

# Campus Architecture

Section B

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## Campuses in Cities: Places Between Engagement and Retreat

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URBAN UNIVERSITIES present an inherent conflict for administrators who oversee campus planning and development. Some see the need to withdraw and create an academic refuge. Others believe a campus must integrate physically with the city in order to stay relevant. The two approaches cannot be more dramatically different, and they have profound implications for both a university's mission and its students' education. Let me make a case for why physical integration is in the best interest of urban institutions.

Many presidents have embraced their role as civic leaders, making a critical contribution to their host cities. They do that by engaging intellectually, culturally, economically, and socially in urban life. But they struggle over how to engage when it comes to the built urban environment.

One can argue that directing the physical development of an urban campus and its immediate surroundings could possibly be the most important tool a president has to redefine a university's direction, its sense of purpose and energy, its academic goals, and its public and civic image. But the art of planning and developing an urban campus is often fraught with challenges brought on by the tension between two strong forces: the imposing pull of the city that often defines an institution, and the ideal of an academic refuge sheltered from the city's hustle and bustle.

The desire for refuge is influenced by a long-held conviction that the great work of academe can thrive only in the seclusion and protection of a cloistered, ivy-walled campus. Such calm and serenity is thought to be necessary to reflect upon, analyze, and solve life's great problems. This commonly held view of academe influences the physical setting, building height and typology, and physical definition of campus edges of many urban universities, and can be seen in three problematic, yet typical, physical characteristics:

**Inward-looking orientation.** Many universities have modeled their campuses along the traditional collegiate idea of a quadrangle and an internal courtyard. Although institutional facilities are built within the city grid, they largely turn their back to the public streets, except when meeting their servicing and loading needs. Their entrances are internal, overlooking manicured courtyards. The pedestrian circulation patterns are consolidated internally, and the adjacent public streets are left deserted.

**Zones of separation.** Other urban campuses push the city away by locating large swaths of green fields or parking lots as barriers. In disrupting the city's grid and creating a buffer zone, planners hope to give the campus a dose of serenity and shelter.

**Defensive building design.** To provide relief from the activity of the street, many campus buildings sit on a plinth—a raised base or a landscaped platform that elevates the true entrance to a "private" second floor. Another common example of defensive de-



sign is a bridge connecting adjacent buildings, forcing pedestrian circulation internally and away from streets. Again, all are designed to create a physical separation from the city.

The result is a built environment that is physically disorganized and isolated from its surrounding context. Many of these campuses lack critical elements necessary for vibrancy, like density, connectivity, and engaging design. They tend to have dormant boundaries that are cold and lack public utility. And even more devastating, the core of such campuses lacks a sense of place and purpose. Simply put, it is neither here nor there.

THAT THESE PROBLEMS are so prevalent on so many urban campuses stems from a common pattern of university expansion and design in the United States. The most aggressive growth occurred in the 1950s and 60s, during an era of heavy federal investment in the sciences and technology, often at urban research universities. This coincided with a wave of urban-renewal policies that focused

on slum clearance, and an era that promoted an architectural style of brutal and modern architecture obsessed with technology, order, and hierarchy. Many universities participated in plans that called for razing dilapidated city blocks, ultimately destroying neighborhoods and leaving in their wake super-block-size buildings with a design vocabulary more imposing than neighborly or urbane.

Another factor is the tradition of recruiting campus administrators who have financial or business backgrounds, but little training in urban planning or design. (Such a problem is not specific to higher education but exists across many industries where those who oversee large capital programs lack the necessary design literacy to understand how to bring about change through the built environment.) Nor are they aware of how to use real estate as a strategic tool in building a successful urban environment.

Finally, higher education's decision-making process is fraught with a cultural aversion to risk and a fragmentation of authority that dif-

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fuses responsibility. In managing new projects or planning campuses, the institution as a whole often forfeits its responsibility and delegates it to a building committee made up of department chairmen and faculty members. Their needs are often expressed in terms of square footage and internal organization rather than objectives of public and urban design.

The picture need not be that dire. Several urban-design principles can help campus leaders reshape their built environment. Such principles are designed to mitigate the tensions between connectedness and retreat, and to capture the advantages of both:

**Stitch the edges.** Counter to conventional wisdom, urban campuses must engage their edges with full gusto. By respecting the city grid, constructing to the building property line with hard but active urban edges, celebrating the building's use at street level, locating facility entrances off the public streets, giving campus buildings street addresses, and embracing the street's circulation flow, the campus can project itself as part of the city, not cloistered from it. The campus edges can then be filled with activity that is natural to city life but unique to the institution's identity, giving the neighborhood a distinct flavor that can be enjoyed by its students and faculty members, yet celebrated by the rest of the city.

**Protect the core.** Having reached out to the city, planners can create a campus core that embodies the ideals of a tranquil setting. This can be accomplished by extending the city grid to the core with walkways, interconnected with active green spaces, while keeping visual corridors back to the city. Like Roman piazzas that are shielded from the larger city thoroughfares, one can create unique, public (but not fenced in) spaces that underscore the rich diversity of an academic setting while shielding campus dwellers from the distraction and noise of the larger city district.

## Campus planners must insist on a mix of uses for all urban edges, allowing a more seamless fusion with the city.

**Think inside the box.** Good urban design is not just about physical guidelines, it is also about the designated use and function. Selecting the appropriate use is more critical to the urban fabric of a campus than the physical attributes. Many universities fill their cores with nonacademic and auxiliary uses, such as back-office administrative functions that dilute the critical mass of academic space, pushing it to the edges and fragmenting the intellectual presence of the university. Around the core and at the intersections of campus walkways and open greens, the soul of an institution must reside. Because we live in an increasingly complicated and interconnected world that demands more interdisciplinary research and educational advances, the campus core should be a fertile ground for intellectual pathways to intersect. The campus edges, on the other hand, require quite a different treatment.

**Adopt the tools of real-estate development.** Campus planners must insist on a mix of uses for all urban edges, allowing a more seamless fusion with the city. They need to understand the fundamental economics of real estate, how it is transacted, and how to optimize its value through the right uses. Some universities bury their

bookstores away from sight in basements in the heart of their campuses. Housing, art galleries, and performance spaces are tucked inside academic buildings. To many administrators, such uses are non-academic activities, and as a result they are often relegated to uninspiring or sub-standard space. To a real-estate developer, these uses are what you live for: a mix of commercial, office, residential, and entertainment needs, which creates a vibrant real-estate market. By bringing these uses to the edges of campuses and by embracing real estate as a tool for creating vibrancy, many campus edges could become active commercial, cultural, and residential hubs.

Planning urban campuses is not about campus planning alone, but about working within an urban-design framework that reflects a city's structure and fabric. While our cities could certainly benefit from a new stewardship of urban university environments, the true beneficiaries are the universities themselves. One only needs to look at higher education's core mission to understand why. At the heart of that mission is the education of citizens who care deeply about and have the capacity to advance humanity in all its disciplines. Universities produce and transmit intellectual capital to the rest of the world. An active physical setting that integrates campus and city can be a catalyst for that mission. An engaged urban campus promotes the pursuit of intellectual life, relevant scientific research, and authentic social and political critique. Similarly, a campus built with an urban-design framework can more readily provide access to the public. Filled with auditoriums, public plazas, art galleries, cafes, cinemas, walkways, and active streets, an urban campus can be a welcoming place. Such a campus can further public awareness and education and, more critically, advance its own mission.

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