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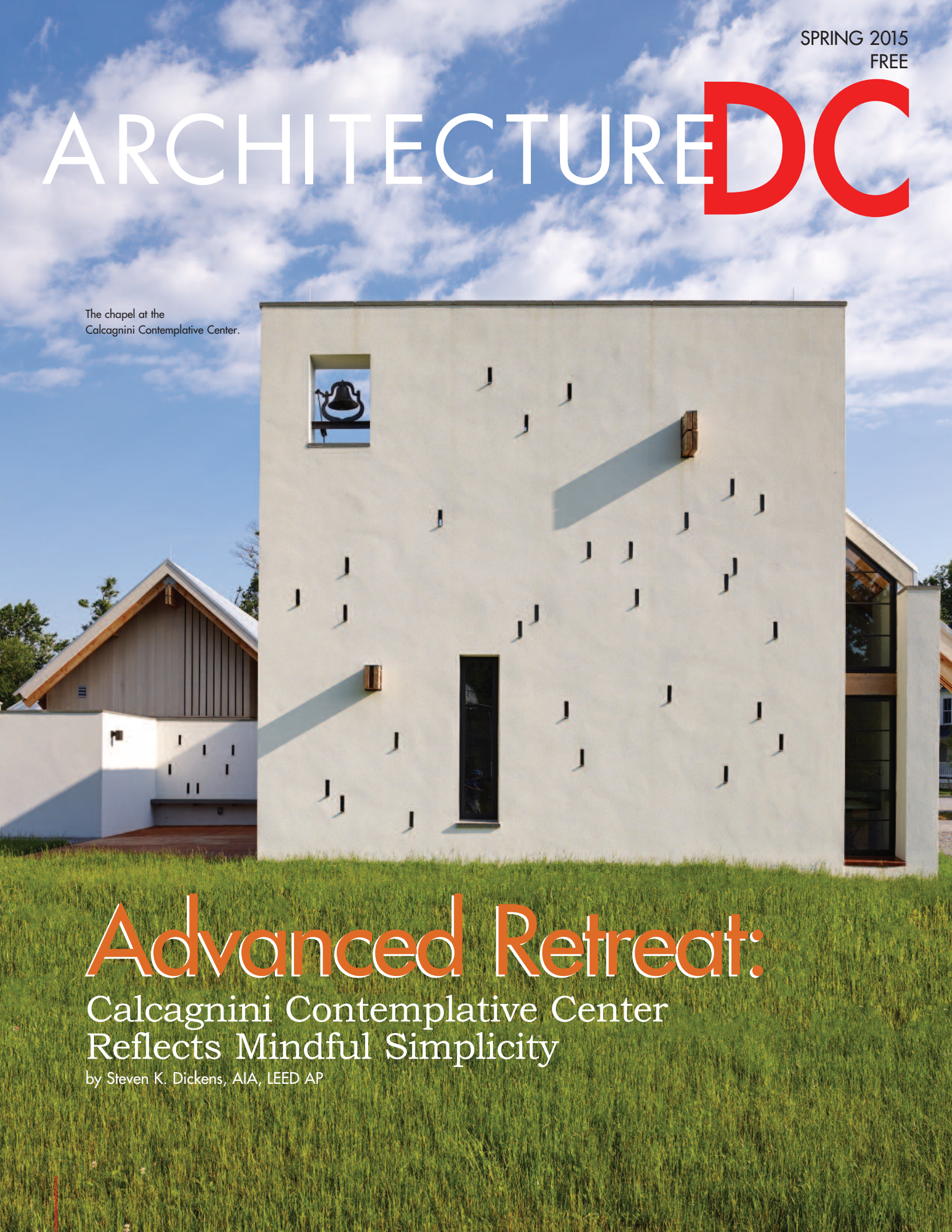

The chapel at the Calcagnini Contemplative Center.

Advanced Retreat:

Calcagnini Contemplative Center Reflects Mindful Simplicity

by Steven K. Dickens, AIA, LEED AP

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In architecture schools, "retreats" of various sorts are popular programs for thesis projects. There is a certain logic to this, given that people go to retreats for many of the same reasons that architecture students do thesis projects: to think deeply and independently; to challenge assumptions and question hierarchies; and to emerge from the experience, one hopes, enlightened and improved.

Moreover, a retreat works well for a thesis project on several practical levels. Its range of programmatic uses—sleeping areas, dining areas, communal meeting spaces, and so forth—is wide enough to support a variety of solutions and creative approaches. It's a good fit for a range of sites, but especially for rural settings free of the complex constraints of an urban context. Furthermore, by virtue of its purpose as a place for contemplation, a retreat tends to inspire thoughtful architectural expression at a variety of scales.

Unlike the world of academia, the Real World offers few opportunities to design retreats. But it does happen occasionally. The Calcagnini Contemplative Center of Georgetown University, by **Alan Dynerman, FAIA,** principal of **Dynerman Architects,** is a real place, but it shares the depth of intellectual consideration that is the hallmark of a successful thesis project. It is a project that was conceived on, and functions on, multiple levels beyond bricks and mortar.

Arthur Calcagnini is a successful businessman and Georgetown alumnus who took a particular interest in the university's variety of "Contemplatives in Action" retreats. The school has about 20 such programs, including religious retreats (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim; both silent and not) and retreats for faculty, students of various disciplines, and alumni. This facet of the Georgetown University experience is rare in American higher education. It is an outgrowth of the Jesuit tradition of retreats for spiritual exercises, and a manifestation of the concept of *cura personalis* ("caring for the whole person"), which is central to Jesuit life and learning. (Although Georgetown is open to students and faculty of all faiths or secularities, it was founded by the Society of Jesus and remains Jesuit-run and steered by the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the order.)

While serving on a student review panel at the University of Maryland, Dynerman met Alan Brangman, AIA, who at the time was the head of facilities at Georgetown. This led to a meeting in which Dynerman showed his portfolio, and Brangman saw a potentially good fit for an unusual project—the proposed retreat center in rural Clarke County, Virginia. Dynerman had

Project: Georgetown University Calcagnini Contemplative Center, Bluemont, VA

Architects: **Dynerman Architects**
Structural Engineers: **McMullan Associates**
MEP Engineers: **Comfort Design**
Civil Engineers: **Patton Harris Rust & Associates**
General Contractor: **Howard Shockey & Sons/Walnutdale Building Co.—A Joint Venture**

The campus of the Calcagnini Contemplative Center, with the chapel at left and the dining hall at right.

designed houses in rural Shenandoah settings, including one with a big fieldstone fireplace that particularly appealed to Brangman, and also some unusual projects that one might categorize as "places for thoughtful interaction," including Hodgson House and Conversation Garden at St. John's College in Annapolis, and the non-profit AED Conference Center carved from a parking garage in DC. Moreover, Dynermans's portfolio reflected a broad spectrum of stylistic approaches. "I'm 'old school,' I suppose, in that I'm interested in making spaces where human interactions are ennobled," he said, adding that no single school of architectural thought has cornered the market on such ennobling.

Dynerman met Arthur Calcagnini and his wife Nancy and learned of their ideas for what, at that time, was to be a $2.5 million venture. "Buildings like this are acts of charity," noted Dynerman. "They are expressions of loyalty [of alumni] and the best intentions and aspirations of people." Immediately realizing that the budget and aspirations did not match, Dynerman did a feasibility study that priced out at $6.5 million. That was a big jump, but the Calcagninis understood the rationale for the larger budget, according to Dynerman. "They got it, they loved it, they funded it."

The resultant complex, which was dedicated in 2013, consists of a series of one-story buildings loosely wrapping courtyards. The eastern courtyard is open on one side to views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It is mostly framed by non-residential components of the program—the Dining Hall and Community Center. The western courtyard, in contrast, is mostly enclosed, with slot views of the surrounding woods and meadows through breaks between the buildings. It is surrounded on three sides by the residential "cabins" and, on the fourth, by the Community Center.

An interdenominational chapel is carefully positioned to create a third courtyard—the Entrance Court—where it engages the other uses but remains a bit apart. Glimpses of it can be seen from most of the rest of the complex, but the views are narrow, restricted, even a touch mysterious at times. In contrast, the Community Center, positioned among the three courtyards, is clearly seen. This site

View of the chapel.

planning mirrors the role of religion at the university: The chapel is special and important and its presence is always felt, but it is not at the center of the complex.

With the exception of the chapel, the basic architectural vocabulary of the center is drawn from vernacular buildings of the Shenandoah region. "Rural buildings are typical and simple," says Dynerman, pointing to readily recognizable archetypes such as barns and farmhouses. He saw this as advantageous for a retreat—people "know the kit of parts, so you [the architect] play with it to heighten the consciousness." That is, when an archetype is simple and well-known, people notice when an aspect is changed, and thus even minor variations can be thought-provoking.

At the Calcagnini Center, two basic elements of the "kit of parts"—roofs and walls—are separated in various ways. The roofs of the chapel and community center are big, sheltering gables, but with a twist. Dynerman introduced subtle angles to the eaves, which modulate the sense of openness and shelter. At the cabins, shed roofs are visually lifted over the low cedar-clad boxes of the primary enclosures. At the Dining Hall, the shed roof dives behind a taller cedar-clad box, which contains service areas and forms a signage wall for arriving visitors. In some locations, a line of high windows separates the roof and wall. All of these moves might fertilize, consciously or subconsciously, a "eureka" moment in a visitor's thinking, a metaphorical insight that could guide one's serious, mindful consideration of a subject. Such moments are central to the contemplative retreat, and Dynerman's myriad modulations of archetypal forms are just the sort of thing that might nurture them.

The complex's palette of materials is intentionally neutral and simple, creating a modest backdrop for human activity. For example, western red cedar boards, which clad most of the buildings and some interior walls, are regularized to reduce their visual prominence. At the chapel, smooth white stucco is introduced as a second exterior material, punctuated by small, randomly placed rectangular openings. The white walls form a *tabula rasa* that invokes, in non-specific terms, a wide range of cultural references, quietly framing most any religious exercise.

The Calcagnini Contemplative Center campus.

At times, the meditative mind might delve or digress into the background elements of a space. If one were to do so in a room lined with the cedar boards, one might notice that although all boards are the same size and general appearance, no two have the same graining pattern. Regarding the white walls, one might connect the dots (in the form of the rectangular recesses) in various ways, playing against the movement of people in the foreground. It's not a stretch to see such subtle patterns as potential sources of insight for a contemplative retreat participant.

Various architectural details also harbor small surprises. The wood columns, for instance, appear from afar to be large, monolithic posts, but up close one can see that they are multiple pieces of dimensional lumber bound together. The connecting bolts, plates, and straps are positioned so as to evoke the bases and capitals of classical columns. These elements not only reflect thorough detailing, but also suggest a variety of cultural and aesthetic metaphors that may further stimulate retreat participants' thinking.

The physical facility of the Calcagnini Contemplative Center is, appropriately enough, the fruit of a long and thoughtful design process. The result is a place that blends rustic simplicity with surprisingly intricate architectural forms and details, offering food for thought in a directed, mindful manner. It turns out that the real thing can be even more compelling than the academic exercise.

Interior of the chapel.