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Caring for Places: Caring for Thought

Among the most exciting times in life are those when ideas rearrange in the mind; when what seemed settled and fixed suddenly becomes transformed by fresh and absorbing new insight. Remembering when that happened and in relation to what circumstances becomes part of the lore of life.

People like to talk about “thinking out of the box,” “the creative leap,” and the “ah-ha effect” — all means of rearranging, or differently categorizing ideas, or of suddenly finding new relationships where none had previously seemed to exist. It happens for individuals making daily sense of their worlds, and it happens in communities of people when we talk about “paradigm shifts.”

Universities are about making this happen. Watching it happen is what teachers love most... the glint in the eye of a student when new vantage points open; the startling reflection that challenges conventional understanding. Capturing and channeling those moments of rearrangement (revising, reforming, “re-engineering”) are part of the university’s purpose.

Another part of the university’s purpose, of course, is conserving, refining and transmitting cultural norms and practices — nurturing both their understanding and the critical thought that subjects them to continuing scrutiny. That universities need to have both is evident; it’s bred into the structure and ethos of the contemporary institution.

Attending to these purposes in the settings of the university as well as in its curricula receives less attention, yet the university campus is one of the places where deliberate, purposeful construction of a common realm can be imagined and constructed; where purpose and vision can trump expediency... or so one would suppose. But in an era of declining public investment in education, a surge in emphasis on market advantage, and the complexity with which university facilities and populations are now enmeshed within the fabric of cities, the project of the university has become itself more entangled with the fate of its adjoining community. Is learning any longer (or was it ever) confined to campus? How does the ever-increasing competition for students play into the construction of facilities and the demands made on the structure and character of the city (or suburb) that surrounds it?

Can the university avoid judgment about its role as an agent of change in the community? Do the patterns of open space and building that are conventionally associated with “campus” have a place within neighborhoods that the institutions infiltrate? Conversely, should the apparatus of the city have something to say about how campus spaces are formed? Should/can the engines of technological change and the buildings they foster be absorbed within conventional fabrics laden with tradition, or should/can they be used to create new understandings among students and faculty? Should not places of learning be designed so that they lead their inhabitants to encounter a larger community, new perceptions of capability, and expanded understanding of their position in the natural and built places they inhabit?

This issue of *Places*, guest-edited by Frances Halsband — who, as an architect, is herself engaged in searching through the intricacies of these issues — may not answer these questions, but it poses them. Its articles challenge us to think about what a campus might be; how a city might be; how we ourselves might be.

— Donlyn Lyndon