

Bright College Years

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I love the American campus, and two them in particular. The campus creates a place apart, a space of culture and learning, a community of clarity and conviviality. It is one of the greatest things America has made. Architectural historians often cite the skyscraper as our greatest invention, and some point to the balloon frame, wood-stud single family home, but I think the campus is a much more important and complex type. How did it come about, and what is it? Books have been written on the subject, but what I know I have learned through my own experience and research.

In the fall of 1975, I arrived in New Haven, Connecticut. I was an American kid who had grown up in Europe, with very little idea of where I had landed. I found myself on the campus of Yale College, surrounded by neo-Gothic and neo-Georgian structures that built up a fairytale world around me. It was exhilarating and disorienting. In this place apart, so different from the messiness of a standard suburb where I had grown up, everybody was more or less my age, everybody was more or less educated, and everybody was more or less ambitious. I dove in. I learned the songs and the rules of American football, I joined clubs and I edited the alternative campus magazine. More than anything, though, I became a Yalie. I became an inhabitant of that campus and what it did to me made me part of its culture for life. Truth be told, I resisted, and still have many doubts about that particular bulldog mythology, but I also fell in love,

especially with the physical place that made the Yale world so convincing. I was so impressed that my first book, published in 1990, was about the architect of that campus.

In 1983, having gotten through both undergraduate studies and graduate school at Yale, I arrived in yet again a very different place. Cincinnati was, as I found out once I arrived, in a place called the Midwest, which for me was as alien then as the middle of Europe is to most Americans. I found myself teaching at and living right next to a very different kind of campus. This one consisted of a collection of mediocre structures spread across a ridge and then tumbling down into a lower plain that was mainly an expanse of parking lots and athletic structures. I remember it being cold and inhospitable. This was not the sort of campus I was used to.

In 1985, I left for the promised land of California, but in 2006, after a stint back in the Netherlands, I returned to Cincinnati. The University of Cincinnati campus was now worthy of that name. Under President Steger's leadership, with the advice of Dean Jay Chatterjee, and through the inspired landscape architecture of George Hargreaves, UC had become a real place. A long, curving walkway connected the upper and lower parts of the campus. New buildings, some of them of exceptional quality, housed vastly improved places for students to gather, learn, and have fun. Sloped planes of grass, hillocks, and planting knit all of the disparate buildings together. This was a real campus. When I left Cincinnati in 1985, the number one reason students did not come

there was because of the campus. When I returned, the number one reason they did was the campus.

The American campus is all about personal experience and how to frame it, and one of the key moments in the campus' evolution is testimony to the importance of that focus. In the fall of 1926, the architect James Gamble Rogers, born in Northern Kentucky and designer of, among many other buildings, Laurel Court, also known as the LaRosa or Archbishop's house, in College Hill, went to visit his son at Yale. According to Yale historian George Pierson, "he found that [he]...didn't know the men on the Freshmen crew or even who they were. Also this young man seemed in poor physical shape – which turned out to be nothing more than improper feeding, from eating around town in coffee shops and the like." As a result, Pierson goes on, "Roger's enthusiasm was enlisted for better housing, homelike atmosphere, and good food." He became the "fourth key," together with Yale President James Rowland Angell, donor Edward Harkness, and Harkness' advisor Sam Fisher, in transforming the Ivy League college into a collection of semi-autonomous residential colleges on the Oxbridge model. He thus helped develop one of the most beautiful and well thought-out models of the American campus.

The next year, the four set out on a trip to England to study Oxford, Cambridge and St. Andrews –the addition of the latter probably having something to do with the gentlemen's fondness for golf. They came back and made a formal proposal to the Yale

Corporation to create ten residential colleges. Each would have its own building – designed by James Gamble Rogers—and each would have all the things a college would need to make a student feel at home there. Rogers envisioned them as quadrangles on the Oxbridge model, with the rows of dormitories serving to create walled enclosures that would separate the students from the messy world outside. Towers and turrets were to punctuate the serried ranks of bedrooms, and each of these vertical spires was to be a beacon of learning festooned with references to faith and learning. A dining hall would take the place of the church itself, calling the congregation in to learn not so much the tenets of Christianity, as the norms of good table manners and conversation. A master, his own house embedded into the college’s fabric, would serve *in loco parentis*, lording it over the undergraduates with teas and seminars, as well as discipline.

Each college, in other words, was to be the essence of the American college, which was a derived version of the Oxbridge model, with a dollop of pragmatism added in. This design was not the result of happenstance or organic growth: Rogers, Angell, Harkness, and Fisher developed it rationally, with a clear aim, namely to save Yale from becoming a faceless machine for research and academics and preserve it as a community of learning and privilege. They spent well over \$15 million of the donor’s funds on this effort. In my book on the architect, I argued that the Yale college system furthered the creation of a self-conscious and self-perpetuating elite, rationalizing what the Ivy Leagues had developed out of their Puritan, religious roots, but renewed with “Western”

ideas of pragmatism (Angell was a student of John Dewey's) and money (Harkness' resources came from his father's holding of 15% of Standard Oil stock) laid on top of those New England ideals. The campus became a laboratory that could take talented students from all over the country and later the world, inculcate them with learning, traditions, and manners, and form them into an effective elite. The American campus in general had and has that function, for better or for worse, and Yale just built the campus in a most self-conscious manner –as, I would argue, UC did half a century later.

The American campus is, I will admit together with the skyscraper, our greatest architectural achievement. If the latter has become the emblem of the kind of capitalism we have perfected, the former is the embodiment of the other side of what makes America great –the Jeffersonian one, if you will. It is no coincidence that our agrarian-focused President laid out “the University,” as those in Virginia still call their state school, as a set of separate pavilions, connected to each other by a continuous walkway and reaching out to encompass the countryside from a rotunda. Each of the pavilions was a perfection of the Palladian country house and an translation of geometry and classical order set down on the landscape. The columned walkways were the place for a community to form as it moved between these elements. They also gave shape to a constructed fragment of the grid Jefferson helped to inspire and which marched over the open landscape all the way to Ohio and beyond. The central rotunda was the cultural and academic anchor, serving to bind the students and faculty to a shared body of learning, culture, and place.

This ideal form did not hold everywhere. Throughout the 19th century, most American campuses consisted of such separate structures, each an enlarged version of the home, farm, or manor house, while larger academic structures served as gathering points. The campus was an idealized form of the village, its structures commanding the newfound land with confidence and bravura. On the whole, however, these structures stood alone, and their designs did not so much inspire or aspire, as they elaborated the American scene. What connection you could find consisted more often than not of proximity or sameness of design. The American campus was as loose and disorganized as the country itself.

Only after the Civil War and, more particularly, as urbanization set in around most campuses, did enclosure take place. At Yale, the original buildings on what is now called the Old Campus were slowly surrounded by dormitories that defined the place and kept out the noise, crime, and confusion of New Haven, a fast-growing city inhabited more and more by immigrants. Though the designs here and elsewhere remained eclectic, they fused together in a kind of unity –echoes of Henry Adams are here fully intentional. The American campus became a bulwark of the elite, passing admission on to their children and separating themselves off from the rest of the country.

At the turn of the century, the campus became the focus of self-conscious design, first at the University of Pennsylvania, in 1895, and then at Princeton. The designs, by the firms of Cope & Stewardson and Ralph Adams Cram, respectively, were in the neo-Gothic mode. In Philadelphia, that was what was then popular. In Princeton the style was right because, Cram, who was the campus architect starting in 1907, was a convinced member of the Catholic revival and believed that campus could become a revival of the medieval monastery: a faith-based community that would act to preserve and further both religion and knowledge. In general, however, both these and other attempts to create an enclosed community of a single design that harkened back to a pre-rational age were part of a larger movement in American culture, outlined most clearly by T.J. Jackson Lears in his seminal 1981 *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. As Lears explains, members of America's traditional elite reacted to the trauma of the war, as well as to their country's rapid industrialization and racial and social diversification, with various attempts to create a coherent world for themselves. Based on a partially invented Colonial past, this reaction, or variety of reactions, also embraced both aesthetic refinement and a body culture, turning inward to the controlled interior painted by our best artists and outward to the countryside where men such as Teddy Roosevelt could prove their superior masculinity.

The campus became, I would argue, the most complete embodiment of those ideals. It developed into a place where young men could come together to learn not just classics

and mathematics, but also the traditions in which their parents would like them to grow up and the manners of the manors they hoped to inhabit. The campus was not just the buildings, but the fight songs, the hazing rituals, the drinking clubs, and all the other panoply of means of socialization cobbled together from English, French, and German models, and transformed into something wholly its own. To this day, the American college style is the very emblem of a relaxed, entitled way of appearing that sells clothes all over the world. But it was, and is, also a complete and integrated world, a place apart and a fairytale vision you can inhabit for a few years.

It was this world James Gamble Rogers helped to shape. Born in Bryant Station, north of Lexington in 1867, the same year as Frank Lloyd Wright, he became an emblem of the idea of forming an effective elite before he made its home. At an early age the Rogers family moved to Chicago, where James went to public school before somehow obtaining a scholarship to attend Yale. Though obviously bright, he almost flunked out, mainly because he spent all his time partying and playing sports. He quickly figured out that socializing was more important than learning. After graduating, he returned to Chicago, started to work in architecture firms without any evident training, opened his own office, designed a few structures for the booming city, and then decamped for Paris to obtain a proper training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Upon his return, he married the daughter of one of Chicago's wealthiest families, traded his Baptist upbringing in for his new family's Presbyterianism, and started to obtain commissions for houses for the wealthy (including one for Dr. Isham, later the Playboy Mansion), office buildings, civic

commissions, and the new School of Education for the University of Chicago. The designs he did here, for Laurel Court as well as the Harrison and Hofer houses in East Walnut Hills, came into his office through both his family's and his own connections, as well as through his Yale network.

In 1905, Rogers moved to New York to set up office there, first with Herbert D. Hale, and later on his own. He also obtained the patron who was to support him for the rest of his life, commissioning him to do the Yale colleges, churches, and later hospitals all over the country. Edward Harkness was the second son of Stephen V. Harkness, who translated an early investment in John D. Rockefeller into a 15% ownership of Standard Oil. Edward spent his life giving away almost all the family fortune –well over \$300 million in 1940 dollars and wherever he gave, he brought Rogers along as his architect.

What Rogers and Harkness brought with them was the Midwest and all its values. Rogers' first major institutional commissions, as well as many later ones, came from allies and pupils of John Dewey's, and his whole approach was shaped, whether consciously or not, by pragmatism. In Rogers' case, that meant making buildings that were both constructed in the most rational manner, using the latest technologies, and making sure that they heightened your experience of both the place and the institution it housed and represented.

When Rogers in 1913 designed his first building at Yale, the Harkness Memorial Quadrangle, which was later subdivided into Branford and Saybrook Colleges, he clad a steel frame with stone he picked with great care to catch New Haven's particular light. He laid out the residential college so that you would move through spaces according to cues that bay windows and turrets gave you, and integrated decoration both to emphasize corners and turning points, and to give you lessons about history. You learned by experiencing the space in a manner Rogers and his team of renderers and picturesque planners choreographed. Rogers wanted Memorial Quadrangle to look real, which meant old, even though it had a steel frame like any Chicago skyscraper. To that end he took measures such as having the slate discolored with chemicals – although Yale lore has it that workmen used more organic means to achieve the result-- to make it look aged, and writing instructions --which I located in the archives-- into the construction drawings that specified that every sixth pane in the leaded glass windows should be broken, and then repaired, to make it seem as if this had happened over the centuries.

The results were impressive. As one alumnus described it:

I was stunned by the buildings... Harkness Tower built by hand by imported European craftsmen. Standing below, staring up towards the gargoyles and the bells made me dizzy... The flash got me, sure. One

hundred and some thirty-five millions of Standard Oil certificates blown into Colleges and the library and the gymnasium and the tower, medieval Europe moved to New Haven, Early Establishment Oxford-land. We wanted to wear monks' robes and take vows.

Yale became the model for countless other colleges, though few were as effective as this expensive compendium of craft and technology. The very idea of the campus had, by the 1930, become a central trope of American culture, celebrated in books, films, advertising campaigns, and later television. It developed an elaborate set of rituals and modes of behavior that is still alive and well today.

What interests me about this model is the physical artifact, and especially its power to go beyond the vague sense that your college years are a place and a time apart that offers a concrete alternative to the complexity and confusion of life before and after that period. This clarity is of course the result of a single purpose, which is education, as well as the tribalism inherent in what America has made of that experience –a mythology you could somewhat cynically say exists mainly to perpetuate the institutions through alumni allegiance.

But the campus itself, and especially the complete environments on the Yale and Princeton models, do something more than that. As the architect Cram had hoped, they

make a place where you are removed, not only from the cares of the outside world, but also from many of the factors that define you. Your stage is not that of the family home and the familiar neighborhood, nor is it the arena of work or community associations such as churches or professional organizations. It is, rather, a place that gathers together disparate people, with different backgrounds and interests, and asks them to share something. That thing is a space. The campus is the place where you live, learn, and play. Those three become intertwined. You become part of a coherent culture, in which you come to share modes of thinking, behaving, and appearing.

Rogers' design for the Yale campus was very clear about this operation. The enclosed quadrangles acted like the monasteries' *hortus conclusus*, or enclosed garden, but also as refinements of the existing landscape. Within this captured space, you moved from dormitories that were miniature homes to classrooms and dining halls that surrounded you with reminders of the traditions and ideas you were meant to learn. Sayings chiseled into the arches, statues of poets and philosophers, but also such references as a copy of the Welsh church where Elihu Yale once prayed and, in later colleges, replicas of Yale College's own early buildings, put you in a landscape you were meant to recognize and perpetuate.

My favorite moment of this kind of confluence of tradition and daily life, and of institution, learning, and ritual, is the nave of Yale's Sterling Library. Sterling is a cathedral of learning, and you march down the main aisle into towards the spread of reading rooms

and the skyscraper of stacks, the place of the congregation taken up by the silent rows of the card catalogs. Ahead is the altar, which happens to be the circulation desk where learning, rather than salvation, is passed out. Behind the librarians, Our Lady of the Circulation Desk blesses you. Officially, she represents the church of college itself: alma mater, dear mother in *loca parenta*. The only flaw in the perfect symbiosis of faith, learning, and institution is the hammer and sickle, duly crossed, held up by one of the attendant lords and painted there by a socialist artist.

I would argue that places such as this worked to create a clear model for an ideal American society as a place where young people from disparate backgrounds could come together to form an effective elite. I would say that they were the incubators for the leaders and the culture that made America into a great world power. I would also note that the notion of this insular community helped create the myth of the best and the brightest that got us into so much trouble when, starting in the 1960s if not before, we overreached and tried to impose our imperium and our ways of doing and thinking of people, places, and things that benefited little from the notions God, country, and Yale embodied by the campus.

What the campus did produce was a type or form of appearance and organization that was able to insert itself into almost every community in America, creating the sanctuaries, the think tanks, but, what is most important, the model communities that I believe helped and continue to provide the values at the core of everything I think is

good about this country. The campus is our City on the Hill, our modern monastery, our place of wilding, our social laboratory, and, more often than not, our core cultural sanctuary, all rolled into one. It produces, when it is effective, an effective and good society.

These days, this model is under pressure. It seems, from a logical viewpoint, like a wasteful model. Why spend four years finding your way, when we could educate you in half that time? Why confuse you with choices and people who are not like you (or, what might be even worse, worship in a different way than you do)? Why spend all that money on thinking in general, and on culture? And is the campus not a waste of space?

I offer you, as an argument why, the University of Cincinnati. I cannot, of course, prove that it is making this city better, and will do so into the future, but I strongly believe it is and will. I believe, however, that it will only continue to do so if it holds true to the campus model, concentrates its resources first on that space, even as it engages other communities, and holds onto the idea that college in particular is a time to learn how to be a citizen, a thinker, and a member of a culture, rather than a professional in one particular discipline.

UC's main campus, dating back to the 1920s, had, by the 1960s, taken on the form that many American campuses adopted during this time period. The quadrangles were implied, rather than enclosed, by separate buildings. They fronted the street, in this

case Clifton Avenue, but preserved a space beyond that front rank for the campus heart, McMicken Commons. The planners unfortunately exiled the dormitories, which were single-use, to the South and East edges of the campus. None of the buildings were particularly distinguished in their form or the spaces they provided. They were utilitarian boxes with just enough decoration and ceremonial areas to mark them as being of academic importance.

Still, this western end of the campus had a clarity and elegance that accomplished most of what a good campus should do. The problem, once the University began to grow, was twofold. On the one hand, UC was, because of its particular history, a commuter campus, with students living off-campus or at home and dropping in to learn and not much more. Second, the whole eastern end of the campus was eighty feet lower, and was sited on a flat area with few distinguishing characteristics.

The University's answer was to edge the campus with housing and to connect the lower part to create an integrated set of spaces. The administration, which had been trying to get rid of the fraternities and sororities, realized that they were actually central to campus life and, what might be more important, to alumni allegiance. At Northwestern University, James Gamble Rogers designed a college-like block for the sororities in a neo-Gothic style. Here, the University turned Clifton's western edge into a de facto campus extension, Greek Row, helping to renovate or build new houses for the different organizations. On the southern edge, the University built one row of 241 residential

units, Varsity Village, and is now building another, thus creating an inhabited ramparts rising up over a moat of parking garages and a line of shops. On the eastern edge, it is renovating the line of 1960s era dorms, turning them into more comfortable and appealing places to live. They have also added new dorms that build on the campus tradition.

Realizing that the campus needs to be more than a facility for learning, UC has invested tremendous resources in creating a new core that is not an open quadrangle fronted by administration and classroom buildings, but a compound of athletic facilities, one of them with a dormitory built right on top of it, dining facilities, and student services.

These structures start at the top of the mesa with the Tangeman Center --which I am afraid I see as a fatuous blob that has engulfed an inconspicuous neo-Georgian structure-- curve down the hill as walls that lead you on, almost without noticing it, to a lower campus (to designs by firms whose principals studied at Yale and acknowledge their debt to their experience there), and past a stadium whose presence had previously overwhelmed this whole part of the campus. There, the magnificent Recreation Center works out its structure and plans, pumping its iron around workout rooms, pools, basketball courts and running tracks.

This new campus core is a radical rethinking of the original model. Most of the elements are there, but they have become all jumbled up. The walls now do not face the outside world, but a fragment of that context brought into the campus core, the

“Mainstrasse.” That street does not lead from one monument or quadrangle to another, but rather leaves you free to wander at either end. The landscape design opens rather than closes, and so do the buildings, which twist and turn to defy any attempt to see them as bastions, churches, or other centralizing institutions.

The effect is to marry the notion of the campus as meeting place of both people and of learning, culture, and socialization, with the complexity and contradictions of the modern city. The UC campus is a refinement of the city in which the graduates may live and work. It shows that place, I think especially to the suburbanites among them, as a site that is exciting, open, and full of delights and facilities, rather than being frightening and forbidding. In this way, the Mainstrasse is a perfection of what many of us now think of as the American ideal, namely the multi-cultural, multi-facilitied urban core of encounter, in a way analogous to how the campus devised a century ago offered an idealized version of the rural America Jeffersonian saw as our true natural habitat.

I have to make a special note about the landscaping, not only in terms of what I think is a brilliant bit of planning that should and will serve as a model for many other universities, but also because of its aesthetics. At Yale, a large part of the campus charm comes from the landscapes devised by Beatrix Farrand, one of this country’s greatest designers in that field. It was the edges especially at which Farrand excelled: she would create multiple borders, punctuate them with trees and soften them with

shrubs just enough to create a rhythm translating the architecture into the realm where it seemed, because it was, more natural.

In Cincinnati, George Hargreaves took the area's geography, as I have noted, and created small-scale abstractions of it. That is one of the central tricks that artists use to show us a large world and let us make it our own: they miniaturize it and condense it into its most salient characteristics. Here, Hargreaves carved away at edges not to reinforce, but to peel away and show the strata that make up the hills and moraines on which Cincinnati sits. He then turned those lines into benches as well as steps, making them useful. At the campus' main, western entrance, the line rises up to become a marker proclaiming the place's identity. In front of the Recreation Center, on Eden Green, tilted planes become versions of the hills and dales that divide Cincinnati into its many communities, here coming together to create a place that offers opportunities to occupy, to sit and study, but also separating off areas distinctly not for use, so serving to recall the importance of open and empty space in our sprawl.

Finally, there are the most visible elements of Hargreaves' landscape: the cones and the wedges that dot both this part of the campus and the area around the medical school. Though these also represent the local landscape, they go beyond that function, creating something that is new and even slightly alien. I wish they were larger, and that there were more of them and I hope that, as the campus expands and improves, there will be. Not only do I think they are beautiful in and of themselves, but they also serve

to offer a vision of another kind of place, one that moves from what we already know, into the realm that is unfamiliar, that is other, that perhaps, if I may stretch my interpretation, stands for the world students, faculty, and staff are finding through thought and research.

When I go to the University of Cincinnati campus now, I am delighted to see how the spaces are used. You will find pick-up football games and fraternity meetings of some sort on the main quad; people sitting, reading, browsing the web, or chatting on Mainstrasse's many ledges or steps; people running, playing, or just sitting even in the stadium's bowl, a space that has turned from a forbidding terrain into a kind of backyard at a very large scale. Even when the weather has turned cold, as it is now, you can still see the spaces in use, as places of movement and connection, tying the campus' different elements together.

There are limits to the UC campus achievement. Like most large urban universities, much of its growth is taking place on its medical campus and, though it has taken pains to try to tie that area into the main campus, it is still a separate and mainly inhospitable collection of parking lots and narrow open spaces over which the castles of cure and care loom with little sense of their academic embedment. The relationship between town and gown is, in spatial terms, as difficult here as it is in most cases in America, and I am considerably less enthusiastic about the urban and architectural qualities of

the developments on the southern edge. On a more fundamental level, UC is still not a campus in the sense that most students do not both live and learn there.

That, however, is a problem for American campuses in general. Other than at elite universities such as those of the Ivy League, the notion that you disappear into the castellated realm for four years appears to be dissipating here, even as countries across the globe copy the model. The ideal is, as I have noted, expensive, and it does not fit into the ways in which we think about ourselves anymore. I understand this reality, but I am sorry of it. I still think the idea that you remove yourself from the path and place of daily life for four years is a good one, especially if you do so in the company of others not like you. I still like this place of both coherence and exploration. Then again, I also think we should reinstate the draft, perhaps with a national service model, and I think that we should figure out—and I think this is central task we face in terms of our country's physical and social future—how to turn our suburbs, so wasteful of and destructive to our environment, and so antithetical to the creation of a coherent and effective culture or society, into places of connection, where the Jeffersonian ideal of living with and on the land becomes connected to the ideals of an open democracy we experience together.

I am not sure that either the traditional campus or the new model I would argue the University of Cincinnati has developed could be effective exemplars. They may in fact be too expensive and too rigid to accommodate a world marked by the continual

movement of people, goods, and information and defined by continual change. I would like to imagine that perhaps we will invent a third model, one which uses the logic of the suburb and makes it work, and perhaps one that integrates current technology so that we connect as much in cyber- as in meat-space.

But, I remain nostalgic for my bright college years, with pleasure and with a little pain rife, the time and the place where I learned to love America, architecture, art, and Yale, all at the same time, and where I found the material for my first book and this paper. I also miss my years discovering the other, perhaps the real America, sallying forth from the UC campus to strike out along the diagonals that connect Cincinnati's communities, to drive Ohio's grid and find its small towns, and to carve my curves through the sylvan landscape of Kentucky. I love what UC has become, and am hopeful for what it means for this city. I do hope and trust that somewhere and somehow, the American campus and everything it has made me will continue to serve as one of our greatest inventions and traditions. For, as the song says, we are poor little sheep, who have lost our way. God have mercy on such as we –or at least let our children and grandchildren have a chance to live on a beautiful campus for four years.

Cincinnati, November 2012