



WINDOWS INTO CIVILITY

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“Windows into Civility,” the theme of these essays, is an architectural metaphor that implicitly acknowledges the special status of the campus. As the physical embodiment of the university, the campus provides the context within which members of this community advance the academic mission. The success of this enterprise depends upon the mutual exercise of tolerance, courtesy and respect. Through the design of buildings and landscape, the campus encourages civility. This essay is a window with a view of the heart of UC Davis, offering a critical look at the campus’s capacity to foster an unencumbered and spirited exchange of ideas.

The campus supports civility in two ways: facilitation and representation. As a facility, the campus provides open and enclosed space for people to perform duties, interact and exercise free speech. As a symbol, the campus represents the aspirations of an open society committed to the pursuit of knowledge and improvement of the human condition. In the case of a land grant university, the campus additionally signifies the grand investment in public education.

As in campuses across America, the hierarchical and symbolic center of UC Davis is the Quad, bounded on one side by the library. The relationship of quad and library is analogous to that between town square and town hall. In both instances, the juxtaposition of public space and institutional architecture facilitates and edifies assembly and free speech. For Olmsted and later City Beautiful advocates, this juxtaposition encouraged civility in the exercise of these rights.ⁱ

Most often used for recreation, socializing and informal study, the Quad, and Mrak Mall too, occasionally play host to expressions of dissent, some of which test the limits of civility.ⁱⁱ Fortunately, these sites—beautiful and spacious—are inherently well suited to the task.

Still, while UC Davis is a civilized place, it is not the best place it can be. Dramatic success and growth have necessitated physical expansion and modernization, introducing shifts in

circulation, geographic center, and aesthetic character. The campus core has sustained changes compromising its efficacy as a forum for public activity. Driving this loss is the placement and design of buildings in a manner that sequesters the Quad and disrupts the once important Central Walk.

The story begins with the ill-conceived Library-Administration building of 1940, now the north wing of Shields (Fig. 1). Administrative offices and library functions were housed in opposite ends of the building, each end served by an identical entrance and staircase; these are the two glazed towers projecting from the north face of Shields. Stylized and sophisticated, these towers quickly achieved iconic status as school symbols.

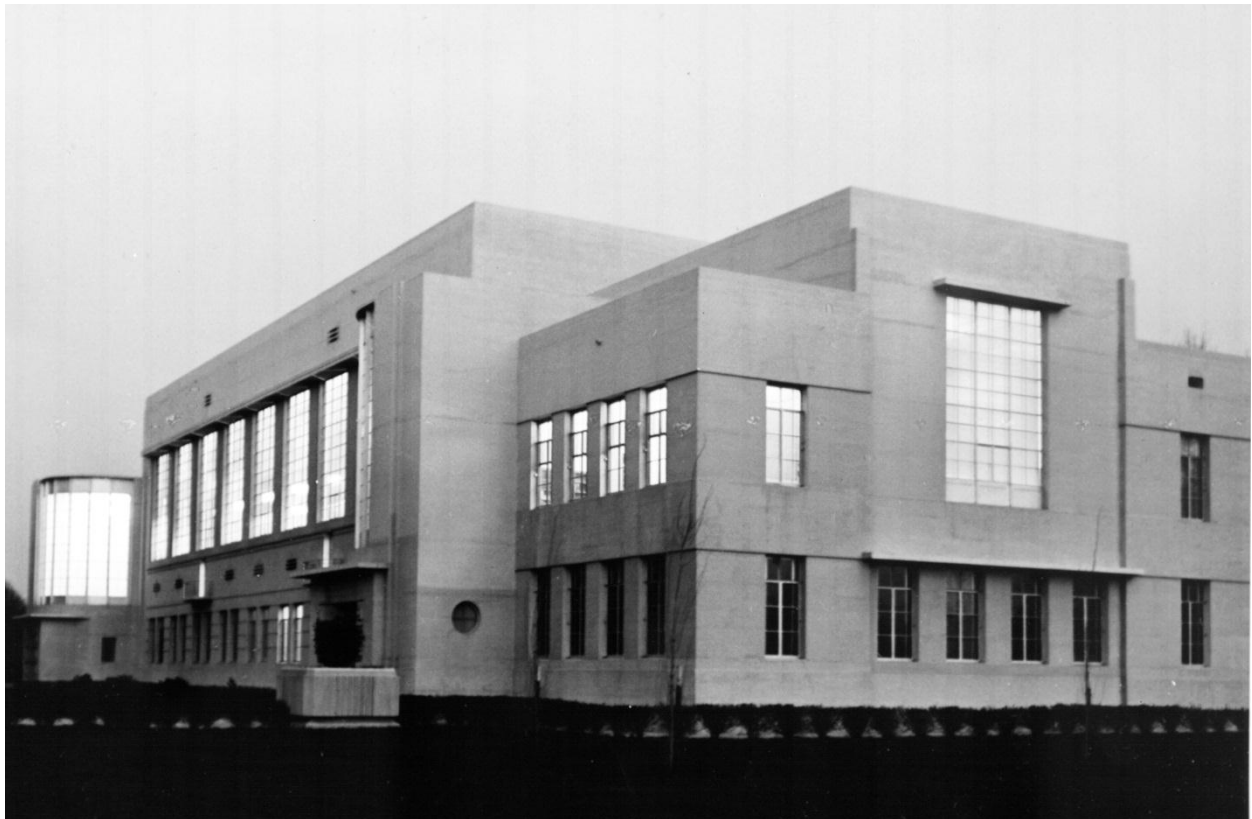


Figure 1. Starks and Flanders, Architects, with William C. Hays, Consulting Architect. Library & Administration Building, College of Agriculture, Davis, CA (1940), view from northwest. (University Archives Photographs, Special Collections, University of California, Davis.)

However, they also serve as twin protagonists in an architectural drama about false expectations. For while these towers monumentally frame the approach along Central Walk, the building fails to reward this procession with a destination—an entry or sculptural object. Thus, the axial bond connecting library and quad, a bond immortalized by Jefferson at Charlottesville, is suggested but subsequently denied.

Oddly—as if attempting to mitigate a perceived error—the architects provided for the resumption of Central Walk on the *south* side of the building—the site of today’s courtyard (Fig. 2). A single entrance, aligned with Central Walk, presided over a formal landscape—the “Sunken Garden.” Indeed, the first commencement of an autonomous College of Agriculture was held here in 1948, beneath a canopy of fifty sycamores.ⁱⁱⁱ



Figure 2. Aerial view of campus in 1950, from the southwest. Library is center, with the Sunken Garden to the immediate south. West Hall is north of the Quad, on the site presently occupied by Memorial Union. (University Archives Photographs, Special Collections, University of California, Davis.)

With the appearance of Memorial Union in 1955, Central Walk endured a complementary humiliation on its northern flank. Previously, Central Walk entered the intimate court of West Hall, pierced through the building, and continued to the edge of campus as Howard Way. Memorial Gate, built in 1928, added an architectural flourish to celebrate passage.^{iv} The MU severed Howard Way from Central Walk, eviscerating the formal procession that established the Quad as the heart of the campus.

Central Walk is now a vestigial fragment of this spine, serving no one and going nowhere. As a result, the Quad lacks identity and purpose. While congenial, it is a lifeless and sterile heart. With the closing of the north staircases, Shields shuns the Quad—a gesture both ‘uncivil’ and isolating.

Unconvincing as a destination, the Quad is generally bypassed along its periphery. As a setting for political speech, the Quad appears to patronize its guests with a superficial show of centrality. Protesters must walk to Mrak in order to be heard by university leaders. Unfortunately however, that procession is likewise greeted with impediments and arrogant buildings.

Mrak Hall exemplifies the pared-down classicism typical of institutional and cultural buildings designed by members of the “second generation” of modern architects in the 1960s.^v Referring to this architecture, Charles Jencks wrote, “Its resemblance to Fascist architecture of the thirties is, alas, all too great.”^{vi} While the comparison is provocative, Mrak Hall offers little to challenge its accuracy. As a symbol of campus leadership and a destination for expressions of dissent, Mrak Hall seems braced for confrontation. The building, imposing and elitist, fosters conflict by misrepresenting its inhabitants as defensive and authoritarian.

Originally, Mrak Mall and West Quad Walk were contiguous, offering a direct and unimpeded path of movement to would-be marchers and everyone else. In 1990 however, the new Shields Plaza threw a curve—literally—into that route, concretizing the priority of the new library entrance over all competing considerations. The raised plaza presents a visual and physical barrier to axial circulation between Quad and Mall.



Figure 3. Simon Martin-Vegue Winkelstein Moris, Architects. Addition to Shields Library, UC Davis (1990), entrance detail.

The west wing of Shields institutionalizes the abandonment of the Quad, while relegating the courtyard within to relative obscurity. As if desperate to legitimize a side entrance (relative to the Quad), the addition presents a rather shrill and overwrought portal to the Plaza (Fig. 3). Limited by security requirements and insufficient spatial depth, the entry sequence cannot live up to the promise of the giant proscenium. Circulation to the courtyard is convoluted, involving level changes and abrupt shifts in direction. While Louis Kahn’s courtyard library at Exeter commands civility and respect, Shields—four band-aids forming a square—does not. Outside, Shields Plaza “wants” (as Kahn would say) to *be* the Quad—to symbolize the essential link between assembly, speech and knowledge.

Philip Johnson wrote, “Architecture is surely *not* the design of space, certainly not the massing or organization of volumes. These are auxiliary to the main point which is the organization of procession.”^{vii} Our missteps—the dislocation of Quad and library, the forced imposition of a west entrance, and the further dislocation of Shields plaza from Shields courtyard—illustrate the wisdom of Johnson’s insight.

Fortunately, none of these missteps is insurmountable. A few suggestions (Fig. 4): (1) add a new entry pavilion to the north façade of Shields aligning with Central Walk; (2) cover the Shields courtyard with skylights and solar panels, creating a gallery accessible from all sides; (3) repurpose North and South Hall as new offices for the Chancellor and Provost; (4) slice new diagonal pathways across the Quad; and (5) convert Shields Plaza into an outdoor café.

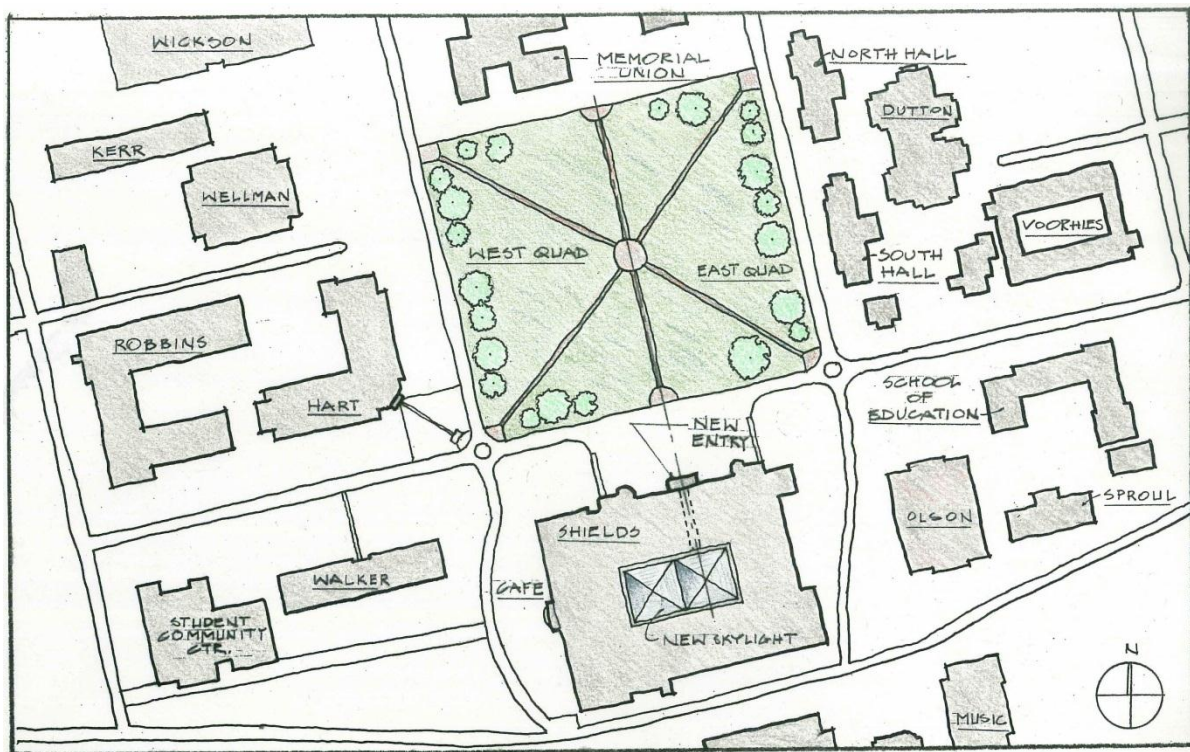


Figure 4. Sketch illustrating proposed modifications to the Quad and Shields Library.

This proposal restores a simple yet profound hierarchy. Central Walk is revitalized as a formal axis linking the Quad, Shields, and Shields courtyard. Suddenly relevant, the courtyard is accessible and usable. Re-knit into the fabric of the campus, the Quad becomes a vital hub, supportive of discussion, debate, political speech, protest, performance and creative exhibits. Most importantly, this dynamic concourse—a risky experiment in transparency—inspires civility in us, as beneficiaries of an institutional trust and caretakers of the unfolding discourse.

NOTES

ⁱ William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 29-32.

ⁱⁱ For a history of campus activism and protest, see Ann F. Scheuring, *Abundant Harvest: The History of the University of California, Davis* (Oakland: The Regents of the University of California, 2001). For a recent example of civil disobedience on campus, see Jeremy Ogul and Lauren Steussy, "Nearly 50 Arrested in Mrak Hall Demonstration," *California Aggie*, Nov 20, 2009, <http://theaggie.org/article/2009/11/20/nearly-50-arrested-in-mrak-hall-demonstration> (accessed September 6, 2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ Scheuring, *Abundant Harvest*, 80. The source for the tree species is the original Planting Plan, available at the office of the Campus Architect, UC Davis.

^{iv} Scheuring, *Abundant Harvest*, 50.

^v Robert A. M. Stern, *New Directions In American Architecture* (New York: Braziller, 1969), 7.

^{vi} Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973), 185.

^{vii} Philip Johnson, "Whence & Whither: The Processional Element in Architecture," *Perspecta*, 9/10 (1965), 168.