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THE ENLIGHTENED AMERICAN CAMPUS

The term 'American campus', in this article, refers to the physical grounds – including architecture and landscape – of the colleges and universities in the United States of America, and in the English colonies in America prior to the establishment of the United States. In this context, 'American' is thus an abbreviated reference to the United States of America. Educational institutions in other parts of the Americas, such as Mexico or Peru, in some cases have even longer histories than the Anglo-American institutions; but the historical development and characteristics of the schools in these regions have been so different that the Anglo-American campus can be seen as a separate and distinct phenomenon.

In this Anglo-American tradition, the difference between 'college' and 'university' cannot be clearly defined. Colleges are usually considered to be institutions for undergraduate students, while universities have graduate schools, such as medical or law schools, giving advanced degrees. But throughout the history of American education, undergraduate schools have sometimes been called universities, so a clear differentiation is difficult. In this article, no significant distinction is intended by the use of the two terms.

I will argue that the American campus has been shaped, in various ways, by concepts arising from the European Enlightenment, as represented by thinkers such as John Locke, David Hume, Voltaire,

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and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The main focus will be on two American schools whose physical grounds were planned in the early nineteenth century: Union College and the University of Virginia. But attention will be given also to later developments in American campus planning. And to begin, I will go back in time and look briefly at the colleges in the English colonies in America, of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I will suggest that the architectural planning of these schools was different from that of English or other European institutions, in ways that would come to characterize later American colleges and universities.

If we look at the typical English colleges of the period, for example Wadham College at Oxford University in the seventeenth century, we see that in nearly all cases they were planned around enclosed courtyards – a pattern that had developed largely from a monastic tradition.[1] But in contrast to this kind of enclosed space, the first colleges in the English colonies in America were outward-turning, oriented to the communities in which they were located.[2] This can be seen, for example, at Harvard College, founded in 1636 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the buildings of which were planned in this outward-looking way throughout the colonial period. An engraving of the college in 1767 shows five buildings, constructed from 1718 to 1764. Rather than forming one or more enclosed courtyards, their positions produced two shallow spaces, completely open to the town of Cambridge.

The other colonial American colleges developed with various versions of the same outward-turning characteristic. For example, the principal building of the College of William and Mary, in Williamsburg, Virginia, constructed around 1700, was aligned with the main street of Williamsburg; with two flanking structures, the ensemble was clearly conceived as an integral part, and focal point, of the town plan of Williamsburg – the capital city of Virginia at that time. At the college of New Jersey, in Princeton, New Jersey (now Princeton University), there was simply one large building, called Nassau Hall, which fulfilled all the college's functions, including the

1 For the architecture of the colleges in Oxford and Cambridge in the 16th to 18th centuries: Mark Curtis, *Oxford and Cambridge in Transition, 1558–1642* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959); Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cambridgeshire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954) and *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974); John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530–1830* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953).

2 Paul V. Turner, *Campus: An American Planning Tradition* (New York: The Architectural History Foundation; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 9–50.

students' dormitories. This structure, constructed in the 1750s, was set back some distance from the road and was surrounded by open space – as were many of the buildings at the other colonial colleges, such as Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. At Princeton in the 1770s, the Latin word 'campus' began to be used to designate this green space around Nassau Hall. Other colleges later adopted the word, and it eventually became the standard term for the grounds of American colleges and universities.[3]

Thus, the word 'campus' expresses some of the distinctive characteristics of American schools: their spaciousness, and their orientation to the outside world and to nature. These traits can be seen as symbolizing or implying certain qualities of the Enlightenment, for example in their rejection of the medieval, monastic character of the enclosed quadrangles of European schools, and a belief that education should serve the entire community or society.

Moreover, starting in the mid-eighteenth century the Enlightenment influenced American education in more specific ways. For example, through the efforts of men such as Benjamin Franklin, the traditional study of theology and classical languages was supplemented in colleges by courses in the natural sciences, government theory, and modern languages. And this became especially true following the American Revolution and the creation of the United States – events which were themselves inspired by principles of the Enlightenment, such as the ideas of the British philosopher John Locke, and the concept of the *Rights of Man*.[4]

Union College

After the Revolution, many new colleges were founded, throughout the United States, and some of them incorporated Enlightenment ideals in new ways. A case in point is Union College, founded in 1795 at the town of Schenectady, in the State of New York – which in particular embodied certain ideals of the French Enlightenment.

3 Albert Matthews, 'The term "Campus" in American colleges', *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 3 (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1900), 431–437. Turner, *Campus*, 47.

4 Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University, A History* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1962, 1990), 3–22, 23–43.

One example is the college's motto. The early American colleges each had a motto, which was typically in Latin or Greek, often expressing religious sentiments; but the Union College motto was in French, and read, '*Sous les lois de Minerve nous devenons tous frères*' – 'We all become brothers under the laws of Minerva' (the goddess of wisdom and the arts).[5] And the Union College curriculum placed a greater emphasis on the natural sciences and modern languages than did traditional institutions.

The progressive policies of Union College quickly made it popular with students, and to accommodate the increased enrolment, Eliphalet Nott, the president of the college, acquired a large tract of land on a hill outside of town for new buildings. In 1812, he hired Joseph Ramée, a French architect who had just come to the United States, and over the next year Ramée designed a new campus for the school, which was the most innovative and ambitious plan for an American college or university up to that time.[6] Before discussing this design, some information about Ramée's background is relevant.

Joseph Ramée began his career in Paris, just before the French Revolution, and was strongly influenced by the radical neoclassicists of this period – especially Claude-Nicolas Ledoux.[7] He was an early supporter of the French Revolution and had in fact designed the central feature, the Autel de la Patrie (Altar of the Fatherland), for the first great ceremony of the Revolution, which took place in 1790 on the Champs de Mars in Paris and was called the Fête de la Fédération. However, Ramée was forced to flee France (having been caught up in General Dumouriez's rebellion against the Revolutionary government during the Reign of Terror), and he spent much of the rest of his life working abroad, in Belgium, Denmark, and in several German cities and principalities. In 1812 Ramée went to the United States, where he stayed for four years, and where his most important project was the design for Union College.

Ramée's design can be seen in two images: the engraving of a lost perspective rendering by him and one of his site plans. One of the most remarkable things about the overall design was its scale. It was

5 Rudolph, *The American College*, 38; *Encyclopedia of Union College History*, ed. by Wayne Somers (Schenectady: Union College Press, 2003), 636–668.

6 Turner, *Campus*, 68–75.

7 For Ramée's life and career: Paul V. Turner, *Joseph Ramée: International Architect of the Revolutionary Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

much larger than any previous American college plan, with many large buildings arranged around vast, open spaces. The architecture is in the radically simplified neoclassical mode of Ledoux, as seen for example in the flat, arcaded patterns on the facades. But perhaps the most innovative aspect of Ramée's plan for the campus was the attention to landscape design – as seen in the many site plans Ramée produced that show gardens and other types of landscaping. Ramée had, in fact, spent much of his earlier career as a landscape designer and was a proponent of the principles of naturalistic or English-garden landscaping. At Union College, he was proposing that the school be placed in the midst of a large park, representing an idealistic concept of education within Nature, which no doubt reflected the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (whom Ramée quoted in one of his publications), and more generally the Enlightenment focus on the natural world.[8]

Several of Ramée's site plans for the college indicate that he gave considerable thought to the different types of landscape that could be incorporated into the campus. These include a large area for horticultural purposes (probably for growing fruits and vegetables for the college dining hall); an area that appears to be a memorial garden or cemetery; an elongated elliptical area that was probably to be a running track; and large areas of leisure grounds and arboretums. Ramée's design for Union College was the first plan for an American college or university in which landscaping was included as such an important component in the life of the school. Only within the context of the Enlightenment could an institution have been conceived in quite this way.

The University of Virginia

At the same time that Ramée was designing the Union College campus, Thomas Jefferson was planning a new educational institution in the State of Virginia. Jefferson, one of the principal founders of the United States, and its third president, was influenced by the European Enlightenment more strongly than probably any of the other founders of the country –

8 The quotation from Rousseau (from his novel *Julie*, regarding nature and garden design) is on the title page of Ramée's *Jardins irréguliers [et] maisons de campagne* ... (Paris: chez l'auteur, 1823).

as seen, for example, in his writing of the Declaration of Independence, with its emphasis on the *Rights of Man*; and also in his insistence on the complete separation of religion and government (as expressed in the First Amendment of the Constitution as part of the Bill of Rights).

Around 1810, Jefferson began working on the creation of a university for the State of Virginia, to be located at the town of Charlottesville (near Jefferson's own home, Monticello). His planning of the institution included both its educational program and its physical design – to which he paid special attention, because of his intense personal interest in architecture. In 1817, after incorporating suggestions made by the architect Benjamin Latrobe (who was familiar with Ramée's plan for Union College), Jefferson completed the university design and the buildings were constructed over the following years.

The central part of the campus plan was a long open space, called the 'Lawn', with buildings called 'Pavilions' along two sides – each of which was to serve as a professor's residence with his classroom on the ground floor. These pavilions were connected by colonnades, behind which were the students' rooms. At the end of the central space was a large domed building, similar to the Pantheon in Rome. (The inclusion of this domed structure, as the focal point of the plan, was one of Latrobe's suggestions to Jefferson, and probably was inspired by Ramée's domed chapel at Union College.) However, the most significant thing about this domed building is that it was not intended to be the university chapel as the main building of a traditional college or university would have been. Instead, Jefferson designated it as the college library. In fact, Jefferson insisted that the University of Virginia not have a chapel on its grounds – consistent with his principle of the complete separation of church and state. Thus, Jefferson was replacing religion with learning and freedom of thought at the centre of his university. In this way, his architectural plan for the school was a powerful statement of Enlightenment thinking.

The University of Virginia campus plan had a great deal of influence on later American college and university designs, especially at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Examples include the new campus of Columbia University in New York City, designed by McKim, Mead and White in the 1890s (in which the central, domed building is the university library as in Virginia), and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), planned by William Welles Bosworth about 1913. Probably more than any other

campus plan, Jefferson's design for the University of Virginia reveals how neoclassical architecture could symbolize the values of the Enlightenment, and of secularism, in American education.

Before moving on, let me mention an unusual aspect of Jefferson's plan: the fact that the design of each of the ten 'pavilions', on the sides of the Lawn, is different. They are all classical in style, but some have pedimented porticoes and some do not; their roofs differ; and they use the classical elements and orders (Doric, Ionic, etc.) in different ways. This violated the classical principle that a group design such as this should be uniform and symmetrical. The pavilions should have had the same design; or, at least, the two sides should have been mirror images of each other. In fact, several professional architects criticized the plan for this reason, when Jefferson showed it to them. But he insisted on making each pavilion different. And he gave a specific – and rather odd – reason for doing so. He said he wanted to provide examples of a variety of classical designs for the 'architectural lecturer' at the university.[9] However, I suspect that Jefferson had a different, more personal motive: he simply liked the many classical designs he had seen over the years, in architectural treatises or on his visits to England, France, and Italy; and he wanted to use as many of them as possible. (One of the pavilions, for example, is based on Ledoux's Hôtel Guimard, which was one of Jefferson's favourite buildings in Paris.) There is something typical of an architectural amateur in this – and also, perhaps, something rather American: a willingness to break conventional rules or innovate in unusual ways. In this regard, the architecture of the University of Virginia, while being neoclassical, is nevertheless different from comparable neoclassical groups of buildings in Europe, and has a distinctively American quality.

The Democratic Movement

In the mid-nineteenth century, many Americans began calling for institutions of higher education that would be more democratic than earlier schools.[10] Despite the reforms that some colleges and

9 Letter from Jefferson to William Thornton, May 1817. See: Turner, *Campus*, 83, 314, note 70.

10 Rudolph, *The American College*, 221–240 ('Crisis of the 1850s'), 241–263 ('Dawning of a New Era'). Turner, *Campus*, 129–161.

universities had made, nearly all of them still served a rather small proportion of the population, mainly producing members of the professions, such as lawyers, educators, clergymen, and government leaders – and nearly all of them men. But there were now movements in the United States to open higher education to women, and to all classes of society, for example by creating institutions that would offer programs in science, engineering, and other kinds of technology – including agricultural and mechanical programs.

In 1862, the U.S. Congress passed, and President Abraham Lincoln signed, the 'Land Grant College Act', which provided funding for such institutions; and eventually nearly every state in the country had one or more of these 'Land Grant' colleges, as they were called. Examples are the New Hampshire College of Agriculture and the Mechanical Arts, Kansas State Agricultural College, Illinois Industrial University, and Michigan State Agricultural College. Many of these schools are now large universities, and naturally their campuses are now very different from what they were in the beginning. But engravings of them in their early years reveal that they had an informal, village-like character, with none of the symmetrical planning or classical architecture of the traditional colleges and universities. One person, in particular, contributed to the issue of how the architecture and grounds of these new institutions should be planned. He was Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect, who is best known for designing Central Park in New York City in the 1850s, which began the movement to create large, public parks in American cities.[11]

In his plan for Central Park, Olmsted drew on the tradition of picturesque landscape planning in Europe, and especially on the 'English garden' tradition. But Olmsted's interest in this kind of planning was somewhat different, notably in having a strong philosophical, or moral basis, reflecting the democratic movement in America at this time. Olmsted believed that natural landscapes and public parks could have a civilizing effect on people, especially on the residents of the large, new industrialized cities that were developing in the 19th century. And he wanted to bring this civilizing influence to the lower classes, in order to improve the quality of

11 For Olmsted's life and career: Laura Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

American democracy. Therefore, in his design for Central Park, Olmsted provided areas for a wide variety of activities, which could be enjoyed by all classes of citizens – including open fields for sports and other public gatherings; more formal areas for public concerts or performances; lakes for boating; and paths for walking and simply enjoying the natural landscape. In this way, Olmsted's park can be seen as a design for democracy, and for the *Rights of Man* – such as the right to enjoy the beneficial effects of nature.

In the 1860s, Olmsted turned his attention to the new Land Grant colleges, writing articles and reports on how these schools should be planned.[12] As one might expect, he proposed that they be laid out as naturalistic parks, with modest buildings arranged informally, creating a kind of small town or rural village. And he proposed that the students not be housed in large dormitories, but in groups of houses (or 'cottages', as he called them), which he felt would create a family-like atmosphere, beneficial to the moral life of the students.

These ideas of Olmsted soon began influencing American campus planning (and not only that of the Land Grant colleges) in a number of ways. For example, Smith College in Massachusetts – one of the early colleges for women – adopted the 'cottage' system for housing its students.[13] And the Massachusetts Agricultural College was laid out like a rural village or farming community set within a park.[14]

The ideal of the college or university as a park-like environment, incorporating natural landscape as much as possible, became so important in American campus planning that it can be seen in countless institutions in all parts of the United States.

In 1935, the French architect Le Corbusier made an extended visit to the country, which resulted in a book of commentary on American architecture and life: *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches* (*When the Cathedrals Were White*), a title that was Le Corbusier's metaphor for the newness and innovative spirit that he found in the country.[15] One of the things about the United States that impressed him most

12 For example: *Report upon a Projected Improvement of the Estate of the College of California at Berkeley* (San Francisco: Towne and Bacon; New York: W. C. Bryant & Co, 1866); *A Few Things to be Thought of Before Proceeding to Plan Buildings for the National Agricultural Colleges* (New York: American News Company, 1866).

13 Turner, *Campus*, 150.

14 *Ibidem,* 142, 147.

15 Le Corbusier, *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches* (Paris: Éditions Plon, 1937).

was its colleges and universities – and especially their park-like character and the kind of healthy, informal living that he thought they encouraged. Le Corbusier wrote the following: 'Everything is for the sake of calm and serenity. Each college or university is an urban unit in itself, a small or large city. But a green city. Lawns, parks, and a whole complex of comfortable quarters. … The American university is a world in itself, a temporary paradise.'[16]

Le Corbusier's views may have been overly romantic. But they suggest one of the many ways in which the American campus can be seen as expressing the secular, rational, and democratic ideals that developed out of the European Enlightenment.

Paul V. Turner: The Enlightened American Campus
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16 English edition of Le Corbusier's *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches*: *When the Cathedrals Were White* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), 135.