DEVELOPING THE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS AS A PLACE OF LEARNING

EDITORS’ PREAMBLE: In this paper, the view shifts to the university setting. Beginning with word snapshots of three campus settings, Peter Jamieson observes the lost opportunities to develop campus environments that are informed by both the rich discourses in the phenomenology of ‘place’ and unfolding research into what constitutes effective teaching and learning. If universities are again to be places in which communities of scholars, both expert and novice, collaborate as co-learners, then facilities are required which are respectful of students’ wellbeing as well as their learning needs. Issues around informal and formal learning which are discussed in this paper are equally relevant to the design of any educational facility.

Prologue—Snapshots of campus life on three continents.

Snapshot one: Within a late seventeenth-century European campus, students move about on bicycle and on foot between historic buildings and across lawns and public spaces dotted with captivating public art. There is a sense of living in an era when the motor car was unknown and students were unhurried in their lives. Yet, closer inspection reveals that the cross-campus travelling is necessitated by the long, narrow dimension of the campus and the distance between key locations. In this beautiful setting there are insufficient places, indoor or outdoor, where students and staff can gather informally to interact in ways that are vital for a thriving learning community.

Snapshot two: The university is one of Australia’s most prestigious and several of its buildings reflect early attempts to reproduce the ambience of historic European institutions. A recent refurbishment of a central external courtyard has been completed and new seating installed for public use. However, occupants must precariously balance books, newspapers, computers, drinks and food as there is no bench or table. In particular, it is difficult for students and staff to use the university’s wireless network or other learning materials in the absence of suitable furniture despite the institution’s commitment to informal learning.

Snapshot three: The building is immediately recognisable as the work of one of the world’s great celebrity architects. It gains the North American institution enormous attention in both architectural and educational circles and features an internal ‘street’ to promote serendipitous encounters. In sharp juxtaposition to the amazing form of the building and the informal spaces created within it, the adjacent classrooms simply reproduce traditional, teacher-led learning environments offering nothing that suggests a commitment to improved pedagogy.

These snapshots capture the diversity of the experience of campus life and frame the discussion which follows. They address aspects relating to the built and natural environments, travel across the campus, the occupation of select social spaces internally and externally, and the challenge of integrating the use of new technologies into the campus setting.
They also portray the lost opportunities to make the campus a more engaging environment where staff, students and visitors can interact with each other to form a dynamic, robust and evolving learning community.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the university campus as a ‘place of learning’ is presently under challenge on a number of fronts. The growing adoption of more student centred learning practices exposes the general poor quality and narrow range of formal classroom types and informal learning environments. Universally, there is an increasing need for a wider mix of spatial types where students can take greater responsibility for their learning, collaborate with peers, and work in more diverse ways according to personal preference and the changing demands of their academic programs.¹

In addition, the introduction of a ‘mass higher education’ system with its increased student participation, along with the growth in international student numbers on many campuses—see Scott² for an account of the origins of this paradigmatic shift in university populations—has put a further strain on the capacity of the existing, traditional classroom infrastructure in many institutions. The change in the composition of the student population has also resulted in a larger number of students needing to maintain employment, which has led to a reduction in time spent on campus by many individuals. There is less opportunity for students to form strong bonds with fellow students and staff or to build a personal connection with the campus itself. The situation is compounded by decades of financial neglect. A tour of most campuses would immediately reveal the massive gulf separating the promotional slogans and the fine ambitions of institutional mission statements and the daily reality of campus life for a vast number of students and staff.

The depleted physical fabric of universities is evidenced by the fact that only a relatively small percentage of classrooms at any university could be classified as ‘new generation’ learning environments—the kinds of contemporary settings required to support more student-centred approaches. The overwhelming bulk of present-day classrooms have changed little—apart from the obvious inclusion of new presentation technologies—in terms of their educational orientation towards didactic, teacher directed approaches.

A recent audit of the quality of building stock at Australia’s research-intensive ‘Group of Eight’ universities, presented an alarming situation.³ The audit found that more than half of the total Go8 stock of building infrastructure was constructed between 1940 and 1980 and has reached, or is reaching, the end of its economic life. These facilities cannot be repaired and need to be completely replaced. Based on indices used by facilities managers the audit

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found that 60 percent of buildings on Go8 campuses failed to meet modern building and relevant statutory standards. It was estimated that the cost of compliance would be about $800 million.

If the campus is meant to demonstrate the "high ideals of learning through the physical fabric", what does the composition of the formal learning facilities and the general physical condition of our universities say about the kind of education that is being pursued within them?  

DEVELOPING THE CAMPUS FOR COURSE RELATED 'LEARNING'

Current efforts to improve the quality of the campus as a place of learning are driven ostensibly by an understanding of 'learning' within the university context as a curriculum based experience. This largely results from higher education's increasingly narrow role as the accreditation gateway into numerous professions as it has generally moved away from the idea of providing a broad, liberal education. From this perspective the key to making the campus a more effective place of learning is to provide suitable classrooms where improved teaching and learning approaches can be undertaken. As many universities—as well as the architects and other consultants ordinarily involved in serving the institutions in construction projects—have little or no experience of 'new generation' classrooms, there has been considerable interest in any emerging examples which might point the higher education sector in the right direction.

(1) ATTEMPTS TO DEVELOP ‘NEW GENERATION’ CLASSROOMS

Universities are held to be research driven institutions and the generator of new knowledge for the wider community. Over the past four decades there has been a plethora of research into student learning in higher education, and the unfolding discourse in this field (Biggs; Jaques; Laurillard; Marton et al; Marton & Saljo; Prosser and Trigwell; Ramsden) has substantially advanced our knowledge of what constitutes effective teaching and learning. However, universities have rarely drawn on this body of material to guide strategic improvements in their own pedagogical practice. This neglect has also impeded the development of 'new generation' formal classrooms to support the shift to more student centred learning approaches.

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Where such ‘new generation’ classrooms have emerged expressly to improve the quality of student learning, a number of critical design elements relating to improved pedagogical practice are apparent. Although these classrooms may vary in many ways, they commonly reduce the total class size, are arranged to foster small-group collaborative learning as the primary use, and promote the teacher as facilitator rather than as content ‘presenter’. Many of these new classrooms are intended to complement, rather than fully replace, existing traditional classrooms where larger class sizes and more didactic instructional approaches are common.

The most radical designs challenge the notion of the teacher as the focal point of the classroom by deliberately orienting the room away from a single presentational point and providing students with audiovisual and information technology to increase student choice and control in the learning process. In many cases, custom-built furniture and fittings have been created (as opposed to purchasing standard institutional furniture) which further emphasises the unique nature of the setting. Other examples incorporate a variety of settings in a single space, enabling students to select their working arrangement according to personal preference or changing need throughout the duration of a class. Typically, new generation classrooms are designed on the basis of a more generous occupant-space ratio which has several educational consequences apart from an increased comfort factor. First, the relative spaciousness increases the emphasis on active, small-group learning as presentational approaches are not mandatory and activity takes place in the ‘space’ between settings. Secondly, greater movement by the teacher and students within the room is possible with the likelihood that there will be more peer-to-peer learning as students interact widely in the setting to learn with, and from, each other. Thirdly, there is generally an emphasis on enabling a wider range of learning experiences—delivering knowledge; applying knowledge; creating knowledge; communicating knowledge; knowledge for decision making through the adaptability of the physical environment and the range of learning resources and media available within it.

In addition, some universities face the ongoing logistical demands of large cohorts which generally require the retention of lecture-style teaching methods and therefore a number of institutions are seeking to improve the traditional lecture setting. This is being done by various means, including increasing transparency — allowing views into and out of the setting—and natural light into the theatre through the introduction of windows to overcome the ‘black box’ sensation. Lawson contends that the benefits of providing windows are far-reaching and that enabling the occupant to view the transition of the external, natural world—to see changes in the weather and the passage of time measured by the movement of the sun—is vital to the individual’s health and wellbeing. Lecture theatres have also been created which enable more student-student interactivity and active learning either through the use of new collaborative technologies or by more radical physical designs which create opportunities for the convenient transition into small-group learning.

The curriculum changes in many universities intended to promote more student centred approaches also place further demands on the broader campus setting to provide a more responsive environment to meet the expanding needs of students.

II) DEVELOPING INFORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

It is important to recognise that the recent surge in the development of non-classroom, informal learning environments is largely being undertaken within the same curriculum driven paradigm which is responsible for the new generation classrooms. Viewed in this narrow, functionalist way, informal learning is construed as activity undertaken by students outside the classroom and without the direct involvement of the teacher, but which is related to the formal course requirements. It typically includes pre-reading class material, individual and group assignment work, and the completion of assessment tasks.

One major response by universities has been to create learning centres. Three broad stages in the development of the ‘learning centre’ as a strategic response by universities can be identified. First, it involved the transformation of the existing library to include greater space for socially based, collaborative learning and particularly the creation of ‘information technology zones’. The outcome for many university libraries has been a continuing struggle to balance often sharply conflicting demands, for example, space for quiet, personal learning and for active, collaborative learning on strictly limited floor space.

Secondly, universities sought to respond to the students’ insatiable appetite for information technology (IT) and the growing emphasis on IT in the learning process, by creating stand-alone IT-hubs or ‘information commons’. Typically, these centres became crowded computer barns driven by the intention of maximising student computer access at the expense of the quality of the learning experience and also promoted individual, rather than collaborative, computer use.

More recently, the ‘learning centre’ was transformed into the ‘learning commons’ when universities recognised the need to address a wider range of student needs and learning styles whilst stressing the efficiency in co-locating services and resources in a single site.

Often such projects were informed by design strategies employed in non-educational projects such as shopping malls, restaurants and bars as well as bookstores where coffee zones have been incorporated to create attractive social spaces. A commonly recognised benchmark in learning commons design is the Saltire Centre at Caledonian University, Glasgow which combines a major library facility with a mix of environments for social and learning related activity.19

Significantly, the ‘learning commons’ strategy has fundamental implications for the long-term development of the campus as learning environment. From a planning perspective, large centralised facilities of this kind that concentrate multiple services and amenity into a single location, often impede the development of various, smaller facilities and sites across the campus—a problem compounded on geographically spread sites where access to a central facility can be problematic for many potential users. In terms of user comfort, large-scale facilities of any kind which produce congestion—shopping malls, hotels, airports—can deter attendance by some possible users and detract from the experience of others.20 From a pedagogical perspective, there is a massive contradiction in the institution’s centralised, ‘formal’ control of ‘informal learning’ which is meant to be student centred—through the concentration of effort and resources into a single facility at the expense of developing multiple sites—regardless of the economic rationale for the centralised delivery of key services.21

In contrast to the one-stop shop strategy of the mega learning commons, a smaller-scale, precinct based approach can be found in The University of Melbourne’s Eastern Precinct, developed by the author in association with Cox Architects. Based around one of several university libraries, this project creates a major campus hub by refurbishing and linking existing buildings and external settings in order to enliven a tired and neglected area, but not at the expense of other areas of the campus. The new precinct is located on a perimeter of the campus where it is intended to serve as a key point of entry and welcome to the campus. It was planned to complement the immediate existing buildings and amenity as well as the natural environment whilst working in conjunction on a wider campus scale with other library and social spaces including the large student refectory.

The project was informed by the rich discourse on the phenomenology of ‘place’ and particularly Heidegger’s primary concern with ‘being’, ‘dwelling’ and the ‘situatedness’ of experience—see Malpas for a comprehensive account of what he terms Heidegger’s ‘topology’. The project commenced by addressing questions such as: What does it mean to ‘be’ present on campus?

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21 Jamieson, P. The serious matter of informal learning.
What kinds of sensory stimulus can the campus provide the learner and staff member? How can the campus provide occupants with intimate, personal places? How can the campus attract and retain occupants, given the presence of attractive social settings in close proximity to the university, so that a critical mass is achieved for the formation of an effective learning community?

The design team sought to create a series of complementary internal chambers and external areas to enable collaborative learning and social interaction to occur across a learning landscape. Importantly, those settings that reside outside the library itself are not under direct staff control and convey an even greater sense of being ‘de-institutionalised’ and ‘owned’ by the occupants. The design team identified a large community of international students living adjacent to the campus in commercial residential towers as potential key occupants of a site and therefore aimed to create domestic-style amenity-gardens, lounges, private settings—given that cohort’s specific needs.

Another conscious design goal was to create a ‘journey’ for the occupants through unique physical forms incorporating custom-built fittings (rather than mass produced furniture wherever possible) and to enable views beyond, across and between the immediate setting—partially to reinforce the relationship with nearby natural environments—and explicitly to acknowledge the importance of ‘people watching’ as a primary social activity. The designers aimed to produce a sense of ‘arrival’ at particular settings in order to heighten the individual’s experience of the physical environment, whilst simultaneously creating various degrees of seclusion or public exposure for individuals or groups.

The design approach also sought to heighten the occupants’ awareness of their environment through the use of a rich palette of materials and colour, offering a range of seating types, creating variations in the height of settings across the precinct landscape, and through a more dramatic use of light fittings to provide the texture and contrast often missing from institutional facilities. Underpinning this approach to the design process was an idea of learning as personal enrichment—extending beyond intellectual activity and involving the individual in rich sensory contact with their environment in order to address Bloomer and Moore’s contention that:

What is missing from our dwellings today are the potential transactions between body, imagination, and environment.

It is the idea that learning in a university campus might involve more than participation in course related activity—albeit that this process is now being improved by being located in new generation classrooms or enhanced informal settings—that provokes the reconceptualisation of the campus as a place of learning.

According to Edwards:

There is an implicit compact in higher education which transcends the necessary functionalism of teaching, research and administration. To be truly a university there is a contract with learning (as against teaching), with a sense of a community of scholars…It is a place, identifiable as such through built fabric and urban space, which expresses these higher aspirations. Given this view the university is more than a collection of functionally rational buildings…

“THE CONCEPT OF THE UNIVERSITY AS A UNIQUE PLACE OF LEARNING HAS BEEN LOST OVER THE PAST CENTURY.”

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It is this sense of ‘place’ that must be reclaimed if the campus is to be more than a collection of classrooms, information technology centres, laboratories, libraries, student refectory, offices, coffee shops and car parks. The campus must be an environment which allows the individual student to make sense of the world and their place in it, and enable the formation of communities which are the essential to individual and collective development.

The solution to improving the current state of the university campus as a learning environment logically precedes an architectural or campus planning response. Presently, such initiatives within universities tend to focus on the use of new technologies and the possibilities for linking with individuals and resources beyond the physical boundaries of the campus. Telecommunications technology is increasingly deployed to overcome the tyranny of distance and virtual learning environments commonly exist to complement the face-to-face experience allowing students to access course materials and communication systems. Arguably, in many respects these initiatives further undermine expectations about the need to develop more comprehensively the extant campus setting.

Fundamentally, universities need to rethink what it means to ‘learn’ and to ‘teach’ and how it might ‘take place’ within the campus setting. Or from Heidegger’s more challenging perspective, we might well ask, ‘What does it mean to be in the place of the campus?’ In this sense, we should turn our attention from ‘learning’, as well as teaching and research, to the much larger question of how we ‘live’ our lives on campus and how we might foster a more complete, richer experience in every sense? This raises critical questions about the campus as a place that facilitates ‘life’.


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Recently, whilst visiting Oxford University the author encountered a spontaneous performance by a street marching band which paraded through the city and eventually concluded its performance in a public square. It was surprising, colourful, fun, exciting and engaging. In order to ensure that similarly spontaneous experiences take place on our university campuses we need a suitable physical environment, but also must create a community which grants ‘permission’ to live in certain ways. Presently on many contemporary campuses, an unexpected encounter with a marching band or some other kind of performance art might just as likely create a sense of disbelief and confusion rather than stimulate engagement in the activity.

Given the opportunity, students (and staff) may very easily create all kinds of engaging and personally meaningful places within the campus. The University of Hong Kong clings to the side of a steep incline providing wonderful views over the harbour. On the roof of a building there is a large open plaza which provides an entrance into the student refectory and which features a large totem-like structure painted in a garish orange-red colour. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that this is a public sculpture depicting the agony of individuals curled tightly in a mass of writhing bodies. It is a memorial to the many people killed in the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989 and has become a special, sacred place on the campus for students.

Learning in its broadest sense involves challenge, stimulation, discovery, uncertainty, excitement, communication, collaboration and reflection; it is not restricted to a formal institutional curriculum. It is about the transformation of the individual, rather than simply their professional accreditation, and according to it involves the ‘head, the heart, and the gut’.

A billboard viewed recently by the author from a train window on the approach to Cambridge University (U.K.) declared: ‘You can learn at home ... you can learn anywhere’. This is increasingly true with the growth of information technology and telecommunications media in all aspects of society internationally. In this context, there is an urgent need to understand, articulate and reclaim the distinctive role of the campus as a place of learning in the richest possible sense.

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