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. My Dober, our Seminar is grateful for your willingness to contribute to this issue on “physically” 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 Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg 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 Varena 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-
Conversations. That sounds like a gentle way of saying that you were fac-
ing a challenging task!

Dobie. 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 contribu-
tions to campus planning and design. And, for Jesuit institutions in particular, that can involve creating a physical set-
ing that resonates with institutional specificity.

Conversations. So besides “physical-
ity” in the sense of Beauty, you’re look-
ing at the history and the identity it may embody. Unpack that a little, please, for us architectural innocents.

Dobie. Well, I see the specificity – the uniqueness and identity – of an institu-
tion grounded in several aspects. One is
place. That’s achieved by a creative blending of buildings, grounds and infrastructure. You try to arrange archi-
tecture 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?

Dobie. 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 usual-
ly talking about new buildings as well as renovated space, landscapes, adjust-
ments 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 “collagical process”?

Dobie. Carefully. Typical sources to consult as you’re drawing up the list of improvements include strategic plan-
ing assessments, growth needs, accreditation requirements, capital camp-
paign 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 improve-
ments identified, whether they’ve been to be necessary or just desirable, can be or will be implemented. So the value of a collegial process includes its render-
ing judgments on priorities, and a thor-
ough examination of site realities.

Significant items in a comprehen-
sive study of existing physical assets include the size and configuration of acreage owned by the institution, topog-
raphy and microclimate, land and build-
ing utilization patterns and adjacencies, circulation networks, parking, greener-

http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol33/iss1/9
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 environment.
These and other place-defining 
features, settings, and circumstances 
are revealed and evaluated during the 
work, are categorized for the study partic-
ipation as a guide to shape solu-
tions and build consensus and sup-
port 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 
big categories, what is recognized and 
integrated in the campus design — 
most often architecture and land-
scape — and what is discovered and 
featured. These might be a sky-
line, a central green or yard, a his-
toric building where the school 
began, the steps in front of a library 
where graduation photos are usual-
ly 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 
locuses for celebratory heritage, 
memorials 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 adminis-
tration building or football stadium.

These gestures and objectifica-
tion, 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 develop-
ment. As such they strengthen the 
image of a particular place, differen-
tiation particularly useful in metro 
regions where schools compete for 
students and reputation. For alumni 
heritage elements recontextualized with 
affection or awe, reminders of cher-
ished rites and rituals, friendships and 
inspiring teachers can motivate 
participation in annual giving and 
campaign programs. In some commu-
nities, town and gown conflicts can 
be dampened by publicizing her-
itage as a campus design theme, 
especially when neighborhood his-
toric preservation is promoted locally 
—or a constant on campus expan-
sion, intrusive or otherwise.

Conversations. What about eco-
logical considerations in all this? Is 
that relatively new awareness a fac-
tor for your planning?

Dober. I would say for many good 
reasons, as another article in this 
issue emphasizes. When building 
and site restoration are conse-
quential items in the campus plan 
—we and the hardest money to 
secure the kind of stewardship 
involved in the project support 
commitment to an important 
ethical objective, optimum use of 
existing physical resources before 
consulting more of the planner’s 
materials and energy, but other, 
more technological aspects of eco-
logy are probably more prominent in 
designing new buildings.

I’m thinking more here of land-
mark 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 infan-
cy 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 masterpiece. 
What period or what aspect should 
be recognized?

Again, Vilnius comes to mind. 
They have a segment of a prominent 
building that was designed first as a 
Jesuit chapel, and later recontextualized 
and decorated by command of the 
Czars to become a church for the 
surrounding Russian Orthodox com-
munity. During the Soviet years, the 
space was compartmentalized into 
chemistry labs, and after Lithuania’s 
liberation, recontextualized 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 
investment and little money. And 
there is a campus church neighbor-
with splendid Baroque architecture, 
a centerpiece in the campus design.

Nonetheless, there is a mood on cam-
puses to recognize the Jesuit begin-
nings, heritage and memory.

Editor’s Note. Richard Dober’s 
analysis, based on his international 
experience with the design of univer-
sity campuses, is intended to set 
the stage for the following feature, for 
which we invited the presidents of 
25 American colleges and universi-
ties to submit pictures of those cam-
pus sites which best express the 
spirit and character of their campus. 
Other “spirit” pictures are distrib-
uted throughout this issue. A number 
of their offerings correspond to Mr.
Dober’s emphasis on heritage. As a 
followup on this article, if there is 
sufficient response, Mr. Dober has 
volunteered to do a commentary on 
additional submitted pictures of her-
tage buildings, markings, or scenes.