Appendix A

Preserving the Future of the University of Cincinnati Campus

- Michael Sorkin
I.

For standard-issue preservation, designation awaits the test of time. In New York and other cities, thirty years must pass before its sanction can be sought. For the National Register, the period is fifty. This passage of time is thought both to insulate discussion from the vagaries of evanescent taste – or fad - and to give the market the protective buffer of a full depreciation cycle. Indeed, an historic objection to the intervention of official preservation is that it constitutes a “taking” by government, a set of constraints on the free use of private property. While landmark designation often has the effect of adding market value, the objection is not a negligible one and can be extended to a broader argument about fixing a dynamic process at a particular moment on the basis of assumptions that themselves continue to shift. This is an issue that arises with particular force in the context of the modern city and modern architecture, with their own ingrained impetus to the constant refreshment of the new. Indeed, the debate about the validity of modernism *qua* style is still lively, especially in circumstances in which modern works sit in social or formal contexts with more historic elements.

Although free of the encumbrance of state administered sanction, drafting a plan for the conservation of the “heritage” of the University of Cincinnati is a particularly fraught enterprise because the heritage the plan seeks to conserve is, in the main, the product of architectural and planning interventions of the past fifteen years. To a remarkable – and unusual – degree, the University has sought boldly to put itself on the map through its patronage of modernist and post-modernist architecture, much of it from top figures in the professional *avant-garde*. Although this body of living work - growing from a rambunctious ideology - puts a certain conceptual strain on the idea of preservation, there are, nonetheless, a number of logical reasons to assess this body of work prospectively, in terms that parallel more traditional preservation discussions.

At least four compelling ideas make prospective landmarking logical and shape its discourse. To begin, the keys works in consideration are all the product of “star” architects - in its expansion, the university has drawn on the talents of what is clearly an “A” list of contemporary designers. These are all much honored and published, indisputably candidates for the history books – immortal via their hits - another form of preservationism. While there are many cavils with the star system in architecture, the abundant certifications lavished on this group of practitioners assures that whatever revision takes place in assessments of the quality of their work or its relative importance, their production is guaranteed to be of historical consequence for its role in the production of contemporary architectural expression, having already endured the test of contemporary taste and notoriety: these are architects and buildings sure to generate thousands of citations on Google.
In this context, the comparison with an art collection is apposite. Unlike a city in which value is created both via the quality of individual work and via the accidental consequences of the juxtaposition of different works by different actors, many of whom have little interest in architectural “quality,” the architectural additions to the Cincinnati context have, like a museum collection, been rigorously curated. And, like a museum, the curatorship bears the strong imprint of the taste of the individuals involved, in particular that of Jay Chatterjee, who has enjoyed both the confidence and the appreciation of the larger community of university decision-makers in his choices. And, these choices have received the very substantial certification of hundreds of millions of dollars worth of direct investment by the university, including the supplement that often comes as part of the cost of adventurous, high-style, architecture.

A second argument for considering plans for the conservation of this group of buildings is more urbanistic in character. In commissioning and implementing its master plan and in following its suggestions, the university proposed, in effect, to physically complete itself. By raising the idea of an end state, the question of preservation is begged in a way that is analogous to the district scale of certification in more orthodox styles of preservation. Here, the idea of ensemble predominates over questions of individual building quality. The argument is that a particular set of relationships and atmospheres characterizes the whole and that any alteration of the larger neighborhood or district would risk harming the satisfactions of a moment declared to be a local end-point or climax in development. Here, the idea of balance is privileged and alterations to or demolitions of any existing elements of fabric are judged for their effects on the whole, relegating discussions of the intrinsic quality of individual constituents to a secondary role.

A third issue for the future of these buildings is that, although all are new, there are already issues of maintenance and use that beg questions of alteration and repair. As with any historic architecture, the parameters of adaptability and re-use are central to the status of the work, helping to define exactly what is understood to be its quality and importance by raising the question of just where the point is at which a building, via alteration, is un-made. For example, most landmarking concerns itself simply with the exterior, public, face of buildings, far more seldom constraining the alteration of interior – “private” – spaces. There are, of course, exceptions to this but there remains a tacit idea that the demand for the complete preservation of a building must meet a special standard, given the higher degree of constraint implied. In the academic setting, modification is demanded both by shifting ideas about curriculum and use as well as by technological change. University growth calls for bigger assembly halls. Laboratories and scientific buildings, in particular, are subject to constant pressures for reconfiguration due to both technical innovations and the inevitable scale-creep of laboratory requirements. Moreover, any new building goes through its own “shakedown,” a period during which the design is challenged by the real parameters of use and unanticipated possibilities and failures are discovered. There are many near-term pressures for alteration that must often be deferred for practical or financial reasons.
Pressure for alteration is also likely to come from circumstances that are particular to individual buildings and from a more general “crisis” in contemporary architecture. For example, the Aronoff Center – probably the most important of the “signature” buildings on campus – is constructed in a cheap palette of materials, of sheetrock and dryvit configured complexly and already showing significant wear. This begs the question of elaborate cyclical maintenance that will undoubtedly devolve into pressure for more major alterations. The question, then, arises as to the “essence” of the building’s character, the aspects that define it and therefore describe what must be preserved to maintain it. In the case of a building in which conventional notions of inside and outside, of plan and section, and of organizational rationale, are challenged both aesthetically and ideologically, the situation is fraught. Given what will undoubtedly be demands for “minor” local alterations in the building, a policy needs to be articulated with relative alacrity and will make an excellent test case for the evolution of a more general set of protocols. In some ways, the idea of a more thorough-going alteration is less conceptually problematic given the fact that Aronoff itself is constituted via a challenge to and reworking of the three buildings previously on site. One might more easily understand the eventual introduction of another architect of Eisenman’s stature and intellect to mount a further challenge to the new ensemble, to keep the layers adding up.

In this light, it does seem important that the preservation process include the participation of the original designers themselves in formulating initial parameters for future modifications. While this risks the conceptual transgressions of the “intentional fallacy,” it is important to distinguish the difference between issues of interpretation and alteration. In literary criticism, the authority of authorship has been a lively issue for many decades and the dominant mood suggests that once a work is committed to the page (or canvas), the circumstances of its reception and interpretation are out of the author’s hands and that validating a given reading in terms of authorial intent were deeply problematic. Of course, this view has never sanctioned alteration in the text itself and it is crucial to note this difference. Views of *Huck Finn* or *Las Meninas* have gone through numerous shifts but nobody proposes to modify the works to accommodate changes in taste or understanding. This is the nub of the contrast within architectural preservation, the idea that there is a differential privilege in the prospective integrity of the work itself. Given this difference, the role of intention is greatly altered: it is one of the main sources of an operational understanding of just how much latitude is conceivable in changing a building.

Another global issue that is likely to arise over the next decades in looking at the entire building stock of the university is that of sustainability. Indeed, there is no issue that is likely to have as strong an impact on architecture in general as the urgent necessity to reduce the human footprint on our overburdened planet. Architecture itself must undergo a conceptual sea-change, one that can have a bracing effect both on building operations and morphologies. Universities, as models of informed citizenship, should be leading the way in this effort and, as major builders and landlords, will certainly come under increasing pressure to assume this role. It is in some ways surprising that the
signature buildings and landscapes at the University of Cincinnati do not take greater interest in these issues. In the future they must deepen this engagement and such attention will lead to additional pressures for retrofit and modification of the campus and its buildings at every scale. The special circumstances of a campus that is coming close to build-out suggests that a new master plan – at least a component of this preservation plan – needs to be developed that will assess the environmental performance of the campus and its components and promulgate effective guidelines for both future and existing construction.

Finally, there is no question that this collection of buildings has itself become the “signature” of the university. But what precisely does this mean? To be sure, the presence of so many imageable buildings “brands” the university environment as singular, in much the same way the collegiate gothic or Georgian revival architectures function on other American campuses (and as they had earlier done here). Just as these traditional academic architectures work to establish an isomorphic relationship between style and meaning, so Cincinnati’s collection must mark something in particular about its academic character and cohesion. This message has several layers. To begin, there is an obvious identification with experiment and with contemporary thinking, with the implication that buildings reflect a larger attitude about knowledge and excellence. This is a logic that does not appeal to all universities – many of which prefer the comforting continuation of “traditional” building - and marks Cincinnati as exceptional. To be sure, the indifferent quality of the pre-existing campus offered a somewhat liberated opportunity for adventure, given the its own lack of a coherent image.

That the new crop of buildings also differs considerably from each other might also be said to advance an idea about the role of diversity in securing excellence and, by extension, an idea about knowledge itself. Embedded in the history of campus construction is a vision of the liberal arts that foregrounds both ideas of continuity and change, of the compatibility of new knowledge with old as well as of a bracing association the excitement and tolerance of free inquiry. The fact that several of the buildings have been “controversial” only burnishes the idea of an open-minded institution, willing to take risks for the best and secure in the idea that the university is a place in which received orthodoxies are subjected to challenge. And, not to be overly reductive, these buildings promote the idea of the university as a manufactory of modernity. That this modernity is hybrid in its expression affirms the currency of the university’s view.

However, these values still beg a number of questions. As with virtually any collection of buildings or objects that have been produced under consistent curatorship, there remains the question of better and worse, of whether one should automatically assume parity in the quality of all the buildings because of the claims of the “collection”. The Hargreaves plan that initiated the building boom is itself a modernist artifact and should not escape interrogation. Because of its innovations, it demands to be judged on the basis of its own categories. Indeed, the value of the University’s larger building exercise must be judged for the quality of its synthesis between traditional spatial concepts – centers, quadrangles,
lawns, etc. - and more modernist spatial ideas of flow, force, disjunction, etc, as well as a formal and material palette that is often markedly different from traditional defaults.

The conflict between tradition and modernity is not so sharply drawn on the Cincinnati campus as it might be in other contexts. That the store of “traditional” buildings – all revivalist not originary – is, with a few exceptions, no great shakes removes a certain burden. The shift to modernism pre-dates the wave of signature buildings that were produced in response to the Hargreaves plan. Most of the preceding work added to the campus during the building boom of the sixties and seventies is dreadful and, although it forms part of the campus heritage, can scarcely be recommended for preservation on any but economic grounds, although there may well be reserves of affection for the “four-headed monster” or the prairie-style faculty club.

But, while there are a number of buildings that might be removed and not be missed, other issues are involved. Whatever else they represent, universities (and cities) are also the embodiments of tradition and memory. These attach themselves to architecture in many ways other than via the test of design quality: buildings and spaces can be beloved – or simply important - for many reasons: the site of a massacre can be as crucial to preserve as the site of a scientific discovery or a first kiss. Any preservation scheme must somehow inventory experiential qualities of space unrelated to aesthetic issues. In compiling a plan for the future of the campus, a strategy must be generated for assessing its residue of meanings from a number of perspectives, including events, traditions, antiquity, utility, and other non-artistic content, particularly any that reinforces the sense of the campus as a place of social cohesion, civility, and consistent purpose.

The importance of an architectural object obviously exceeds its provenance. In the case of contemporary architecture and even more especially of a collection of buildings whose architects all continue to practice, it is legitimate and necessary to evaluate the quality of the building itself. Clearly, the discussion of preservation at Cincinnati is not about works by Brunelleschi or, for that matter, Frank Lloyd Wright, works in oeuvres that will not grow and which virtually every observer agrees are the product of genius. That jury is – and must – still be out for Cincinnati’s projects and it is clear, even now, that the quality of these works is uneven, ranging from brilliant to dated.

The following comments, then, represent a single critic’s assessment of a series of recently built projects, to be added to an abundance of other analyses that will be part of the accumulated weight of opinion that will ultimately weigh on decisions concerning the preservation and transformation of these works in the future. Each of these works is a player in the realization of the master plan developed by George Hargreaves and it is logical to begin with an assessment of the plan itself, which will continue to function not simply as a guiding instrument for the deployment of new construction but which is also a armature for assessing the meaning and success of work executed under its aegis.
II.

The Hargreaves Plan And Spaces

As a basic strategic document the plan is very good. Its effectiveness is clear in the rapid development of the campus according to its principles. The plan deals successfully with the generative rotational imperatives of the campus and its surroundings and identifies the geometric lines of force that underlie both its existing campus order and the desire lines that emerge from the combination of morphology and use. The plan is also successful in delineating neighborhoods or villages that are defined by the interplay of open-space and built enclosure. Particularly impressive is the way in which sports fields and facilities are integrated into this texture of rotated quadrangles without over-prejudice of scale. Indeed, the tight clustering of new buildings around Nippert Stadium – the campus cathedral – is remarkably urbane, even wry. The finest single formal outcome of the plan is the “Main Street” group, an unusually refined collaboration between a group of designers in which their give and take over the realization of this portion of the master plan has produced both outstanding individual buildings and a compelling sense of harmony in form, materials, function, and mood.

The plan also does well in its efforts to give a consistent spatialization to the interstices of the campus – the sites between existing buildings – and recognizes the difficult and varied conditions of the campus edges. Problems remain, in particular, on the north and east edges of the campus where a surfeit of parking structures and blurry green spaces create a ragged feeling. The implementation of the plan also fails to solve the thorny problem of linking the east and west campuses, which is made difficult by a knot of large streets, by issues of displaced adjacency, and by concentrated parking. However, as a general armature, the master plan is quite successful as is evident from most of the construction that it has influenced. In particular, the articulation of a linked series of spaces – the “emerald necklace”, “string of pearls”, or “chain of green” – has given the university a rich formal distributor that most effectively creates both individual spaces and the means of circulating between and among them.

The generative principles behind the strategies of place-making, infill, and circulation embodied in the plan might be said to be fairly common parlance, clear continuations of campus and urban design ideas with wide currency. More idiosyncratic is the specific formal expression of the public green and plaza spaces that have been designed by the Hargreaves office. No less than any of the buildings his plan has sited and inspired, these spaces clearly bear a specific signature and demand artistic respect. Hargreaves’ work is strongly geometrical, abstract rather than “naturalistic,” and highly episodic. His repertoire of mounds, berms, paths, mono-cultural planting, pylons and architectural incidents, and light surrealism has struck me, on repeated visits, as strongly legible but as more successful in two dimensions than three. In part, this is surely due to the relative youth of much of the planting. It is, however, of a conceptual piece with a certain new wave in landscape design bound to the cohort and period of which Hargreaves is such an exemplary representative.
Pressures on these elements are likely to come from a number of directions. There will surely be issues of maintenance for sculpted earthen – and other - elements of the work which are already showing signs of deterioration. There will be functional claims on spaces that find themselves “reprogrammed” as students and community members impose uses – from sports to romance – that these spaces do not specifically predict. There will surely be moves to a richer palette of plant materials and to more diverse, less schematic, mixes of species. And, in line with larger environmental imperatives, these will surely be pressures on the landscape to do more work – more visibly – in bioremediation, carbon sequestration, water management, biodiversity and synergy, and other issues that will shape the idea of a productive landscape, rich in specific functionality.

These pressures notwithstanding, a key role of a preservation plan must be to establish and insist upon an artistic parity between landscape and building elements, a conceptualization that reinforces the sense of mutual invention between the two. The careful identification of the spaces and elements of the interventions being undertaken in this preservation plan is clearly central to any on-going efforts to integrate open space elements into the roster of artifacts to be “listed” for protective attention. An interesting conceptual wrinkle is added by the fact that a landscape always contains the “seeds” of its own transformation. Plants and trees grow and the spatial character of the spaces they help define continually shifts.

**Aronoff Center**

As suggested earlier, if one building in the recent spate of construction were to be singled out for special importance, it would, for me, be Peter Eisenman’s Aronoff Center. This is easily the most formally inventive structure on campus and, given Eisenman’s relatively small output, likely to be a relative rarity in the future. It is a challenging building but interesting for the way in which it wears its generative methodology so conspicuously on its sleeve. Because of its idiosyncrasy and low-rent materials, it is also likely to be one of the thorniest to integrate into a systematic preservation regime and one of the most urgent.

**CCM**

Like Aronoff, the CCM is consequential both for the intrinsic quality of its design and as an exemplar of the way in which new architectural and spatial elements can bring disparate existing buildings into satisfying ensemble. The project has both great elegance and clarity, marked by strong spatial generosity and subtle integration into existing topography. The relative simplicity of form and detail in the Cobb project as well as the diversity of the ensemble as a whole both invites future interventions and potentially modulate their effects, setting their scale as small. It was my impression that this complex is particularly well-liked on campus although, personally, I find (as I often do with this architect’s work) the Cobb elements to be somewhat over-rated and a little bland. However, certain spaces – such as the convulsive bubinga-wood auditorium – invite special designation.
Lindner Center
This building is likely to be one of the easiest to preserve, both conceptually and physically. The resistant simplicity of its parti, the sacral nature of the commemorative installation in its atrium, and the beefy, minimally detailed, structural system all conspire to assure durability. Its original planning clearly takes into account the possibility of modification of the perimeter office spaces, which offer appropriately protective flexibility. This is not a great work but a very legible one.

CRC/Dormitory/Classrooms
This huge, complex, and ambitious project is easily the most dramatic of the signature additions to the campus and it is highly successful formally, contextually, and programmatically. Despite its 350 thousand square feet, complex blending of its five component pieces, and intricate patterns of use, it functions very well and blends with great aplomb into the larger athletic, Main Street, and campus ensembles in which it plays such a pivotal role.

Preserving the CRC raises many issues similar to those confronted by Aronoff. Many of its materials and finishes – as well as its expressive joinery - are sure to raise durability issues and its social and physical complexity and very high level of use are sure to give rise to a variety of maintenance problems that may compromise its visual integrity. And, the programmatic richness that gives the building so much of its character may also prove to be a source of stress in the future. While basic functions – athletics, dining, classrooms, dorm – are durable, the particular forms that they take – such as the multiple-station cafeteria – reflect current preferences that are likely to shift over the life of the building.

This pressure for re-conceptualization applies both to spaces that are highly specific and to others that more loosely programmed. Most conspicuous in this latter category is the large, covered, “interior plaza” on the eastern side of the building, which is dark and not entirely inviting, particularly in winter weather. It is easy to imagine pressure to enclose or otherwise refine this space although it is also easy to imagine that this might be done successfully, particularly with the collaboration of the original architect.

There are also several design decisions that are crucial to the building’s character that may produce pressure for alteration. While on campus, I heard a number of complaints about the slit-like fenestration of the dorm, which many students seem to find a harsh victory of form over function. The dark coloration of the main mass of the building and the moody lighting levels of much of the exercise areas produce a sobriety that risks lapsing into the somber. These, however, are relatively minor cavils in a work of great richness and invention which, as suggested above, succeeds extremely well both autonomously and in context.
Edwards Center

Although falling under the rubric of a “signature” building, this is an undistinguished, if functional, work to which it is difficult to imagine much sentiment becoming attached. More corporate than campus.

Engineering Research Center

While I have never had any particular affinity for the work of Michael Graves, this is clearly one of his best buildings. It succeeds at everything its aspirational classicism promises. The ERC is measured and balanced but not overbearing in its symmetries, urbanely sited, materially rich, and very substantial in feeling, both inside and out. It functions as both centerpiece and hinge, a fine marker of the anxiety of transition from the brick Georgian default of the early campus to the scale and formal configuration of the signature modernities of the recent building regime. I suspect that a survey of the campus population would yield a strong sense of identification and respect for this building, which, in the straightforwardness and clarity of its configuration and detail, makes the task of understanding the “package” of its preservation unusually easy.

Tangeman Center

Like Aronoff and the CCM, the Tangeman center sets the stage for a conversation about preservation by its own incorporation of a heavily modified existing structure within the larger framework it establishes. The building functions well as an end piece on the highly successful Main Street and rounds out the rich sequence of spaces and programs for student life along it. As a piece of architecture, it is somewhat hulking and crudely configured. It does, however, have some very strong moments in its generous interior, particularly the sweeping, curved, wall of glass in its main space, which evokes the pleasures of an ocean liner’s deck.

Steger Center

A beautifully proportioned and urbane building that is literally and figuratively central in creating the form and atmosphere of Main Street. Although it reflects and extends the materiality of its new neighbors – the Tangeman Center and the CRC complex – its more modest scale and careful modulation as its steps down the sloping street adds richness and texture to a context of what could have been overwhelming bulk. Configured as a loft space, the building interiors are intrinsically flexible – designed to be battered about. The building is also particularly artful in setting the rear mews that parallels Main Street, which – by providing a sequence of restful spaces, a more intimate circulation spine, and a suture with the existing campus fabric - must be rated as one of the best spatial outcomes of the current plan.

University Pavilion

This relative sleeper of a building is one of the finest in the new crop. Although volumetrically simple, the building elevations are varied in relation to context and orientation and detailing is careful and elegant, both inside and out. Finishes, too, are of good quality and the building is at once airy and solid, with a dignified demeanor that is both serious and open. Unlike some of the edgier items on the signature list, the University Pavilion is clearly comfortable with its own sense of completion, a sense that deserves respect.
Vontz Center

Vontz is one of Frank Gehry’s most serene works and, in general, a great success. As a laboratory, it is well designed to permit periodic reconfiguration and its plan and section are models of clarity. Much as the building separates “served” and “servant” spaces, so too does it isolate “designed” and “flexible” spaces, something that greatly clarifies potential preservation issues by isolating the labs from the stair, circulation, exhibit, and auditorium spaces that bear the master’s most distinct imprint. Maintenance of the buildings exterior, however, seems likely to be an issue as the fenestration that projects from the panelized brick facades is already leaking, as is skylight glazing. In a building in which this detail is a signature, it is important that any modification or repair be done as consistently and invisibly as possible.

Medical Complex

Construction of the Eden Quad, Medical Sciences Atrium, and CARE building should have a major impact in clarifying the access to and identity of the somewhat inchoate mass of the Medical Center megastructure. While most of its buildings are not of great distinction, their aggregation is nevertheless impressive. In future planning, there is potential for the examination of a condition in which the field of figure and ground is reversed to produce an interiorized set of circulation nodes and links that parallels the exterior system on the West Campus. It seems that the medical center will evolve in a way that will demand a combined system of connection, sometimes predominantly interior, sometimes exterior. The design of this complex armature will be complex, fascinating, and challenging and will offer opportunities for interesting translations of the principles of the Hargreaves plan.
III.

In many ways, the preparation of this plan is straightforward. Because of what is clearly a broad consensus on campus, among the public, and in the critical community about the tremendous achievement of this enormous transformation, the basic value of the remade campus seems well established. And, the formal and technical issues surrounding the preservation of the spaces and buildings produced do not seem to differ in any intrinsic way from more routine questions of preservation. If there is a single thorny issue that confronts future planning, it is that of the mechanism by which the preservation of the campus is to be pursued and assured. Because campus preservation is almost entirely a matter of internal regulation – no outside body is available to protect the structures and spaces in question – the University must produce both a stable and responsive authority to oversee the protection and enhancement of this resource and a set of clear standards and protocols that enjoy the consent of the broader campus community. The task of a preservation plan is – inter alia – to assure that the work of visionary leaders does not require visionary leadership to maintain.

The richness of the university’s collection of buildings and landscapes, however, should in no way signal the end to its growth. Many tasks remain and these must be accomplished in clear harmony with what has already been done. As suggested, a general “greening” of the campus to bring it up to the highest environmental standards is an important piece of this. Solving the failed elision of the campuses requires commitment and ingenuity. Many older buildings too require modification and replacement. New uses will arrive. Residential life will be augmented. And, the university has the opportunity to introduce a new class of beautiful architectural object as it seeks the many small and lapidary objects that will add to and extend the marvelous spirit it has so successfully achieved.