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INNOVATIVE LANDSCAPING & KEY STRATEGIES for Illuminating Our Campus “Centers”

by Dr. David Vinson

In the visual arts, the theory of the center allows spectators to consider the relationship between the center and its peripheries, and in turn to evaluate how space is used in a medium to affirm a hierarchy of values. Whether in a painting, a photograph, or the still frame of a film, the center is most commonly reserved for the sacred (and occasionally, also the profane). It is the home of gods and nobility, of chaste maidens or valorous soldiers.

As a locus of power, the center manages at once to be accessible as well as transcendent. Consider Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and his subject's enigmatic expression, or perhaps John Singleton Copley's Revolutionary-era treatment of Pitt the Elder's collapse at the House of Lords ("*The Death of the Earl of Chatham*," 1781), in which Pitt is cradled, Christ-like, by those positioned nearest him.

The center puts us under its spell, and we are united by the meanings it generates. The theory of the center can be applied also to interactive spaces, whether on a grand scale (Manhattan's Times Square; the French Quarter of New Orleans; the Eiffel Tower in Paris) or at the micro level (the stage of the Grand Ole Opry; the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel). Literature has produced its own "centers" as well—Mount Doom in the *Lord of the Rings* series; the conch in *Lord of the Flies*; or, my personal favorite, Basil Hallward's oil portrait of Dorian Gray.

Locating Your Campus "Center"

If you shift your imagination to the broad landscape of your own private university or college, can you identify the campus "center"?

Not its geographic center, but rather its symbolic center, a site that unambiguously represents a range of meanings to those who frequent it?

For many, sporting complexes represent this "center." It is there that student-athletes breathe rarefied air. And if we're lucky, as spectators, we become witness to the miraculous—a buzzer-beater shot; a skyrocket homerun; a screaming free-kick in the corner of the net. Statues are erected to preserve in our collective memory the feelings inspired during such moments.

Commemorated outside of Alumni Stadium, home to Boston College, is a statue of Doug Flutie. Visitors from afar visit the statue to reenact perhaps the most iconic play in the history of college football, the "Hail Flutie," in which Flutie himself hurled into oncoming winds a 63-yard Hail Mary pass to defeat the defending national champs, the Miami Hurricanes, in the dying seconds of the 1984 Orange Bowl.

For other institutions around the country, the figurative center may not be a sporting complex or even a building. It may be a plot of land instead, such as a quad that embodies the institution's aesthetic and charm.

Campus "Centers" as Sites of Meaning-making

At Berry College in northeast Georgia, the "center" of campus consists of a set of buildings that frame a beautifully designed landscape, one that locals call the Ford Quadrangle. The quad is a destination point, a site for communal gatherings and where festivals, concerts, and other campus activities are held. The striking beauty of the quad is amplified by the Ford Buildings, which were gifted by Henry Ford. Erected in 1922, they are neo-Gothic in design and home to a dining hall, a theater, a gymnasium, an admissions office, and an alumni center.

Nearly one thousand miles northeast of Berry College is the picturesque New England-style village of Clinton in central New York. Clinton is home to Hamilton College, where the roads are aligned with massive sycamores that turn yellow and red during the fall season. At the campus "center" is a statue of its namesake and trustee, Alexander Hamilton. A granite base supports the greenish-bronze figure of Hamilton, who is dressed in customary

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18th-century fashion, with a long overcoat, breeches, stockings, and buckle shoes. In his right hand, he carries a walking stick; in his left, a tri-corner hat and book. His appearance is simultaneously stately and self-assured, that of a gentleman-officer whose sensibility is nothing short of ideal, and given the enduring appeal of the site, also timeless.

Enhancing Campus “Centers” with High-quality, Energy-efficient Lighting Systems

On September 29, 2005, a ceremony was held to unveil the remodeling of the Hamilton statue. Fixed around its rectangular base, new lighting installations give the Founding Father an even more mythical appearance, especially as the statue beams at night. Taken at a distance, one sees that the figure of Hamilton looks towards the orange Oriskany-stoned Hamilton College Chapel. They form a meaningful pair, for together they evoke the egalitarian origins of the institution as a seminary that welcomed European-Americans in addition to local Oneidas.



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If you shift your imagination to the broad landscape of your own private university or college, can you identify the campus “center”? Not its geographic center, but rather its symbolic center, a site that unambiguously represents a range of meanings to those who frequent it? Campus open spaces function as key sites of meaning-making, and we can maximize their utility, whether as sites of organic integration, where native vegetation can flourish, or as spaces of respite for students who simply need a break.

Based in the foothills of San Francisco’s peninsula region, Stanford University attracts a talented student body not only with exemplary academics but also with a campus that embodies warmth and style. The adobe exteriors of the buildings are topped with red Spanish tile roofs, and its academic and historic “center,” the Main Quad, is illuminated at night by lighting systems that provide an ideal set of characteristics, each working in unison to enhance the ambiance of campus.

The installation of pedestrian post-top luminaries has resulted in lighting that is softer and more inviting, largely free of glare, energy-saving, and longer-lasting. This represents a smarter, cost-effective strategy for lighting our campus “centers.” Throughout Stanford’s campus one can find luminaries approved by the Better Buildings initiative of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). The luminaries are retrofitted with a glass refractor and (typically) a 50W 2700K LED optical

replacement kit. The campus-wide area lights, which rest atop ten-foot tall cast iron or steel poles, are perfect for gathering and event spaces, and they serve as an appealing reference point for students as they navigate the bricked courtyards of the Main Quad.

Stanford also utilizes antique-inspired streetlamps, known otherwise as Acorn lights. 14-foot tall pole lights are topped with an acorn-shaped globe, and they add to the charm of the campus, effectively combining new, eco-friendly technology with old world aesthetics.

The “Centering” of On-campus Landscaping

Even a quick glance at the remarkable landscape of the campus at Florida Southern College and one can discern, surely, that an artist of some kind was involved in its conception. This was the case, actually. Frank Lloyd Wright had his hand in the design of ten buildings and three other structures on campus, the largest concentration of Wright-designed architecture anywhere in the world. Wright also played a

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pivotal role in designing the campus at large. According to William B. Carpenter, a historian of the iconic architect's involvement with Florida Southern, "Wright felt most college campuses were architectural failures and wanted the opportunity to design the campus from scratch." Wright relied on his principle of "organic architecture," which he believed would unite individual structures with their environment. The impact of his philosophy is evident campus wide, and taken as a whole, the campus draws on the sort of emphasis one might find in a landscape painting, in which the artist has encouraged through a series of visual strategies the movement of the viewer's eye across a scene. Wright's innovative designs work holistically to "center" the landscape, thereby making it a crucial component of the institution's cultural and brand identity.

Reinventing Landscapes to Maximize Beauty and Functionality

The campus of Florida Southern College breaks rules practiced by so many other institutions. For instance, Lake Hollingsworth acts

as a replacement concept of the ubiquitous quadrangle. In this case, several of Wright's modernist-inspired buildings overlook the lake. Ivy-covered brick buildings, lovely and yet not uncommon on campuses across the country, are notably absent. They are replaced by naturalistic structures (among them, the Annie Pfeiffer Chapel, the Polk County Science Building, and the Usonian House) that utilize natural light, low ceilings, as well as minimalist furnishings, color, and lines.

Not everything designed by Wright has aged well (low ceilings?), but his work has proved visionary in so many ways. His determination that landscape and architectural design work in unison allows for a clarity of aesthetic values, and the buildings, meticulous pathways, gardens, and atriums all give the campus an effect that is modern and functional. As basic design blocks for the campus, Wright also adopted a plan based on spacing orange groves evenly to form a grid—a simple but effective demonstration that organic integration with the environment is possible on a grand scale.

Wright's work at Florida Southern also prefigures landscape innovations underway at private university and college campuses nationwide, those that aspire to get multiple layers of functionality out of campus open space. Sports fields can reduce storm water runoff; sites can be designed to protect and restore native vegetation; large open spaces can look beautiful and simultaneously give students the option to socialize in spaces *away* from technology.

Simple Alterations that Lead to Stellar Results

To alter the landscape of our campus, however big or small the project, is hardly a betrayal of tradition; to the contrary, we can honor the past while making our campuses more appealing to current and prospective students.

We can continue to improve upon our campus "centers," those which remain so special to us. A simple alteration, such as installing a high-quality, energy-efficient lighting system to the base of a much-loved statue, can transform the familiar into something bright and new.

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Similarly, post-top luminaries can provide a pathway for our students as they navigate campus, and can also work as temporary, interstitial gathering spaces that compliment a broader campus aesthetic.

Campus open spaces function as key sites of meaning-making, and we can maximize their utility, whether as sites of organic integration, where native vegetation can flourish, or as spaces of respite for students who simply need a break.

The ongoing goal, for we are united in our collective pursuit of excellence, is to offer students a range of experiences that they will continue to cherish, and in the hope they will return for a visit.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PUPN staff writer

Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, husband, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.



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