Shaping Campus Edges at UC Berkeley

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The University of California at Berkeley is a rich and dynamic place. It has a vigorously marked focus, with its Campanile, visible from across the bay in San Francisco, and a Beaux-Arts central campus plan explicitly, perhaps presciently, oriented by its architects toward the Golden Gate, the Pacific, and Asia beyond. UC Berkeley's boundaries, however, are complex and indeterminate, stretched and fractured by the demands of growth.

Berkeley's faculty members are world leaders in research, and the university draws top students from California, the U.S., and the world. New academic programs are constantly being developed and existing programs expanded. Now, in addition, as part of the California Master Plan for Higher Education, UC Berkeley must grow by an additional 4,000 students (with associated faculty and support staff) by the year 2010. The 2020 Long Range Development Plan, certified by the Regents in January, 2005, proposes adding 2.2 million gross square feet of academic and support space to accommodate the population and program growth. UCB and the city it inhabits together face formidable challenge and opportunity.

Initially set out on open ground a century ago, the campus now finds itself tightly constrained: its boundaries on three sides are well-established city neighborhoods that have grown up around the original small campus, each with a clear, noncampus identity. The fourth side is mostly steep university-owned open space reserve, with the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory set farther up in the hills.

The campus has already moved into those neighborhoods in various ways. The university has bought or rented buildings. It has bought land, demolished existing buildings, and built new ones. Early on, the campus actually also subsumed a number of streets entirely. As with most universities, the neighborhoods surrounding UC Berkeley have not welcomed the growing campus presence.

University Influence at its Edges

Decisions made by UC Berkeley about its edges and expansion beyond its boundaries have shaped the form and activities — the character — of streets and neighborhoods bordering the campus. Sometimes those changes were made with intent, sometimes through disregard. Most appear to have been the result of demand for space and services.

In terms of character, Southside is the primary student neighborhood, and the lively commercial life here is directly related to the large number of students who live nearby in the university's highrise dormitories (the "units") and in private apartment complexes. Small academic and service groups also create a mixed-use office environment in former residential buildings. To the west, large numbers of people coming to the campus arrive in downtown Berkeley, making it a major East Bay transit center, with bus and BART connections to the Bay Area and beyond. On the north, large academic buildings across Hearst Avenue from the campus, along with those of (delete those of) the Graduate Theological Union and other small schools and research centers, have given the Northside neighborhood an increasingly institutional character.

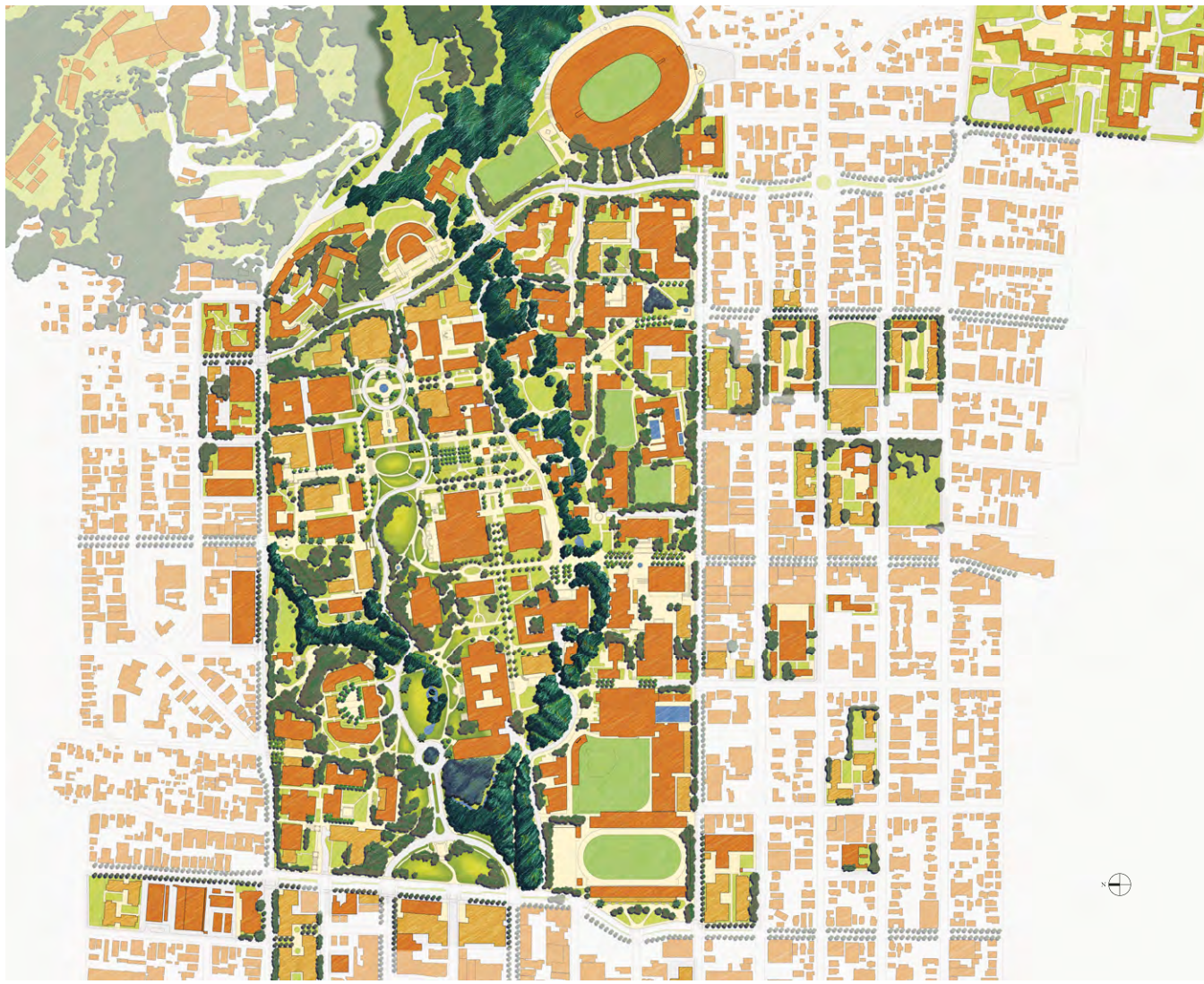
Density of development is another way the university has influenced its surroundings. The effect of density has been felt especially to the south and north. In the 1950s three groups of highrise dormitories replaced single-family houses on the south side; and since the 1970s two large academic buildings have been built on the north side, replacing small apartment buildings. Current plans for the west, downtown, edge of the campus, propose intense commercial development — a hotel, conference center, and retail uses — between the campus and the transit center, supporting the City of Berkeley's efforts to reinvigorate its downtown.

The presence of university buildings has also changed neighborhood scale and rhythm, affecting how public roads and sidewalks connect open space, how buildings frame views, and how people experience the sequence of Berkeley's urban space. Large, poorly sited buildings on the central campus block orienting view corridors, and campus buildings on residential streets — even the best — provide a less rich visual vocabulary for passersby than do Berkeley's traditional houses and gardens.

Finally, as campus programs and population have grown, and as private automobile use has replaced public transit, streets and sidewalks approaching the campus and its open spaces have become increasingly congested. One of the most hotly contested elements in the current Long Range Development Plan is the projected increase in parking planned by the university to meet faculty, staff and student demand. The City of Berkeley claims this will increase an already burdensome traffic load.

Each side of the Berkeley campus has been affected differently by the university's presence, and each offers different opportunities for positive results. But, in response, the university's approach to development along its edges is now more intentional, more studied, and more publicly articulated than in the past.

Opposite: UC Berkeley imagines a number of new and replacement building sites on its main campus and in adjoining areas of the city as part of its 2004 Long Range Development Plan.



North Side of Campus

Hearst Avenue is the traditional north boundary of the central campus. Some years ago the university crossed this street and built a number of large buildings: two parking structures, two academic buildings, and a residence hall. These campus buildings generate constant pedestrian traffic in both directions across the street. Core academic activities — research, instruction — now occur on both sides of this boundary, and the edge itself, for about three blocks, has been functionally almost erased as a result. A residential neighborhood with many large single-family houses and old apartment buildings remains intact close to these campus buildings.

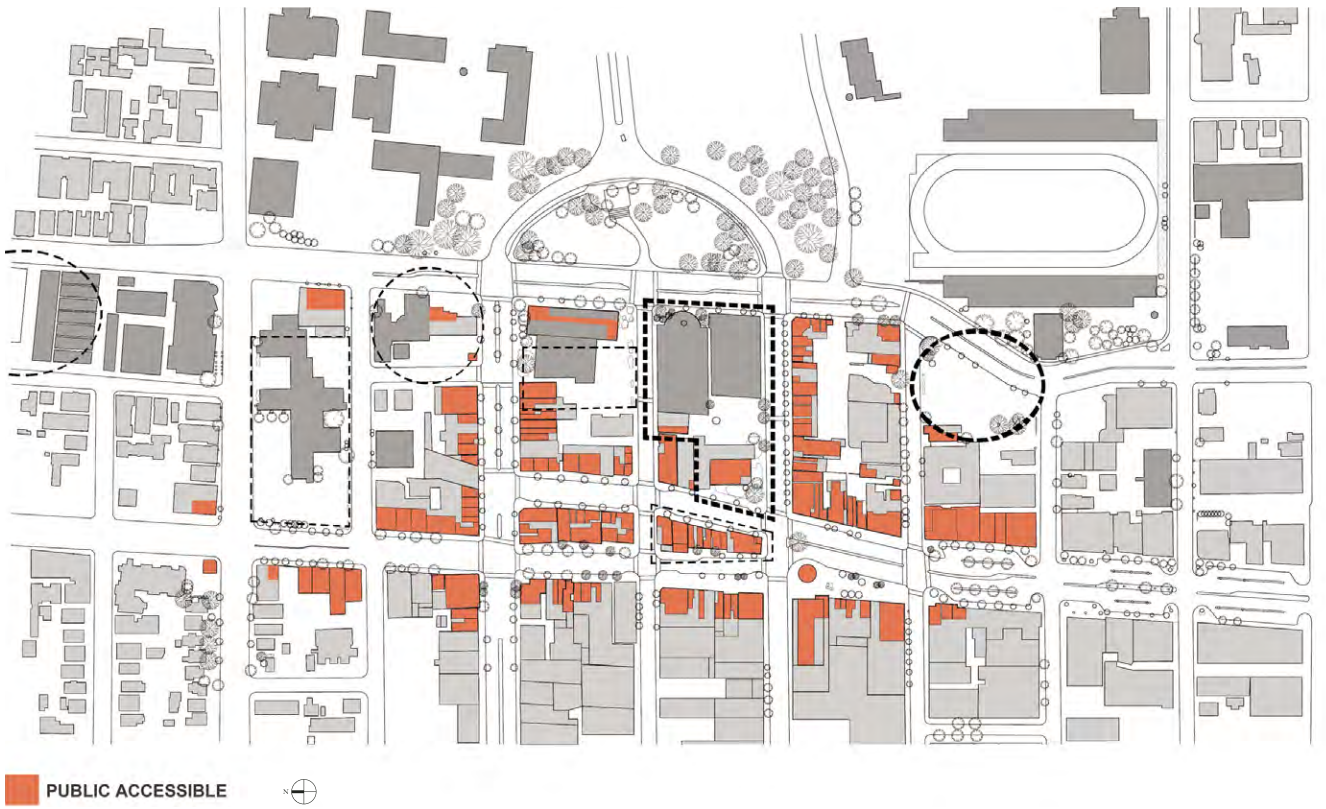
Recently, the university took a different development approach to a project on its north side. The Goldman School of Public Policy is housed in a large old fraternity house. Its recent addition is about the same size as the original, and was designed as its complement — with similar form, massing and detail. Although the new building continues the campus activities in this neighborhood, it does not increase density, and the character of the street — large elegant houses and apartment buildings, some with ground-floor retail — remains intact.

West Side of Campus

The west side is the campus downtown edge. Here a wide street, Oxford Avenue, separates the campus from the city. Although four university-owned buildings and one state-owned complex across Oxford Street have severely inhibited commercial development along the west side of the street, the campus edge here appears distinct. The most significant face of the campus is primarily open space: the West Crescent lawn, Grinnel Natural Area, and Strawberry Creek.

The university and the city are engaged in an effort to develop a hotel/conference center along Center Street. Center Street would thus become the connection between Berkeley's main commercial street (and the location of bus and rapid transit lines) and the campus. The university's art museum and film archive plan a new building at the end of Center Street, across Oxford Street, facing the campus, but also linked, by Center Street, to other areas of Berkeley's downtown, especially Addison Street around the corner, the city's designated "arts district," already home to several theaters.

The initial campus proposal for the hotel/conference center/museum saw in this project an opportunity to



develop a better connection between downtown and the campus. Visitors coming to the hotel for a conference or to the museum would discover the buildings and beautiful open spaces of the adjacent campus. The university's art museum would provide a program resource, enlivening Berkeley's downtown. This would mean that diners visiting the already lively restaurant row of Center Street, recently facilitated by the city, would be joined by a lively mix of art-museum and film patrons, conference attendees, shoppers, and pedestrians on their way to transit stops in the area.

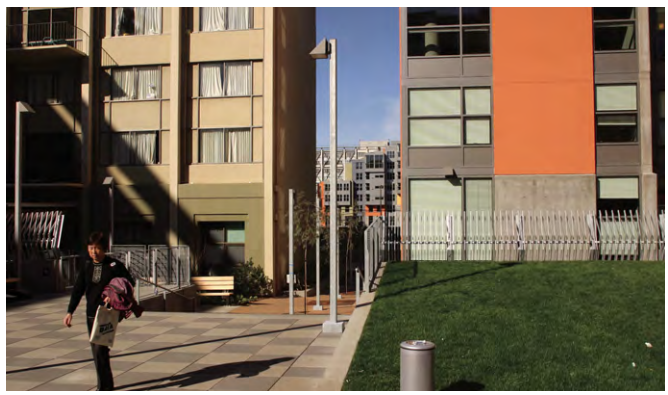
Progress on this ambitious and innovative project has been slow, as university, city, and citizen advocates have claimed conflicting positions regarding form, development and financing both for the project and for transforming Center Street itself.

South Side of Campus

The south side of the campus has been most affected by university planning and design decisions. The university built highrise residence halls, a dramatic art museum a comprehensive student health center, parking garages, and recently new lowrise residences. All this development occurred in a neighborhood that once consisted of large homes, apartment buildings, and religious institutions. The university bought and rented properties, and over time activities in the Southside neighborhood have become more and more dependent on the university's presence.

The first campus buildings, the highrise residence halls, were designed around courtyards. The courtyards contained landscaped walks and large pavilions used for dining. There are three such groups of three slab towers, nearly identical. Although the units themselves are blocks away from the campus, the groupings turned away from the streets and the neighborhood and created self-con-

Downtown Berkeley campus edge. The darker gray buildings are university buildings. The orange areas show portions of downtown buildings generally available to the pubic. Dotted lines indicate areas where there could soon be major change, four of which involve university property. The two most strongly indicated are the potential museum/hotel site (rectangular) and a private development that includes housing and an ecology center (oval). Drawing by Marianne Stuck and Benjamin Bross.




tained gathering spaces for resident students only. Students streamed back and forth between the units and the campus.

The units also did not look like the neighborhood. They are typical 1950s towers set in a neighborhood of brown-shingle and stucco houses. Their form emphasized their structural logic, with expressly delineated columns filled in between with panoramic glass and panels. The courtyard pavilions, seismically deficient and now demolished, were glassy structures with romantically curved roofs.

Recent Southside projects address the relationship between university buildings and the neighborhood in very different ways. The university recently opened a new dining facility that functions like a restaurant, open to the community as well as to students, and which opens onto the street with a gathering place at its entry.

Two three- to four-story buildings with craftsman details responding to scale and rhythm of the surrounding neighborhood have also been built. More dramatically, a set of "unit infill" projects are being completed, which add towers of a very different sort to the high-rise complexes already there. Whereas the form of the earlier buildings were statements of repetitive structural logic, coated in pastel tan, which could as easily have been offices, the new structures are vibrantly colored vertical masses of various heights with syncopated fenestration that unmistakably house living spaces of various sorts. They formally animate both the streets and the courtyard spaces within, all the while significantly increasing the density of already dense housing along the College Avenue bus route.

Responding to Place

What we see then at Berkeley is the evolution of campus planning strategies linked to their place in the surroundings, vigorous in some instances, recessive in others, tentative (maddening, some might say) when interacting with the commercial forces of a city which both gives it nourishment and depends on its presence for its own stimulation and well-being.

Four views of new infill student housing at UC Berkeley. The design successfully engages a complex urban environment from a variety of approaches. Design by EHDD Architecture. Photos by Donlyn Lyndon.