

From Space to Place on a Historic College Campus: The Importance of Landscape, Structure and Comfort in Outdoor Learning Environments

Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia is the oldest Women's College in the world chartered to grant the Bachelors Degree to women. Founded in 1836 by representatives of the Methodist Church in Middle Georgia, Wesleyan quickly established itself as an institution of higher learning whose curriculum rivaled that of all-male colleges. In 1928 after almost a century in its original location in downtown Macon, the main campus was moved north of town to a then quite rural area encompassing over 200 acres. The new campus was architecturally designed along neo classical lines featuring plain, stately brick buildings trimmed in white marble with multiple marble columns on several structures. The original campus had two main classroom buildings, Tate and Taylor Hall located across an enormous open space (approximately 50 by 200 yards) from the dormitories and dining hall. The original intent of the architects and trustees (as can be evidenced by the original architectural drawing hanging in the Humanities office) was to fill this gaping prairie-like space with several classroom buildings, creating multiple "quads" of more human dimensions. However, the Great Depression, a world war and economic downturns created a different destiny for the Wesleyan campus. The vast space between the dorms and the classrooms became the Quad and multiple generations of Wesleyannes now see this accident as normal. I suppose one way of justifying this is that if all the Wesleyan graduates, faculty and staff from 1836 on were to miraculously congregate at one time in The Quad they would come nowhere near filling it. This makes The Quad a metaphor for a sort of Wesleyan eternity, where no matter how long our college stays alive, there will always be room for another graduating class in our very own Elysian Fields.

"Place...is space endowed with physical and human meaning" (Bednarz, et. al., 1994). The Grand Canyon is a clear example of endowment with physical meaning. It is, well...Grand! Everyone who sees it or hikes into it's depths or rafts down it's mighty river has a similar response: "Awesome," "unbelievable," "amazing." However, the same cannot be said about the Quad at Wesleyan College. People don't "see" or experience the Quad. They look past it. It is an uneventful space with no structures or drama of any sort that give it identity. Therefore, it is primarily susceptible to meaning-making, or place-becoming in it's present state. To ascribe meaning to a location one has to have formed a relationship with that location. This happens through personal experiences and thus memories that are connected to a spot. You remember where you had your first kiss. You are deeply attached to a special childhood place like grandma's house, or a special tree where you played or a "fort" you built with friends. Large, empty spaces are simply not "knowable." Structures such as trees, hedges, boulders, cliffs, water features, buildings and sculptures provide limitations and unique forms to open space that create opportunities for meaning making.



Here is another perspective. For the resident student the Wesleyan campus is home. Within this home the quadrangle is a spatial anomaly, a inexplicably large and awkward null space devoid of any meaningful connection to campus life. Although geographically central, it is in no positive way an experiential hub. Its disproportionate size and lack of structure prevent it from being imbued with any meaning in the present, in the here and now. It is only after graduation, when Wesleyan consolidates in the memory of the alum, that the campus becomes spatially reconciled as a contiguous place comprising a

structured set of images and feelings. In this abstracted, subjective realm the quadrangle becomes The Quad and assumes a central position as the inviolate heart of the campus. Is this, perhaps, why our alumni trustees who welcome and support new buildings around its margins cannot imagine any physical changes to The Quad itself? Is this why we continue to preserve The Quad as a [sterile, static space](#) and eschew its transformation into a living, dynamic place?