.

"It was essential for the first floor to be open, like a storefront," Doban said. "We wanted the design to communicate with the pedestrians and drivers along Main St. and enliven the street. It was important to the city that we do this and it also was desirable for the college so that people could see the activity in the building. By bringing the site to street level, the building becomes an asset to the community, not part of a walled-off complex."

Most recently, a few blocks from Allison and Milavec Halls, the architectural firm transformed a former auto repair shop into a sleek Culinary Arts Center. The center, which is part of Monroe College's School of Hospitality Management, opened this September.

"The existing building was shaped like a box and not distinguished architecturally so we gave it character using an industrial palette of materials inspired by the stainless steel equipment used in the kitchens," Doban said. "And, to take advantage of the light from the existing industrial windows facing the street, we created a ceiling that appears to soar."

The one-story building's most dramatic feature, however, is a window that opens up onto a courtyard, bringing more light into the facility and enlivening the courtyard.

"We opened up a wall facing the courtyard and added a window that runs the full length of the building," Doban said. "Now the students in the facility can look out into the courtyard while they're preparing food in one of the center's four kitchens, and the students relaxing in the courtyard can view what's cooking. This courtyard is important to the life of the college because it is one of the few open spaces at this urban campus, and it is further invigorated by the character of the renovation."

Construction on Monroe College's second new dormitory, the 61,500 s/f Harrison Hall, is



A map of projects that Susan Doban Architect, PC has designed for Main St. in New Rochelle, NY.

scheduled to begin in the spring of 2007. The firm's design for Harrison Hall will feature 50 suites for 250 students and a cafeteria serving the entire campus, and will complement the adjacent buildings, Allison and Milavec Halls.

The Main St. frontage of Harrison Hall will incorporate the same signature blue spandrel glass that distinguished the tower element of Allison Hall, but in the new dorm the glass will be juxtaposed against a brick tower that will distinguish not only the building, but will identify the Monroe campus itself. And, like the other buildings the firm has designed for Monroe, the first floor will be open and inviting.

"We are fortunate that Susan Doban Architect, PC, is part of our team at Monroe College," said Marc Jerome, executive vice president of Monroe College. "The architectural firm has embraced our vision for the Westchester campus and each building it designs reflects that. These buildings demonstrate that Monroe College is committed to its students and re-

mains committed to the New Rochelle community."

"As an architect," Doban said, "it is a wonderful privilege to be able to contribute to the growth of a dynamic college and in doing so bring new life to the city's downtown. We appreciate the richness of downtown New Rochelle—its architecture, its people, the businesses, and institutions. We are committed to respecting its historic past and to keeping it vital."

Ralph DiBart, executive director of the Downtown New Rochelle BID, which has been the driving force behind redevelopment along Main St., said, "Before the architectural firm began working for Monroe College about five years ago, lower Main St. consisted of an abandoned hardware store and parking lot, but in just a few years the entire character of lower Main St. has changed. Allison Hall now serves as a termination point for lower Main St. and the tower planned for Harrison Hall will mark Monroe College's New Rochelle campus and will be visible from upper Main St. as well.

Even more importantly, the projects have brought new life and activity to the street."

In addition to the work for Monroe College, Susan Doban Architect, PC, has extended its vision for downtown New Rochelle to the BID's Model Block project by restoring the facades of several 19th century structures long obscured by 20th century metal and stucco. The firm also has developed façade improvement design standards for the BID and the Community Preservation Corporation (CPC).

"Designing the façade for the Curtain Shop and General Store at 541 Main St. was particularly rewarding because the earlier probes indicated that there might be a gem of a façade hidden behind the cracked stucco covering that unfortunately had concealed, yet, ironically enough, protected, the building's true beauty for many years," Doban said. "This turned out to be just the case. The building is now one of the beautiful turn-of-the-century stone and terracotta jewels along Main St. that is being polished to complement a string of new development."

"Susan had confidence that we could restore our building when other architects said it couldn't be done," said Louis Vaccaro, manager and one of the owners of the Curtain Shop, adding that ongoing communication with Doban was key to the success of the project. "She was able to take most of the old and add the new. I think she's amazing."

"It's incredibly exciting to see the richness of the past preserved alongside projects that are very much of the present," Doban said. "Main Street's architectural history is one of New Rochelle's greatest assets."

The firm's current work also includes preliminary designs for the renovation of a historic, ornate terracotta office building at the corner of Main St. and Centre Ave., as well as a concept for a new apartment building around the corner for Cornell Pace.

In its home base of Brooklyn, the firm is committed to educational, residential and commercial projects including work on the site planning and design of 45 residential units with artists' studios above the Fairway Supermarket in the developing area of Red Hook, Brooklyn, and streetscape designs for Emmons Ave. in Sheepshead Bay, and for Sunset Park.

Doban, who received her M. Arch. degree from Columbia University and graduated from Harvard University, founded Susan Doban Architect, PC, in 1996.