

# Campus Beautiful: Shaping the Aesthetic Identity of Iowa State University

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*Campus Beautiful: Shaping the Aesthetic Identity of Iowa State University*, edited by Jodi O'Donnell. Ames: University Museums, Iowa State University, 2015. 477 pp. 400 photographs (many in color), maps, sidebars, references, appendix, author and title index. \$100 hardcover.

Reviewer Jerome L. Thompson, an Iowa State University alum, is retired from the State Historical Society of Iowa, where he served in a variety of capacities, most recently as state curator.

*Campus Beautiful* is a history of the Iowa State University (ISU) campus, but even more it is like a fine museum exhibit catalog, with the campus itself as the exhibit. It represents great local history research well presented to give readers an understanding of a specific geographic place and its changes over time.

The book's cost and limited production may limit its audience, but that does not reflect on the quality of the publication and its contents. The book includes historic photographs and maps that have never been included in any other publication on the history of the university. Each image provides strong visual evidence for the essays. The book's large format and the quality of the reproductions make this an important catalog of sources contained in the university archives.

It is clear from the first few chapters that the audience for this publication is anyone who attended ISU or lived in Ames, because most of the references to former buildings and landscapes use current landmarks for reference. Only someone familiar with the campus today can easily make those connections. That does not diminish the quality of this history or the usefulness of this publication for future reference and research.

A team of authors contributed their expertise in architectural history, landscape history, and art history. Some authors have specific connections to ISU while others do not. The articles and essays are not only descriptive but also provide context for understanding why certain developments happened politically, economically, and socially.

The book approaches its subject chronologically, which helps readers see changes in place over time. It spans from the agrarian roots of the college to its status as a world-class university today. In the first pages, authors establish the first president's philosophy on the importance of aesthetics: "It is the useful in the world that sustains us; it is the beautiful that exalts us" (President Adonijah Welch, 1877, quoted on p. 5). As a horticulturalist, Welch was influenced by Andrew Jackson Downing and Fredrick Law Olmsted, and he put their principles into practice in campus landscape design. He saw landscape as "a living laboratory" for students.

As the campus story progresses through time, author Paula Mohr identifies threats to the landscape, ranging from student population growth and the need for new buildings to economic conditions and changes in transportation. This is evidenced by the need to relocate the interurban train tracks to campus, to establish and pave roads in the early twentieth century, and to provide parking for the number of students who possessed or had access to cars in the post-World War II era, furthered by the onslaught of baby boomers in the 1960s and 1970s. Mohr concludes that, with each threat, the university preserved the core landscape features.

The changes in architecture on campus are well documented by Wesley Shank and Jason Alread. They helpfully include sidebar images and definitions of architectural styles found on campus. They also provide context for changes in architectural designs that came to appear on campus over the past 150 years.

The collections of public art on campus are carefully documented by art historian Lea Rosson DeLong and museum director Lynnette Pohlman. After the landscape and the buildings, this is the third leg of the stool that makes a campus beautiful. The works by WPA artist Grant Wood and the appointment of sculptor Christian Petersen as artist-in-residence began a tradition that has continued for 80 years. Both authors note the importance of the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities and the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 as influences that were important for the development of this aesthetic effort. Pohlman particularly notes passage of state legislation in 1979 that calls for 0.5 percent of new building construction or major renovation costs to be reserved for commissioning public art in state buildings and at state universities. This helped the "Art on Campus" collection to grow and add aesthetic interest to nearly every place on the campus today.

Finally, the book's appendixes contain resources that elevate this work over similar undertakings: a collection of keyed university maps from the 1870s to 1979, an illustrated checklist of selected works of public art, a list of artists of all works in the museum collections, a timeline of development events, and an extensive bibliography and index. Each chapter is fully footnoted, with the sources—mostly primary sources from the rich resources of the university archives—cited at the end of each article.