

A Flexible and Fluid Approach at the University of Rhode Island

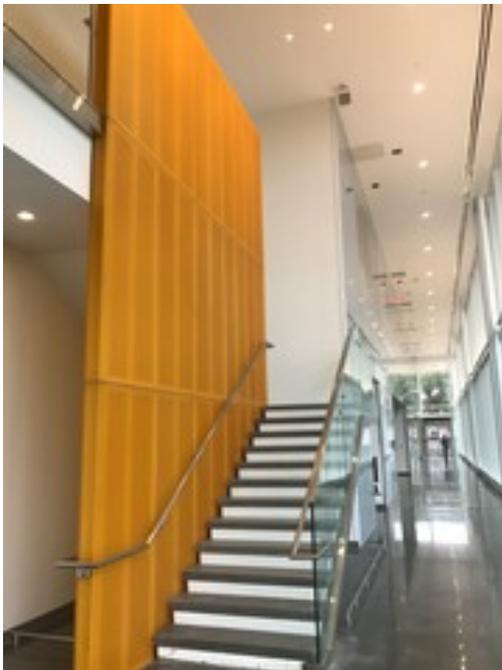
Written by: Jim Devol and Michael Steinbrecher, both Hill International Project Managers

In the late 19th century, in the wake of the American Civil War and on the eve of the Second Industrial Revolution, the University of Rhode Island (URI) was founded in Kingston. Since its founding as an agricultural college with 17 students, this public research institution has grown to support the education of nearly 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students annually in more than 100 degree programs. Its main campus spans more than 1,200 acres, with three auxiliary campuses in Providence, West Greenwich, and Narragansett.



Nine years ago, the dean of the College of Engineering launched a mission to replace the college's outdated buildings and update its academic paradigm. At the same time, the University chose to invest almost \$20 million in its Fine Arts Center. In the course of this program, Hill International has been awarded three contracts by URI (two for the College of Engineering and one for the Fine Arts Center) to manage preconstruction, the development of swing space, construction, and renovations in eight buildings on the University's main Kingston campus.

The architecture, delivery methods, designers, and locations for these projects were incredibly varied. But despite varying construction needs, each project required a holistic project management approach to help ensure the compliance of the design, procurement, and execution with the ambitious vision of the client.



The first project that Hill worked on was the most contemporary: the Fascitelli Center for Advanced Engineering. Hill was then awarded a contract to support the reconstruction of Bliss Hall, another project for the College of Engineering. Lastly, URI's Fine Arts Center renovation project was awarded to Hill. Success on these three diverse jobs was achieved by being flexible in the use of the Hill personnel across all the projects on campus, collaborating daily between senior project managers, communicating with the University staff, and helping to ensure all the projects were safely run by the contractors. These factors can be imitated and can help lead to more successful project outcomes. Prioritizing these factors is especially important for firms working on multiple projects in one location or larger construction programs.

Bliss Hall

Constructed from some of the last of the granite blocks to be quarried from the Westerly, RI, granite quarries, Bliss Hall stands as a historical monument on URI's main campus. Bliss sits inside the quadrangle along with the other original buildings of the campus. The image of the quadrangle has remained largely unchanged since its buildings' erections. Yet Bliss is an engineering building, and so perhaps even more than the other historic academic buildings on the quad, it has required technological upgrades to keep pace with the fast-paced field of engineering. The renovations on Bliss Hall were completed early in December 2019.

"The project was a success," says Hill Project Manager Michael Steinbrecher. "But there were some challenges to overcome. For instance, Bliss's period architecture presented a unique difficulty. We had to help ensure that materials procured were flush with those originally used on the exterior of the building. We also had to be very careful to prevent any damages to the original granite façade during construction—that's of course in addition to the strict safety measures we took to protect the students, staff, and faculty who are on campus all year."



To meet these challenges, Hill deployed several different strategies. With respect to protecting the granite exterior, the project team consulted with historians from the Rhode Island Historical Society who approved all aspects of the architect's design before procurement and implementation to save money and time for the University. This was particularly important as URI's budget needs fluctuated through the life of the job. Thus cost-effective additions were made to Bliss Hall that allowed the historic building to incorporate state-of-the-art technologies within a building that looks as pristine as it did in 1928.

Safety is important on all construction jobs. Hill's Corporate Health, Safety, and Environment Manager Bill Mueller regularly visits job sites around the U.S. for inspections. "This is less about holding project managers accountable than it is about educating to instill a culture of safety," says Bill. He visited URI's campus too, where he pointed out the positive things that Hill's employees were doing to keep the properties, themselves, their colleagues, and the people on campus safe.

One of the most important ways that Hill provided for safety on the Bliss Hall project was by establishing temporary classroom space elsewhere for students. Work could be undertaken at the site during the school year with minimal risk to the school population and without detriment to the educational offerings of the University. This approach protected people while saving money and time.

"We actually had two interns who were working on the Fascitelli Center and the Fine Arts Center at the time, Giana Zackarian and Sam Lindgren," says Michael. "As students of the University, they were instrumental in helping to identify the temporary classroom space and facilitate the movement of lab gear and classroom hardware from Bliss Hall to preserve the continuity of classes."

“Giana and Sam were also fantastic supports for the technical aspects of their respective projects,” adds Michael. “It was quite fortunate that we were hired to support three projects on campus in the same timeframe. We were able to mobilize our resources where they were necessary to support challenges all over on campus. No one was confined to their own job.” This was especially useful when trying to schedule and sequence work efficiently around hectic school schedules.

Fine Arts Center

It has been helpful to draw upon all of Hill’s available resources on campus for URI’s Fine Arts Center. This building, initially constructed in the early 1970s, was designed in the Brutalist vogue of the 1960s. The building has the characteristic Brutalist look: a cast-in-place slab-sided concrete monolith. Its façade featured small windows and doors. The Fine Arts Center has also had significant water-infiltration and heat-loss issues. Thus, despite a modern revival of interest in Brutalism, URI decided to reshape the Fine Arts Center in accordance with ongoing campus upgrades.

“This building is a cultural hub not just for URI students and faculty, but for the entire Rhode Island community,” says Michael. “As such, it seemed appropriate to open the building up to that community. We’re going to replace the concrete with a brick veneer, as well as enlarge the windows and the doors.” Most of this work is external; nevertheless, careful staging has to be arranged to avoid disrupting classes held inside the Fine Art Center. Constant communication facilitates the scheduling of work in the summer and before classes start in the early mornings.

Hill has also been critical in keeping the Fine Arts Center project’s costs down. Michael says: “We had a suspicion that the project might be over budget. So we got a second opinion from an estimator, and by quickly and slightly adjusting the project’s scope, we were able to keep the project within the University’s established budget.” Successes like these have consistently characterized Hill’s positive relationship with URI. The Fine Arts Center project itself was awarded as a result of work well done on Bliss Hall and the Fascitelli Center.

In accordance with Hill’s flexibility on URI’s campus, Hill Project Manager Jim Devol will be moving to the Fine Arts Center project when the close-out process is complete on the Fascitelli Center. In addition to being an alumnus from the University, Jim brings more than 35 years of experience to the Hill team. Moreover, having worked on the Fascitelli Center from its beginning as well as eight other major projects undertaken by the University since 1999, Jim is uniquely qualified to lead the Fascitelli Center project and support the Hill team working on the Fine Arts Center, as well as Bliss Hall.



The Fascitelli Center for Advanced Engineering

The Fascitelli Center stands at the forefront of architecture on URI's campus. This new engineering building, completed in time for the fall 2019 semester, is characterized by a glass exterior. The openness of the facility is symbolically related to the goals of the University for the building—as a premier space where collaboration between many different academic disciplines takes place. Inside the facility, the symbolism of the sleek glass is made concrete. Classes and labs are open and inviting. State-of-the-art, active-learning classrooms are the rule throughout the building. Multiple presentation screens and pedagogically appropriate classroom design prevent any obstructed views in classrooms. Extensive MEP work allows for the most current in laboratory equipment to be incorporated into the facility.



“For the Fascitelli Center,” says Jim, “our first challenge was to relocate the faculty, staff, and equipment from the five existing College of Engineering buildings into swing space. This included an offsite rented facility and spaces in four on-campus buildings. The rented space was done using a design-build contractor and the swing space on campus was done by the construction manager for the main building. Once done, we had to move the staff into these temporary spaces over just a few weeks at the end of the summer and then over the winter break. Only then could the demolition of 90,000 SF of buildings begin.

“We succeeded in implementing URI’s schedule goals for each swing space and opening the new Fascitelli Center in time for this fall semester because of careful planning and execution. Very significantly, we took careful inventory of the laboratory equipment and worked with the designers and faculty to evaluate the feasibility of fitting all of that equipment into the new facility’s

rooms. We also helped communicate the moving plans with the faculty working there. Our fantastic interns, Giana and Sam, helped us immensely in liaising with the faculty. That really helped facilitate the users’ move-in process.”

For the move into the Fascitelli Center to be successful, Hill spent significant amounts of time managing the expectations of the staff and keeping them informed of deadlines, milestones, and obstacles. In addition to Jim, Mike, Giana, and Sam, Assistant Project Manager Patrick Lydon and Project Manager Inger Hamre-Foley helped facilitate communications on the project. Patrick and Inger also managed the equipment inventories, move planning, and execution. The sharing of responsibilities across the team characterized the Fascitelli, Bliss Hall, and Fine Arts Center projects.

The Future at URI

The opening of the Fascitelli Center and Bliss Hall realizes the University's vision for exceptional engineering and science facilities. The Fine Arts Center project takes the University further with enhanced liberal arts facilities. The tripartite construction program, enhanced by the fluidity of Hill's team on different projects throughout the campus, demonstrates the high-quality collaboration between Hill professionals and URI. Hill's professionals look to accomplish more with the University in the future, too.

"There's a potential bond issue on the ballot in 2020 for the next phase of the Fine Arts Center project," says Jim. "We look forward to potentially being a part of that project and further strengthening our relationship with my alma mater."

"I'm very proud of what our team has helped URI to accomplish," adds Mike. "And I look forward to seeing what the University will do next. I think URI understands, now, that they have in us a reliable partner for accomplishing their construction endeavors and, ultimately, their vision for delivering a world-class education to their students."

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[Hill International](#) provides program and project management, construction management, cost engineering and estimating, quality assurance, inspection, scheduling, risk management and claims avoidance to clients involved in major construction projects worldwide.