



The Power of Place

Measuring the human impact of UC's architectural renaissance

by [John Bach](#)

photos by [Bob Flischel](#)

Can you build community using bricks and mortar?

Absolutely. As the University of Cincinnati wraps up a long 15-year campaign to make over the Uptown Campus, it is clear that the effort is yielding more than just a physical transformation. The new campus may also be contributing to a shift in the culture and, perhaps, even changing the way members of this community think and relate to one another. The campus reformation -- a capital investment exceeding \$1.2 billion -- has not gone unnoticed nationally.

Places Magazine dubbed UC "an international cultural destination." In hailing the university's conversion from "a nondescript, slipshod building complex," the magazine joins the ranks of national media such as the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune and the Washington Post, all of which have heaped praise on UC's signature architecture and greener campus.

But to what end? Was international acclaim the purpose? Does UC's urban renewal further education? And does the more attractive university setting actually attract more? Administrators are counting on the more stimulating, architecturally rich campus to improve the learning environment as well as boost the recruitment of world-class students and faculty. If initial results are any indication, they are right.

In the fall of 2007, for the first time, UC was forced to create a [waiting list](#) for incoming freshmen because the volume of applications was so large. Michael Pride, director of UC's architecture and interior design programs at DAAP, confirms that the intrigue with the physical campus has become an essential marketing tool.

Beyond recruiting, architects and planners maintain that the spaces hosting collegiate experiences have a profound impact on students during their formative years, affecting both



UC has spent more than a decade as the darling of national architecture writers. The New York Times proclaimed in 1996 it was 'one of the most architecturally dynamic campuses in America today.' Tangeman University Center anchors UC's MainStreet, which, according to last year's Los Angeles Times, 'gives the university one of the most impressive collections of contemporary architecture on any American campus.' TUC's original facade still faces McMicken Hall. The rounded portion wraps three sides of the building and adds 20,000 square feet, which includes a food court and movie theater. The new TUC was designed by Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects of New York with the Cincinnati firm GBBN Architects.

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who they are and who they will one day become.



Architect Frank Gehry's curvaceous Vontz Center for Molecular Studies occupies the grassy lot on Martin Luther King Drive at the gateway into UC's Academic Health Center. When the sun hits just right, the red brick of the Vontz Center reflects the UC Physicians Medical Arts Building, which stands just across the street. Architectural Record magazine in 2000 praised Gehry's building for showing "it is possible to insert a free-standing object -- with landscaping -- and have it alter one's perception and memory of the place."

"Like any work of art, architecture can transform awareness and engender different ways of thinking," famed architect Peter Eisenman told the Christian Science Monitor, after unveiling his [Aronoff Center for Design and Art at UC](#) a decade ago. "What you think is in no small measure a function of where you think."

Pride, who works in Eisenman's building, agrees.

"People truly respond to design even if they don't do so consciously or can't articulate it," she says.

"We have places on campus that take an active role in education. They stimulate thinking, and they offer up those challenges on a daily basis. The design keeps us active and informs our decision-making process."

While UC sociology professor Rhys Williams supposes that architects are prone to overstate the influence of design, he agrees that students do absorb messages about how much they are valued from the campus environment. "One of the messages we get from physical space is about hierarchy and power and privilege," he explains. "Big houses with big walls around them communicate something.

"One reason run-down poor neighborhoods feel depressing is that they feel abandoned. They feel forgotten, and they often are.

"That kind of communication goes on here, too. All of our signature architecture communicates what is valued.

"It would seem to me that the university has put a lot of resources into the students," Williams adds. "The fact that there are a lot of new buildings makes it feel like there is change happening, like there is momentum. It feels more energetic."

Steven Howe, head of UC's psychology department, also stresses the importance of place in how we conduct ourselves. "The environment, whether built, virtual or even intellectual, is very important and formative in terms of behavior," says Howe, MA (A&S) '78, PhD (A&S) '81. "A university is constructed precisely in order to promote certain types of behavior. It is supposed to be a place where scholars can be scholars and students can learn."

In all the media attention on UC's transformation, one point has often been overlooked -- UC had some solid architectural features to build upon. UC's aim wasn't simply to add a few architectural wonders to campus, but to blend historic and contemporary architecture together to create a place that would have deep meaning and a distinct character. Fortunately, that purposeful step was not overlooked by everyone.

For a week in the summer of 2007, the [Association of University Architects](#) met on UC's campus and at Miami University for their annual [conference](#), themed "Sense of Place: Classical to Contemporary," hosted jointly by the two universities. Professor Pride says the event reflects the fact that "UC is now distinguished among its peers across the country as

having a unique sense of place."

Though architects strive for it, harnessing the elements that go into "placemaking" is no easy feat, largely because there seems to be no magic formula for achieving it. Pridé, whose research focuses on the social and political implications of urban design, points to the daily gathering spot on [Bearcat Plaza](#) -- the open area along UC's MainStreet triangulated by [Tangeman University Center](#), [Nippert Stadium](#) and the [Steger Student Life Center](#) -- as a meaningful place on campus where students might naturally "pull off a protest or just sit in the sun and eat their lunch."

"There is no single definition of a sense of place," says Frances Halsband, a partner in the New York City firm [R.M. Kliment & Frances Halsband Architects](#), who has written extensively about campus design nationwide. "The definition seems to be you know it when you see it."

And Halsband recognizes it at UC. The former dean of architecture at Pratt has taught at Columbia, Harvard, Cal Berkeley and several other universities (including a stint as a lecturer in DAAP's [Niehoff Studio](#)). She even moderated "A Symposium on the Importance of Place" at UC in 2006.

To her, the crucial question to determine successful campus planning is this: Do people sense they are on a memorable campus? Clearly, she says, the answer at UC is "yes." "I think Cincinnati is truly a campus for the 21st century," Halsband says. "It truly is a new vision of what a campus could be. I've been watching Cincinnati for years. The first few years that I saw it, I thought the place was simply an architectural zoo. There was one of everything, and they (the buildings) were interesting and curious. It wasn't until it was all finished and tied together by landscape that it made sense."

Halsband says the key to UC's success in creating a memorable campus was the move to [expel cars from the center of campus](#).

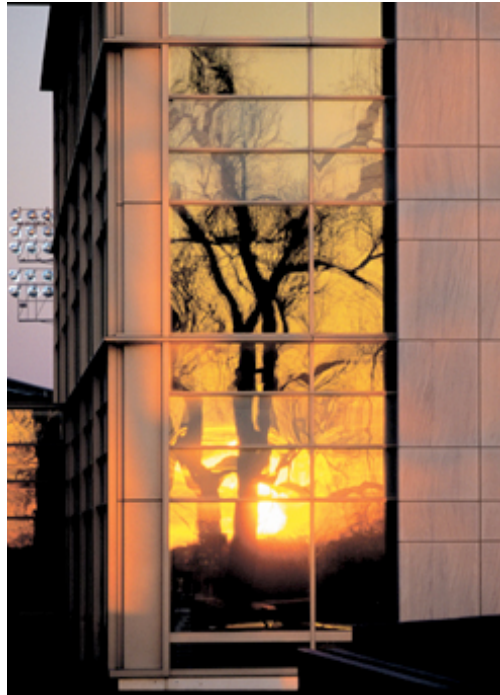
"The transformation from parking lots to a planned landscape, I think, is probably the most significant thing of all," she says. "When you enter the gates, you know you are in someplace different. And you know you are in a place that celebrates the human experience."

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University Pavilion's front-entrance glass reflects the leafless trees of McMicken Circle. "The pavilion grows on you," says photographer Bob Flischel. "It has a certain ability to reveal itself in a lot of different ways."

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