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Colleges Have Lost Interest in Designing Campuses with Meaning

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The architecture of a university's campus is an open book that most of us have forgotten how to read. The ways that buildings relate to each other, and to the environment in which they are set, communicate meaning, character, and significance. Whether the campus is carefully planned or hastily assembled, costly or cheap, modest or bombastic, the information is there. In that sense, a campus is an edited statement of the institution's self-image, how it solves problems, and how it wishes to present itself to its students, alumni, faculty members, and the public.

Some campuses may be the products of centuries and the accumulated designs of dozens of architects. At the University of Oxford, for instance, the various colleges are based on many different design vocabularies — medieval, classical, and Gothic revival — and typically use plans built around courtyards. They sit cheek by jowl on urban streets, sometimes jostling competitively with one another for our attention, sometimes graciously accommodating differences in architectural idiom. Integrated into the city on one side and a rural landscape on the other, free-standing buildings — often stunning works of architecture like Christopher Wren's Sheldonian Theater or James Gibbs's Radcliffe Camera — add an element of surprise. Whereas each college has its own character, those of less interesting design seem better than they actually are because they are part of a complex and vital living composition, part of a context of shared ideas and respect for differences.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Thomas Jefferson's much smaller Academical Village at the University of Virginia is the vibrant and coherent creation of one man. Realized in about a decade of planning and construction, it remains one of the wonders of American architecture. The plan is based on the image of a human being. The rotunda, or the library, is the head, which is framed by shoulders and outstretched arms — the colonnades and pavilions — in a characteristic gesture of welcome.

Jefferson uses terraces and steps to subtly integrate his composition into the difficult topography of the site. Carefully calibrated changes of scale mark the realms of students (the rooms sheltered by the colonnades), faculty members (the pavilions), and the world of knowledge they share (the library). Sadly, with the exception of a few buildings designed by McKim, Mead, and White and by Fiske Kimball, university presidents and architects charged with expanding the campus appear to have ignored Jefferson's historic core. Most post-1830 buildings float aimlessly around Jefferson's dynamic grid, and the vast expanse of buildings realized since 1950 are totally alienated from it.

Between the design extremes of Oxford and the Academical Village, there are hundreds of fine campuses in the United States built between the Revolution and 1950. One finds an amazing variety of campus plans comprising buildings of very different architectural character. They are inventively related to climate, topography, and context, and they form a heritage of architectural richness of form, together with a subtle variety of meanings that articulate each college's educational ideals.

The older buildings at Rice University, the University of California at Los Angeles, and the University of Texas at Austin, for example, are arranged around courtyards of very different character with open colonnades for circulation. Inspired by earlier Mediterranean architecture, their forms are nonetheless quite original. At Dartmouth College, the roots are Colonial New England, whereas Yale University's colleges, library, and gymnasium are an imaginative offshoot of English Gothic. And at Sweet Briar College, in Virginia, the forms are developed from the architectural legacies of Jefferson and McKim, Mead, and White.

After 1950, however, most colleges seem to have given up on the challenge of designing campuses that are intellectually and architecturally coherent. Whether budgets are limited or excessive, whether the buildings lack distinction or are dazzling displays of self-aggrandizement by star architects, the result is the same: new buildings with little or no relationship to each other or to their historic cores. Many of those buildings often seem interchangeable because their designs seldom consider differences in location, climate, topography, and culture.

Is it right that new college buildings in the United States appear similar to those in places with marked differences in climate and geography, such as India, China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, France, or Brazil? Are those nations' histories, political systems, religions, and traditions all irrelevant to campus architecture and design? Or is it simply that, beyond the elementary provision of space, campus planning and architecture are no longer considered important or worthy of serious attention? If the answer to those questions is yes, then prefab trailers should do as well as "starchitecture" as venues for education, and a few variations of a basic campus plan will serve everyone.

How can we avoid creating campuses that look like random collections of unrelated buildings? For more than 2,500 years, architects have been able to design noble buildings that enhance their surrounding neighborhoods and communities. Those designs responded to different contexts and to buildings using very different architectural languages. The challenge is to learn, again, how to read architecture. To do that, we must understand that architectural forms project meanings in three ways:

Through symbols. A dome, for example, serves as a symbol of the cosmos. At the University of Virginia, Jefferson used one to convey the idea of the library as the cosmos of knowledge. McKim, Mead, and White's plan for Columbia University also had a domed library, modeled after Jefferson's, as the central feature of the campus. It is a telling symptom of the loss of campus coherence that neither of those two great institutions uses its historic rotunda as a library. Whether a library is planned as a cosmos of knowledge or a cathedral dedicated to learning, such symbols remind us we are in a special place of privilege, opportunity, and the noble ideal of scholarship. Libraries are the core of the university because they are repositories of knowledge that we need to understand the complex world in which we live, and how to act justly in our lives and be good citizens, parents, and neighbors. That remains true today, even when so much information is stored digitally.

Even campus plans themselves may project symbolic intent. The clusters of courtyards at Oxford suggest an ideal of a closed community dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, an approach that the campuses of Princeton and Yale Universities modified and adapted. Harvard University has courtyards of brick buildings inspired by English and earlier Colonial American architecture. The open spaces there and at other New England colleges are modeled after small colonial towns to suggest a community of learning, with buildings around a common green. The motif of a commons conveys the possibility of an ordered life, structured on intellectual discussion and debate rather than violence.

Through relationships. Those relationships are among the parts of the building, between those parts and the overall design, and between the building and the person looking at or using it. For example, when the entrance to a building is large in scale and unmodulated in relation to people, it may suggest that human users lack importance. In contrast, one of the great design features of the Empire State Building is its modest, one-story entrance. In addition, the tower is set back from Fifth Avenue so as not to overwhelm the viewer on the street. In similar manner, the tall stacks of Sterling Memorial Library at Yale are set back and surrounded by the lower mass of reading rooms.

The careful articulation of the scale relationship among the parts of a building conveys considerable information about the institution. At his Academical Village, Jefferson used the scale of the classical column, each one a metaphor for a person, with great ingenuity. The smallest columns articulate the colonnades that house individual students' rooms. The intermediate-size columns are used to articulate the 10 pavilions, which corresponded to the 10 departments of knowledge in Jefferson's curriculum. The largest are part of the library's great temple front.

Through context. What is the relationship of a building or group of buildings with other areas of the campus or the town in which it is located? A building that ignores its surroundings may suggest superiority, lack of interest, or even contempt. The same may be true of the actual relationship, or lack thereof, between the campus and its adjacent town.

In the end, all buildings convey meaning — whether or not that was intended by architect and client — and it has little to do with questions of budget, architectural style, or self-expression. Many colleges no longer seem to care that their campuses suggest a negative institutional image, that they reflect badly on the institution's ability to solve problems of physical planning, or that they demonstrate little regard for celebrating their students' and faculty members' aspirations. Such issues can be dealt with only by the concerted effort of the institution's president and provost, the sole people able to mobilize a new, more ambitious, and more challenging pathway to a better campus. Presidents are responsible for retaining architects, setting budgets, providing their briefs, and approving their plans, and they should not allow this situation to persist.

Why that appears to be such a formidable challenge today should be cause for great concern. Most of the beautiful campuses in this country were created with the direct involvement of presidents. When Woodrow Wilson was Princeton's president, he selected the Gothic architecture of Tudor England as the inspiration for design of the university's new colleges. He wrote that by that "very simple device ... we seem to have added to Princeton the age of Oxford and Cambridge." He also adapted the quadrangle form to create self-contained residential colleges that would weaken the influence of fraternities and private clubs. Until World War II, successive presidents continued to shepherd the design of new buildings to enrich the character of their campuses.

Many institutions are reconsidering their 50-year commitment to modernistic buildings. Rice University's new Baker Hall and McNair Hall and Princeton's newest college (now under construction) all reflect, in different ways, the architecture of the older buildings on the campus. It would be well to follow the example of those new efforts to rethink how we may revitalize university architecture and campus planning. In my own work as the architect for Rice's Humanities Building, Princeton's Aaron Burr Hall, and the University of Delaware's Gore and DuPont Halls, the briefs I received were to restore the lost architectural integrity of important parts of those historic campuses.

But I am not suggesting that architects copy old buildings and pass them off as new. That is ill advised in any field of study. Rather, colleges and universities need to continue a process that is as old as the history of Western architecture: to adapt the lessons of the past to the requirements of the present and future. And yes, we should be more adept than in the past at "reading the text" of a campus, at designing new buildings that enhance older adjacent structures, at communicating the particular character of each college, and at precisely formulating the message a college aspires to convey about itself. In that quest, it is presidents and trustees who must lead their institutions.

And if, like Jefferson, we continue to believe that "the diffusion of knowledge among the people" constitutes the surest "foundation [that] can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness," that is surely a worthy endeavor at the start of a new century and millennium.

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