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Shaping Place: Structure and Discovery

Buzz Yudell

Analogy is only helpful to the design process in its careful application. This is perhaps how best to understand the concept of Main Street at the University of Cincinnati. One of the buildings central to this vision is the Joseph E. Steger Student Life Center. In designing this building, we engaged in a fluid, collaborative process whose ultimate success lay in the university's willingness to clarify their vision through a process which balances structure and discovery.

At the time we received the commission for this building, the university was interested both in completing the "Braid" that would tie sections of the campus together, and in creating a focus of student life. Main Street was the governing analogy for such a complex which would create this critical link and be animated by a 24/7 mix of uses.

It was the linear form of the site and the mix of uses that would be present there that had originally suggested the idea of a Main Street. However, there was never an inclination to hew to the notion of Main Street based on some image of commercial urban life. Instead, the opportunity for discovery, based on the specificity of campus needs and life, trumped the idea of a fixed image or formulaic urban solution.

The Main Street project does share with its prototype the idea of a density of uses which can both activate and serve community. Yet, it has not been conceived primarily as a commercial machine. Instead, student needs and their variable schedules have governed the patterns of access. The programmed adjacencies of use, both horizontally and in three dimensions, have been generated by the imperatives of campus life, not retail life.

Collaborative Process

In working to refine the Main Street analogy, Moore Ruble Yudell/Glaserworks engaged in a dynamic process which involved close collaboration with the designer of the campus master plan, Hargreaves Associates, and with the architects of two adjacent buildings, Gwathmey Siegal/GBBN Architects and Morphosis/KZF Design.¹

In this effort, the university encouraged freedom of exploration in several unusual ways. Most importantly, the planning team was encouraged to discuss program type, allocation and placement, building site options, phasing, and financial implications of alternate diagrams within the evolving campus framework.

Finding the right fit between structure and discovery was critical to the process. Carefully programmed multiday workshops in Cincinnati were augmented by workshops in New York City and Santa Monica. While more traditional committee meetings supported a finer grain of decision

making, it was the workshops which generated most of the pivotal programmatic, site planning, and financial decisions.

Early on in our workshops we debated the question of street or plaza, path or place. The Hargreaves team spoke of a street with stepped outcroppings to negotiate the fifty-foot grade change while encouraging gathering. However, Mike Moose of Glaserworks was concerned that the terraced street was flowing too fast and should have more places for calm activities.

At one workshop an earnest student told all the architects to "forget everything you remember about campus life when you were in college." He and others went on to describe a life in which boundaries of time, space and academic discipline are falling, due to both electronic media and more informal social patterns.

Clearly, no analogy could be entirely correct. Indeed, what eventually evolved was a hybrid of path and place with many opportunities for social interaction at varied scales. In many ways the project may be developing more as a main *place* than a Main Street.

A Flexible Armature and a System of Elements

The Student Life Center developed as a flexible armature for the energetic, electronic, eclectic nature of student organizations and activities. The program evolved as a hugely varied mix of uses, many of which require collaborative space. Some require high visibility, while others need quiet and discretion: a panoply of uses and needs. How could we support these now and yet accommodate the inevitable flux with time?

In part we distinguished elements, needs and activities which are immutable or primal (social needs, physical comfort, climate, light, building structure, campus structure) versus those which are shifting. The building evolved as a system of elements which are permanent, complemented by a set of spaces which are flexible. In a sense the building is a highly inflected loft.

This duality of generic and specific, or loft and inflection, generates variations in scale and type of space, and accommodates program diversity with highly particularized responses to campus context and topography.

The building is configured as a thin, single-loaded loft, with south-facing social corridors containing bays inflected to frame campus views and to provide casual meeting places. At grade level this south passage becomes an open-air arcade. It gives street presence and direct access to an array of activities including a twenty-four-hour computer lab and lounge, a student gallery, a business support center, and more typically commercial uses such as Starbucks and



Subway. Student organizations have access from the arcade on Main Street. Their “over-the-shop” locations are primarily configured in open-plan suites with daylight from north and south.

Thanks to the flexible planning phase, we “discovered” that by pulling our building south from our assigned site (which had been laminated against the backs of laboratory buildings and Swift Hall), we could develop a marvelous path and set of terraced outdoor rooms which we called the mews. These have become semiprivate gardens for many of the ground-level uses, and are now highly valued complements to the activity of Main Street. Moving the eastern prow of the building south from the existing Swift Hall allowed us to develop a powerful ceremonial covered entry

to this newly shaped interstitial space and to renovate Swift Hall in a more respectful and strategic manner.

Iconic places such as the east and west prows, campus-scaled portals, and the arcade, along with social stairs and bays ample enough for casual encounter, and the terraced mews, give diversity of experience and power of place to the building. They provide people varieties of outlook and exposure, allowing them to modulate their own sense of being together or apart. This permits the simple loft spaces to be quiet, flexible vessels for the changing organizational and commercial uses that bring people here: a structure that encourages people to discover their own ways of inhabiting this place.

Above: The Joseph A. Steger Student Life Center. Entrance to “Mews” between new and old buildings is straight ahead. Main Street is to the right.

Inset: Social corridor with south-facing bays on upper floor. Photos courtesy of Moore Ruble Yudell Architects.

Notes

1. The Moore Ruble Yudell core team included Buzz Yudell, John Ruble, Mario Violich, Adam Padua, Tina Beebe, Kaoru Orime, and Yana Khudyakova. The Glaserworks core team included Mike Moose, Art Hupp, Steve Haber, and Mike Maltinsky.