

Critical Campuses: Universities that Engage the City

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This essay proposes the idea of a "critical" urban campus. Such a campus provokes questions about and explores new ways of addressing contextual realities, tangible and intangible. In doing so it is critical of prevalent norms in the construction and usage of public space, exchange of knowledge, criticism and inquiry, the role of private property and capital in the life of the civic community, sustainability, and the relationship of the campus building's architecture with civic space and form.

This is a topic of immediate importance to contemporary institutional architecture, particularly that of colleges and universities located in cities. The university provides the physical and intellectual space that helps resist and question the status quo and dogma: its very *raison d'être* of critique suggests an architecture that is also critical. Additionally, by sharing its facilities, the university can supplement the often scarce social and cultural infrastructure of a town or city.

Critical campuses become urgently necessary in places such as Pakistan where society is generally resistant to constructive debate and the state fails to provide basic social services and facilities. Simultaneously, while obscurantist forces gain ground, a growing population of youth, seeking not only degrees but also ways to understand and relate meaningfully to ideas in religion, identity, technology and contemporary global culture, yearns for a space for constructive interaction and questioning. Private capital has seized the opportunity to supply degree programs to this constituency, mostly neglecting the students' fundamental need to form communities open to discourse and debate and the private institution's own potential as an amenity for the city. Insular urban campuses often comprise predominantly of separate "departments" of classrooms in buildings whose architecture, content with facade-making, applies superficial notions of tradition or clichés of modernism such as glass curtain walls without regard to the local climate and its corresponding architectural traditions.

In resistance to this, there is real potential for campus architecture to assume a critical role in Pakistan. Some ways through which this can be are:

1. Situation: embedding the campus in an existing urban milieu with the aim to positively impact the socio-political context of the site and providing equitable access to citizens from various parts of the city. Apart from making the campus inclusively available as an amenity for the city in general, this can have a salutary effect on the social and economic character of the host area of the institution.

2. Edification: architectural design that is scrupulous in its observance of the laws of the city, yet is able to maneuver creatively within their limits. Going beyond this, the architectural effort can extend its remit by working with governments to ameliorate surrounding areas through improved accessibility, sanitation, landscaping, utilities and services, and community usage of public space. The institution can thereby set a worthy example for the role that others like it can perform in their own milieu.

3. Sharing: facilities can be shared with the larger community. Precious resources such as libraries both physical and virtual, sports venues, workshops and labs can be made available to scholars from outside the campus as can be event spaces such as courtyards, exhibition galleries and lecture and performance spaces. This can supplement the city's own social and educational infrastructure and interaction spaces.

4. Outreach: inviting and engaging the larger community through events and activities encouraging learning, creativity and dialogue. Not only does this carry education beyond the society of the campus itself, it can also become a major means for raising awareness amidst the public about issues of pressing social importance. At the same time it provides students opportunities for community service, imparting to them a wider awareness of their world as well.

5. Spatial Innovation: design that challenges traditional notions of departmental compartmentalization, student-teacher interaction, indoor and outdoor realms, and literal opacity of academic spaces. This can play a pivotal role in creating new and stronger relationships between students and teachers and between students themselves. It can also influence pedagogy through either the proximity (or separation) of disciplines. Spatial innovation operates by rethinking zoning, accessibility, material articulation, and room configuration. An example of the latter would be flat lecture rooms rather than tiered in order to facilitate participative and group learning.

6. Programmatic Innovation: providing a diverse range of amenities for a complete day in a student's life beyond normative classrooms. These facilities should encourage the student to explore and express his or her potential in each dimension of existence - mind, body and soul. Innovation in program also includes reinterpreting a normative function or usage. Libraries for instance are becoming increasingly interactive, open, noisy and group-oriented, thus reflecting the evolving understanding about how learning happens today. Programmatic "voids" can also be created - non-specific, flexible spaces available to be appropriated by students and teachers for their purposes. This fosters greater engagement with one's space on campus.

7. Urban Form: creating solid-void configurations in the campus architecture to help shape the space of their urban contexts. Through its position vis-a-vis the city, the very physical form of the campus can make a statement about its role in civic life. Campuses can form edges with the urban space that not only mould the space of the city but also establish a dialogue with it through view corridors, transparencies, access points, exhibits, and interactive displays. They can also internalize urban space through the creation of plazas and courtyards where urban paths converge or intersect. Through architectural language, campus buildings can respond to history with propositions for the present and future.

8. Experiential Depth: architectural design that emphasizes a tactile, deeply layered and gradually unfolding experience of the campus beyond the visual appearance of surfaces and facades. This again fosters greater engagement with the campus as users discover and identify with a wide array of special spaces, appropriating these for themselves. The creation of paths and points of social encounter makes for a socially interactive place. Vertical continuities through multiple-height voids also establish a sense of community through the visibility of human movement. Sites with strong natural elements such as contours, views and vegetation can respond to these to enhance a sense of place.

9. Sustainability: architectural design that is environmentally sustainable with an emphasis on human comfort. This includes considerations such as shaded outdoor circulation, natural light, adequate ventilation and equal access for handicapped persons. Energy conservation through careful design of the building envelope, passive (and active) devices, and recourse to renewable sources also ultimately is a social statement and even today an act of criticality.

These elements of an overall critical design strategy seek to resist the insular, superficial and commercially driven impulses in campus planning today. They essentially aim at achieving a physical environment that engenders and sustains the internal community as well as galvanizing it to connect with the external. This environment is of course only the humble beginning that architecture can deliver - a beginning that must eventually find its full expression in the criticality and generosity of the institution's discourse.