



Peer Reviewed

Title:

UC Merced: Time Will Tell [To Rally Discussion]

Journal Issue:

[Places, 17\(2\)](#)

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Publication Date:

2005

Publication Info:

Places

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3mf2r0sm>

Acknowledgements:

This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information, contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:

places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, UC, campus, Bender, Parman, Merced, Christopher Adams, John Kriken

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UC Merced: Time Will Tell

Christopher Adams and John L. Kriken



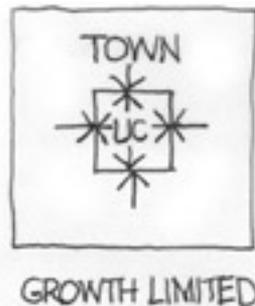
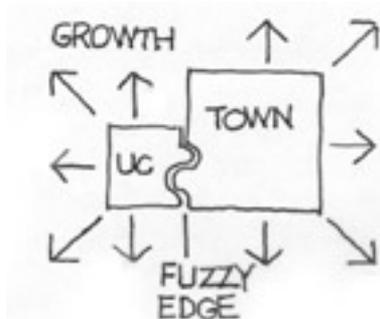
As the campus planner and lead campus design consultant for the new University of California, Merced, we wish to comment on the Spring 2005 article “New Campuses for New Communities: The University and Exurbia,” by Richard Bender and John Parman, which dismisses the idea of a campus as “more and more of a distraction to what real investment in higher education is coming to mean.” Such provocative questioning is an important aspect of our profession, and contrary to some of their asser-

tions, the new UC Merced campus reflects this kind of investigation.

Bender and Parman argue that “the idea of building a traditional campus may be more and more of a distraction to what real investment in higher education is coming to mean.” We would respond that a UC campus remains a distinct and single *place*, in the sense described by Frances Halsband in the same issue. The University of California has a basic mission in the state for research and historically has served as the primary public institution for

residentially focused undergraduate education. A UC campus is more than individual buildings to be inserted into the fabric of a town; it requires quasi-industrial districts for research, large playing fields, and significant land reserves for the housing of students and faculty.

The program for UC Merced was based on a study of the space requirements of public and private research universities throughout the United States. At such institutions, academic space needs are a function of number



of faculty, not students. In converting space needs into land coverage, we considered elevator demand at class changes; building and safety codes, particularly for laboratories; and the surcharge for remodeling highrise spaces, all of which led us to midrise coverage. Because a university is always changing, we provided land for construction staging at all levels of growth. Our observation of UC campuses over the last half-century led us to provide generous reserves for faculty housing to allow Merced to remain competitive in recruiting faculty, regardless of the cost of housing in the adjacent community. Finally, parking demand, even at campuses with good public transportation, led us to provide realistic amounts of space for surface parking and eventually for parking structures.¹ The resulting total land area requirements were beyond what any city in California's San Joaquin Valley could accommodate.

In proposing the integration of the new campus into the core of Merced, Bender and Parman make significant assumptions about the city's eagerness to welcome the University with its power to reshape the community in pursuit of its academic mission. This proposal also assumes that the University has the administrative and financial resources to acquire the hundreds of separately owned parcels

that the new campus would ultimately require. As Halsband noted, when faced with a campus pushing outward, "neighborhoods are likely to push back—and often with good reason since these neighborhoods themselves have evolved into historic districts, with their own memorable and distinctive qualities of space and architecture." Merced's older neighborhoods—with their tree-shaded street grid, provided us with a model to emulate, not to destroy.

Bender and Parman cite the examples of UC campuses built in the 1960s at Santa Cruz and San Diego, which we agree suffer from their degree of separation from their host communities. Instead we studied UC Davis, Chico State University, and the Claremont Colleges, as well as older East Coast institutions in small cities, to see what worked and what didn't. From these examples, we learned that a successful town/gown interface requires close and continuous proximity on at least one edge of both the campus and the town and that car and truck traffic should go around, not through, this interface.

Our solution, which was developed in concert with Merced County planners, places the campus at the border of a new community at the edge of the existing city, within a grid of streets—which would organize development of both. A town center, within the

County's plan and also shown in the campus master plan, forms the heart of the interface. Museums, performing arts facilities, and sports venues will be built at this interface, while other university operations, such as the storage of hazardous materials and certain kinds of research, will be located away from the town. Even further away, a reserve for future research facilities—perhaps for something that cannot even be imagined now—is provided. (Who would have imagined a cyclotron when Berkeley was established in 1878?) We planned that traffic would not separate the campus from the adjacent community and instead, would connect to a new loop road around Merced, which had been initiated prior to the decision on campus location.

In the *long* run (which is the only way to consider a university master plan) we believe that Merced, the campus, and Merced, the town, will develop jointly as a thriving and exciting community. It will take a while (see photo of UCLA in 1930), but we urge Bender and Parman to come back and take a look.

Notes

1. UC Berkeley is considering increasing its parking from approximately 7,700 spaces to 9,000 despite its location on a BART line and at the confluence of a number of bus lines.

Opposite: Aerial view of Royce Hall and Powell Library from Goodyear Blimp, 1930. Photographer: Thelner Hoover (UCLA Class of 1930). From the Hoover (Thelner and Louise) Collection; originals located in the UCLA University Archives.