

**Statement
on
Preserving Historic Buildings on University Campuses**

Society of Architectural Historians
Heritage Conservation Committee

Much of the architectural fabric of colleges and universities across the United States consists of historic buildings. Whether they are monumental structures, designed quadrangles, or more functional support facilities such as dormitories, it difficult to imagine the American campus without the identity provided by historic buildings.

As colleges and universities face pressure to increase their physical footprint, expand new programs, or serve new constituencies, there is ongoing pressure to respond by enlarging existing buildings, building on unencumbered land, or demolishing existing buildings to make way for new construction. Increasingly, however, these institutions are under renewed pressure to replace some historic buildings entirely, rather than look for ways to rehabilitate, repurpose, or otherwise augment existing historic buildings.

While almost every campus in the US contains some balance of historic and new construction, recent examples illustrate the damage done to the historic core of many significant campuses. Examples abound across the country. In each individual case, compelling arguments can be presented citing aging facilities, the cost of rehabilitating historic buildings, and donor interest in new construction. While the individual arguments can be convincing, however, collectively the cultural losses are significant and often irreversible.

We encourage colleges and universities to incorporate preservation and conservation into their master planning efforts, so that sensitive issues can be identified well before individual projects emerge. On many campuses, design oversight is often lacking when advance project planning is undertaken. Senior administrators make decisions without involving appropriate design staff. Master planning should include input from appropriate design professionals, either staff members or those contracted for the work. When repair and renovation projects are planned, they should be done so in consultation with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*, to help insure that projects embrace appropriate, historically sensitive repairs, rehabilitation, and expansion. Some buildings simply must change; however, thoughtful master planning can ensure that these changes are appropriate. There are many reasons for the preservation of campus historic resources: modeling the wise use of existing resources, presenting environmentally appropriate ways to address embodied energy, preserving the ability to tell the story of the historic development of a campus, and ensuring that physical resources are diverse and visually engaging.

Similarly, historic houses are often acquired colleges and universities by donation. Often, these donations occur without any consultation with design staff, or conformance with existing master plans. As a result, colleges and universities often struggle to find uses for these historic houses, and struggle to maintain them. It should be standard practice that historic house donations are only accepted if the college or university can support them and can integrate them into existing or planned curriculum. Without a plan and an endowment, colleges and universities often struggle to use and maintain historic houses. Often, after years of frustration (and the accumulation of a maintenance backlog), they are sold.

The Society of Architectural Historians urges those who plan and fund the future of college and university campuses—

architects, planners, administrators, trustees, and donors—to balance the needs of the future with the cultural and historic identity transmitted to them from the past. Historic buildings need not remain static. Rather, they can be, and often are, updated to reflect current desires for accessibility, sustainability, and flexible performance.

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