Project Background and Purpose

It can be said that history, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder, as preservation decisions reflect the values of the preservationist as much as the merits of that which is preserved... Historic preservation is a process that involves an imaginative transformation as much as a conservation of material culture.¹

We require reminders of our heritage in our memory, our literature, and our landscapes. But advocates of preservation who abjure us to save unaltered as much as we can fight a losing battle, for even to appreciate the past is to transform it. Every trace of the past is a testament not only to its initiators but to its inheritors, not only to the spirit of the past, but to the perspectives of the present. ²
The University of Cincinnati Campus Heritage Plan has been prepared in the penultimate year of the Getty Foundation’s program of providing seed money for colleges and universities across America to study their historic built resources. “Historic” may be defined in the traditional sense as resources having achieved at least fifty years of age and having contributed to American historical events, people, or design characteristics. Preparation of a campus heritage plan for a predominantly contemporary campus such as this may appear at first glance to be premature at best.

What then should be the focus of the Campus Heritage Plan, with its emphasis on the contemporary work of signature designers—architects and landscape architects—who have only recently contributed to the extensive transformation of the university campus? What would be of the greatest value to the university?

For instance, how should the plan address the landscapes recently completed? These landscapes are architectural in nature with their mounds and angled edges rather than pastoral in nature. Are the expressions of design of enduring quality to serve the campus community or will they require renovation and redesign to address changing needs and more human engagement?

Questions like these are the basis for the discussion and recommendations of the University of Cincinnati Campus Heritage Plan.
Historic Preservation at University of Cincinnati

The University of Cincinnati retains a few buildings, some landscape features and organizational elements from all of the campus’ evolutionary periods of development. In general, the university’s remaining historic (predating 1948) resources have been well maintained and respectfully treated. Two structures shown on the current master plan as demolished structures may want to be re-considered for an appropriate use.

Over the 20th century, program expansion in response to changing national trends, acquisition of institutions merging into UC with their own independently conceived facilities, and enrollment “booms” from the 1940s through the 1970s were addressed by adding mostly utilitarian academic and residence halls to an increasingly commuter-centered campus.3 The campus has undergone such radical change since the early 1960s that the older, historic campus and portions of the surrounding neighborhoods are barely recognizable. Buildings from this modern period (before 1991) are not always considered significant for the present, although some may be valued as local landmarks, and could be inadvertently lost.

The campaigns of new construction over the past twenty-eight years—culminating in the implementation of the Hargreaves master plan—have measurably transformed the campus. Rather than relying upon ivy-covered walls, historic buildings and pictorial landscapes, the image of the university relies instead upon the dynamic contemporary artistic character of its signature buildings and landscapes and its pedestrian-centered campus, most notably visible on the university’s MainStreet. The Campus Heritage Plan recognizes these masterworks to be of potential historic significance and recommends that great care be taken in how changes to these buildings and landscapes are undertaken.
How the Plan Is Organized

Recognizing this evolving understanding and appreciation of UC’s historic resources, the University of Cincinnati Campus Heritage Plan is organized to accomplish the following objectives:

- **Foster a new appreciation for campus resources by placing them within a broader context of college planning and design.**

  Chapters 2 and 3 provide an overview of the historical background and context for understanding the history and significance of the buildings and landscapes. The chapters discuss the development of the University of Cincinnati’s campus through various periods significant to its history and outlines relationships between the university’s development and the history of campus planning in America. Through these relationships, the national significance of the campus and many of its buildings and landscapes can be established.

- **Identify what aspects of the campus design may be recognized as significant to the university's or our nation’s heritage now or in the future when the signature designs have reached fifty years of age.**

  The Getty Campus Heritage Grant application identified specific buildings and landscapes as the focus of the plan (figures 1.1 and 1.2). Architectural critic Michael Sorkin was invited by the university architect to assess the “essence” of the Hargreaves master plan and the signature projects it spawned. In a public
lecture delivered on campus at the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning in April 2007 (Appendix A, Preserving the Future of the University of Cincinnati Campus), Sorkin described the significance of the signature buildings and landscapes in order to “initiate a dialogue about the nature and practicality of continuity and change.”

- Identify likely threats to the resources, particularly impetuses for change when resources are either not performing successfully, are difficult to maintain, or fall out of favor through normal cycles of taste and style.

Understanding that the campus and its buildings and landscapes cannot be frozen in time, the preservation approach described in Chapter 4 goes on to describe the underlying principles for accommodating change where buildings and landscapes are considered significant and worthy of a preservation ethic. Chapters 5 and 6 outline the significance, condition, and recommended treatment of individual buildings and landscapes in the context of pivotal management issues identified in the course of preparing the plan. These chapters are supported by the description of character-defining features for each building or landscape that are included in the plan’s appendices.

- Establish a set of treatment and management guidelines that help protect the most significant values and principles of the design as time takes its toll on materials.
How to Use The Campus Heritage Plan

The goal of the University of Cincinnati Campus Heritage Plan is to address the process of change and provide guidelines for its implementation. It should be viewed as a roadmap for a case-by-case process of accommodating needed change while preserving the character and integrity of both “mature” and “signature” buildings and landscapes at the university using the tools that have been developed and refined in the field of historic preservation over the past forty years. Specific outcomes are not prescribed; rather, the plan serves as a resource for:

- Understanding the history and significance of buildings and landscapes
- Identifying character-defining features that are significant to the designs of buildings and landscapes
- Determining appropriate levels of treatment and degrees of change to which buildings and landscapes, or portions of them, can be subjected without losing character-defining attributes
- Using appropriate guidelines to evaluate proposed changes
The Campus Heritage Plan and the Future

Universities are among the most dynamic of institutions in their need to change over time. To survive and stay relevant, universities necessarily respond to a variety of program and market-driven influences. The University of Cincinnati is no exception. Changes at UC are complicated by the restraints of an urban campus with few remaining land banks for future buildings and landscapes. The campus is densely developed and will continue to evolve to use space to its highest utilization. Pressure to stay on the cutting edges of education and research and in “market” perceptions that will attract the best faculty, staff and students will lower tolerances for substandard or dated facilities. All university buildings must be designed with the knowledge that change is inevitable. Historic and signature buildings and landscapes will need to be able to adapt to new programmatic and environmental needs over time.

UC’s image or identity shaped by the physical character and appearance of the campus plays a critical role in impressing parents, attracting students, and, perhaps most importantly, maintaining, inspiring, and activating alumni boosters and donors. Universities that change too fast and too radically do so at the peril of alienating alumni constituents who may no longer identify with the changed institution. Most universities to carefully preserve their older campus buildings and landscapes while adding new facilities as infill and around the edges, as a strategy for maintaining and enhancing their images. Just the opposite has been true at UC. It is the new buildings and landscapes that have brought it so much critical acclaim and public recognition of the “brand or identity”.
To some degree, then, the Campus Heritage Plan is an ongoing discussion about the role of Planning + Design + Construction on behalf of the Board of Trustees in shaping the environment that survives into the future. Given the university’s enormous investment in the built environment and the desire to make the campus an inspiring and educational experience in itself, the underlying premise of this plan is to support conservation and protection of all features with inherent value to the university community. When change is required, the plan will suggest processes and procedures for testing this change in order to avoid construction or demolition where the loss of such a building or landscape would be regrettable.
Endnotes

1 Charles A. Birnbaum and Mary V. Hughes, eds., Design with Culture; Claiming America’s Landscape Heritage (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 1-2.
3 Getty Campus Heritage Grant Application, June 6, 2006.
4 Getty Campus Heritage Grant Application, June 6, 2006.

Photography

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Figure 1.1

Note: The Cincinnati Observatory, “a mature building”, is not shown on this map.
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Figure 1.2

Contemporary Landscapes
Mature Landscapes
Contemporary Buildings
Mature Buildings