

College of Arts and Sciences South Lawn Project, University of Virginia

Design Principles

Responses to the context of the Central Grounds and site

The South Lawn as a project and as an idea refers to what will be a new precinct on the Grounds—an academic center for the College of Arts and Sciences that extends the axis of the original Lawn across Jefferson Park Avenue (JPA). While the University's medical and research facilities to the east already occupy both sides of JPA, this formal extension of the Central Grounds to the south is a major event in the evolution of the University. Therefore, the South Lawn area has been planned with the utmost concern for the harmony of its buildings and landscape, as well as with its neighborhood.

The charge presented to the design team, led by the Santa Monica firm Moore Ruble Yudell, was to seek inspiration from the composition of Jefferson's original Lawn, including the character and scale of its architecture, without resorting to imitation. Accommodation of the College's contemporary programmatic requirements on the steeply sloping site while respecting the scale and character of Central Grounds historic architectural fabric posed another challenge. These and other influences have led to the shaping of the facilities program into a complex, three-dimensional arrangement of buildings and gardens—one that takes the important axis of the Lawn as its link to the Central Grounds, and simultaneously as its point of departure.

The Axial Crossing of the South Lawn Terrace

In early studies by landscape architects Cheryl Barton and Walter Hood, the formal extension of a pedestrian terrace across JPA was a universal point of agreement. The nearly 100-foot wide panel of lawn that is proposed reflects the general proportion of the upper Lawn at a smaller scale.



Vista Point

The terminus of the South Lawn Terrace is a circular plaza, framed by pergolas on two sides, with an overlook that recaptures the historic viewshed to the distant ridgeline that leads to Monticello. The center of the terrace is to be filled by a stone and water sculpture whose slightly domed surface reflects the sky and invites contemplation on the low benches that surround it. On the west side of this vista point, an exterior stair sweeps down to terraces and gardens below. To the east, a glassy conservatory housing a café and digital resource center is framed by two west-facing porches that serve as entrances to two perpendicular wings of buildings housing new facilities for the College of Arts and Sciences' programs in History, Religious Studies, and Politics.

The Jeffersonian Grid

While the surrounding streets rotate at various angles around the site, the plan maintains the grid of the Central Grounds thus unifying old and new University functions across JPA.

Two parallel wings of academic buildings establish an east-west sequence, linking the College of Arts and Sciences to the adjacent Foster Family historical site and gesturing to academic facilities in the nearby Medical Center. These buildings frame an outdoor courtyard reminiscent of the Pavilion Gardens on the Lawn.

American Architectural References

The articulation of plan and program for the new buildings draws on several significant points of convergence in American architecture, as exemplified by the works of Thomas Jefferson. The humanistic hierarchy of the whole and its parts, the cadence of repeated elements, the interplay of major and minor spaces, and the use of pure geometries to shape rooms and outdoor places are hallmarks that link his works and that of other significant American architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Kahn.

The general layout of a central, circular Commons linking two wings has its obvious genetic reference to the Lawn, but an important internal logic as well: the Commons gathers arrivals from multiple levels and directions, and redistributes movement vertically and horizontally to various activities in the buildings by way of a grand stair and three levels of lounge/passageways. The main lecture hall directly below the plaza creates a focus of academic community at the center of the new College facilities.



The wings of the new building weave offices, classrooms, and meeting rooms along both sides of the garden courtyard. This planning projects straightforwardly into a series of “hotels” oriented north-south connected by simpler rows of faculty offices. The fourth-floor façade steps back from the floor below to provide an accessible outdoor terrace that visually reduces the apparent scale of the building.

Responses to Jefferson Park Avenue

Jefferson Park Avenue presents a challenge for the planning of the Central Grounds and South Lawn. This busy City street is an integral part of the circulation network linking town and gown. The design of the South Lawn seeks to address the reality of pedestrian and vehicular movement on JPA in terms of safety, accessibility, and image, by paying attention to the character of the space below the crossing.

The walk along JPA past the eastern half of the site is enriched by views into the new central garden courtyard as well as down the slope toward the historic Foster Family homestead and burial ground. Historic Venable Lane is maintained as a pedestrian path, offering accessible places to view both sites. On all sides of the new building complex, multiple pedestrian routes lead to interior and exterior stairs up to the South Lawn Terrace to encourage as much pedestrian traffic as possible onto the Terrace itself. Below the crossing, a landscape treatment on both sides of the street suggests regional geologic strata using stonework and special lighting.

Building Character

The general articulation of the wings of the new College into six departmental centers that recall the “pavilions” and “hotels” on the Lawn is further delineated by their exterior treatment. The standing seam metal roofs oriented north-south contrast with the intervening ranges, which have lower “green” roofs planted with sedum. Each of the six departmental centers has its own design—a variation of brick walls, white-framed wood windows and white bands and pilasters using a system of pre-cast concrete forms. Custom-designed railings of white metalwork give visual emphasis to the third-floor balconies. The ranges employ more common, simpler patterns, with the fourth floor given an “attic” reading by the use of cool-gray zinc paneling with window frames and accent panels of Charleston Green—a color common to the Central Grounds.

The two “pavilions” that face the South Lawn axis are given further significance with two-story entry porches. Using distinct compositions of columns, textured pre-cast lintels and panels, and colored metal louvers and grilles, these are the most embellished of the six houses and provide the clearest link to the original “pavilions” of the Lawn.

Thus the “gestalt” of the new College is a transformation of the original architecture of the Lawn to meet the radically different conditions of a new site, program, and time, similar to Jefferson’s own adaptation of Palladian and Roman sources. This re-working is most evident in the development of the Commons, which in effect terminates the axis that began at the Rotunda. The geometry of the Commons uses the Rotunda’s radial grid: a circle divided into twenty units, framed by pairs of columns. The glassy “conservatory” of the Commons houses its grand stair set between two stone walls, incorporating clear window-walls to enhance its transparency.

Landscape Principles

Like the building design, the landscape has been planned with utmost care. The crossing terrace is intentionally quiet and geometric—a formal expanse of lawn floating through adjacent trees and topography. A sequence of thematic gardens linked by a circuit walk provide responses to particular existing site conditions within the overall framework of groves, gardens, and terraces.

A new set of “groves” frames the new complex on the east and west sides, and site hydrology is expressed through a simple system of walls, water retention gardens, and other details. The treatment of the historical Foster Family site features its own geometric orientation that is rooted in existing archaeological findings. Thus the landscape design follows the same pattern of response to site, program and historic context, while interpreting these in a creative and intellectual fashion.

