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Turning Opacity into Transparency

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For David Woodhouse and Andy Tinucci, following in the footsteps of Chicago modernist Walter Netsch has become a habit.

“This is the third time we’ve done it in Chicago,” Tinucci says.



Netsch may be best known for his light-filled chapel at the United States Air Force Academy in Denver, but he was also a devoted disciple of brutalism. And it shows in the buildings he designed for the University of Illinois, the University of Chicago, and Northwestern University.

Woodhouse Tinucci Architects has worked on his buildings at all three in recent years, the latest being the University of Chicago's Joseph Regenstein Library, originally designed and built by Netsch in 1970. So what's it like to follow behind that modern master, and open up 15,000 square feet of his opaque concrete on the ground-floor?



“It was kind of a blast – especially with that courtyard out to the center, where there was very little glass and what was there was heavily tinted,” he says. “And look at how the building was made – the panels were clipped onto a heavy concrete structure. We didn’t have to undo them, just open them up with a band of super-clear, modern mullions of glass.”

Now the space is a large rectangle that’s half interior and half exterior, and a place for collaboration between undergraduate and graduate students.



It wasn't always that way. "It had a reputation as a more raucous space – an undergraduate-only learning environment," he says. "We opened it up on the north side to let light in, and created different kinds of learning zones with study niches, and newer glass open spaces."



They added furniture sets for flexible spaces, so that instead of being in one large space, students are always in a protective zone. And they created different kinds of learning zones with study niches, and new, glassed-in open spaces. The big idea was to bring the outside in. "We wanted to create a more exterior focus in the space – to grab the exterior courtyard and drag into the interior space as much as possible," he says.



Chances are, Netsch would like it as much as the students do.