Campus sums up the distinctive physical qualities of the American college but also its integrity as a self-contained community and its architectural expression of educational and social ideals.

Paul Venable Turner from Campus—An American Planning Tradition

The master plan for an academic campus embodies and reveals an institution’s intellectual, social and physical aims. When these distinctive characteristics, unique to each community, are difficult to discern and incoherent, it is because the principles that bring clarity and harmony to buildings and open spaces have been ignored in favor of the needs of the moment. The rules of planning, as applied to campus architecture and the design of open spaces, can be used to regenerate an institution’s sense of place and more clearly communicate its mission.

III. A Summary of Campus Planning

Designs for The University of Texas at Austin

Drawing of the front (south) elevation of the Old Main Building, Frederick E. Ruffini (circa 1883). Because of the lack of funds, all of Old Main was not built at the same time. The West Wing was completed by January 1884; the middle portion, including the auditorium, was finished in 1889; and the East Wing was completed in 1899. Ruffini died before the central portion was built; J. L. O’Connor became the new architect and subsequently designed much of the rest of Old Main. Although there are differences among the wings, Ruffini’s design and dimensions were not changed.
Preliminary Development Plan for The University of Texas at Austin by Cass Gilbert (1910). Between 1910 and the early 1920s, Gilbert drew several development plans for the University of Texas campus. None was implemented, but some aspects of his proposals were adopted by Paul Cret in the 1920s.

The conditions that frame the view of a modern university are substantially more complex than its historical antecedents. In the mid-16th century, colleges and universities were required to protect their students and faculty from uninvited adversaries and the threat of disease; as a result, they permitted only a few points of entry, designing courtyards and quadrangles in response to needs for protection. Buildings were placed around the perimeter of quadrangles and courtyards, which could be occupied as future growth required.

The beginning of the 17th century represents a definitive moment in the history of campus planning. During these years, the formal enclosure of the quadrangle became an important form-generating feature of campus design in England, and gates and courtyards were positioned symmetrically on axis with each other. The concerns that influenced the design of campuses in the 16th century were changing as social and health conditions improved.

By the 18th century, educational programs and curricula began to organize and shape the physical environments of the American campus. The American campus was now a democratic institution, representing the ideas of the new republic in its teachings and in the placement of its buildings. The American campus began to symbolize a community on the edge of an urban environment, with controlled interaction with its mercantile neighbors.

Although the 18th century brought significant commercial, scientific and technical changes, few of these discoveries dramatically altered the physical plan of the American campus. The intrusion of the city into the daily life of the academic community reinforced the traditional belief that the campus should be removed from its urban context. Campus architectural plans were strongly influenced by a university’s relationship to its natural environment. It was considered desirable to be removed from the city, and the beauty of open space and its natural qualities were increasingly valued.

During the mid-19th century, the building of new academic campuses proliferated throughout the United States. “Soon colleges began the practice of hiring architects to produce ambitious master plans...” By the middle of the 19th century, the grandiose collegiate plan was common,” according to Paul Venable Turner.

A master plan articulates the spirit, mission, visual coherence, order and unity of a campus. Its design embodies its predispositions toward students, faculty and the neighboring public, from which its character is either distinct or with which it is crucially integrated. While there was no master plan for the placement of buildings on the The University of Texas at Austin campus when its first few structures were erected, the University’s early leaders soon became thoughtful about its physical plan and recognized the capacity that its buildings, open spaces and natural environment could have for enhancing the work and life of its students, faculty and administration.
The University of Texas at Austin was deeded its original 40 acres in 1881. When the city of Austin was first surveyed, the State Capitol building was placed on the first hill north of the Colorado River. The second hill north of this site, originally called College Hill, became the site for the University and was described as “higher and the city proper, commanding a beautiful view in all directions.”

The first official development plan for the Austin campus was prepared by San Antonio architects Charles A. Coughlin and Arthur B. Ayres between 1903 and 1907. Their plan failed to provide a clear, consistent image and a workable plan for future growth; consequently, it was never implemented.

The second development plan for the campus was prepared in 1908 by Frederic M. Marx, who was chairman of the School of Architecture at Washington University in St. Louis. Marx proposed enclosed quadrangles, a popular campus design of the time. He also designed an open college green to provide natural relief for the campus. While his plan was not wholly accepted, many of its elements survived in later master plans, especially its emphasis on strong linear axes and its focus on a monumental main building.

The University's first approved master plan was designed by the renowned New York architect, Cass Gilbert, who designed New York City’s Woolworth Building and the Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C., and served as the University’s architect from 1910 until 1922. Two aspects of his plan were particularly important to the future of the campus. The first was the establishment on the original 40 acres of a major north-south axis and a lesser east-west axis; the second was the use of Battle Hall as a model for the architectural character of future buildings.

When Gilbert began his tenure, the campus consisted of eight buildings designed with widely disparate styles and materials. He produced several development plans and designs for two significant campus buildings: Battle Hall (1911) and Sutton Hall (1918). Unlike the proposals by Coughlin and Ayres and Frederick M. Mann, Gilbert proposed a campus with a stronger formality and monumentality. He used Battle Hall and Sutton Hall to establish an architectural image for the campus that remains today.

Gilbert’s plan proposed self-contained courtyards within the quadrants defined by the north-south and east-west axes. In his first plan of 1910, buildings were limited by continuous one-story loggias, which surrounded the courtyards. In his 1914 plan, Gilbert eliminated many of these loggias, leaving the buildings to sit as masses free in space without a sense of closure or strong association with open spaces.
The designs for Sutton Hall and Battle Hall each had a particular influence on subsequent University buildings. Sutton Hall established an appropriate and distinctive vocabulary of materials with cream-colored limestone, buff-to-orange brick, red tile roofs and terra cotta detailing; it is still regarded as an excellent prototype for a typical University of Texas at Austin academic building. Battle Hall is significant for its more monumental massing; its formal relation to a central open space; a rich materials palette of limestone, red tile roofing and decorative ironwork; and elaborate soffit detailing, all of which appear in key buildings designed later for the campus.

Preliminary front (east) elevation of the Library by Cass Gilbert (1910). The beautiful Library Building, now Battle Hall, served as UT’s main library for 26 years, as the university’s main repository of books from 1910 until 1937, as the administrative offices for the College of Fine Arts from 1937 until 1950, and as the main admissions office for the College of Fine Arts from 1950 until 1973. It is still considered by many to be the finest building on the campus.

The building is named for William J. Battle, a classics professor, who served as acting president of the University from 1914 to 1916, and as chairman of the Faculty Building Committee from 1920 until 1948.
Following Gilbert’s tenure as campus architect, James M. White produced plans for the campus in 1923 and 1926. Other than his proposal for separate areas outside the original 40 Acres for men’s and women’s dormitories and athletic programs, and the defined area for sciences to the northeast, no major elements of either of his two plans were formally adopted.

The University updated its campus master plan in 1928 in consultation with the Dallas firm of Greene, LaRoche, and Dahl. Herbert M. Greene served as campus architect between 1922 and 1931. During these years, ten new buildings were constructed, many of which are still considered to be some of the finest at the University.
In 1930, the University of Texas Board of Regents commissioned Paul Philippe Cret to prepare a plan for development of the campus. Cret was an internationally renowned architect from Philadelphia. French by birth, Cret was trained at the École des Beaux-Arts, where he became familiar with the classical composition and axial organization that would shape his design of the campus. Cret, like Gilbert before him, studied the campus thoroughly during the preparation of his plan, paying careful attention to the site, the existing buildings, and previous plans. When he began work in 1930, the campus consisted of 18 buildings, only 12 of which were consistent in style. Cret understood the changing nature of modern campuses. His strategy for organizing the campus was one of a flexible formality that brought together classical concepts of clear formal organization and modern functional requirements. He organized the campus around major North, South, East and West Malls, which bisected the central 40 Acres and continued beyond the 40 Acres to the north and the east. Secondary organizing elements were formed by streets and walking paths, all of which ran parallel to one of the two main axes.

These organizing elements defined the separate groups of buildings and related the groups to each other. Each mall further united the campus by relating to major and secondary elements of building massing and to monuments in the landscape. The north-south axis connected the Main Building, Home Economics Building and the Littlefield Fountain; the east-west axis connected the entrances of the Texas Union and the School of Architecture Building (further marked by small corner towers), the pavilion wings of the Main Building, and the open-air amphitheater proposed for Waller Creek.

Preliminary Plan for Development by Paul P. Cret (1933). Cret was suggested as the new consulting architect by Robert Leon White, an avid student of Spanish colonial architecture. Cret noted in his "Report Accompanying the General Plan of Development" (1933): "The modern university has to be, on account of its size, a grouping of several compositions, related to be sure, but independent, and requiring a certain variety of treatment to avoid the monotony and the institutional character inherent to the repetition of similar units." He insisted that the public buildings be modern, but he wanted the academic and student service buildings to be traditional so they could portray the Spanish spirit that both he and Dr. William J. Battle felt was appropriate to Texas.
The group of six buildings around the South Mall marked the formal public front to the campus. Other buildings designed by Cret, although also rectangular, were configured more flexibly in combinations that were shaped as the letters of the alphabet: H, I, L, T and U. These configurations provided flexibility to the plan and called for buildings that were not meant to exist in isolation but, more importantly, to work in combination with other buildings to define and reinforce major and secondary open spaces. This flexibility of configuration suggested a more private and domestic, almost picturesque, informality which contrasted with the public character conveyed by the formality of the South Mall.

Cret’s axial organizing strategy derived from both the French Beaux Arts school and, more specifically, from the formal American campus design tradition established by Thomas Jefferson in his plan for the University of Virginia. Cret modeled the spatial proportions of the formal South Mall on the proportions of the central space in Jefferson’s plan and terminated it as Jefferson did with the Library.

The master plan designed by Cret gave architectural direction for buildings and for the design of open space. The fundamental difference between the earlier plan by Cass Gilbert and the comprehensive development plan completed by Cret in 1933 was its attitude toward open space. The campus that Cret encountered before commencing his work was a loosely composed set of buildings in predominantly open green space. Those buildings were transformed by Cret into a campus defined by contained spaces—malls, courtyards and quadrangles—appropriately scaled and well proportioned to support these existing buildings, but with a rich and harmonious character of their own.

In his landscaping proposals Cret used low formal hedges to define the perimeter of spaces, and he used trees and shrubs to modify and articulate spaces around buildings. Different spatial experiences, ranging from the formal South Mall to the informal and natural terrain of Waller Creek, created a feeling of variety within a structured composition.

Cret’s master plan coincided with the beginning of a momentous planning and building period at the University. In 1931, Cret was commissioned to design ten buildings for the campus. Following this intense design period, he served as consulting architect for an additional nine commissions for the University. Cret’s master plan was vigorously adhered to from 1933 until the late 1940s.
Development Plan for The University of Texas at Austin by Paul Philippe Cret (1933). These various portions of the Cret Development Plan are made from an enormous watercolor rendering. Cret's perspective, often used by "report," are the other important legacy of Cret's association with the University. He spoke of a "spirit" that he hoped would carry the plan to completion, even though he realized that changes would necessarily be made over time. Cass Gilbert had approved the Littlefield Fountain, which had been commissioned by Major George W. Littlefield while he was a member of the Board of Regents. Gilbert had approved the fountain concept, but he felt that Cret had a different idea about the placement of the statues. Instead of grouping them around the fountain and mounting two on pylons, he decided to install them on either side of the South Mall, as today. Coppini was displeased because this change destroyed the meaning of his original concept.
Paul Cret’s master plan and subsequent building designs had a lasting impact on the physical character of The University of Texas at Austin as it expanded and developed. In 1938, however, Woolrich Laboratories (formerly the Engineering laboratories building) was designed without reference to existing buildings on campus. Although some building designs adhered to the Cret style throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, an increasing number of buildings neglected the goals of campus integrity and coherence. This change in the spirit and character of the campus was striking. By the mid-1970s, the vision established by Paul Cret had been abandoned. New buildings did not have the same relation to open space or did they relate to other adjacent buildings.

Although the late 20th century has brought profound and fundamental changes to educational curricula and methods of teaching, the introduction of the automobile has had the most significant and lasting impact on the physical characteristics of all campuses in the United States, and in particular The University of Texas at Austin. The devaluation of open space and its alternative use for parking lots and buildings with large footprints and towering heights, has eroded a sense of form and tradition.

A new master plan for The University of Texas at Austin must reference the historic successes of Gilbreth, Greene and Cret. Responsibility for the future development of the University should be assumed only after understanding, respect and love of its past have been acknowledged, because it is in these earlier buildings and open spaces that we find the essence of our community. Those buildings are flexible and enduring, and these open spaces encourage interaction and pedestrian comfort. They should be the models and inspiration for future development.

The Main Building with its 27-floor tower, was completed in 1931 and stands today as an icon for The University of Texas at Austin. The tower rises boldly above other buildings. It is 59-feet square and 307-feet tall. J. Frank Dobie, University professor and the Southwest's master storyteller, suggested that the tower should have been laid on its side so that all rooms would be close to the ground, with a “gallery running around the front of it”.

The Library Building replaced the old Main Building and immediately assumed the name “Main Building.” It was constructed in two parts; the rear was actually the Library, which was built first and was open for the 1933-34 school term. Old Main was still standing. After additional funds became available, old Main was razed (1934-35) and the front of the building and the tower were constructed. The entire building cost $3,354,166, funded by $2,800,000 from the University Available Fund, a Public Works Administration grant and a loan and bequest from George W. Littlefield.

Although the late 20th century has brought profound and fundamental changes to educational curricula and methods of teaching, the introduction of the automobile has had the most significant and lasting impact on the physical characteristic of all campuses in the United States, and in particular The University of Texas at Austin. The devaluation of open space and its alternative use for parking lots and buildings with large footprints and towering heights, has eroded a sense of form and tradition. Paul Cret’s master plan and subsequent building designs had a lasting impact on the physical character of The University of Texas at Austin as it expanded and developed. In 1938, however, Woolrich Laboratories (formerly the Engineering laboratories building) was designed without reference to existing buildings on campus. Although some building designs adhered to the Cret style throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, an increasing number of buildings neglected the goals of campus integrity and coherence. This change in the spirit and character of the campus was striking. By the mid-1970s, the vision established by Paul Cret had been abandoned. New buildings did not have the same relation to open space or did they relate to other adjacent buildings.

Although the late 20th century has brought profound and fundamental changes to educational curricula and methods of teaching, the introduction of the automobile has had the most significant and lasting impact on the physical character of all campuses in the United States, and in particular The University of Texas at Austin. The devaluation of open space and its alternative use for parking lots and buildings with large footprints and towering heights, has eroded a sense of form and tradition. Paul Cret’s master plan and subsequent building designs had a lasting impact on the physical character of The University of Texas at Austin as it expanded and developed. In 1938, however, Woolrich Laboratories (formerly the Engineering laboratories building) was designed without reference to existing buildings on campus. Although some building designs adhered to the Cret style throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, an increasing number of buildings neglected the goals of campus integrity and coherence. This change in the spirit and character of the campus was striking. By the mid-1970s, the vision established by Paul Cret had been abandoned. New buildings did not have the same relation to open space or did they relate to other adjacent buildings.

Although the late 20th century has brought profound and fundamental changes to educational curricula and methods of teaching, the introduction of the automobile has had the most significant and lasting impact on the physical character of all campuses in the United States, and in particular The University of Texas at Austin. The devaluation of open space and its alternative use for parking lots and buildings with large footprints and towering heights, has eroded a sense of form and tradition. Paul Cret’s master plan and subsequent building designs had a lasting impact on the physical character of The University of Texas at Austin as it expanded and developed. In 1938, however, Woolrich Laboratories (formerly the Engineering laboratories building) was designed without reference to existing buildings on campus. Although some building designs adhered to the Cret style throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, an increasing number of buildings neglected the goals of campus integrity and coherence. This change in the spirit and character of the campus was striking. By the mid-1970s, the vision established by Paul Cret had been abandoned. New buildings did not have the same relation to open space or did they relate to other adjacent buildings.

Although the late 20th century has brought profound and fundamental changes to educational curricula and methods of teaching, the introduction of the automobile has had the most significant and lasting impact on the physical character of all campuses in the United States, and in particular The University of Texas at Austin. The devaluation of open space and its alternative use for parking lots and buildings with large footprints and towering heights, has eroded a sense of form and tradition. Paul Cret’s master plan and subsequent building designs had a lasting impact on the physical character of The University of Texas at Austin as it expanded and developed. In 1938, however, Woolrich Laboratories (formerly the Engineering laboratories building) was designed without reference to existing buildings on campus. Although some building designs adhered to the Cret style throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, an increasing number of buildings neglected the goals of campus integrity and coherence. This change in the spirit and character of the campus was striking. By the mid-1970s, the vision established by Paul Cret had been abandoned. New buildings did not have the same relation to open space or did they relate to other adjacent buildings.

Although the late 20th century has brought profound and fundamental changes to educational curricula and methods of teaching, the introduction of the automobile has had the most significant and lasting impact on the physical character of all campuses in the United States, and in particular The University of Texas at Austin. The devaluation of open space and its alternative use for parking lots and buildings with large footprints and towering heights, has eroded a sense of form and tradition. Paul Cret’s master plan and subsequent building designs had a lasting impact on the physical character of The University of Texas at Austin as it expanded and developed. In 1938, however, Woolrich Laboratories (formerly the Engineering laboratories building) was designed without reference to existing buildings on campus. Although some building designs adhered to the Cret style throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, an increasing number of buildings neglected the goals of campus integrity and coherence. This change in the spirit and character of the campus was striking. By the mid-1970s, the vision established by Paul Cret had been abandoned. New buildings did not have the same relation to open space or did they relate to other adjacent buildings.

Although the late 20th century has brought profound and fundamental changes to educational curricula and methods of teaching, the introduction of the automobile has had the most significant and lasting impact on the physical character of all campuses in the United States, and in particular The University of Texas at Austin. The devaluation of open space and its alternative use for parking lots and buildings with large footprints and towering heights, has eroded a sense of form and tradition. Paul Cret’s master plan and subsequent building designs had a lasting impact on the physical character of The University of Texas at Austin as it expanded and developed. In 1938, however, Woolrich Laboratories (formerly the Engineering laboratories building) was designed without reference to existing buildings on campus. Although some building designs adhered to the Cret style throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, an increasing number of buildings neglected the goals of campus integrity and coherence. This change in the spirit and character of the campus was striking. By the mid-1970s, the vision established by Paul Cret had been abandoned. New buildings did not have the same relation to open space or did they relate to other adjacent buildings.

Although the late 20th century has brought profound and fundamental changes to educational curricula and methods of teaching, the introduction of the automobile has had the most significant and lasting impact on the physical character of all campuses in the United States, and in particular The University of Texas at Austin. The devaluation of open space and its alternative use for parking lots and buildings with large footprints and towering heights, has eroded a sense of form and tradition. Paul Cret’s master plan and subsequent building designs had a lasting impact on the physical character of The University of Texas at Austin as it expanded and developed. In 1938, however, Woolrich Laboratories (formerly the Engineering laboratories building) was designed without reference to existing buildings on campus. Although some building designs adhered to the Cret style throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, an increasing number of buildings neglected the goals of campus integrity and coherence. This change in the spirit and character of the campus was striking. By the mid-1970s, the vision established by Paul Cret had been abandoned. New buildings did not have the same relation to open space or did they relate to other adjacent buildings.

Although the late 20th century has brought profound and fundamental changes to educational curricula and methods of teaching, the introduction of the automobile has had the most significant and lasting impact on the physical character of all campuses in the United States, and in particular The University of Texas at Austin. The devaluation of open space and its alternative use for parking lots and buildings with large footprints and towering heights, has eroded a sense of form and tradition. Paul Cret’s master plan and subsequent building designs had a lasting impact on the physical character of The University of Texas at Austin as it expanded and developed. In 1938, however, Woolrich Laboratories (formerly the Engineering laboratories building) was designed without reference to existing buildings on campus. Although some building designs adhered to the Cret style throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, an increasing number of buildings neglected the goals of campus integrity and coherence. This change in the spirit and character of the campus was striking. By the mid-1970s, the vision established by Paul Cret had been abandoned. New buildings did not have the same relation to open space or did they relate to other adjacent buildings.
Shown here, in addition to the Main Building and Towers, are nine other Cret buildings. They are Goldsmith Hall, the Texas Student Union, Hogg Auditorium, Carothers and Andrews Dormitories, Gregory Hall, Jesse Hogg Gymnasium, Pasteur Hall, Welch Hall and the Hogg Building. Nine of the buildings were dedicated at Round-Up time (homecoming) in the spring of 1933. Note also the large fountain at the center of the campus. Some of these served as residences for students. Littlefield Fountain is at the end of the South Mall.

Cret buildings in the early photograph are Waggener Hall, Welch Hall, Anna Hiss Gymnasium and part of Baker Hall. Also shown is the Hal C. Weaver Power Plant, completed in 1928 and designed by the firm of Greene, La Roche and Dahl. This aerial view shows how Speedway, connecting downtown Austin with Hyde Park, then ran through the campus. Originally called Lampasas Avenue, it was changed to Speedway after Hyde Park was developed and vehicles sped out to the new development. Currently, Speedway is crowded, as cars are parked on both sides of the street and buildings and parking lots border either side.