"Many universities today approach new building as if creating a campus was like playing fantasy sports—put together an imaginary dream team."

The Campus as Petting Zoo by Witold Rybczynski, HON. FAIA

A friend who is a partner in a national architectural firm that does a lot of campus work recounted for me a conversation he recently had with the university architect of a leading public institution. That individual, my friend told me, referred to university architects as "curators of an architectural petting zoo."

An exaggeration? Consider the University of Cincinnati. Over the last decade, the university has commissioned buildings by Peter Eisenman, FAIA, Frank Gehry, FAIA, Bernard Tschumi, FAIA, Thom Mayne, FAIA, and the late Michael Graves. "The hope is that buildings by starchitects will turn the University of Cincinnati into a desirable, glamorous place to spend four years living and studying," writes Nikil Saval in a recent issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. Saval points out that Cincinnati's enrollment has increased and its place in the *U.S. News & World Report* ranking of universities rose—slightly—from No. 156 (2011) to No. 129 (2015). (The institution dropped to No. 140 in the 2016 ranking, after the *Times* article was published.)

Thanks to the architectural glam, what has risen more than slightly is the university's debt load, which is now $1.1 billion. "It's a financial gamble—one that many public institutions find themselves driven to make," Saval observes. "And it also threatens something more abstract but no less fundamental: that the university will turn into a luxury brand, its image unmoored from its educational mission—a campus that could be anywhere and nowhere."

Architectural Constancy

We didn't always build campuses this way. In 1894, the University of Pennsylvania, where I used to teach, appointed Walter Cope and John Stewardson as campus architects, and over the next two decades entrusted their local firm with one major building after another: a dormitory quad, the law school, the school of engineering, the veterinary school. The exemplary work—nine buildings in all—continues to define the architectural character of this urban campus.


Thayer Academy in Braintree, Mass.

Cope & Stewardson worked across the country: seven buildings at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, five at Princeton University in New Jersey, and 11 at Washington University in St. Louis. Although the firm more or less invented the style that came to be known as Collegiate Gothic, its prolonged relationships with its educational clients ensured that the character of the built results varied; the Penn quad was Jacobean, while the main building at Wash U. was, in the architects' words, "academic Gothic of the fifteenth century."

Assigning university building to a single firm used to be a common practice. James Gamble Rogers was consulting architect at Yale University, and he left a Gothic Revival stamp on that campus. Ralph Adams Cram and Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue rebuilt the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in a muscular Gothic style that Cram described as "between the Scylla of pictorial romanticism and the Charybdis of hard utilitarianism." Cram later served as supervising architect at Princeton, designed Sweet Briar College in Virginia (where he switched to Colonial Revival), and planned a new campus for Rice University in Houston, whose quadrangles and medieval Byzantine style have influenced architects to this day. Paul Philippe Cret adopted a classicized regional style at the University of Texas at Austin, where he was supervising architect for four decades and was responsible for no less than 19 buildings.

Architectural constancy was also visible on private preparatory school campuses, which often resembled miniature universities. Cram designed several buildings at both Choate (in Wallingford, Conn.) and Phillips Exeter Academy (in New Hampshire). Between 1894 and 1895, George Peabody of the Boston firm Peabody & Stearns built 10 buildings at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. The Lawrenceville campus was planned by Frederick Law Olmsted, and two decades later, Olmsted Brothers laid out the campus for the Middlesex School in Concord, Mass., where Peabody & Stearns designed most of the major buildings. While both campuses are centered on a sort of village green, the buildings at Lawrenceville are Richardsonian Romanesque, whereas those at Middlesex are Colonial Revival.

The idea that continuity is more important than variety persisted until the mid 1900s. Eliel Saarinen oversaw the development of the Cranbrook schools for two and a half decades; the result was one of the most beautiful campuses in the country. Ludwig Mies

van der Rohe designed 20 buildings at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), where he was campus architect for two decades. His IIT legacy was extended by Walter Netsch and Myron Goldsmith of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM). Netsch was also the lead SOM designer for the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo. These exemplary campuses have been designated historic landmarks, and their individual buildings (the Cranbrook Art Museum and Library, Crown Hall, the Cadet Chapel) are widely recognized icons. Continuity works.

Thayer Academy

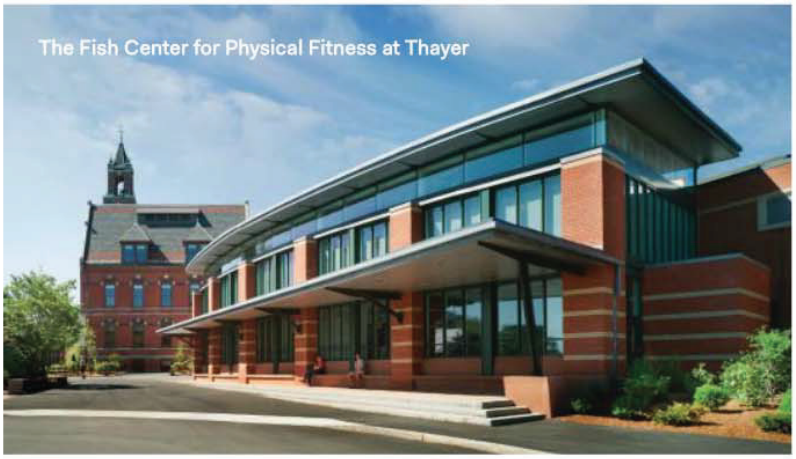
That was then. Today, most educational institutions have opted for the petting zoo model. The reasons are not hard to find. The architect selection process at many universities, both public and private, involves senior administrators as well as deans, faculty members, and donors, most with little or no experience of building design. "Let's try someone new" is a suggestion that appears hard to resist. There is also safety in choosing a known name; as they used to say in the early days of personal computers, "No one will blame you for picking IBM." In any case, what better way to impress students—and their parents—than to engage a celebrated architect.

There are exceptions. Thayer Academy is a private, co-educational, college-preparatory day school. Built on less than half of a 34-acre site (the rest is occupied by playing fields), the school is in the center of Braintree, Mass. Although there are historical buildings, the general impression is not of a consistent architectural style, but rather of a consistent sensibility. Over the last seven years the school has invested more than $40 million in construction. During this restoration, addition, and expansion, the school has stuck with a single firm: Eck | MacNeely of Boston.

It helps that Thayer has good architectural bones. The original building is an imposing Ruskinian Gothic pile with polychrome brickwork, finials, buttresses, and an imposing clock tower. It was designed in 1876 by Boston architects Henry Hartwell and Albert Swasey, another of whose notable works is the restored Academy Building in Fall River, Mass. In 1896, Hartwell (now partnered with William Richardson) returned to design Glover Hall, a large building whose bipartite composition is explained by its unusual program: laboratories flanked by two gymnasiums (for boys and girls). By then, fashions had changed and the style was robust Richardsonian Romanesque. In 1930, Frothingham Hall, an auditorium in the form of an English Gothic village hall, designed by Harper & West of Boston, completed the ensemble. Although built over the course of 50 years and stylistically dissimilar, the three buildings exhibit a strong sense of unity: red brick with limestone trim, steep slate roofs, compatible fenestration. Each faces—and helps to define—a large central green. The day I was there, the lawn was occupied by students playing Frisbee.

The next new building, the Southworth Library, appeared in 1965. In the forward-looking spirit of the optimistic postwar era, the one-story International Style pavilion with a flat-roof and an all-glass façade firmly broke with the past. A 1990s student center and sports facility was slightly more contextual, inasmuch as it used red brick, but its postmodern fillips—square windows, random moldings, cartoonish lintels—didn't really fit in.

Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, and Paul MacNeely, AIA, had done small projects at Thayer since the 1980s, but their relationship with the school was cemented in 2005, when they designed two large but very different additions. One is a seamless Romanesque extension containing biology labs at the east end of the 1896 Hartwell & Richardson building; it looks like something the original architects might have designed. The other is a modern-looking fitness center, added to the sports facility. The curved façade forms an



The Fish Center for Physical Fitness at Thayer

The Glover Advanced Science addition

interesting counterpoint to the west end of Glover Hall, while a large cantilevered canopy provides a sheltered drop-off and waiting area for students.

In 2005, Thayer undertook a more ambitious project: an arts center with a 540-seat proscenium-stage theater that could function as a school meeting place, a performance space, and a venue for community gatherings. Eck | MacNeely, which specialized in residential work, had never designed a theater, nevertheless it got the job. Ted Koskores, who has been headmaster of Thayer since 2003, told me that he appreciated the on-going connection with the architects. "You can use specialists, but they are often simply applying a template instead of being sensitive

Thayer's Center for the Arts (left) and Frothingham Hall

to the local situation," he said. "We placed a value on a long-term relationship with architects who had proven themselves to understand and appreciate our vision."

The arts center is attached to Frothingham Hall. While the larger addition does not mimic the Gothic Revival style, it echoes the older building's gable front and its colonnade picks up the rhythm of the adjacent buttresses. The pitched roofs and dormers, and the brick and limestone exterior, create a sense of continuity, while introducing modern features such as generous glazing in the lobby. "One of the limitations of our Victorian buildings is that they are opaque—you can't see into them," Koskores observed. "We wanted our new buildings to have a greater sense of transparency." As part of the addition, Eck | MacNeely transformed the now-redundant auditorium of Frothingham Hall into a studio for the visual arts: painting, drawing, graphic design, and architecture. When I visited, a lone student was carefully building a model of a space frame.

Eck | MacNeely's next commission at Thayer was to answer the nagging question: What to do with the awkward library? Rejecting demolition, the architects gutted the building, preserved the Miesian sense of an open interior and the exposed waffle slab—a charming reminder of the 1960s—and added a new façade modulated by bay windows. The lower level was

converted into an art gallery. The library project was followed by several interior renovations, as well as a master plan and improvements to the grounds (done in collaboration with the landscape architect Richard Burck Associates).

Thayer's renovated Southworth Library

Eck | MacNeely has played the role of an old-fashioned seamstress: let out the waist a little, turn the cuffs, fix that frayed buttonhole.

A Campus Full of Feeling

The Thayer campus exhibits what Christopher Alexander calls a sense of wholeness. In *A New Theory of Urban Design* (Oxford University Press, 1987), Alexander described four features of how successful environments develop: they grow piecemeal; growth is often unpredictable; the resulting whole is coherent; and the whole is full of feeling. He was referring to cities and towns, but a campus is a kind of small town, and Thayer exhibits all these characteristics. Piecemeal growth was a factor from the beginning, and unlike some campuses—and like most towns—there was never a single overriding master plan or architectural style. An example of recent unplanned growth: the arts center was originally conceived as a freestanding building and only during the design process was the decision made to combine it with Frothingham Hall. While it is unlikely that Eck | MacNeely would have designed a brand new library as a one-story pavilion, their modification to the 1960s building has resulted in a surprisingly coherent solution. "Full of feeling" is harder to pin down,

but the Thayer buildings, old and new, share a sense of broken-down scale, casual composition, and solid, unaffected materiality. They are all of a piece.

Eck | MacNeely junior partner Meredith Chamberlin, AIA, estimates that since the first built commission—a small astronomical observatory designed in 1985—the firm has carried out more than 30 commissions at the school, some of them very small. In many of these minor alterations, Eck | MacNeely has played the role of an old-fashioned seamstress: let out the waist a little, turn the cuffs, fix that frayed buttonhole.

Thayer Academy

1 Main
2 Glover
3 Fronthingham
4 Center for the Arts
5 Southworth Library
6 Middle School
7 Cahall/Sawyer
8 Operations Center
9 Business Office
10 Development Office
11 Cahill Observatory
12 Central Green

Such alterations reflect Alexander's overriding rule governing successful urban growth: that every new building should contribute to creating—and strengthening—a sense of the overall whole. Each of the recent additions to the Thayer campus has responded to an immediate functional need (for a theater, a fitness center, a visual arts studio), but in fulfilling this need the new construction has also improved—one might say "repaired"—an exterior space, reinforced a pedestrian link, or enhanced a relationship to an older building. Simply good design, you might say, but it takes time to develop a deep understanding of a place in order to perceive such nuances—time and the consistent support of an understanding client.

Many universities today approach new building as if creating a campus was like playing fantasy sports—put together an imaginary dream team and the rest will take care of itself. This is a short-sighted view. There are many subtle advantages to an extended client–architect relationship. The architects become intimately familiar with the place—not just the physical environment but the way it is used and how the institution itself functions. The architects are not tempted—as are the designers of a single building—to put all their eggs in one basket. They understand that some buildings on a campus need to be more assertive—and some don't. There are some older details that are worth repeating; not everything has to be all-different, all the time. Universities and colleges need to realize that they are not merely building buildings, they are building places, and a successful place should exhibit, in Alexander's terms, a sense of organic wholeness—hard to achieve in a petting zoo.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Witold Rybczynski, Hon. FAIA, is an emeritus professor of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. He has contributed to the *Atlantic, New Yorker, New York Review of Books*, and *The New York Times*. The recipient of the 2007 Vincent Scully Prize, he was honored in 2014 with the National Design Award for Design Mind from the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. His latest book is a collection of essays titled "Mysteries of the Mall" (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux).