

Focusing on the Relationship between Mission and Planning Learning Spaces

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Structures for Science: A Handbook on Planning Facilities for Undergraduate Natural Science Communities

Focusing on Mission and Vision

The first order of business in shaping spaces for learning is to attend to the institutional mission, mindful of Ortega's exhortation that sound and healthy institutions are those that have put the "question squarely, 'What is a university for, and what must it consequently be?'" Wrestling with issues of mission and context, identifying goals driving the design and redesign of programmatic and pedagogical initiatives that will be accommodated by these spaces is *planning with the end in mind*. Such discussions help avoid ad hoc decisions about spaces; they help establish some institutional benchmarks for determining how renewing of programs and space (which go hand-in-hand) fits into your mission and shapes your planning. As these discussions proceed, priorities for the short- and long-term will emerge and strategies to achieve those priorities will be identified. These discussions will not be easy, especially in an environment of stiff internal competition for limited resources, but they are an essential foundation for successful facilities management and planning.

In the context of discussing the institutional mission, there will come an understanding that, although the financial cost of attention to the physical environment is significant, failure to act will also have great consequences. It may not be immediately obvious how to measure the psychological impact on students and faculty of outmoded, unsafe, and cramped facilities, on the quality of learning. It is not difficult to assess how programs that are potentially exciting and productive are hampered by constraints of spaces and technical capacity, or how recruitment and retention of strong students and faculty are constrained by spaces that are found wanting.

Depending on the scope of the anticipated project, the time between first thoughts and physical reality may be lengthy, but this is a time for deep thought about the meaning of education on your campus, for all members of the community to ask:

How does space matter for learning? How can new and more appropriate spaces contribute to better learning for all students? How do we know?

But an institution cannot be built of wholesome usage, until its precise mission has been determined. An institution is a machine in that its whole structure and functioning must be divined in view of the service it is expected to perform. In other words, the root of university reform is a complete formulation of its purpose. Any alteration, or touching up, or adjustment about this house of ours, unless it starts by reviewing the problem of its mission—clearly, decisively, truthfully—will be love's labors lost.

— Jose Ortega y Gasset. (1944). *Mission of the University*. Princeton University Press.

When institutions move too quickly from the perception of problems with spaces to the selection of design professionals, the resulting renovations or new construction will limit, rather than nurture, the desired community of learners. It is not acceptable simply to think about how many square feet for classrooms or laboratories, about lighting or siting, configuration. Questions to be asked at this stage include:

- ◆ When was the last time we revised or reaffirmed our mission?
- ◆ What are our institutional priorities? How have they been determined?
- ◆ How does our current academic plan connect to our mission? Is it compatible with our understanding of the future in which our students will live and work?
- ◆ Do the changes we envision for our spaces for learning within our mission and academic plan? Do they reflect broader institutional visions of learning? Do they reflect goals for learning established by leaders of departments or programs? Do they reflect our vision for the future?
- ◆ Does our thinking about spaces for learning represent several independent visions or a coordinated, institution-wide vision? Do current budgets and master plans for campus spaces reflect a broader institutional vision?

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This reaffirmation of mission and reexamination of academic plan should take place at the departmental as well as the institutional level. As planning proceeds over the coming months and years, if it is rooted firmly in a common understanding of the institutional past, present and future, if you have taken the time to reexamine and explore the underpinnings and rationale for your academic program, the resulting spaces and structures will enhance your institutional distinction into the future. It is a time to determine *what works*.

Focusing on the Campus

What is a campus? Significantly, the campus is the stage setting for the life of your community: the campus is the *common ground* that unifies the diversity of activities in which students and faculty are engaged, and the diversity of buildings in which those activities take place. On a campus built over the years, this common ground brings order and stability to the diversity that has accompanied such growth and change. The common ground that is your campus should make sense from the symbolic, educational, aesthetic and functional perspective. It should have such strength and clarity that each building proclaims its own individuality, yet at the same time contributes to the greater collective good.

All individual buildings on a campus have a physical as well as a curricular context, yet (unlike regularly recurring discussions about curricular issues) rarely do campus communities come together to consider how the campus as a whole *works* for them. As you now think about possibilities for new spaces, and/or about renewing existing formal and informal learning spaces, it is essential to consider both *campus* and *curriculum* from the perspective of mission, strategic goals, and priorities. It is also important to reflect on the social aspects of architecture.

Focusing on Architecture and Community

The importance of maintaining a focus on community, on the social aspects of architecture when designing and renewing academic buildings, cannot be overstated. Walk around and through the buildings and open spaces on your own campus.

Observe how buildings planned and built in earlier eras, which reflect the ideas and values of different times, come together in a coherent pattern and serve as an appropriate stage setting for the life of your community today. Ask:

- ◆ How does the campus reflect our particular academic traditions?
- ◆ Does the campus reflect the values of our community today, and our vision for the future?
- ◆ What are the best, the strongest characteristics of our campus that should be preserved and extended?
- ◆ Which are the buildings that alumni return to again and again?
- ◆ Is there a *sense of place* that brings life and meaning to our community?

As you tour your campus, consider how the proportion and scale of buildings and open spaces, as well as the rhythm of openness and boundaries, provide a common ground that brings a sense of rationality and hospitality to the environs. Make benchmarking visits to other campuses, gaining new insights about how architecture serves a community of learners.

Your campus as well as your curriculum is a clear expression of how your community asks and answers about the purpose of the enterprise, of how you understand the relationship between *how* and *what* and *where* students learn. The time of planning, design and redesign of spaces for learning can be a defining moment in the life of a community of learners. This is an opportunity to step back and reflect on the current reality of the physical environment into which any new spaces must fit. Ask:

- ◆ Do buildings, individually or collectively, serve as centers of intellectual and social activity?
- ◆ Is there an inherent unity, integrity, and coherence to our campus, or does the placement and character of the buildings, walks, and roads suggest that decisions over the years have been made in a piecemeal, *ad hoc* fashion, building by building?

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- ◆ Can a new facility reinforce what works now in campus patterns and anticipate new patterns that will accompany future growth and change?
- ◆ Are there ways that new spaces or structures can be an opportunity for redefining “centers” on our campus?
- ◆ In what ways might new and/or renovated spaces and structures remedy past mistakes in campus planning?
- ◆ In what ways can we enhance the utility and unity, the *common ground* that we already have?
- ◆ In what ways might the spaces and/or structures we are now planning become a physical expression of our vision for the future of our institution?
- ◆ Can the landscape design be used as an educational tool for students?

Answering such questions helps to determine what must be done and what must not be done, as well as what would be nice to do, in regard to the external physical characteristics the physical environment for learning on a campus. If there are architectural characteristics that make your campus distinctive, make a point of considering them in the design of a new facility. What does not work, what does not foster unity, or what appears not thought through or the result of random decisions you should avoid and not repeat.

Whether you are building a new, renovating or adding to an existing building, you must think through siting issues from the perspective of the tangible impact of the proposed structure on campus, circulation patterns and on its relationship to open spaces and other buildings. You must also consider the less tangible, but no less real, impact that a new structure will have on the order and stability of the common ground that is your campus.

Conclusion

In the process of planning either new programs or new spaces, connections should be recognized and created—among departments and disciplines, between campus buildings old and new. Considerations should be given to the architectural and intellectual connections that foster community. The programs, the spaces, and the structures themselves will not create community.

Communities are based on a sense of shared purpose and bound together by a common vision. The end result of all your planning will be new spaces and structures to house programs for the learning community on your campus. Whether these will actually work will depend on the degree to which they reflect the ideas of the many and diverse communities on your campus, as well as the identity and mission of the institution.

It is important also to recognize the communities that surround and shape the external environment for the institution. Representatives of the local community should be informed as your planning proceeds.

Do not waste any opportunity to shape and sustain a physical environment that reflects, nurtures, and celebrates the learning community on your campus. The physical environment can express integrity and unity in much the same way as do the intellectual and social environments for learning. That should be your goal.

Never lose sight of the physical expression of community that is your campus and its best, strongest, and most “characteristic” characteristics. These are what make you what you are; they are what should be preserved and extended in your planning. ■