

Preserving Nature's Gift
The Wisconsin Campus of the Future

by James S. Watrous
Chairman, Art History Department and member, Campus Planning Committee

Wisconsin Alumnus, February, 1961

The Wisconsin campus as seen through the critical eyes of a distinguished Wisconsin artist and member of the University's art history department In his article, Prof. Watrous analyzes the campus in terms of its beauty and the usefulness of its buildings. Citing some of the unfortunate examples of the past, Prof. Watrous goes on to explain the thinking that is guiding the planners of the future and concludes that "'wise judgments by faculty and administration, and sympathetic cooperation and financial support by the people of Wisconsin, the state government and alumni are the only means by which we can compose an efficient and attractive University."

ACROSS THE COUNTRY and around the world, the name of the University of Wisconsin has borne two images. The first of these is of a University distinguished among institutions of higher learning. The second has been of a college campus whose beauty is surpassed by few.

The University's reputation in the enterprise of learning was created during decades of devotion to scholarly excellence and to academic freedom. This distinction was achieved with the minds and hearts of countless men and women who contributed individually, and in Community, to this-greatness.

The beauty of our campus, however, we did not create-it was a gracious gift of Nature-a dramatic composition of lake and hills, woods and glens. Through this gift, Nature confronted us with a choice of an incomparable privilege of adorning this splendid landscape or an opportunity to despoil its beauty. We can see now the unwillful choice we made. In our treatment of such beautiful resources, we have performed less commendably than in our academic efforts.

As alumni we are drawn to this university by personal sentiment, and, as in all such intimate relationships, delightful memories tend to recreate the charms rather than the blemishes. But in time sentiment is tempered by realism and attractive imagery may not survive another look. How many of us have paused to observe the campus with an objective eye; have critically appraised its aesthetic merits? Have we taken the trouble to judge its physical, character as it exists in areas beyond the old familiar gathering places of alumni and visitors? We face questions which, when raised, evoke disturbing answers: Have we, at Wisconsin, enhanced our natural endowment of lake, hills and woods? What success have we had in planning a distinguished and appealing environmental order? -What do we possess of architectural excellence? How often do we experience the sense of physical and visual well-being which comes with the delights of design?

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What are those physical and visual attractions which have created the second image of Wisconsin as a campus of beauty? First, and paramount, are the natural beauties of the lake, the hills and woods. There are a few others. We may add our admiration of the rise of Lincoln Terrace terminated by the tasteful modesty of Bascom, and the honest masses (though fortunately small) of old North and South Halls. But we are also thankful for the towering elms which screen a hodgepodge which flanks this inviting vista. The panorama of the lake from Observatory Hill is matched by few in the upper Midwest despite its interruption by ponderous masses to the East, We take delight in Lake Mendota when its presence is not obscured or stingily revealed at street ends and through peek-holes between buildings and trees. The Union, with long effort, gradually converts an Italian "palazzo" (which ignored its marvelous setting) into a place of lake-side pleasure at the Theater and Terrace. Add to these a few nooks and glens or paths and drives. These are the accents and promises for which the campus is remembered with, delight; an isolated building here and there. Indeed these are handsome-but they are fragments.

What of the campus proper? It is curious in shape and difficult to design -two miles long and three blocks wide. It is a thin ribbon of land tightly contained (until very recently) by Lake Mendota, University Avenue, a commercial district to the east, and a bleeding-out onto a refilled swamp of University Bay. Here on this narrow strip of land, reduced again in width by Bascom Woods, the old orchard, railroads and apartments on the Avenue, and the playing fields of the dormitories, are the concentrations of academic buildings. Here too, was a shape of terrain which presented a difficult challenge to excellence of design and planning.

Granted that the task was difficult. But who can endorse the unhappy clutter of the Medical School where poor design jostles poor design in cramped disorder? Where is the only drive open to visitors making their way from Langdon to Bascom? Along its course still stand (though happily not much longer) the decrepit piles of Psychology and Journalism Halls. Around its bend are the jumble of quonsets and shacks which huddle below the crazy-quilt back of Education. It is a drive saved from disgrace by a winding course and promise of something better beyond.

Why was the decree of some irrational plan approved for the 'second most important entrance to the campus-the Agricultural College mall with its split-architectural-personality of red brick buildings on one side fronting yellow on the other? Who devised the faceless forms of Old and New Soils? Why was Elizabeth Waters Hall placed to obstruct a third of the most dramatic view on the campus? These, and many other, are part of the campus-but not its beauty.

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IT IS THE CANDID truth that the Wisconsin Campus has been saved by Nature. The softening and protective screen of trees, the dip and rise of the hills which happily intercept our vision, have spared us from a drabness of architectural performance and a complex of disorder which otherwise would be depressing. It is ironic that Nature should bless us with her bountifulness in the beginning and soften our blows at her as time went on.

It is not pleasant to contemplate, as of now, that our neglect, and that of our predecessors, have done little to embellish the natural beauty of the campus. Indeed, we were well on the way to ruining it. We have had plans for the campus in the past. Some were ill conceived. Some had merit only to be forgotten. Above all, we were responsible for a state of mind which unconsciously assumed that the natural beauty of the campus could and would survive any form of indifference or assault.

Now, in 1961, we face a critical situation which no longer can be ignored. The University will grow at a progressively accelerated rate. The building program for instruction, research and public service will be of a magnitude unlike anything imagined in the preceding decades. If these future structures are not sensitively conceived and grouped they will compound an encroachment upon the campus which will bear the elements of blight. The campus is not an American city where congestion and blight causes a flight to new open spaces or creates the necessity of renewal at fantastic expense. The campus cannot be moved, it is here to stay. We must work with what we have.

There are those who may believe that this image of the campus is unwarranted or over-drawn. I invite them to do only a few of a number of things. First, visit Madison and take a long, hard look everywhere on the campus, walk the academic; by-ways where students walk, join the faculty in their laboratories, their lecture halls and offices in those buildings which are inadequate or hazardous; in short, explore the campus beyond the favorite and easily accessible gathering places. Next, let them compare University buildings in terms of design and accommodation with the grade or high schools of their own communities. Let them try and imagine the future look of this campus, which is swiftly becoming "space poor", if twice the number of structures were arranged in the scatter-shot manner of the past.

Now let us raise a very pertinent question. Are there any hopeful signs of change in our attitudes and actions? It is encouraging to observe that in the last two and one half years thoughtful and continuing efforts are being made to improve our position.

These include:

1. The establishment of a planning and construction group headed by Dean Kurt Wendt with;

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- a. Prof. Leo Jakobson, architect and urban designer, directing the staff engaged in future planning studies, and
 - b. The organization of a staff of programming architects and engineers under the direction of Mr. Donald Sites and Prof. ylin Small
2. The reconstitution of the former, unwieldly eighteen-man planning commission into the smaller and more active Campus Planning Committee with Dean Wendt as chairman.
 3. The conscious efforts of the Administration to obtain private funds for the beautification of choice spots on the campus.
 4. The initiation of improved planning procedures for state building under the new State Architect, Mr. Karel Yasko.
 5. The innovation of advance studies and analysis sketches for identifying building requirements jointly engaged in by faculty, planners and architects.

A new effort to establish intelligent and orderly planning began with the development groups under the leadership of Dean Wendt and Prof. Leo Jakobson. Critical studies of the problems affecting the University, the City of Madison, academic buildings, pedestrian and vehicular traffic, research functions and innumerable other factors have been undertaken. Twenty-year plans, flexible in their nature, are being created in an effort to attain a functional and aesthetic order within the context of the enormous building program for the next decades.

Already, a "Lower Campus" development has been studied, designed and approved by the Regents, as a long-term ordering of the multi-purpose meeting ground of intellectual, cultural, religious and recreational programs. A twenty-year plan for the Medical Center has been completed which will give character and facility to one of the most congested segments of the campus. A coordinated design for lake-shore development in the Union and Wisconsin Center area, from Hydraulics to Lake Street, could produce as exciting a lake environment as any in the Northwest. Meanwhile, at every turn, we must carefully judge what to remove, what to repair, what to replace as the insistent pressures for space come from every instructional, research and public service department of the University.

We are quite aware that there are three major factors present in all of our problems: the economics of construction; the functions and facilities of ships to all other buildings; and the aesthetics of

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structures, groupings, greenways and vistas. To build a structure economically there must be the best possible judgments of permanence, maintenance costs, and appropriateness to function so that it will require little remodeling over the years. To design buildings which will satisfy the requirements of instruction and research in a period of radical change in these fields calls for as much foresight as can be summoned. To plan a campus ensemble worthy of a distinguished seat of learning requires skill and perception. We must seek to create, as best we can, a total environment worthy of the title "University."

Those who are intimate with our situation know that compromise has been the history of campus planning since World War I, and though we will be forced into compromise in the future we can be hopeful that it will take a more acceptable form as it is guided from a vantage point of intelligence and vision. Insufficient funds for land purchases have forced unhappy decisions in the placement of buildings, using up precious ground which should have been saved for other kinds of structures. Many added wings, which are unsightly and inadequate, are so because financing was difficult. Expensive maintenance and remodelling have sapped funds which, with modest additions, could have provided building replacement with a gain in space and efficiency. A few more years of such patch work and the campus would have been chaotic.

AND WHAT LIES ahead? Bulging LA enrollments—a minimum of 31,000 students on campus in nine more years! Meanwhile, the research required for progress in learning and knowledge, the research demanded increasingly by industry, and federal, state and local governments will grow faster than the instructional functions of the University. Where will we place the buildings which must house these activities? Where is the land? How will we attain some order and design? These are the problems which the University is now making new and greater efforts to solve. Intensive studies by professionally trained planners and architects, wise judgments by faculty and administration, and sympathetic cooperation and financial support by the people of Wisconsin, the state government and alumni are the only means by which we can compose an efficient and attractive University.

We no longer have a pastoral or "ivy-covered" campus. If we are to save woods and vistas, and produce greenways and concordant architecture which will provide a sense of space and beauty, we must build upward in combinations of low and high-rise structures. To continue to build out over every parcel of land will doom the campus to being two enormous piles of brick and mortar. What once was Bascom and Observatory Hills will become sprawling mounds of masonry.

Every building now standing and every building added will affect the result. We must develop attractive groupings, quadrangles, piazzas, clusters of woods, and greenways and malls. We can no longer afford the

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dubious luxury of indiscriminate construction unless we are willing now to accept a default in foresight which will be typified by a despoiling of every charm which still remains. We must seek to create a quality of environmental planning which is consonant with our academic achievements and respectful of Nature's remarkable gift. We must do as well as any other educational institution in this matter. To do less will be to transform the campus into a great architectural monument to failure for which we and our successors will be justifiably ungrateful.

Original article included:

[Photo: Dean Kurt F. Wendt, rear, chairman of the Campus Planning Committee, and State Architect Karel Yasko explain future building plans to the Board of Regents.]

[Graphic: This sketch indicates the direction of future campus planning at the University. Pictured here is a proposed twenty year development plan for the Medical School. Included in the new development will be: additions to the Medical School and Wisconsin General Hospital, a cancer clinic (the long building in the middle of the complex), an addition to the children's hospital, a medical library, and facilities for geriatrics, genetics, and the School of Nursing.]