Princeton University has always been a dynamic institution, evolving from a two-building college in a rural town to a thriving University at the heart of a busy multifaceted community. The campus changed dramatically in the last century with the introduction of iconic “collegiate gothic” architecture and significant postwar expansion. Although the campus exudes a sense of permanence and timelessness, it supports a living institution that must always grow in pace with new academic disciplines and changing student expectations. The Campus Plan anticipates an expansion of 2.1 million additional square feet over ten years, and proposes to achieve this growth while applying the Five Guiding Principles.

CHAPTER 3

THE EVOLUTION OF A CAMPUS (1756-2006)

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In 1753, after competing with New Brunswick, the community of “Prince-Town” persuaded the trustees of the College of New Jersey to select it as the new site for the growing institution, based in part on what were seen as the pedagogic benefits of a sheltered location far from the corrupting influence of cities. Land was donated by the FitzRandolph family for the relocation of the college from Newark, where it had moved a few years before from its original home in Elizabeth. The relocation was completed in 1756.

The unique terrain of the chosen site resulted from its situation “…on the first high land which separates the alluvial plain of South Jersey from the mountainous and hilly country of the north. There is a gentle depression between it and the mountain, and a gradual descent on every other side of it towards the streams that nearly encircle it.”

Understanding this underlying geology does much to explain the experience of Princeton’s campus as a stepping hillside whose wide-open southern vistas are today obscured by the growth of trees and construction of buildings. The woodlands and fields below the campus would permit the growing University to expand far beyond its original 4.5-acre tract—a boundary line still visible today, traced by the path of McCosh Walk across the upper campus.

The shape of the land influenced architects and landscape architects, particularly between 1900 and 1940, who made use of its hills and escarpments to create the dramatic compositions and sense of spaciousness which define the unique character of the campus. Despite its modern density of development, the campus still maintains a character of open views and lack of enclosure that contrasts with that of many other universities defined by quadrangles. The terrain also has a newfound importance in this Campus Plan—which seeks to recover the symbiotic relationship between campus design and natural systems, and to restore the environmental health of the woodlands and watersheds on which the campus is built.

The design of Nassau Hall, which once housed the entire college, was adapted from the College of William and Mary, and its collegiate symbolism would in turn influence university buildings around the country including those of Harvard, Brown, Dartmouth, Georgetown, and Rutgers.

A unique feature of the design was the decision to locate the building 300 feet back from Nassau Street, Princeton’s
The Evolution of a Campus

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During that time and notwithstanding his other important collegiate gothic work...Cram created—not just in his firm’s work but in that of others—what most would agree is the most resilient gothic university campus in the New World.

During the same period, Beatrix Farrand served as the supervising landscape architect, establishing the distinctive approach to landscape that together with the planning and architectural vision of Cram would create an enduring identity for the campus. Cram and Farrand often sharply disagreed over the design of the campus, but today it is clear that the University’s buildings would not have the impact they do without the unifying power of the campus landscape—the simple and elegant greens, complementary plantings, tree canopy, and carefully choreographed views.

Farrand cultivated over three decades. Many of her landscapes survive today, including broad areas of campus, as well as numerous individual trees and her signature “wall plantings”—actual trees pruned to grow against the side of a building. Their endurance is a testament to her understanding of sustainable landscapes, a concept which this Campus Plan has reinvigorated.

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inquiry. Recent buildings on campus tell a story of the inherent tensions between the contemporary identity of the University, the integrated sense of the campus as a whole, and the individuality of the architect. Navigating these tensions can be a significant challenge for even the most skilled architects, especially in the shared context of Princeton’s beloved campus. This Campus Plan advances the idea that diverse and open modern architecture, expressing the contemporary identity of the University, can successfully fit within the overall sense of campus established by enhanced attention to landscape and careful planning of the campus layout.

The Icahn Laboratory, designed by Rafael Viñoly Architects, is one of the best recent examples of a confident contemporary building with a strong identity that nonetheless fits elegantly within the context of the campus. It joins two other buildings in the gentle curve of the Ellipse, an open space conceived as part of the 1995 master plan by Mabchado and Shevill Associates. A major campus pathway follows the building’s external structure alongside a grand public atrium containing a popular café. These features successfully weave the building into the pattern of campus life and allow it to contribute to a larger idea of the campus beyond the specialized needs of the Lewis-Sigler Institute for Integrative Genomics, which it contains.

If anything can be learned from this vibrant history, which expresses through the development of the campus the history of American planning, architecture, and landscape architecture, it is that the Princeton campus is not a pristine artifact frozen in time. Despite indelible images which instil a sense of permanence, the campus has in fact been continuously evolving and changing. This is the nature of a living institution at the leading edge of new fields of knowledge, for which growth is a matter of survival and continued preeminence in the world of higher learning.

It is important to view this Campus Plan in its histori- cal context; while it may appear that the next ten years will yield dramatic changes to the scale and density of the campus, they are actually very consistent with the history of campus evolution. Over the course of 250 years, the campus has constantly grown. It has roughly doubled in size three times since 1850, and has seen gradual but continuous aesthetic and structural transformations and refinements. Princeton’s campus is simultaneously a site of historic significance and a constantly evolving space, a work in progress that is never truly completed. This Campus Plan continues the evolution of the campus into its next stage, for which a new set of challenges must be confronted and solved.

Both the public and the architectural community have tended to see the issue of tradition versus innovation in absolute terms: either the University turns its back on the past and commits to innovation, or it resists the new and stakes its claim for the continuity of tradition. This is clearly a false dilemma. Technology and society change continuously, and the most interesting architects working today are those who look for a synthesis of history with the demands of the present. The Campus Plan recognizes that it is above all the scale and texture of our outdoor spaces (both new and old) that make Princeton work so well. We need to honor the past through attention to the landscape and careful planning of the transition while still building innovative works of architecture that will effectively serve our teaching and research needs in the decades to come.

—STANLEY T. ALLEN, DEAN OF THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
1879 

The establishment of the eating club, known as the Ivy Club, marked the beginning of a shift in how education was perceived. Founded in 1879, the Ivy Club was established as an answer to the then common practice of students eating in public restaurants or at work. The club was modeled after similar clubs found in Europe and its origins can be traced back to the Germanic idea of “living and learning” together. Initially, the club was a place for students to socialize and it later evolved into a mechanism for students to support each other through clubs and organizations.

1914 

Ralph Adams Cram, who designed several buildings on campus, said, “a university is a growing organism, whose form lies partly in the past, partly in the future.” This statement encapsulates the evolving nature of Princeton University as it expanded and adapted to the changing needs of its students. The university continued to grow and develop, influenced by both internal and external factors, leading to the creation of new spaces, such as the Engineering Quadrangle, and the transformation of old buildings like Nassau Hall into modern facilities.

2006 

Since the 1970s, Princeton has continued to expand and transform, adapting to the changing needs of its students and the broader society. The growth of Princeton has been marked by a focus on sustainability and innovation, as seen in the expansion of the Engineering Quadrangle and the renovation of historic buildings like Nassau Hall. The university, with its impressive architecture and beautiful gardens, remains a symbol of academic excellence and a place of intellectual inquiry.
Campus Growth by 2016

The line graph below charts the growth of Princeton University in terms of building square footage and student population from 1900 to the start of the Campus Plan in 2006. The graph also projects the same data from 2006 to 2016 based on planned projects and future recommendations.

As the graph shows, the sizes of the physical plant and student population have increased steadily over the past century, but there are two periods of more rapid growth. The first period occurred in the 1960s with the boom in Cold War scientific research and funding. During this time, the construction of new and larger research facilities was accompanied by an increase in the graduate and undergraduate student populations. The second period of rapid growth began in the 1990s and continues to 2016. Though not as steep as it was mid-century, the last two decades of growth have expanded the size of the institution by almost 40 percent.

The early part of the 20th century saw building area and student population growing at similar rates, but that no longer holds true after 1960. Whereas the ratio of building area to population in 1940 was about 1,000 square feet per student, in 2016 it will approach 1,600 square feet per student.

Why is building area growing at a significantly higher rate than the student population? It is partly because modern academic and research buildings are larger than their historic counterparts. Furthermore, a modern campus requires more than just academic and residential buildings; it must provide its population with a variety of infrastructural and support facilities that contribute to campus life and the efficient operation of a large institution.

In the ten years from 2006 to 2016 the campus is projected to expand by an additional 2.1 million square feet—not as much as the record-setting decade of the 1960s, but very likely the second most intensive decade of growth in the history of the institution. The lesson of the 1960s for today is that periods of substantial growth need careful planning to ensure that the additions enhance the campus setting rather than detract from it, and that the impacts on the environment and the surrounding community are well understood and thoughtfully addressed.

Balancing our desire to preserve the intimate yet majestic nature of Princeton’s campus while meeting the needs of what is actually a very large and growing university was one of the most interesting challenges presented by the campus planning process. I believe that our neighborhood approach, and our landscape plan, were key factors in our ability to address this challenge successfully.

— KAREN MAGGIE
CHAIR OF THE TRUSTEE COMMITTEE ON GROUNDS AND BUILDINGS
Planning is so difficult because—at least in the early years of an institution’s life—it seems so easy. We take the first steps naively, not quite realizing that each of them is full of consequence and will make every following move much more complicated. If the institution is lucky and alert, it may be able to turn future complexities into imaginative possibilities and perhaps even realities. But every successive intervention makes the design of the whole—if there still is one—more intricate. If we began, long ago, walking on air, we will almost certainly discover that, much later, we are pressed to invent new and surprising high-wire acts time after time.

The most difficult planning problem for an institution is to decide what its visible architectural and natural universe should “look like.” If there is to be an incarnation, one must first of all seek its character and meaning, and then try to express its significance in tangible forms and forms that might possibly suffice.

Princeton was the first college or university to have had the term “campus” associated with it. And once the term was there, it began—inseverably—to impose itself on the college and to demand a response and definition. It obviously implied that Princeton would be a separate place with its own boundaries and distinct identity—rather than an institution whose buildings were interwoven with the town and its residential neighborhoods.

It would be an enclave; but “campus”—literally a field—rather than an institution whose buildings were interwoven with the town and its residential neighborhoods would be an enclave; but “campus”—literally a field—also indicated something more open (and different from) the closed, walled and protected place of (for instance) an Oxford college.

When we press further, however, we are still left to discover what might be meant when the words “campus, college, and university are brought together in conjunction. Which images—in architecture, landscape, textures, space, and sky—would satisfy so hopeful a vision and ideal? Scott Fitzgerald’s “dreaming towers”? Auden’s “careless beauty” in “a green country”? Zukofsky’s “multitudinous quadrangles” that were “venerable, magical, and enduring”? Waugh’s “unwearied sinews, multitudinous quadrangles” that were “venerable, magical, and enduring”? Which images—of architecture, landscape, space, and sky—would satisfy so hopeful a vision and ideal? Scott Fitzgerald’s “dreaming towers”? Auden’s “careless beauty” in “a green country”? Zukofsky’s “multitudinous quadrangles” that were “venerable, magical, and enduring”? Waugh’s “unwearied sinews, multitudinous quadrangles” that were “venerable, magical, and enduring”? Which images—of architecture, landscape, space, and sky—would satisfy so hopeful a vision and ideal? Scott Fitzgerald’s “dreaming towers”? Auden’s “careless beauty” in “a green country”? Zukofsky’s “multitudinous quadrangles” that were “venerable, magical, and enduring”? Waugh’s “unwearied sinews, multitudinous quadrangles” that were “venerable, magical, and enduring”? Which images—of architecture, landscape, space, and sky—would satisfy so hopeful a vision and ideal? Scott Fitzgerald’s “dreaming towers”? Auden’s “careless beauty” in “a green country”? Zukofsky’s “multitudinous quadrangles” that were “venerable, magical, and enduring”? Waugh’s “unwearied sinews, multitudinous quadrangles” that were “venerable, magical, and enduring”? Which images—of architecture, landscape, space, and sky—would satisfy so hopeful a vision and ideal? Scott Fitzgerald’s “dreaming towers”? Auden’s “careless beauty” in “a green country”? Zukofsky’s “multitudinous quadrangles” that were “venerable, magical, and enduring”? Waugh’s “unwearied sinews, multitudinous quadrangles” that were “venerable, magical, and enduring”?

Noe, given the very substantial growth—over recent decades—of the population in the entire Princeton region, we know that the general lack of access roads, the traffic congestion, the pressure on community green space—and countless other considerations—can make any new construction (or analogous event) the trigger for an immediate chain reaction of innumerable problems and perplexities.

Shall we add a modest new wing to an equally modest academic building? But even the two or three dozen additional people in the new wing will need parking spaces—and the building will require electricity and heat (and air-conditioning) which will in turn strain the central steam plant slightly more. There will also be a slightly larger crowd in the lunchroom, the physical fitness room, and the restroom. One can certainly manage for now—but later?

If we build, not a modest wing, but new high-institution buildings for chemistry and neuroscience, with dozens and dozens more people, then there will be a far greater impact on the community, the campus, the energy supply, waste disposal, the sewer lines, the stream beds leading to Lake Carnegie, the storm-water catch basins, the shuttle service, parking lots, the civicas, and the possible need for more traffic lights or pedestrian bridges on Washington Road. All these (and other) mundane items are—in effect—the atomic and sub-atomic particles that constitute the deep structure of our campus, and each has enough velocity and charge to affect even the least obvious of its neighbors, jolting and jolting them, unless we prove to be sufficiently astute in our planning to provide enough room for each, with comfortable cushions to serve as shock absorbers.

The trick in planning has been to pay the greatest possible attention to what we call our (and everyone else’s) infrastructure, so that all the new outer structures and superstructures which the University may build in the future can shine forth in ways that enhance our sustaining vision of the campus and its meaning. Fortunately, the recent comprehensive process, led by President Tilghman and the University’s exceptional consultants, has done precisely that. As a result, when the next round of buildings and pathways and plantings has been completed, everything will seem composed, enduring, and also animated by youth and zest once again. All our streams will continue to run brightly down their stream beds toward the brimful waters of Lake Carnegie, beneath all those dreaming—and also wakeful—towers.

Neil Rudenstine
Former provost and former chair of the
Trustee Committee on Grounds and Buildings
NEW CHALLENGES

The particular physical characteristics of the Princeton campus create unique challenges that distinguish this planning effort from those of other universities. The topography and ecology of the campus setting, its historic patterns of growth, and the evolution of the campus and community edge have created problematic conditions today that can either be exacerbated or repaired by new development. Each of these challenges is intensified by the increasing size of the functional area of the campus—the setting for the daily life of students, faculty, and staff.

CREATING A MORE WELCOMING CAMPUS

Princeton University receives more than 700,000 visitors each year. While Nassau Street is the University’s traditional front, most visitors today arrive by car at what is clearly the back of campus, and find themselves in a distant and disorienting location with few directions. Once within the historic core, the intricate character that makes the campus beautiful also makes it confusing and difficult to navigate.

CONNECTING THE WHOLE OF CAMPUS, FROM THE CORE TO THE EDGES

Although the historic core is highly walkable, more modern campus neighborhoods have fewer pathways and are more isolated from the center and from each other. Faculty in the E-Quad, for example, are disconnected from their colleagues in the natural sciences. To be truly pedestrian-oriented, the dense pathway network of the core must be extended across gaps and into outlying areas of campus.

INCREASING DENSITY WITHOUT LOSING OPEN SPACE

Princeton’s “park-like” character is one of the most highly valued qualities of the campus by both the University community and the residents of the surrounding town. New buildings of increasing scale, parking garages, and infrastructure must be added while minimizing impacts on open space, natural features, and vistas of greenery.

UNIFYING DISPARATE CAMPUS AREAS

Over 250 years, campus neighborhoods have developed with widely varying styles of architecture, some of which lack coherent relationships between buildings. Recently completed buildings continue to express a wide range of architectural styles, a trend which will continue in the next ten years. This aesthetic diversity must nonetheless be integrated into a coherent whole.

GROWING SUSTAINABLY

The plan to concentrate growth in a limited space has significant environmental benefits, from the protection of surrounding open land to the reduction of driving between destinations on campus. At the same time, the local impacts of buildings on the natural features and underlying watersheds of campus are greater, and the ever-increasing energy demands of new buildings for the sciences and other uses make environmentally sustainable development a significant challenge.

ADDRESSING IMPACTS OF GROWTH AT THE EDGES

In the next ten years and beyond, campus growth will move increasingly to the edges of the campus, as this is the location of much of the remaining available campus land, and some of this growth will occur at points where the University meets the surrounding community. This means that the success of the plan will rely on a productive and sustained dialogue between campus and community.