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Gateways Work Both Ways

Nicholas Howe



David Dixon’s “Campus Partners and The Ohio State University: Transforming a Failing Commercial District” (*Places*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 46-49) raises some pressing questions about site use and symbolic intent without, I think, addressing them adequately. Having taught at OSU from 1991-2003, I read his article with great interest and looked forward to

visiting the project for myself when I returned to Columbus. I spent a quiet Sunday morning in May wandering around the site while it was still very much under construction. What follows are my impressions of a not-yet-completed project, and should be read as such.

To understand the “Gateway Center” it helps to know that the

main campus of the Ohio State University is built on the western edge of High Street, the spine that runs north-south through Columbus and provides a sense of orientation

Buildings on the west side of High Street between 10th and 11th Streets, since demolished (2003). Photo by the author.



for the city. The northern edge of the campus blends into a residential neighborhood of early-twentieth-century houses with little demarcation other than a simple sign for the university. The scale of commercial buildings on the east side of High Street across from the campus is modest and makes for a subtle transition from city neighborhood to tree-lined campus.

The new Gateway Center on the southern edge of the campus, by contrast, sharply demarcates the line between the university and the surrounding neighborhood of one- and two-family homes as well as small apartment buildings occupied chiefly by students and the economically marginal. In the years before the Gateway Center was proposed, this area had become far less attractive than the north side of campus. Many build-

ings were in disrepair, the crime rate was higher (or at least the crimes that occurred there got far more attention), and the population was more transient and less affluent. The annual readers' poll of *Columbus Monthly* regularly voted a Middle Eastern eatery in this area as winner in the category "Best Restaurant, Worst Neighborhood." The area had numerous bars popular with students—places that stank of stale beer even from the outside, and that inside had tables bolted to the floor to prevent their use as weapons during fights. On weekends, the Columbus police would be out in force, and a wire cable would be stretched chest-high across the utility poles on the sidewalk to keep drunken patrons from rushing into the busy traffic on High Street. Many of the buildings there were undistinguished, though some had a forthright dignity that merited reuse rather than the demolition they suffered in 2002.

The need for renovation acknowledged, one can still observe that the Gateway Center looks like nothing

so much as an office development of the sort found along highways ringing the far suburbs of American cities. Its design and scale suggest buildings set down in what were until yesterday agricultural fields rather than a project that acknowledges its own potentially intrusive presence in an urban area with a complex history and population. The most obvious feature of the Gateway Center is that it announces itself as a barrier: it is built right up to the sidewalk with few setbacks or nooks and crannies for human use of a sort that the OSU campus has in abundance. Unlike the campus, the Gateway Center does not seem meant to encourage strolling, sitting, or those chance encounters that characterize a flourishing university. In the current vernacular, it looks far more "corporate" than "academic."

The images in Dixon's article do not reveal how awkwardly the new project fits into the neighborhood that it abuts, or even overwhelms. This is one of modest rowhouses and the like along the side streets off High Street, and fast-food restaurants along it. Perhaps the flow or transition between the Gateway Center and these residential areas will be improved over time, with plantings and other amenities to encourage neighborhood use, but right now it is hard to imagine where they will appear because the new buildings fill all of the available site. Moreover, the project is billed as a Gateway Center, when architecturally it bears little relation to what anyone passing through it will find on its far side: a Midwestern campus with (mainly) stone buildings of conservative design built around a large, central green space known as "The Oval." At one end of this space the postmodern accent of Peter Eisenman's Wexner Center shows that the campus has

Looking west along Chittenden Avenue toward High Street with Gateway Center to the south and rowhouses to the north (2005). Photo by author.

Another Echo of History

John McKean

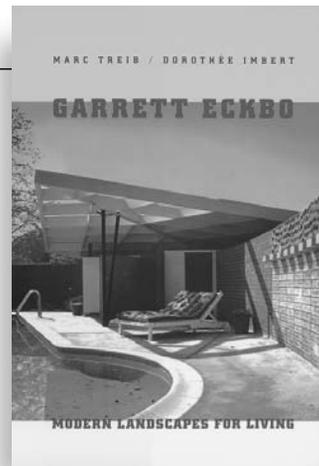
registered newer “deconstructive” architectural trends, but for the most part its central buildings are three or four stories high with broad, welcoming stairways at their fronts.

The name “Gateway Center” is perhaps more revealing than intended. It is meant to signal that these new buildings will be the entrance to OSU, a kind of formal welcoming zone between town and campus. But, as the historian Jacques Le Goff has observed, gateways serve two functions: they allow entrance and deny entrance, they invite and repel. As it stands now, the Gateway Center, with its planned office spaces and mall stores, does not do what a gateway to a university should do: namely, invite one into an area where people gather to talk, read, think, experiment, create, argue, and, most of all, share their work. The Gateway Center does not offer a symbolically appropriate entry into a public university that is the largest in Ohio and one of the two or three largest in North America. If anything, it reads like office space for the various insurance companies that have made Columbus a center of that industry.

Perhaps, though, the Gateway Center will come in time to seem a cutting-edge statement, one that announces how the university is less a place for independent intellectual and artistic life than a subsidiary of corporate culture. If so, the Gateway Center will seem a successful piece of site planning. In the meantime, it threatens to become a barrier between the university and the community surrounding it.

In the recent issue of *Places* on “Considering the Place of Campus,” it was interesting to read Henry Millon’s historical review of the 1968 work on Italian university campuses by architect Giancarlo De Carlo (“The Echo of history,” Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring 2005). For those without easy comprehension or access to the volume

he discusses, I might flag another fascinating essay by De Carlo—more abstract perhaps, but very much part of the same train of thought. Entitled “Why/How to Build School Buildings: Order-Institution vs. Education-Disorder,” it appeared in *Harvard Educational Review*, No. 4 (1969), pp. 12–34.



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