

Main Street and the Urban Campus: University of Cincinnati's Master Plan

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University of Cincinnati's campus and its surrounding neighborhoods have undergone a dramatic transformation over the past decades, due in large part to an extensive University Master Plan completed by Hargreaves Associates in 1991, and revised in 1995 and 2000. The Master Plan sought, among other things, to forge a coherent identity from a campus fragmented by decades of piecemeal development, to respond to the urban context of uptown Cincinnati, and to make the campus more attractive to prospective students. At the same time, redevelopment groups, many of whom the University is a member, have been actively reshaping the neighborhoods near campus. It will be argued that both the design proposals of the Master Plan and the off-campus interventions represent a conflicted response to the University's identity as an urban institution. The desire for an authentic image / identity has led to an appropriation of urban formalism while the desire for marketability and aesthetic appeal has led to an increasingly sheltered environment that can provide a total experience for students. This internal schism between *engagement with* and *retreat from* the city is informed by conflicting perceptions of the city as the site of opportunity or danger, respectively.

Urban Context, Fragmented Campus

The University of Cincinnati (UC) is located in uptown Cincinnati, an area north of downtown that consists largely of former streetcar suburbs and their retail districts. It is bordered on three sides by the mixed-income residential

neighborhoods. To the east are Corryville and the retail district of Short Vine Street; to the south and west are the "CUF Neighborhoods" of Clifton Heights, University Heights, and Fairview. These neighborhoods consist of a mix of students and non-students, with Corryville tending toward an older and more diverse demographic. The Calhoun Street / McMillan Street retail district directly to the south serves both the University and the CUF Neighborhoods. To the north of campus is Burnett Woods; further north is the neighborhood of Clifton and its retail district along Ludlow Avenue. The University's East Campus, the medical campus, is adjacent to the Main Campus and abuts two hospitals and additional residential neighborhoods.

A brief review of the University's history shows that its campus expanded incrementally eastward from its inception in 1819 into the 1950's. In the following decades, the University of Cincinnati, like many institutions of higher education, grew significantly, extending its campus boundaries and building prodigiously. The new development departed dramatically from the older, more traditional campus: a number of the new buildings were high-rises surrounded by empty space and parking lots rather than clearly defined quadrangles.¹ Prior to the adoption of the Master Plan in 1991, University of Cincinnati's campus was overrun with parking lots, fragmented by internal streets, and crowded with buildings that had been built scattershot across the campus grounds.

It was these conditions to which the Master Plan had to respond: an urban context and a fragmented campus.

Engagement v. Retreat

Although the official motivations for creating the Master Plan are numerous—including upgrading and expanding academic facilities, dramatically improving the quality of the built environment, and creating a more residential campus²—the basic motivations were essential two-fold. The first was to create an identity, or image, for the University and its campus³—a character that would construct a meaningful whole from disparate pieces, that would create a place from a non-place. The second and more fundamental motivation was to increase the University’s marketability, thereby attracting and retaining higher numbers of top-quality students. The 2000 Update to the Master Plan states this objective in no uncertain terms: “The University needs to maintain, if not surpass, the range and quality of student life and services facilities found at other institutions if it is to remain competitive [...].”⁴

The creation of a coherent identity and image—a campus brand—led naturally to an augmentation of the University’s urban setting. The strategy was to celebrate, encourage—even reinterpret—the surrounding city. As an urban university, UC could be “a thriving, energetic, round-the-clock hub”⁵. Its context could provide opportunities for interaction, exploration, and growth. In the words of the Master Plan:

Greater connectivity to the surrounding community will enrich the University and the community. *The proximity to [...] various community institutions and numerous neighborhood business districts should be capitalized on more effectively, thereby expanding the University as a place of learning within a larger matrix.*⁶

To take full advantage of this setting, education was recast as the full student experience rather than exclusively academic activity. “*Education is a total experience,*” the Hargreaves Master Plan states. “[T]herefore the opportunities to educate are unlimited”⁷ and include not only academic learning but also social interaction, recreation, and real-world experience—the latter a hallmark of the University’s renowned co-operative education program. Thus an urban character provided a unique university brand, had the trappings of the exciting and avant-garde, and was a natural fit for the already-dense campus.

The way to make the University more attractive and marketable was to focus on student services, amenities, and the built environment. In 1997 the University hired the facility-planning firm Brailsford & Dunlavey, who performed an extensive study of the University’s campus life. They concluded that “students wanted more and better facilities on campus” and that “the lack of adequate facilities on campus was cited as a reason that potential students do not attend the University.”⁸ The firm also developed “market-responsive facility programs” for East and Main campus⁹, which were integrated into the 2000 Update of the Master Plan. Consequently, the 2000 Update focused almost entirely on enhancing the quality of student life and services.¹⁰

The Master Plan therefore proposed a variety of facilities not traditionally associated with university campuses: restaurants, cappuccino bars, convenience stores, and movie theatres, to name a few. According to Gumprecht (2007), the idea that college should provide students a “total experience” that includes not just education but also social life, recreation, and entertainment, is a “distinctly American notion”¹¹—one that has transformed the American university campus. The strategy, aimed at satisfying a private clientele, is essentially insular. The university is conceptualized as a closed system that meets

as many student desires as possible within its boundaries.

The market-driven total experience also emphasizes safety and security. According to the Master Plan, “A campus that is safely accessible and ‘welcoming’ at night is critical” to the objective of creating a lively and attractive campus.¹² The Master Plan further states: “One must feel secure to be comfortable, and while the campus environment should welcome visitors, the University must also strive to offer security to its inhabitants and users.”¹³ The triad of comfort, safety, and security is important for marketing to prospective students and their parents, who are particularly concerned about safety on a self-declared “urban campus”.

The ultimate result of these two desires—for an *urban identity* and *market appeal*—is an internal conflict regarding the university’s relationship to the city. The desire for an urban identity is a desire for *engagement*—for greater involvement with the city and its vast resources. But the desire for market appeal becomes a desire for *retreat*—for making the campus a self-contained environment buffered from the negative aspects of the city.

This schism arises from conflicting perceptions of the city. The desire for urbanity is rooted in a view of the city as providing opportunities that can be exploited for mutual benefit of both the city and university. Conversely, the desire for marketability accommodates a view of the city in general, and Cincinnati in particular, as both potentially dangerous and unsightly. This view favors the creation of a clean, well-provisioned, and well-manicured environment within the campus and targeted revitalization projects beyond, aimed at reducing crime and/or fostering particular kinds of student-oriented development. Here the city serves as a kind of architectural backdrop that can be made more presentable through strategic intervention.

The Hargreaves Master Plan

Hargreaves Associates’ 1991 Master Plan and its subsequent updates, executed in stages since 1991, is an expression of the dichotomous motivations that informed it. While it acknowledges and responds formally to the desire to engage with the urban context, it also aims to create a safe and secure environment that provides a high quality total experience. It appropriates the formal elements of the city—scale, density, heterogeneity—without actively engaging with it.

The dichotomy is polymorphic, manifest differently at the center of campus and at its edges. At the center is a mixed-used pedestrian corridor called Main Street, one of the primary organizing features of the Master Plan. Main Street connects the historic academic quadrangles to the modern residential portion of campus, at once weaving the campus together and providing a true campus center. As its name suggests, Main Street borrows formally and programmatically from the urban environment, creating a vibrant “urban” space that reaffirms the University’s identity.

At the campus edges the Master Plan calls for urban infill and revitalization projects, which make the edges of campus more aesthetically urban. Several interventions were proposed to the south of campus along Calhoun Street. This campus edge, formerly parking lots and empty space, was populated with mixed-use infill buildings. A similar development was proposed on the non-campus side of Calhoun Street, and several other off-campus locations were highlighted as potential development opportunities. The Master Plan refrained from laying out specific plans for these areas, but some of the suggested interventions have been carried out by organizations such as the Uptown Consortium, an association of area institutions that includes UC, and the Clifton Heights Community Urban Redevelopment Corporation (CHCURC).

Main Street: The Campus Center

Main Street is at the center of the University's efforts to improve campus life. The pedestrian street and its associated plazas are framed by a series of buildings that are almost exclusively devoted to student services and activities. Main Street is the home of the One Stop center for administrative and student services; the student union, replete with a shopping-mall style food court, a movie theatre, the campus bookstore, and a restaurant; the student life center, home of student organizations, a 24-hour computer lab, several retail outlets, and chain eateries (including Starbucks); and a new recreation center that includes not only a lap pool, running track, climbing wall, lazy river, hot tub, smoothie bar, and basketball courts, but also a dining hall, a café, a convenience store, a dormitory, and a suite of high-tech classrooms. Main Street spans from the historic "Academic Ridge" to the new campus green, a wi-fi enabled landscape that also contains an amphitheater concert venue.

The Main Street buildings, by decree of the Master Plan, are sleek metal-and-glass constructions several stories high that wrap the curving street, making the space fluid and dynamic. The intent was to "create a vibrant urban center to the campus, to which students will gravitate when not in class"—a place that would "focus energy rather than disperse it."¹⁴ According to the Master Plan, "[...] the provision of various recreation, retail, social, dining, residential, cultural, and administrative facilities and services [...] will radically remake the University campus into a thriving, energetic, round-the-clock hub [...]."¹⁵ Thom Mayne of Morphosis, the architecture firm responsible for the design of the recreation center, intentionally intensified its urbanity, increasing the density of the site plan and amplifying the original program in order to bring together more elements of student life.¹⁶

Main Street is a triumphant expression of the University's efforts to establish its image and

identity as an urban campus, to create a meaningful center that holds the campus together, and to provide top-quality student life. But though it borrows the forms, scale, activity, program, and density of the city, the strategy specifically concentrates non-academic student activity at the center of campus, drawing students away from the edge. Rather than engaging the city, Main Street recreates the city on a small scale.

The role of safety as a motivation for this environment should not be understated. The perception of uptown Cincinnati as an area of crime is pervasive among campus visitors. As a university tour guide, I found that the questions about campus security and crime were among the most common, particularly from parents. Their perception was not arbitrary. Downtown Cincinnati had been ravaged by riots in 2001 after an unarmed black teenager was shot and killed by a police officer. Crime increased dramatically in the subsequent years as the police department implemented an unofficial slowdown.¹⁷ A recent study shows Cincinnati homicide rates increasing.¹⁸ Uptown, however, has far lower crime rates than the city center, and its crime is predominantly non-violent, comprised mostly of burglary and larceny.¹⁹ This Uptown / Downtown distinction seems to matter little to non-residents, who perceive the city as a whole to be unsafe. The University needed an exceptionally comfortable and secure environment to combat such negative perceptions.

Main Street therefore borrows selectively from the city. While its appearances are urban rather than academic—an eclectic mix of buildings rather than stylistic uniformity, active and vibrant rather than cloistered and introspective, a mixture of uses and activities that include commercial and recreational beyond the academic and social—in several important ways this is simply an image. The development is owned and controlled by a single private entity and its users are a private

clientele. Main Street not only recreates the city on a small scale, it also *reinterprets* it, creating an idealized environment that is well kept and safe from the vagaries of public life. It is a simulacrum of a Main Street, borrowing selectively from the image of an idealized archetype.

The very name *Main Street* conjures up images of small town America—of safety, security, and old-fashioned hospitality. Main Street occupies a special place in the national consciousness, along side county fairs and apple pies²⁰, and this disarmingly quaint name serves to reinforce its image as a safe and secure environment. Main Street is also evocative of community and social interaction. Its inclusion on the University campus implies that the University is just such a community—a small town within the larger city. This very metaphor isolates the campus ideologically from its surroundings.

The *image* of Main Street is perhaps its most important quality. The urban environment is the new image of the University. Main Street, filled with students, has become a favorite image for the University's promotional materials. And the mental image of archetypal main streets provides associations with community and security. As an image and icon—the new University brand—it can be marketed and consumed.²¹ The focus on the image is not accidental. In the words of Gumprecht (2007): "Increasingly, college is marketed in the same way as any other high-prices product, using graphic devices designed to make the 'buyer' [...] want to be part of what they see."²² Through Main Street the University is selling the image of an idealized quasi-urban lifestyle.

Of course, the University's Main Street borrows selectively from the archetype. It includes commercial and retail functions, promotes pedestrian activity, and maintains a small vertical scale. But its horizontal high-tech architecture is a far cry from the narrow

nineteenth century buildings of the archetypal Main Street. Perhaps more importantly, whereas the archetypal Main Street is associated with the slow pace of small town life, a haven from change and the unexpected²³, the University's Main Street embodies speed, movement, and novelty.

In many ways, Main Street challenges the tradition notion of a campus center—one that is calm and contemplative, reserved for thought and discussion, dominated by the intellectual and the academic. UC's Main Street is intentionally opposite, favoring movement and activity, placing recreation and commerce at the campus core. It provides opportunities for consumption at the same time that it itself is consumed as an image. Its archetypal counterpart is not simply about old-fashioned values; it is an architectural form that is fundamentally "structured around [...] the commercial assumptions of modern consumer culture. It is an apparatus of the modern cash/credit economy, and presumes fairly high income levels, intensive levels of exchange, and a spatially focused population indoctrinated with the virtues of consumption."²⁴ The new university center is a commercial hub.

There are, of course, multiple motivations for this new center: accommodating the existing campus fabric, appealing to prospective students, etc. But it also speaks to the changing role of the university in general. The University of Cincinnati is known for its co-op program, which gives students on-the-job experience while still in school. Like many research institutions, it is increasingly seeking lucrative public-private partnerships. The prospective student is looking for swimming pools and climbing walls, to be sure, but is also shopping for a career—for the added value of a college education, for the associated financial benefits and social status. In many ways, commerce is the new center of the university, and perhaps Main Street is an appropriate expression of this new role.

In this light, the ultra-modern fast-paced Main Street makes perfect sense. Whereas archetypal Main Street evokes the small-scale, home-grown economy of times past, the University Main Street represents the future—the brave new economy of high technology and global capital.

This odd hybrid of the hyper-urban and the small town, the city and the campus, public and private, exuberance and seclusion is a perfect expression of the University's motivations and ambitions. Its outward contradictions reflect the internal contradictions between academia and the market, the local and the global, the campus as a retreat from city life and the campus as beneficially intertwined with its urban context.

The Campus Edge: Calhoun Street and Off-Campus Development

The Calhoun Street development along the southern edge of the University's campus, completed in 2005, consists of a single narrow building with retail on the ground floor and student apartments above. The complex was intended to create a continuous urban edge along Calhoun Street, mimicking the existing urban fabric and strengthening the commercial activity already present.²⁵ The strategy is unambiguously urban, blurring the boundary between city and campus. The housing was originally intended primarily for graduate students, in order to "[offer] older students and students with families a stronger association with the surrounding community"²⁶ without sacrificing the convenience of campus.

The Master Plan also proposed a series of strategic interventions in areas immediately adjacent to campus, including the non-campus side of Calhoun Street. While these interventions are rough sketches in the Master Plan, many of the proposals have been taken up by local redevelopment groups such as the Uptown Consortium. The Consortium is an association of area institutions that includes

the University of Cincinnati, several area hospitals, and the Cincinnati Zoo. University President Nancy Zimpher chairs the board.

Under the supervision of CHCURC, and in collaboration with the University, the Calhoun Street proposal developed into a plan that substantially replaced the existing fabric, a mix of fast food chains and older structures, both commercial and residential. In its place mixed-use superblocks similar to the on-campus development were proposed, with condominiums taking the place of student apartments.²⁷ Several blocks were razed, but development has stalled. As of this writing, grass has been planted on the empty blocks. Only one of the local businesses that had been on the strip relocated; the others simply closed. According to CHCURC, the new development was intended to make room for "regional retail", or chain stores.

The Uptown Consortium and its partners have been responsible for a variety of other similar interventions in the areas near campus. The developments are intensely urban, increasing density and retail activity. The housing is market-rate, often including condominiums. Several such developments have been constructed immediately adjacent to the University campus, including projects to the east of the main campus and to the south of east campus.²⁸ These locations bear a strong relationship to the interventions proposed by the Hargreaves Master Plan.²⁹

When the development is limited to the campus proper, a strategy of urban infill appears to be one of authentic engagement with the city. The off-campus development, however, is less about engaging with the city as it is about remaking the city in a new image.

Once again, both motivations are at work. The city is made at once more urban and more appealing. These motivations are evident not

only in the built environment but also in the language of the Master Plan:

The quality of student campus life is affected by and dependent upon interaction with the surrounding community. *There are opportunities for development in partnerships with the community involving both commercial opportunities (retail and office) and opportunities for housing.*³⁰

The connection between the quality of student life and the community beyond links the marketability of the University to the redevelopment of the city. The Master Plan further states: "Development opportunities existing both on and adjacent to campus have been identified and planned *to create a wider range of products and services available to the campus and surrounding district [...].*"³¹ Providing a wider range of products and services is the principle goal of the 2000 Update to the Master Plan, and is driven by a desire to appeal to students.

The goals of the Uptown Consortium are supportive of those outlined in the University Master Plan. One of the Consortium's primary goals is to enhance public safety—to make Uptown "a safe, attractive, and walkable community [...]."³² The Consortium's *Strategic Opportunity Plan* makes an explicit connection between appearance and public safety, arguing that a more attractive environment means more people on the street, which in turn improves public safety and reduces crime.³³ The Plan therefore proposes to enhance the appearance of the existing retail districts.³⁴ Other goals include increasing home ownership and making physical improvements. Thus the development essentially aims to make uptown more appealing.

Therefore, although the off-campus interventions described above mimic, even intensify, their urban context, their aim is to remake the city in a more pleasant image. The

aim is to reshape the very fabric of the community—its built environment, its home ownership rates, its retail offerings, and hence its very demographic. The development ultimately creates an *attraction—a destination, an experience*—that offers a luxurious lifestyle, safety and security, and the vibrant, urban feel of an idealized city.

Conclusion

The motivations at the heart of the Hargreaves Master Plan are the creation of an urban identity for the University and the creation of an appealing environment for its prospective clients. While these motivations conflict in regard to the perceptions of the city they represent—as a site of opportunity or of danger—and consequently conflict in regard to the favored relationship between city and campus, they nevertheless agree in their ultimate aim: to increase University marketability, enrollment, and revenue. The resulting strategy, despite its various expressions, is singular: to recreate the city in a new, better image. Main Street creates an idealized city within the campus, and the off-campus development applies the same ideal to the city entire. The specifics of this ideal have not been explored here; neither has its veracity, the ethical questions implicit in its implementation, nor the ultimate consequences of this ideal on the city and its residents. What has been revealed are the internal motivations of the increasingly market-dominated university, and the ways in which these motivations are expressed in the built environment on- and off-campus, and serve to structure the city-campus relationship. The Main Street as a component of the new campus is neither accidental nor the inevitable outcome of its context, but rather is symbolic of the changing role of the American university.

Notes

¹ Hargreaves Associates, and University of Cincinnati. 2001. *University of Cincinnati master plan 2000: Master plan update II*. San Francisco, Calif: Hargreaves, Associates. p. 11.

² *Ibid.*

³ Hargreaves 2001, p. 11.

⁴ Hargreaves 2001, p. iii.

⁵ Hargreaves 2001, p. 5.

⁶ Hargreaves 2001, p. 8. Emphasis in original.

⁷ Hargreaves 2001, p. 6. Emphasis in original.

⁸ Hargreaves 2001, p. 4.

⁹ Brailsford & Dunlavy. University of Cincinnati: Campus edge student housing, recreation, and student center master plan. 2007 [cited September 11 2007]. Available from http://www.facilityplanners.com/portfolio/university_cincinnati/housing_rec_union97/.

¹⁰ Hargreaves 2001, p. iii.

¹¹ Gumprecht, Blake. 2007. The campus as a public space in the american college town. *Journal of Historical Geography* 33, (1) (01): 72-103.

¹² Hargreaves 2001, p. 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Bennett, Paul, and Walter Smalling. 2001. *University of Cincinnati: An architectural tour*. The campus guide. 1st ed. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. p. 43.

¹⁵ Hargreaves 2001, p. 6.

¹⁶ Amelar, Sarah. 2006. Morphosis intertwines programs and forms for a campus recreation center at the University of Cincinnati. *Architectural Record* 194, (10) (10): 37-37.

¹⁷ Prendergast, Jane. 2002. Violence up, arrests down. *The Cincinnati Enquirer*. April 2, 2002.

¹⁸ Osborne, Kevin. 2006. Deadly city: New crime report is bleak; Mallory under the gun. *CityBeat*. May 10, 2006.

¹⁹ Hamilton, Rabinovitz & Alschuler, Inc., et al. 2004. *Uptown Cincinnati strategic opportunity plan*. Cincinnati: Uptown Consortium, Inc.

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the symbolic aspects of Main Street, see: Francaviglia, Richard V. 1996. *Main street revisited: Time, space, and image building in small-town America*. The American land & life series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

²¹ Francaviglia 1996, p. xxi, from the Forward by Wayne Franklin.

²² Gumprecht 2007, p. 100.

²³ Francaviglia 1996, p. 131.

²⁴ Francaviglia 1996, p. xii, from the Forward by Wayne Franklin.

²⁵ Hargreaves 2001, p. 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Clifton Heights Community Urban Redevelopment Corporation. *Clifton heights community urban redevelopment corporation*. 2006 [cited September 9 2007]. Available from <http://www.chcurc.org/>. The plan was a collaboration between CHCURC, the University of Cincinnati, and the City of Cincinnati Department of Economic Development.

²⁸ See Uptown Consortium, Inc. Public safety. [cited September 9 2007]. Available from http://www.uptownconsortium.org/public_safety.asp

²⁹ See Hargreaves 2001, p. 17.

³⁰ Hargreaves 2001, p. 5. Emphasis added.

³¹ Hargreaves 2001, p. 45. Emphasis added.

³² Uptown Consortium 2007.

³³ Hamilton, Rabinovitz & Alschuler, Inc., et al. 2004, p. 6.3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*