

4-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Dober, Richard P. (2008) "Heritage, Identity and Campus Design," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 33, Article 9.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol33/iss1/9>

Heritage, Identity and Campus Design

*The design of a campus
must be carefully planned*

An interview with Richard P. Dober, AICP

There is a growing awareness that in order to compete with rival institutions, Jesuit campuses must be as attractive as possible. They must both maintain the appearance that the campus embodies a tradition and show that it is up-to-date – technologically sophisticated, safe, home-like, green. As we speak, a number of Jesuit institutions are drawing up plans for campus centers, dorms, classroom buildings. The seminar's director, Fr. Jack O'Callaghan, S.J., opened this dialogue with an architect who has a special expertise on Jesuit architecture and design.

Conversations. Mr. Dober, our Seminar is grateful for your willingness to contribute to this issue on "physicality" in Jesuit higher education from your own experience of dealing with campus architecture and planning. We're concerned that, while the Mind gets a lot of play in Jesuit education, the Body – beauty, aesthetics, art – doesn't hold the same place of honor it once did in our schools. Could current architecture be a case in point? Some of the great buildings in European cities, very often now used for other purposes like the Brera Museum in Milan or the Hilton Hotel in Budapest, were once Jesuit colleges. But recent issues of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* dealing with a revival of concern about beautiful architecture failed to mention a single Jesuit university in this context. You told me earlier that your recent experience at a very old Jesuit university sparked some reflections which might interest our readers.

Dober. Yes, some months ago I spent a week at Vilnius University in Lithuania. It's that country's oldest institution of higher education, founded by the Jesuits in 1570. They asked my help on a preservation plan for their eighteen-building complex. As you can imagine, after four centuries it offers a lot of three-dimensional evidence of persistence and alteration in the campus architecture and landscape. That region of Lithuania saw succeeding waves of subjugation, revolu-

tion and revitalization — looking at the university one can see a residue of visions, vicissitudes, and victories.

Conversations. That sounds like a gentle way of saying that you were facing a challenging task!

Dober. You're right. But my questions about how to honor, use and express that history physically occasioned a number of productive conversations about campus image and identity. And I hope some of my current thoughts could tie into this issue's theme. I'm talking about three-dimensional forms of heritage and their potential contributions to campus planning and design. And, for Jesuit institutions in particular, that can involve creating a physical setting that resonates with institutional specificity.

Conversations. So besides "physicality" in the sense of Beauty, you're looking at the history and the identity it may enshrine. Unpack that a little, please, for us architectural innocents.

Dober. Well, I see the specificity – the uniqueness and identity – of an institution grounded in several aspects. One is **place**. That's achieved by a creative blending of buildings, grounds and infrastructure. You try to arrange architecture and landscapes, new and old, on the site so as to serve and symbolize the goals and objectives of the institution.

Conversations. Isn't that a tall order for someone coming from the outside without much real knowledge of a place?

Dober. That's exactly why there has to be a participatory campus planning process, involving representatives from campus constituencies likely to be affected by the study outcomes. The collegial process defines the list of improvements. And of course people have to be realistic about degrees of

urgency and site realities. You're usually talking about new buildings as well as renovated space, landscapes, adjustments in the circulation systems – walks and roads, parking lighting and signs, and occasionally, land acquisition and consolidation.

Conversations. Obviously, this isn't something anyone can manufacture out of whole cloth. How do you structure this "collegial process"?

Dober. Carefully. Typical sources to consult as you're drawing up the list of improvements include strategic planning assessments, growth needs, accreditation requirements, capital campaign opportunities, competition, faculty and departmental entrepreneurship, donor interest, due diligence to aging

and obsolete facilities, welcomed or threatening changes in the environs, a new administration demonstrating its leadership, mandates from trustees and other influential voices. Any or all of these can generate concerns.

And of course not all the improvements identified, whether they're seen to be necessary or just desirable, can be or will be implemented. So the value of a collegial process includes its rendering judgments on priorities, and a thorough examination of site realities.

Significant items in a comprehensive study of existing physical assets include the size and configuration of acreage owned by the institution, topography and micro-climate, land and building utilization patterns and adjacencies, circulation networks, parking, greenery



Right: Vilnius University grand courtyard and church of St. John.

Photo courtesy:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Vilnius_university_grand_courtyard_church_st_john.JPG

Screened left: Boston College's Ford Tower.

in its many manifestations, views and vistas to be maintained or created, safety and security, sustainability, zoning and related codes, and the character and quality of the environs.

These and other place-defining factors, features, and circumstances revealed and evaluated during the work, are shared with the study participants so as to help shape solutions and build consensus and support for adopting and implementing the plan.

Conversations. So Place is one of the key components, as you begin to design a plan for a campus. What are other components?

Dober. Another important one, obviously, is **heritage**. As a campus plan component, this comes in two basic forms; what is recognized and integrated in the campus design — most often architecture and landscape; and what which is discovered and featured. These might be a skyline, a central green or yard, a historic building where the school began, the steps in front of a library where graduation photos are usually taken, the life-like statue honoring an esteemed president or dean, a tree dedicated to a founder, the consistent use of red brick in traditional and contemporary buildings — things like that. On Jesuit campuses churches or chapels are often seen as appropriate locales for celebratory heritage, mementos and testimony for those whose service and good works should not be forgotten.

Some campuses tell the stories of their existence and experiences in a special place where heritage is explicated via pictures from early campus life, cascading tiers of books written by faculty, the portal from an antiquated and demolished administration building or football stadium.

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These gestures and objectification, minor or monumental, glow with the aura of authenticity, attract attention as emblems of ambitions and achievement, and command respect for an event, personality, or a pivotal time in the school's development. As such they strengthen the image of a particular place, differentiation particularly useful in metro regions where schools compete for students and reputation. For alumni heritage elements recollected with affection or awe, reminders of cherished rites and rituals, friendships and inspiring teachers can motivate participation in annual giving and capital campaigns. In some communities, town and gown conflicts can be dampened by publicizing heritage as a campus design theme, especially when neighborhood historic preservation is promoted locally as a constraint on campus expansion, intrusive or otherwise.

Conversations. What about ecological considerations in all this? Is that relatively new awareness a factor for your planning?

Dober. It ought to be, for many good reasons, as another article in this issue emphasizes. When building and site restoration are consequential items in the campus plan (and often the hardest money to secure), the kind of stewardship involved in the project communicates a commitment to an important ethical objective, optimum use of existing physical resources before consuming more of the planet's materials and energy. But other, more technological aspects of ecology are probably more prominent in designing new buildings.

I'm thinking more here of landmark buildings whose faithful restoration is an important heritage consideration. For them, planners have to exercise exacting choice in recovering or duplicating that which was lost or blurred. This is where **beauty** becomes an important con-

sideration. Architecture has its infancy and maturity, varying moments when it seems as complete as the designer's dream and the client's wishes; and also times when a later intervention raised the quality or added import to the masterwork. What period or what aspect should be recaptured?

Again, Vilnius comes to mind. They have a segment of a prominent building that was designed first as a Jesuit chapel, and later reconfigured and decorated by command of the Czars to become a church for the surrounding Russian Orthodox community. During the Soviet years, the space was compartmentalized into chemistry labs; and after Lithuania's liberation, reconstructed for musical and theatrical performances. Realistically, the latter function is likely to continue for some time, because there are more pressing needs for other kinds of capital improvement and little money. And there is a campus church nearby, with splendid Baroque architecture, a centerpiece in the campus design. Nonetheless, there is a mood on campus to recognize the Jesuit beginnings, heritage and memory. ■

Editor's Note. Richard Dober's analysis, based on his international experience with the design of university campuses, is intended to set the stage for the following feature, for which we invited the presidents of all 28 American colleges and universities to submit pictures of those campus sites which best express the spirit and character of their campuses. Other "spirit" pictures are distributed throughout this issue. A number of their offerings correspond to Mr. Dober's emphasis on heritage. As a follow-up on this article, if there is sufficient response, Mr. Dober has volunteered to do a commentary on additional submitted pictures of heritage buildings, markings, or scenes.