Building a better campus

By Laura H. Jacobs '95 '05

with historical context by Jill Anthes ’86 and Todd Furgason ’01

Those who haven’t been to the University of Arkansas campus in a few years might be surprised at how different it looks. Yes, the town of Old Main still rise above the trees, and students still study at the Greek Theatre. Memorial Hall and Vol Walker Hall and other familiar campus icons remain, but much of the campus has been transformed by an active decade of construction.

The campus experienced a lull during the 1970s and 1980s, but construction began to pick up by the mid-1990s. Since 2000, nearly 3 million square feet of new construction and renovation, such as the residence halls at Maple Hill, the new academic quadrangle at the Walton College, and the recently opened Garland Center, have been completed.

For the first time in its history, the University of Arkansas has appointed a full-time, professional staff to oversee the physical growth of the campus – the facilities management Planning Group. The staff is all alumni: Jay Huneycutt, B.LArch. ’85; Kevin Santos, B.S. ’86; Jill Anthes, B.Arch. ’86; Karen Van Horn, B.Arch. ’88; Todd Furgason, B.Arch. ’01; and Jody Verser, B.Arch. ’10.

The thing to know about campus planning is that it is multifaceted, deliberate and complex. The Planning Group is involved in a broad range of issues, including master planning, development standards, landscape design, historic preservation, transportation planning, resource allocation oversight, and facilities assessments. This article focuses on the physical planning of the campus.

“We are working to improve the spatial relationships between buildings by being more precise about the form, massing, and alignment of new campus structures,” said Jill Anthes, campus planner. The Planning Group works with architects hired to design new buildings, or to renovate existing ones. Their role is to help the architects and consultants fit their projects into the institution’s long-range plans for the campus.

For each of the campus districts – Historic Core, McIlroy Hill, Everest Hill, Maple Hill, Rose Hill and Athletic Valley – the Planning Group has studied how the existing layout can be improved by infilling with new structures and creating better outdoor spaces. Each district comes with its own challenges, but the planners are trying to tie together the sometimes incongruent collection of buildings.

“The new Walton College quadrangle illustrates the difficulty of adding new architecture next to a building like Kimpel Hall, which few people find attractive,” said Todd Furgason, campus planner. “In this case, the scale and arrangement of the buildings and the open space makes it work.”

“We look at each new design as it fits into the full build-out,” Anthes said. “We’re not thinking in terms of how a single building will be developed, but, instead, we are looking toward the realization of the master plan. The next step may not happen this year, or in five years, but it will happen eventually. Only by sticking to the plan will we create a more cohesive campus.”

One example of how this is currently playing out is the construction of the new Nanoscale Science and Engineering Building, soon to open on Everest Hill. Though it looks like an individual building now, the structure is actually the first wing of the future build-out of the district.

“The ‘nano building’ is a fragment of the master plan,” says Furgason. “It’s ready to accept the next building. The district was planned in such a way so that all phases share a single loading dock, floor levels interconnect seamlessly, and pedestrian walkways will connect the district to both Engineering Hall and, by a footbridge, to the Harmon Avenue Garage.”

While the front entrance now seems hidden away, for example, that’s only because the main entrance will be constructed in the next phase. The height of future phases will not exceed that of historic Engineering Hall across the street, protecting the primacy of the buildings in the historic center of campus. Everest Hill will also demonstrate how materials, colors and design elements can knit a district together. In this case, the red brick relates to the buildings on Arkansas Avenue and Dickson Street. As construction nears the top of the hill, the plan calls for a transition to limestone that relates directly to the material palette of the historic central campus.

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The 1925 Plan

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The 1925 Plan of academic and residential quadrangles arranged in an orderly way, example. The proposal envisioned a dense, tightly structured grouping of an urbane campus of interconnected Gothic buildings. Think construction of Washington University, designed body growth expected to reach 8,000. The wooded hillside, and to prepare for student movement of buildings then scattered across the plan to avoid continuing the irregular placement of buildings such as Waterman Hall (the original wing of the School of Law, with its fan-shaped courtroom), the Animal Science Building (now the Animal, Food and Life Sciences Building), Buchanan-Droke and Gladson-Ripley Halls, Brough Commons, the Science Engineering Building, the Mechanical Engineering Building and Vocum and Humphreys Halls.

Williams was involved in another round of campus plans in the mid-1960s, this time with Hamilton-Burr Associates. The firm produced several plans that generally carried forward the principles of the 1952 Plan, but on an expanded scale. In particular, they called for the university to acquire all of the residential neighborhoods north and south of the campus for new large-scale buildings. Parking was also expanded as more of the landscape was allotted to surface lots. These plans from the 1960s guided the construction of Pomfret Hall, the Graduate Education Building, Arkansas Union, and Mullino Library.

After this busy period, there was little construction on campus for a quarter of a century. Buildings such as Kimpel Hall, the Business Building, Arkansas Union, and Mullins Library.

The return to planning

In 1998, the university hired Sasaki Associates of Boston/San Francisco, with local firm Foster Wittels Evans & Rasco, to analyze the campus. The 1998 Plan cataloged the existing physical conditions and documented space needs for the growing campus. The plan re-established a series of basic design guidelines directing the physical and environmental growth of campus. In essence, it recommended a return to a more traditional campus form and character, just as other campuses around the country were rediscovering their own historic patterns.

“The guidelines were intended to address the lack of architectural discipline and to make the future campus more structured and beautiful,” Anthes said.

This return to the principles of the 1925 Plan informed the current Campus Plan, created by facilities management Planning Group, which has been guiding development for the past 10 years. The master plan identifies new and infill building sites, sets building alignments and masses, integrates transportation projects, and ties real estate acquisitions to a physical plan for campus development. It is linked to a capital plan for construction with projected budgets for new buildings, renovations, restoration and demolition, as well as streets, trails and landscapes. The plan shows the full build-out potential of the central campus, and demonstrates that the university has ample room for development within the campus growth boundary based on current trends of student population growth.

“Campus planning has gone far beyond just implementation,” Martinson said. “They laid the groundwork for taking what had become a very eclectic assemblage of buildings across the campus and developing a coherent context for campus growth. This work has led to significant improvements in the appearance and function of the campus.”

“We have a small planning team, but their influence and attention to detail is truly remarkable,” Martinson said.
How have things changed?

Since the planning office was formed a decade ago, it has provided dedicated, day-to-day oversight of construction projects relating to the larger vision for campus. It also pulled together previously scattered information and created new resources for the benefit of campus administrators and consultants. For example, there was previously no geographic database of campus property holdings or accurate base map of the campus. These resources are now available, and are being continually used and updated.

In addition, there is now a practical manual for how to apply the principles of the master plan, which includes building alignments and massing, landscape principles, an appropriate building materials list, and campus lighting standards. The manual also establishes, for the first time, something as simple as a standard site furnishing program. In the past, the campus had a cacophony of differing lights, benches, trash cans, bollards, etc. that were installed as part of individual construction projects. Visitors to campus will now notice more consistency as the campus where approximately 80 percent of the vehicular traffic enters, ”Marston,” the business affairs associate vice chancellor, said.

Univory campus planners suggested placing retail space along the Garland face of the garage and constructing a new bookstore across the south end. These additions were proposed to create a pedestrian-friendly walk along Garland, and to soften the visual impact of a large garage. Their research showed the historical location of restaurants and other retail establishments in that location in the past.

"We couldn’t be more pleased with the outcome, and despite the difficult economic times the retail spaces have leased quickly with tenants catering to the university population," Martinson said.

"As we were considering a garage location, we were trying to minimize the visual impact of a large parking structure at the north approach to campus and historic preservation. They also coordinated in-depth programming studies for campus recreation, the Arkansas Union, and Mullins Library. If fully implemented, these proposals will transform the character and vibrancy of these campus landmarks.

Their campus standards process helps the design professionals work with and integrate your project,” said Christie King, B.Arch.’98, a senior associate with Wittenberg Delony & Davidson Architects. "During my 15-year history of working in higher education, I have been witness to how campuses engage architects and planners in a design process across the country at public and private institutions ranging from 600 students to over 50,000. It is not an exaggeration to say that working with the Planning Group is one of the best experiences that I have had.”

"They are guided by all of the right things about planning – stewardship, history, research, precedent – but all with an eye toward the incredible potential future that the Fayetteville campus offers. They are clear in their guidelines, which have been developed with a clear design sensibility, coupled with a rational outlook on operations and maintenance considerations,” Jones said. “They are excited about the campus, encourage a high level of design conversation, and engage in a discourse about the project. They are not afraid to listen, and they think about the problem holistically (program, user, design, planning, etc), which allows them to embrace compromise and consensus building, which is the root of working on a campus.”

The vision for the future

Chancellor Gearhart was recently quoted in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette as saying, "A first-class university, which we are, needs first-class facilities." The focus on improving the learning environment for students is integral to the aspirations of the campus plan. With unprecedented growth, however, the pressure to quickly provide more space can lead to decisions that negatively affect the larger vision. The planning office is trying to provide a context for decision-makers so that the resources spent on each project can take care of today's needs while making the campus a better place.

"As the flagship institution of higher education in Arkansas, the university should be the leader in good campus design. We should expect a high standard of quality in our buildings and landscapes," Arns said. “The Campaign for the Twenty-First Century raised the bar for what the university can achieve, and our campus should reflect those ambitious goals.”

"Our planning team provides a vision of what can be, sometimes what should be, that most of the rest of us just don’t get," Martinson said. "I’ve found that they’re usually right. They really are helping us build a better campus.

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