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BULLETIN

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CASHING IN ON MODERN BANKS

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ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

Benedictine Military School & Priory

A MODERNIST LANDMARK ON SAVANNAH'S SUBURBAN SOUTHSIDE

BY ROBERT A. CIUCEVICH

Medieval monastic heritage and a rich military tradition combine to inspire the singular design of unique Modernist campus at Roman Catholic monastery and boy's high school.

CHAPEL WITH ARMORY-GYMNASIUM IN BACKGROUND. Photography by R.A. Ciucevich.

PRIORY CHAPEL, C. 1963-64.

Articulated in brick, concrete, glass, and steel, the buildings and landscapes that make up the campus of Benedictine Military School and Priory represent the culmination of nearly 100 years of Benedictine presence in Georgia at the time of its dedication in April of 1964. The cutting edge design of the buildings as well as their arrangement in a traditional collegiate quadrangle plan is – in the words of Atlanta Journal-Constitution reporter Ann Marshall in her c1964 news article –

"beauty both modern and medieval."

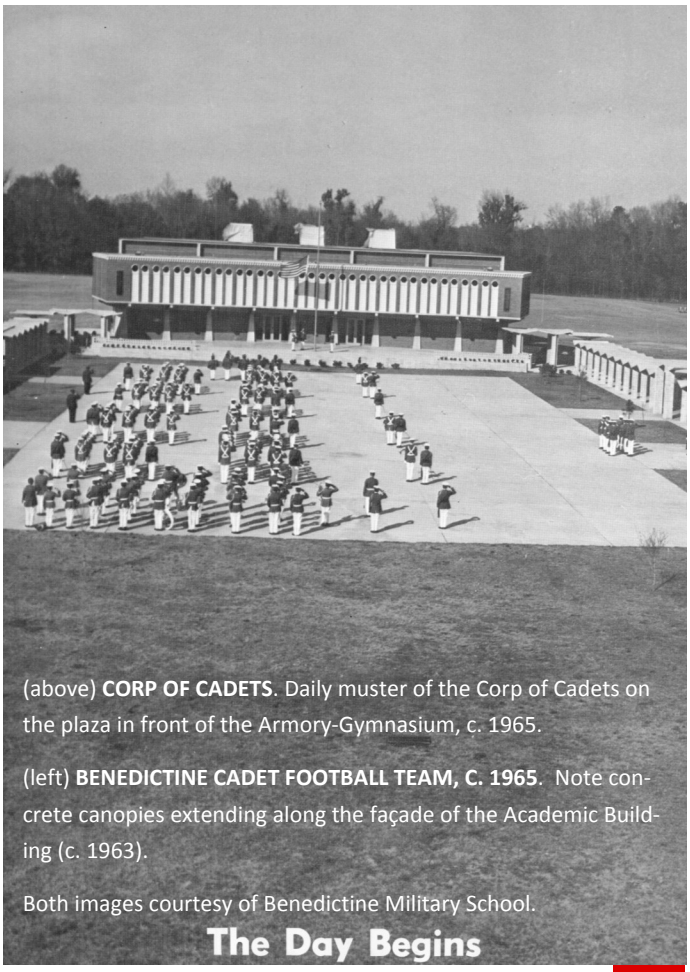
A tour de force of modern architecture evoking references to some of the most iconic works of the master architects of the genre, this timeless collection of buildings is regarded by Georgia's Historic Preservation Division as a "rare example of a complete modern campus with intact buildings and landscapes" and as an important and "exceptionally significant … example of modern architecture in Georgia." Designed to represent both the military heritage of the then 60 year old school as well as uphold the monastic traditions of the nearly 1500 year old Order of St. Benedict, the avant-garde architecture employed in the creation of this Savannah monastery-school exists today – nearly 50 years later – as a testament to the vision and talent of principal architect Juan Carlos Bertotto and as a high water mark for Modernism in the Savannah area in general. Begun as a boy's preparatory school, Benedictine College – as it was originally called – was organized on a military basis in the Southern military school tradition of West Point, VMI, and the Citadel. The school opened in 1902 with 21 cadets and was an immediate success. The "BC" Cadets were highly visible in the community and often acted as a color guard or escort for civic occasions as well as marching annually in the St. Patrick's Day Parade, an enduring tradition begun in 1903. Before long the Savannah community as a whole embraced the school, regarding it as its own version of the "Citadel". By the 1950s it had become a tradition among Savannah's Catholic families for son's to attend the alma mater of their fathers and grandfathers. With enrollment skyrocketing and the old Romanesque style college building – built to accommodate 200 students – no longer suiting the growing needs of the school and monastic community, the monks began to plan the construction of a new suburban campus on Savannah's Southside, purchasing a wooded 104 acre tract in 1958.

Facing similar needs for expansion, many Benedictine communities in the United States launched extensive

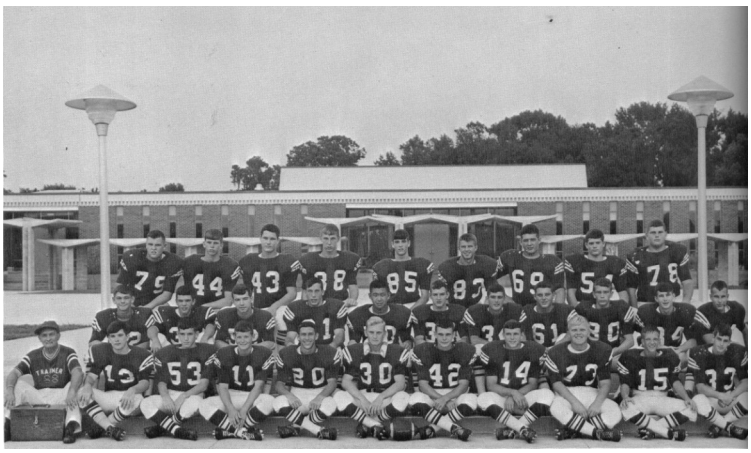
building programs during this time, commissioning well known architects to design master plans to guide the growth of their abbeys and associated schools, culminating in a watershed of groundbreaking Modernist architecture. Rather than imitate the traditional styles of the past – such as Romanesque or Gothic – the monks opted for modern architecture because they wanted to adopt an architecture that was new and of this time – an architecture that would better reflect the contemporary culture and post-war, technology-driven society in which they now lived. Between 1958 and 1963 Benedictine communities at St. John's Abbey (Marcel Breuer, 1955 – 1967), in Collegeville, Minnesota, St. Gregory's Abbey (Pietro Belluschi, c1959-1960) in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, Annunciation Priory (Marcel Breuer, c1959-62) in Bismarck, North Dakota, St. Louis Abbey (Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, c1961-62) in St. Louis, Missouri, among others, commissioned Modernist architects to design ambitious, innovative, and site-specific new architecture for their monasteries and schools. Duncan Stroik, a noted ecclesiastical architect and editor of the journal Sacred Architecture, refers to this period of innovation in an article, "The Roots of Modernist Church Architecture", when he writes that the "Benedictines in the U.S. were the equivalent of the Dominicans in France, being great patrons of Modernist art and architecture, as well as being liturgically progressive," and describes the buildings constructed during this period as "sleek, non-traditional and critically acclaimed by the architectural establishment."

Savannah's Benedictine campus and priory was planned and developed during this same period – roughly between 1958 and 1964 – and was part of this national trend that occurred within the Benedictine monastic community in the United States during this time. Having been granted independence from Belmont Abbey in 1961, the monks of Sacred Heart Priory commissioned the Savannah firm of Thomas, Driscoll, and Hutton to design a 35 year master plan for the new campus and priory that called for two phases of construction: an initial phase consisting of an academic building, cafeteria, gymnasium-armory, small chapel, and monastery; and a second phase of construction in which dormitories for boarding students and a larger chapel for the student population – apparently intended as a parish church – would be constructed at a later time.

The decision by the Savannah Benedictines to build a Modernist campus and priory was certainly an informed and deliberate one. There is no doubt that the monks were aware of, and directly influenced by the modern architecture being built at other Benedictine monastic foundations of the period, particularly Annunciation Priory – this is evident in the architecture and layout of the buildings. However, the monks, along with their confreres at other Benedictine communities of the period, chose modern architecture not out of preference for an architectural style but through a shared belief that Modernism could best translate their Benedictine ideals into a built form that would also satisfy their responsibility, as prescribed in the Rule of St. Benedict, to "share in the creation of a new future", a sentiment best expressed in 1953 by Abbot Baldwin of St. John's Abbey:



(above) **CORP OF CADETS**. Daily muster of the Corp of Cadets on the plaza in front of the Armory-Gymnasium, c. 1965.



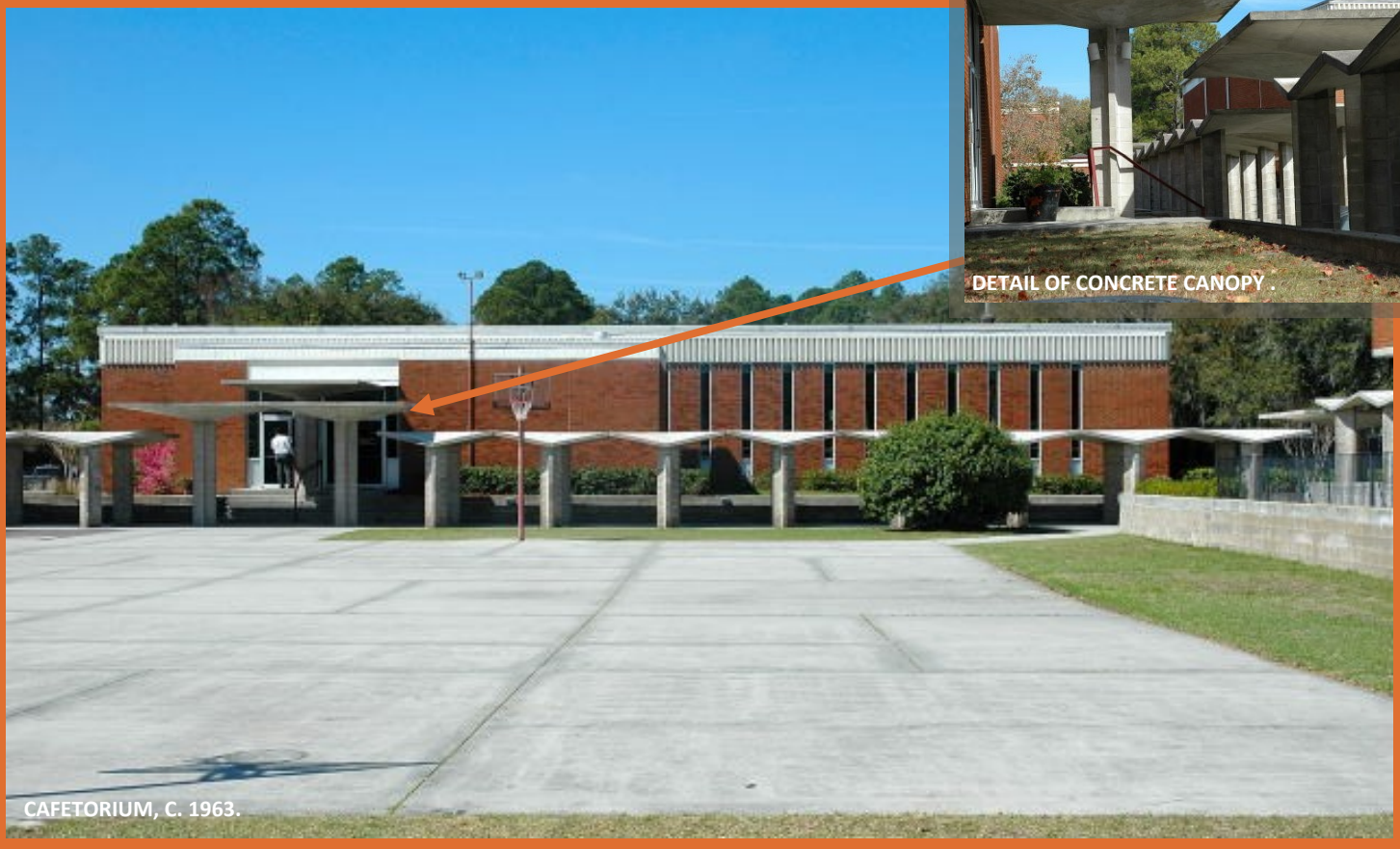
(left) **BENEDICTINE CADET FOOTBALL TEAM, C. 1965**. Note concrete canopies extending along the façade of the Academic Building (c. 1963).

Both images courtesy of Benedictine Military School.

The Day Begins

"THE BENEDICTINE TRADITION AT ITS BEST CHALLENGES US TO THINK BOLDLY AND TO CAST OUR IDEALS IN FORMS WHICH WILL BE VALID FOR CENTURIES TO COME, SHAPING THEM WITH ALL THE GENIUS OF PRESENT-DAY MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES. WE FEEL THAT THE MODERN ARCHITECT WITH HIS ORIENTATION TOWARD FUNCTIONALISM AND HONEST USE OF MATERIALS IS UNIQUELY QUALIFIED TO PRODUCE A CATHOLIC WORK. IN OUR POSITION IT WOULD, WE THINK, BE DEPLORABLE TO BUILD ANYTHING LESS, PARTICULARLY SINCE OUR AGE AND OUR COUNTRY HAVE THUS FAR PRODUCED SO LITTLE TRULY SIGNIFICANT RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE."

DETAIL OF CONCRETE CANOPY .



CAFETORIUM, C. 1963.

ARMORY-GYMNASIUM.

INTERIOR VIEW OF GLASSED-IN REAR ELEVATION OF THE ARMORY–GYMNASIUM (LOWER LOBBY).

ARMORY-GYMNASIUM.

The cantilevered superstructure of the Armory-Gymnasium serves as a continuation of the concrete canopies that connect all of the buildings on the campus.

The buildings and layout of the new Benedictine campus was designed by an innovative young architect named Juan Carlos Bertotto – a native of Rosario, Argentina – who was instructed in the Bauhaus tradition while attending Georgia Tech's School of Architecture, from which he graduated in 1958. In planning the Benedictine campus, Bertotto clearly drew inspiration from the landmark works of the Modernist architects he studied while he was a student at Ga. Tech: Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van Mies van der Rohe, Oscar Niemeyer, Marcel Breuer, and most especially, Eero Saarinen.

Bertotto and the Thomas, Driscoll, and Hutton team designed all of the buildings on the campus in the New Formalist style of modern architecture that was en vogue at the time – an architecture that incorporates the building forms of the past – classical precedents such as columns, highly stylized entablatures, and colonnades – with new forms made possible by advances in building technology – such as the newly discovered plastic-like qualities of concrete exhibited in the umbrella shell, waffle slab, and folded plates. All of the buildings on the campus are of steel frame and concrete block construction and feature flat roofs, terrazzo floors, and glass window walls. The use of a striated red brick as an exterior veneer is intended as a nod to the past and as a means of softening the machine aesthetic of glass, metal, and concrete prevalent elsewhere, while the cast concrete frieze along the cornice of the buildings – which resembles a modern style dentil course - serves to further unify the buildings visually.

Bertotto employed historic precedent in his design for the campus as a way of alluding to the Benedictine Order's medieval monastic heritage through its association with the Gothic style, which is no more apparent than in his design for the Priory Chapel and Monastery.

Bertotto's Priory Chapel (c1963-64) clearly references Eero Saarinen's iconic Kresge

PRIORY CHAPEL AT NIGHT. Taken as a promotional photo, c. 1964. Courtesy of Benedictine Military School.

Chapel completed in 1955 at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, appropriating the scale, form, and basic materials of the Kresge chapel – as well as the reflecting pool or "moat" – while adding intervals of thin vertical windows embellished with austere Gothic buttressing and ornament. Bertotto also retained the enclosed walkway that Saarinen used to connect his chapel to a small office and library – although used here to connect the Priory Chapel to the Monastery – which also displays Gothic inspiration through its round headed, cantilevered windows, thin cast-concrete water spouts jutting through roof parapets, and heavy batten wood doors. One of the most significant aspects of Bertotto's design is the chapel's circular floor plan, which places the altar in the center of the building with the choir stalls arranged in a circle around it. The design is significant as it pre-dates liturgical changes in church architecture that would later be inspired by Vatican II, placing the Priory Chapel among the earliest examples of "pre-Conciliar" church architecture in the nation to feature a "centralized plan" (a deliberate design aspect certainly insisted upon by the liturgically progressive Benedictine monks).

Bertotto was likely drawn to Saarinen's modern circular chapels for inspiration (Saarinen's c1956 Scott Chapel at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, also appears to have been an influence) based on his understanding of medieval monastic precedent and – since the Priory Chapel was originally designed for use as a chapter house – he appropriated the form of the 13th Century English chapter house since they too were characteristically free-standing, mostly polygonal yet sometimes circular, and were attached to the side of an associated cathedral by a hyphen-like vestibule.

Like his chapter house turned chapel, Bertotto also based the design for his contemporary monastery on historical precedent, utilizing that most basic of medie-

val forms – the monastic cloister – while expressing it in modernist terms. A traditional cloister – the central articulating feature of a monastery – is a rectangular open space surrounded by a continuous covered passage – or cloister walkway – with open arcades on the inner side that run along the walls of buildings, forming a quadrangle or garth. The cloister walk served to link and give access to all the main buildings and facilities of the complex. While the cloister is usually attached to the side of a church or cathedral, Bertotto's "contemporary cloister" is free-standing and appears to be based on the monasteries of the Carthusian Order in which the monk's individual cells – unlike other monasteries – open directly from the cloister walk. Like the plan for the 12th Century Carthusian monastery – or "charter house" – at Clermont, France – depicted in a 19th century rendering by Voilett le Duc, the cells of Bertotto's monastery occupy three sides of the cloister while the refectory, chapter house, and other necessary "offices" occupy the remaining west side.

At Benedictine, the geometry of the cloister is everywhere: from the subtle symbolism of the sunken courts that form the heart of the plans for the Cafetorium – the most Miesien of the buildings on campus – and the Academic Building – where Mass was originally celebrated for the student population – to the monastic origins of the campus' traditional collegiate quadrangle plan.

The pre-form, reinforced concrete canopies or "esplanades" that Bertotto designed to connect all of the buildings on the Benedictine campus - as well as the spatial arrangement of the buildings around the central quadrangle was inspired – at least initially – by the modern concrete covered walkways of the monastery and college campus designed by Marcel Breuer for the Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Priory (c1961) in Bismark, North Dakota. Like the first construction phase at Savannah's monastery-school, all of the components – buildings, courtyards, walkways – of the Annunciation Priory campus were designed as a single vision and built all at once. Breuer's design for his "little jewel in the desert" included a priory and chapel, a refectory, a girls' boarding school and dormitory, administrative offices, and a student chapel – a main, independent concrete covered "crosswalk" spans the campus from east to west, connecting the monastic and student wings located on each end of the campus green. Breuer first came upon the idea of using concrete covered walkways when designing his plan for St. Johns Abbey and University. According to a 1954 Time Magazine article entitled "New Look for St. Johns," covered walkways were the key component in Breuer's "fresh conception" of cloisters:

"Instead of running along the side of a building, as cloisters have done since St. Benedict, they will be independent covered walks, mostly of local fieldstone on the outer side, roofed with reinforced concrete and glass-walled or open on the inner side to provide views of the gardens and landscaping. Said one monk: "This is a great improvement over traditional Benedictine architecture, where buildings are always so planned that if a fire starts it can spread immediately in all directions."

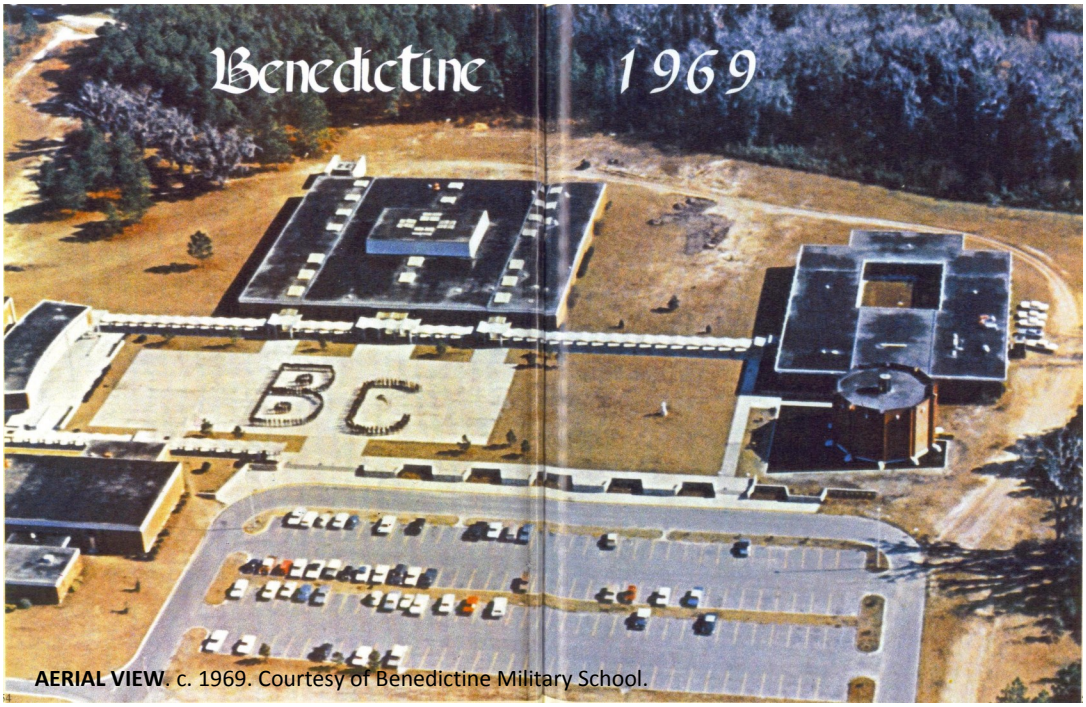
CHAPEL INTERIOR.

AERIAL VIEW OF CAMPUS. c. 1964. Courtesy of Benedictine Military School.

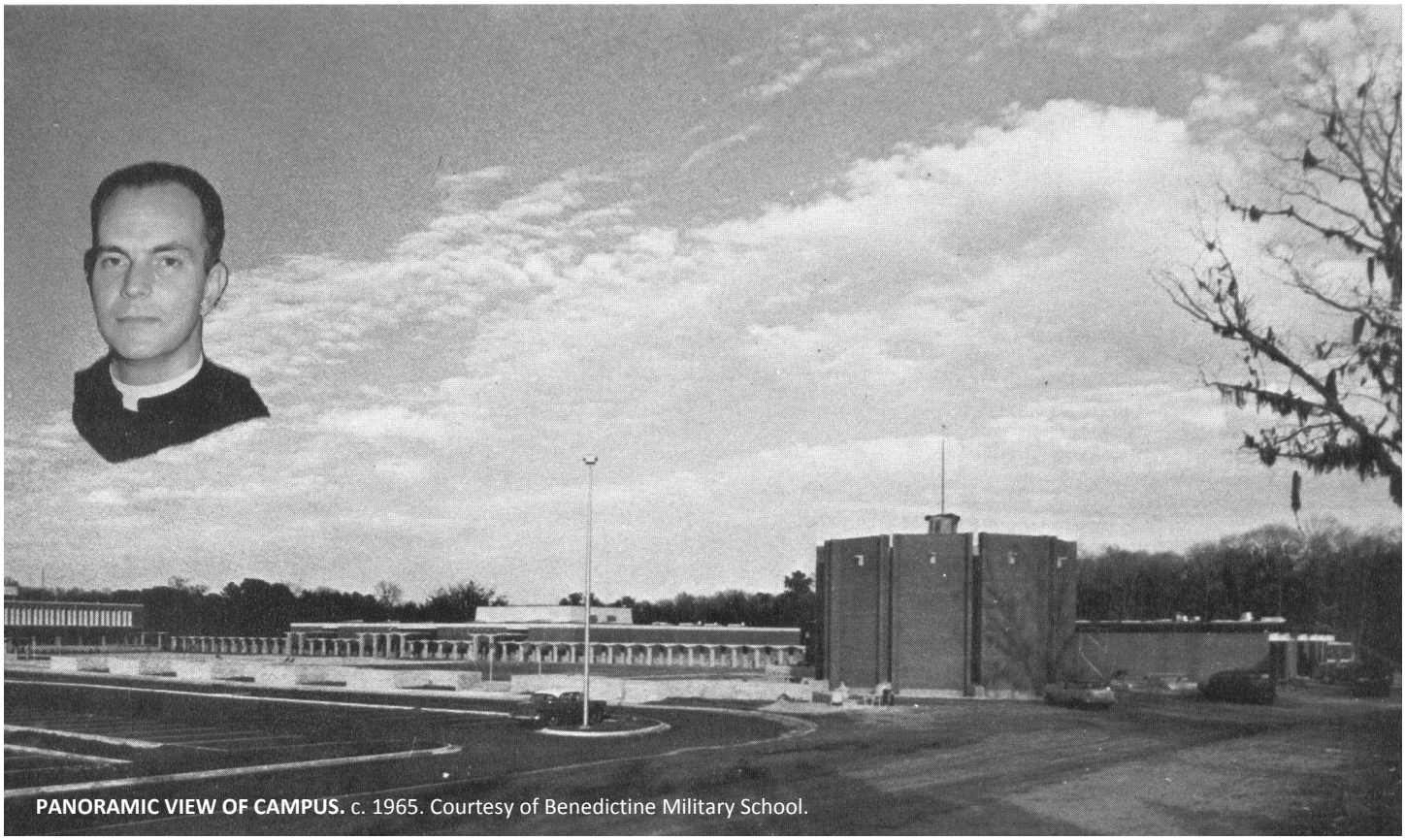
In his design for the Benedictine campus, it appears that Bertotto took Breuer's concept of a "contemporary cloister" a few steps further, as all of the major components of the priory/school are situated in separate, free standing buildings connected by a series of independent, concrete covered walkways (rather than the centuries-old "U" shaped configuration of attached school-monastery-church). The idea to use independent covered walkways in a campus setting was not a new one, however, as Frank Lloyd Wright famously used "esplanades" to "create a sense of continuity of design" throughout the Lakeland campus he designed for Florida Southern College between 1941 and 1958. Breuer clearly drew inspiration from Wright's earlier work at Florida Southern and, if the "esplanades" at Benedictine are any indication, Bertotto did as well. Bertotto's concrete covered walkways share several similarities with Frank Lloyd Wright's esplanades: they are a major component of the campus design; they are freestanding and extend along the length of buildings; concrete block retaining walls often form the inner walls of the walkways and double as planters when extending along buildings; and they are stepped at building entrances.

The Armory-Gymnasium is the signature building of the academic campus. Situated at the end of the concrete plaza – symbolically facing the Priory Chapel on the opposite end of the monastery green – the Armory-Gymnasium Building was designed to represent the military heritage of the school, serving both as a World War II memorial and as a multi-use facility for sports as well as military and religious ceremonies and school functions. The ramped concrete podium pavilion in front of the building was meant to serve as a focal point for the daily muster of the cadet corp. as well as solemn religious ceremonies.

Bertotto drew his main inspiration for the Armory-Gymnasium Building (c1963-64) from another of Eero



AERIAL VIEW. c. 1969. Courtesy of Benedictine Military School.



PANORAMIC VIEW OF CAMPUS. c. 1965. Courtesy of Benedictine Military School.

Saarinen's works – the Milwaukee County War Memorial Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, retaining the essence of Saarinen's design by utilizing the basic form and structure of the formal entry section of his cruciform-shaped building. Bertotto raised the bulk of the building off the ground on reinforced concrete piers and eliminated load-bearing walls to allow a "freeform façade" and open floor plan – a brick veneer curtain wall along the lower façade obscures what is essentially an open ground floor with a glassed-in rear elevation. The cantilevered superstructure – a key characteristic of Saarinen's design – is the most distinctive element of the Armory-Gymnasium, giving the façade an imposing monumentality while serving as a continuation of the concrete canopies that connect all of the buildings on the campus. Of all of the characteristics adapted from Saarinen's design, however, the symbolic function of the Armory-Gymnasium as both a utilitarian building and as a memorial is perhaps the most significant. Inspired by Saarinen's War Memorial Center, Bertotto imbedded two granite memorial plaques – recovered from a c1946 WW II memorial at the original downtown location – directly in the center of the buildings façade. Like Saarinen's "living memorial" – which was said to "Honor the Dead by Serving the Living," Bertotto's memorial podium pavilion serves as a daily reminder to the assembled Corp of Cadets of the heroic sacrifice of the 30 Benedictine Cadets who gave their lives defending our country during World War II as well as serving as an ideal platform for special ceremonies and everyday functions.

While the buildings and campus of Benedictine Military School and Priory were not designed by internationally known architects, and the architectural merits of the complex may fall short of the avant-garde modern architecture achieved at major monastic foundations around the country during this period, there is little doubt that this small Modernist priory and military school built by Savannah's contemporary Benedictines is a significant achievement in its own right and worthy of recognition as an excellent example of modern architecture in Georgia and as an important part of the legacy of the Benedictine Order in the United States.▪

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*Unless otherwise noted, images are courtesy of author.