



Courtesy of University of Illinois at Chicago

# The Modern Campus, Chicago Style: Education, Community, and Democracy at the University of Illinois at Chicago

By Jake Hamburger, Columbia University

In 1965, when the University of Illinois completed the construction of its campus in Chicago, its student newspaper proclaimed a victory for “radical idealists” and “rugged individualists.” The founding of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle (UICC<sup>1</sup>), according to the *Chicago Illini*, was the triumph of “a student body that had to stay in Chicago for economic reasons and who couldn’t afford the luxury of living away from home.”<sup>2</sup> UICC was a permanent campus for those who lacked the means to study at the flagship state university in Champaign-Urbana; before 1965,

the only public institution in Chicago was a temporary commuter campus located on Navy Pier, which offered only two-year programs. The Chicago Circle campus, designed by architect Walter Netsch of the modernist firm Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill (SOM), was an aesthetic tribute to a new vision of the public land-grant university. Its brutalist architecture, which emphasized functional efficiency and flexibility (especially its imposing central forum), spoke for a new kind of public spirit for a radical commuter institution. Netsch’s campus boldly proclaimed the University’s conviction that there need be no conflict between catering to the specific needs of low-income students and providing the kind of liberal education that democratic citizens deserve. UICC’s founding was an attempt to further democratize the American public university by extending it to previously marginalized populations without sacrificing its essential educational mission.

In the same issue of the *Illini*, however, another edito-

1 Today, after a merger with the nearby medical campus in 1982, it is known simply as the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). I will use each name as is appropriate to the dates in question.

2 “A Dream Comes True,” *Chicago Illini* 4, no. 14 (1 February 1965): 8.



rial hinted at a less optimistic future for the new campus. It warned that the Chicago Circle campus, like so many other large public research universities across the country, risked instilling a new kind of alienation, “the dehumanization of the student,” and transforming its commuter population into “Circle Robots.”<sup>3</sup> For some, Netsch’s imposing brutalist design was not so much the symbol of a new democratic public spirit, but rather, a shallow replacement for a holistic educational community. From the first days of the new campus’s construction, it was by no means certain that its novel conception of the public university would succeed; nor, if it did, at what cost. Throughout its history, UIC has indeed helped to expand access to higher education to a largely working-class and immigrant student population. However, in so doing, it has been unable to meet the bold demands of its founding symbolism. UIC’s later decision to remove the signature features of Netsch’s design — which coincided roughly with its efforts to attract more affluent, non-commuting students — revealed the limits of the university’s conception of democracy. Rather than extend a liberal education to those who otherwise could not afford it, UIC’s project produced the opposite effect, alienating these students from the essential formative process of higher learning. UIC’s democratic experiment revealed that tensions indeed exist between the needs imposed on economically disadvantaged students and the essential educational purpose of the university.

The founding aims of UICC sought to overcome the tensions between the ideals of liberal education and democratic equality that have existed throughout the history of American higher education. As Andrew Delbanco argues in his polemical history of America’s colleges and universities, their “distinctive contribution” to the centuries-old tradition of liberal education in the West “has been the attempt to democratize it, to deploy it on behalf of the cardinal American principle that all persons, regardless of origin, have the right to pursue happiness.”<sup>4</sup> The ideal of liberal education — that through the study of religion, philosophy, history, arts, and natural sciences in the company of others devoted to this same end, one can approach a knowledge of oneself and one’s world that is conducive to a good human life — was no American invention, and has arguably changed little in principle since antiquity. In the United States, however, the early colleges suggested for perhaps the first time that liberal education could be made available to everybody (or, at the very least, to *anybody*). Since the beginning of higher education in this country, it has remained an open question whether or not these two ideals can be reconciled, whether or not the mass expansion of college education must come

at the expense of its liberal character.

The first American colleges, including many of today’s Ivy League schools such as Harvard and Yale, offered not only holistic curricula (almost exclusively based on a theological program) aimed at guiding students towards ethical and intellectual self-development, but also served as communities dedicated to a shared purpose of higher learning.<sup>5</sup> These colleges — at least, according to their ideals — were places where students could, for a brief period of their lives, inhabit an environment exclusively dedicated to the study of what is essential to human life, and live among their fellow students working towards a common moral and intellectual purpose. Although these institutions at first served only a wealthy few, they came of age when the dominant ideology was equality between persons and an opposition to hereditary privilege. It was not, as the American exceptionalist might have it, that by virtue of being American, these institutions were necessarily egalitarian either in spirit or in fact. Rather, in the context of the founding of the United States, it was that few principled arguments could be made to keep liberal education a class-exclusive good. Even if only a handful of Americans in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had access to liberal education, even the elite colleges had to justify themselves as *in principle* open to everyone.

As higher education began its rapid expansion towards the end of the nineteenth century, despite new demands placed on colleges and universities, the ideal of liberal education remained an integral component of the American conception of what higher education should be. A driving impulse behind the 1862 Morrill Act — which laid the foundation for a national system of higher education — was the need to expand agricultural and vocational training. Additionally, many of the university reforms of the late nineteenth century often aimed to reject the old college ideal in favor of a scientific utilitarianism; reformers challenged the paternalism, elitism, and intellectual hierarchy of the older institutions, seeking to broaden the range of curricular choice and adapt higher education to the demands of the “real world.”<sup>6</sup> Broadly speaking, the notion of the college as an isolated environment dedicated primarily to students’ spiritual, intellectual, and moral development came into conflict with various notions of social utility. Colleges — an increasing number of which during this time reincorporated themselves into universities — came to be seen as having a social responsibility, both in terms of providing career training to individuals seeking economic advancement and to promote through research the general stock of scientific

5 *ibid.* 40, 54.

6 Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 58-67. See also Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern American University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 63-74.

3 “No Circle Robots,” *Chicago Illini* 4, no. 14 (1 February 1965): 8.

4 Andrew Delbanco, *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 33.

knowledge.

Despite changing notions of the purpose of higher education, the late-nineteenth-century reforms did not accomplish a break from the traditional standard of liberal education. Instead they gave education a new form. As Julie Reuben argues, by the 1920s the initial spirit of scientism and utilitarianism of the 1890s had reached a sort of compromise with the older conception of liberal education. Universities began to realize that while they had a responsibility to serve the changing needs of society, they could not completely abandon the task of “educating the whole man,” of guiding their students’ moral and philosophical formation.<sup>7</sup> This traditional aim of liberal education became incorporated into a notion of “social utility”: what was seen as “useful” to society was not only expanding the general stock of technical and scientific knowledge and preparing students to participate in civil society, but producing well-rounded citizens who could engage as free citizens of a democratic society. Crucially, according to Laurence Veysey, many of the institutions created or strengthened under the Morrill Act were initially conceived on the model of the traditional college, particularly in terms of the way their campuses were designed.<sup>8</sup> The campus was still generally taken to be a *community* devoted to a common scholarly purpose; the difference was that this purpose had come to include not only moral and philosophical development, but also economic and scientific training and research. By the middle of the twentieth century, despite some concessions to scientific method and social utility theory, a version of the mission of liberal education survived (at least in the elite private universities and the older public ones). Even for the student who chose not to pursue the traditional model of learning, the campus environment itself retained the sense of common aims that was essential to liberal education. If students’ moral and intellectual development was no longer the primary aim of American higher education, such development was nonetheless made available on an unprecedentedly large scale.

-----

This period of compromise in American higher education reached its zenith in the mid-twentieth century as the G.I. Bill dramatically expanded access to higher education. In Chicago, it was the shortcomings of this arrangement that made apparent the need for a new kind of public university. Wherever possible, the veterans returning from Europe used their federal assistance to attend institutions that best approximated the old college ideal: namely, the elite private universities and liberal arts colleges, as well as the

older public universities.<sup>9</sup> Among these early public universities was the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the flagship state institution that attracted students with both the grades and means to attend from across Illinois. Even despite the federal financial assistance under the G.I. Bill, however, many veterans (along with a great deal of other students) in Chicago were nonetheless unable to afford the expense of moving downstate. As there was no public undergraduate institution in the city, the University of Illinois opened a temporary campus in 1946 in response to the rapid increase in the student population. Built on makeshift facilities on Chicago’s Navy Pier, and offering only two years of undergraduate education, the campus was never meant to be a permanent institution, but it nonetheless remained the only publicly funded option for commuter students throughout the 1940s and ’50s.<sup>10</sup>

It became clear towards the end of the ’50s that a permanent four-year undergraduate campus was necessary that would cater to the needs of students living at home. By the middle of the twentieth century, American colleges and universities had (with mild success) extended a version of liberal education, combined with vocational and technical training, to a fairly large population of students. The standard of a college education, despite decades of debate and reform, still included a community of students living together and devoting their energies to intellectual and moral self-betterment. The need in Chicago for a permanent commuter campus, however, revealed that past attempts at “democratization,” including the Morrill Act and the G.I. Bill, had left large numbers of working-class students behind, and that a new kind of campus life was required in order to make the university work for them.

Once it was decided that a permanent public undergraduate campus in Chicago was necessary, a 1959 report compiled by Norman Parker — vice president of the Chicago Undergraduate Division, the institution that had run the temporary Navy Pier campus — outlined some of its key features. The campus that would become UICC was intended almost exclusively for undergraduate instruction, with graduate programs and faculty research to be kept to a minimum. No student housing was included in any of the initial plans, as nearly all of the student population was projected to commute from home. Also absent were an athletic stadium, a campus museum, and many other social and symbolic fixtures of the traditional campus. Instead, a prominent student union was to serve as the center of student life. The union was intended as a centrally located space where students could gather in between classes before

---

9 Keith W. Olson, “The G.I. Bill and Higher Education: Success and Surprise,” *American Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 5 (December 1973), 606.

10 George Rosen, *Decision-Making Chicago: The Genesis of a University of Illinois Campus* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1980), 20-1.

---

7 Reuben, *Making*, 238.

8 Veysey, *Emergence*, 112.

leaving campus in the evening.<sup>11</sup> The campus was no longer a space in which students lived amongst each other, but rather, a gathering place in the midst of a large, modern city.

For the planners in the Undergraduate Division, however, this break from the traditional campus model would nonetheless preserve a sentiment of collective purpose. According to its initial plans, the new campus was to differ only in terms of these living and recreational arrangements. The Parker Report, along with most of the other early projections for the UICC campus, envisioned a student population of approximately 20,000 by the late 1960s, not unusual for the time. Despite the primarily working-class character of its students, who might have been expected to favor engineering or vocational training, the Undergraduate Division's assumed academic program predicted a relatively balanced distribution of academic departments typical of its contemporary public institutions. The humanities, particularly English, remained the largest area of study.<sup>12</sup> As initially conceived, then, UICC aimed to make a humanistic liberal education, alongside career-based training, as available to its students as public universities had been since the nineteenth century. The administrators who envisioned the aims of the new campus saw no tension between providing education on the model of the public land-grant institutions and its new conception of student life. UICC's experiment in democratization sought to demonstrate that the traditional setup of the college campus was not a necessary condition for the continuation of liberal education within American higher education.

-----

Aware that its aims for UICC implied a novel conception of the modern campus, the University made no small effort to ensure that the campus's architectural design engender a new educational ethos. In 1961 the administration hired Walter Netsch of SOM — both man and firm widely respected in the world of modernist architecture — as its chief architect, whose task was to translate the educational vision of the new campus into its aesthetic and spatial features. According to the University's 1961 press release, the distinguishing features of the Netsch campus design were to serve two purposes: both “to meet the needs of today or tomorrow,” and to “embod[y] a modern conception of efficient space utilization.”<sup>13</sup> Netsch, rather unconventionally,

organized the campus buildings according to general academic and administrative functions rather than particular departments. Instead of, for example, separate buildings for each department's classrooms, Netsch envisioned a “lecture center” where all undergraduate classrooms were located regardless of academic specialty. Each building, and each specialized space within the buildings, were ordered as a single system designed to maximize flexibility. Any particular space could be used for a variety of purposes, depending on the situation (with the exception of necessarily specialized spaces such as chemistry laboratories). Netsch took explicit measures to make the campus as functionally adaptable as possible, in order to anticipate the changing demands that an advanced capitalist society might place on its universities.

This function-based distribution of space made possible the most striking feature of the Chicago Circle design: the elevated, open-air “Forum” (also known as the “Great Court”) in the center of the campus and the system of second-story walkways that connected it to the surrounding buildings. Both the Forum and the walkways were intended to achieve a maximally efficient circulation of pedestrians around the campus: the buildings forming the perimeter of the Forum were those designed for the most intensive use, and the walkways provided a “pedestrian expressway” that would allow users to move from one to another without the inconvenience of dealing with street-level traffic.<sup>14</sup> Netsch intended his optimization of pedestrian space not only to make campus life more convenient, but also to instill it with a novel form of public spirit. The Forum, as the name suggests, evoked the public spaces of classical antiquity. Its bare, concrete expanse was punctuated by four seating areas and a circular staircase designed to resemble the Greek amphitheater (they were, in fact, used on at least one occasion for a student production of Sophocles' *Antigone*). Buildings and walkways were arranged in such a way as to maximize what Netsch called “social communication.”<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that each student, as a commuter, was drawn away from the campus by a variety of particular commitments outside of university life, the design of the campus was to provide them with new kinds of social interaction, funneling them into a Brutalist agora designed for informal gatherings and artistic display.

According to Netsch, Chicago Circle was “the last 19th century campus we ever have to design.”<sup>16</sup> His use of stark, Brutalist aesthetics to evoke the classical forum was a declaration of UICC's role in reshaping the American university, while simultaneously preserving its essential purpose. UICC was to continue in late modernity the intellectual tradition of liberal education that dates back to antiquity; one was

---

11 “A Ten-Year Building Space and Land Estimate for Development of a General Campus Plan,” University of Illinois Chicago Undergraduate Division, August 1959, UIC Archives, Record Group 003-01-02, 1, 4, B-15-6.

12 *ibid.* 1, 14.

13 “For Immediate Release: U. of I. Campus at Congress Circle, Chicago --- Design Concept,” Office of Public Information, University of Illinois, September 14, 1961, UIC Archives, Record Group 064-01-02, 2.

---

14 *ibid.* 3. See also John Morris Dixon, “Campus City, Chicago,” *Architectural Forum* 123, September 1965.

15 Dixon, “Campus City.”

16 *ibid.*

meant to picture Socrates questioning the youth in the Forum before they made their way home for the evening. This campus, designed to maximize its adaptability to the changing demands of the modern city, rigorously calculated to maximize efficiency, claimed nonetheless to be an educational environment that prepared its students as both independent individuals and democratic citizens. Netsch's design was a bold attempt to reimagine an intellectual life and public spirit for a body of students who, living apart from one another, would not otherwise have anything in common but the name on their degree. Netsch, and the University administration who hired him, understood that if UICC was to carry on the legacy of the American land-grant university, it had to discover a way to make a campus feel like a home for its students even though, in a literal sense, it wasn't. American higher education, which had reached a delicate compromise between the traditional model of liberal education and the nineteenth century conception of social utility, risked abandoning the former if the university were to become merely a place to earn one's degree and go about one's business. Netsch's design was an attempt to preserve this balance by making utility and efficiency serve the interests of intellectual community.

-----

After the Forum and the elevated walkways had served as the defining physical features of the Chicago Circle campus for over two decades, the University began to reconsider their success in accomplishing their symbolic mission. By the late 1980s, it had become apparent that the Forum had failed to engender a robust sense of community among the students. According to a study conducted by the architects at Johnson, Johnson, and Roy for UIC in 1990, not only was the elevated campus difficult to maintain – and, for much of the year, impossible to use because of Chicago's erratic weather – but students had come to experience it as cold and alienating.<sup>17</sup> The upper campus's maintenance problems only reinforced its alienating effect on campus life, since as it became more difficult to make use of the walkways, over time, fewer activities and functions were located along it, and students increasingly came to feel it as a place that did not accord with their own aims. As an early architectural critic of Netsch's design put it, the campus "offer[ed] little to allay the sense of alienation that is an inherent danger in a large university. The buildings belong to everyone, and therefore to no one. The environment is hard, unyielding, vast in scale."<sup>18</sup> The massive scale and Brutalist material of the Forum, intended as a new aesthetics for the modern campus, hindered its aim to bring students together into ra-

tionalized public gathering spaces. Students simply avoided the elevated central campus, inconvenient and uncomfortable, and went about their business.

If the conceptual and structural features of Netsch's central campus design were symbolic of UICC's founding ideals, the campus's redesign in the early 1990s coincided with a reconsideration of the University's initial conception of democratization. Starting in the mid-1980s, UIC began to consider both the renovation of the original Forum and walkway system and the transition away from the model of a purely commuter campus. Despite its founders' conviction that UICC should be devoted solely to students living at home, the UIC administration began to worry that the campus's lack of student housing was a hindrance to the University's admissions and research priorities. The administration found in a 1984 report that UIC's lack of residential facilities put it at a disadvantage in the competition with other universities for both the brightest undergraduate students and the ablest research faculty and graduate students.<sup>19</sup> Having discovered that housing options played significant role in both undergraduate and graduate students' decisions on where to matriculate, and that many prospective faculty members considered a residential student population to be conducive to a proper academic environment, the University decided that if it was to increase the quality of its student body and expand its graduate programs, it could no longer remain an exclusively commuter campus.<sup>20</sup> Part of this drive towards "quality" may have been motivated by an impulse to increase UIC's prestige among other research universities by attracting more competitive applicants,<sup>21</sup> but it reflects at the same time a realization the existing campus concept was a hindrance to the establishment of a communal sentiment.

-----

The 1965 *Chicago Illini* editorialist who warned of "Circle Robots" seemed to have been proven correct some three decades later. UICC's attempt to create a modernized educational environment specifically for a commuter student population proved instead to alienate the student from the university and his or her fellows within it, rather than serve as a common meeting space for a collective intellectual and social end. By 1994, UIC had demolished the entire elevat-

17 "Elevated Walkway: Issues and Options – University of Illinois at Chicago," Johnson, Johnson, and Roy, April 1990, UIC Archives, Record Group 003-18-02.

18 Dixon, "Campus City."

19 "Summary Report on Student Residential Facilities," Master Plan Committee, University of Illinois at Chicago, September 20, 1984, UIC Archives, Record Group 003-01-02, 1-2.

20 Ibid. 2.

21 UIC's archives (Record Group 003-01-02) contain no small number of letters to high school principals of some of the more affluent Chicago suburban districts seeking information on college enrollment decisions. It is likely, then, that part of the administration's standard for determining how "quality" undergraduate students make their decisions was based on the preferences of well-off students.



ed Forum and walkway system, replacing it with a much more modest ground-level thoroughfare, and constructed several on-campus dormitories for non-commuter students. Netsch's bold statement of the modern campus's ability to create a new form of social interaction for commuter students was to some degree retracted. UICC's experiment in democratization revealed that togetherness cannot be achieved through rational calculation; if the goal is to make the campus a home for its students, there seems to be little substitute for actually making it their home. This sense of community, being at home amidst one's fellow students, is a necessary component of an authentic liberal education. If the campus is no more than a place one goes to earn one's degree, then the tradition of intellectual and moral development which has survived in American higher education may be in danger of ceasing to do so. If the university loses the acknowledgment of a shared purpose, it risks being governed solely by a notion of utility that has little regard for either non-quantifiable benefits to the individual or a common social good.

UIC's experience suggests several important limitations of a certain conception of how to "democratize" higher education. It is hardly "democratic" to merely mold the university to the needs of low-income student populations if this transformation corrodes the element of the university that is most essential to it. As Andrew Delbanco has suggested, there is almost inevitably a conflict between the demands of economic necessity and those of a serious college education.<sup>22</sup> Throughout its history, UIC has extended a certain kind of education to student populations who otherwise might not have been able to attain it – e.g., working-class students, immigrant or second-generation students, and students of other disadvantaged demographics – and this is certainly an accomplishment. However, if it is the case that in order to expand access to higher education, it is necessary to sacrifice the ideal of a community devoted to the common end of the search for truth which forms individual characters in relation to such a common aim, such an achievement, whatever its merits, is not a democratic one. Rather than reshape higher education so as to accord with the demands imposed on certain students by economic necessity, the university must find a way to offer a satisfactory educational environment despite those demands, or better yet, put its resources towards the aim of overcoming them altogether. Without a sense of common purpose, the university cannot satisfy the intellectual and moral needs of its students, and in turn, without a population of well-educated individuals, a democratic society has little hope of realizing a public good.

---

<sup>22</sup> Delbanco, *College*, 33.