

## 11. The American Campus Ideal

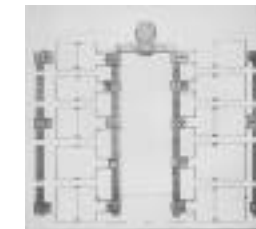
### *The Academic Village*

The American university campus represents an ideal that developed slowly through the late 17th and early 18th centuries and has been widely imitated throughout the world. It is based on the firm conviction that the physical environment for learning is critical to education and that a supportive, well-defined, well-designed learning space indelibly marks the education of people. The American campus spatially and symbolically embodies a community of learning.

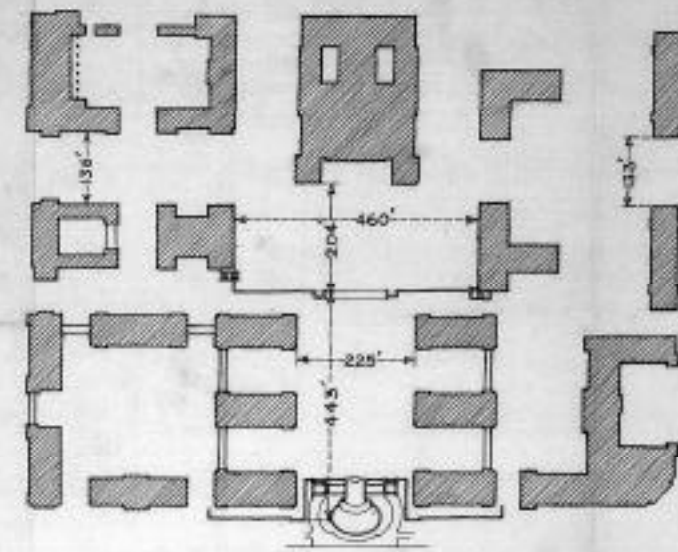
The American campus is a place where urban design has excelled. Inherent in campus design from the beginning was the concept of the "academical village," which appeared most notably in the work of Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia, Frederick Law Olmsted at the land grant colleges, and the idealistic and democratic groups headed by John Jay Shepherd, who created Oberlin College in Ohio. It was Jefferson's University of Virginia that brought the ideal of the academic village to the American campus. Jefferson, and later Olmsted, attacked the idea of the campus as a single large building, writing "...in fact a university should not be a house, but a village." Both suggested clustering and connecting small buildings assembled around open spaces. The University of Virginia was very much like an American village green surrounded by houses.

Jefferson's academic village joined knowledge, daily living and the exchange of ideas with a spatial form in which these activities could occur. He envisioned an academic community in which social and intellectual ideals would be inseparable from its spatial forms. The primary distinction between this American ideal and its European counterpart was that the American campus gave equal value to open spaces and buildings.

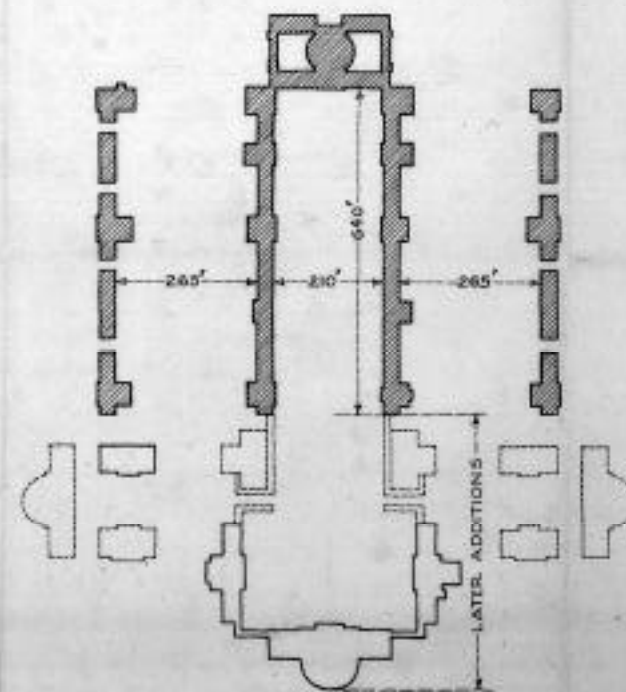
Jefferson designed the University with grand courtyards created by the careful placement of buildings and the open landscaped spaces among them. He placed the University library prominently at the focal point of the major axis with academic building wings flanking.



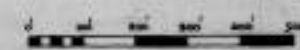
*The landscape designed by Thomas Jefferson in 1817 for the University of Virginia in Charlottesville established a clear hierarchy to favor the Library. The lawn terraces to form tiered, theatrical planes that frame a view of the distant hills. It is this same view that was subsequently obscured by the library designed by McKim, Mead and White.*



UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS  
THE 1933 PLAN  
SOUTH MALL AND LIBRARY PLAZA



UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA





The landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, echoed Jefferson's view that a college or university should recognize "indoor and

outdoor recreations." Olmsted wrote that for a college or university "...establishing certain tastes and habits are of more importance than any other object. The two most important tastes and habits must be the library and the gardens: one with reference to indoor recreations, the other with reference to outdoor recreations. The records show that timely consideration has been given to the first. The second, I submit, is of no less importance."

Olmsted proposed to provide students with a general, village-like arrangement, "...and this arrangement cannot be appropriately realized unless all your buildings should correspond in size and general style externally with those which would meet the ordinary requirements of a rural community." For Olmsted and Jefferson, the physical setting was the means for establishing tastes and habits, and for creating an enriching educational environment.

Olmsted and his brother, John Hull, traveled through Texas for approximately five months in 1854, before the University of Texas was founded. Olmsted later published a book, *Journey through Texas*, (1857) which remains one of the best 19th century books about early Texas. He wrote: "Austin has a fine situation upon the left bank of the Colorado. Had it not been the capital of the State and a sort of bourne to which we had looked forward for a temporary rest it would still have struck us as the pleasantest place we had seen in Texas.

*The University of Virginia in Charlottesville. The ground plane rises as you approach the Library.*

It reminds one somewhat of Washington; Washington *en petit*, seen through a reversed glass.... The country around the town is rolling and picturesque, with many agreeable views of distant hills and a pleasant sprinkling of wood over prairie slopes."

The city versus country setting for a campus was a subject vigorously debated in the 19th century; some campuses that had spawned a surrounding town moved to more rural environments. Urban campuses were also created, but the model of an academic village prevailed.

How can this uniquely American vision of the ideal campus be translated for a growing modern university such as The University of Texas at Austin with its population of 48,000 students? It is important to recognize that a campus needs to be seen as a whole and not as a series of disparate pieces; the overall quality of a campus needs to be considered even when urgent demands for new buildings and spaces need to be addressed. Expediency should not be sanctioned without regard for the larger issues of how to define and promote a sense of place.

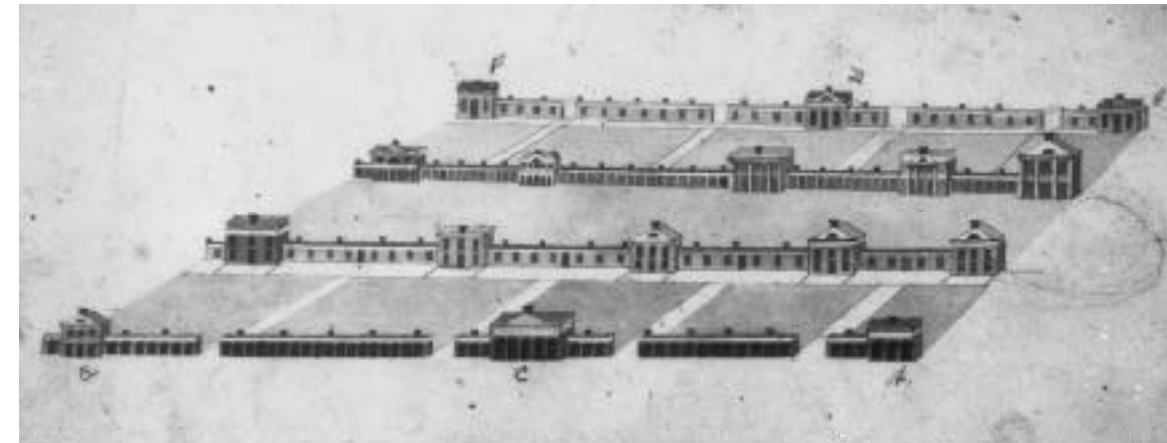
An academic campus is a living entity, continuously regenerated. However, when regeneration ceases, the life of a campus is arrested. The design of buildings and open spaces is equally important to create the ideal campus and this brilliant American invention.



*The Oberlin College campus in 1908 is a powerful example of an attempt to integrate a campus with a town. The campus first occupied the central green, consisting of two sides of commercial buildings and two sides of academic facilities. Campus growth relocated the academic buildings from the central green, which was left to accommodate activities of the town and the College. Campuses in small towns need this type of gesture: a space that mutually supports their endeavors.*



*Aerial of Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio.*



*Building and lawn plan of the University of Virginia c. 1820.*

*Two sets of less public landscapes run parallel to the Lawn gardens, which are accessed from the pavilions along the colonades. This drawing conveys the successful integration of architecture with landscape and the equal weight awarded to each. The two inner rows are pavilions and dormitories; the outer rows are hotels and dormitories. The Rotunda was built later.*



*The Main Building and the State Capitol were placed on the two major hills in Austin. This 1887 drawing by August Koch emphasises the elevation of the terrain of the University area, where some 50 or more houses were under construction. In 1887 the new capitol was under construction. It was not until 1899 that the Old Main was completed.*

The strong image of a close community joined together by shared interests can be seen in the original 40 Acres of the University, planned and designed by Paul Cret in 1933, with earlier master plan contributions by Cass Gilbert in 1909 and James M. White in 1923 and Greene, LaRoche, and Dahl in 1928. The original 40 Acres, deeded to the University in 1881 by the State of Texas, located the campus on a hill, creating a powerful and enduring image. Even though these 40 Acres, first called "College Grove" and then "College Hill," were set aside in 1839 by the City of Austin, the location of the University was determined by vote of the people of Texas in 1881. Austin won the election, and the 40 Acres were then given to the state to use for the proposed university. The eventual placement of buildings and open spaces within these 40 Acres was beautifully balanced. The scale and splendor of trees and topography, and the equilibrium between the constructed environment and the open spaces continue to play a critical role in public perceptions of the campus.

The Cass Gilbert master plan for The University of Texas at Austin established the Spanish Mediterranean character of the campus structured by a cross axial plan. However, it was Paul Cret's 1933 master plan that most significantly established the future design direction

for the 40 Acres and served as the model for the overall character of the University. Cret's plan recommended shaping exterior spaces into courtyards and using building walls to define the larger open space. The result was a superb, powerful and axial organization.

The Cret plan addressed the most dramatic physical features of the campus—its steep contours and hilly terrain—and modified these natural elements into a series of terraces along a central north-south axis with stepped courtyards placed along them. A complementary east-west axis crossed the north-south axis at the Main Building. Cret also established a language of symmetry between buildings and open spaces that ran along a central axis. These open spaces and geometrical forms together defined the communal spaces of the University.

The campus has provided a nurturing environment for its students, faculty and staff since 1883. More than 60 years have passed since the design of the master plan by Paul Cret, and the buildings and land belonging to the University have grown from an academic village of 221 students, eight faculty and a single administrator\* to a sprawling campus of 369 acres with 12,500,000 square feet arranged among 139 buildings. Each year 48,000 students are educated by 2,200 faculty members.

The University offers courses in more than 270 degree programs in 14 independent disciplinary schools and colleges, and a graduate school, 75 academic departments and programs and a Division of Continuing Education.

To revitalize The University of Texas at Austin, it is essential to recapture the vision of the campus as a collection of ideal villages whose physical environment is central to and supportive of learning.

To do this, it is necessary to explore those precedents and principles of this uniquely American invention and reinterpret the goals for the University's campus, which, since its inception, has exemplified the ideals of Jefferson and Olmsted.

\*The first Administrator was a proctor; UT did not have its first President until 1895.