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The Front Yard of Smith College

Space is cultural. A built space always indicates the material and political priorities of the local community.¹ At Smith College, one of the well-known higher education institutions for women, many buildings and constructions are recording the development of the campus and people's interaction with these places. Many of the spaces are understated in our daily life, such as Chapin Lawn that I found essential for Smith campus in my research. The lawn is surrounded by a variety of important buildings that were built from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century, including the Campus Center, John M. Greene Hall (JMG), academic buildings Hatfield Hall, Neilson Library and Wright Hall, and student houses Chapin and Haven.² Probably because the neighboring buildings have obvious functions for our campus life, I seldom paid much attention to Chapin Lawn until I chose it as a seemingly ordinary site to study for my landscape studies class. In fact, the history of Chapin Lawn is as copious as many other places at Smith are, especially in the recent decade. Through my research, 2003 is a turning point for Chapin Lawn: before 2003, the triangular green space generally blended in the overall landscape of the college, while after the construction of the Campus Center in 2003, Chapin Lawn has been modified into an oval land with its independent identity by offering a naturalistic peaceful space for the students and the institutions.

In my initial impression, I regarded Chapin Lawn as an ordinary but representative space for Smith College. When I first came to Smith, I felt I was walking in an American movie. As an

1. Dolores Hayden, *A Field Guide to Sprawl* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 7.

2. *REFERENCE: Dates of Building Construction, Smith College File*, last modified Dec 14, 2016, https://moodle.smith.edu/pluginfile.php/281020/mod_resource/content/1/presidents%20and%20buildings.pdf.

international student living on campus, I noticed that the college obtains strong characteristics of New England: the landscape consists of mainly classic red-brick buildings and natural green lawns. In between, a few seemingly new buildings with modern architecture styles occasionally exist, which proves the gradual development and the progressive construction of the institution. With more observation and being obsessed with contemporary architecture styles, I found the buildings decorated with glass wall and geometric patterns – such as Hillyer Art Library and Ford Hall – more appealing than other components on campus. Therefore, I spent much less time considering the roles of the lawns. I simply regarded them as the normal spaces separating academic buildings at reasonable distances, as most American campuses have such green grass areas. Nevertheless, I noticed that the use of Chapin Lawn is more diverse than that of Burton and Neilson Lawn, though people treat these three as the main lawns at Smith. For instance, Chapin Lawn is used to hold most campus-scale activities. Meanwhile, many individuals choose to sit and relax on Chapin Lawn rather than on the other two lawns. (I soon realized that sitting on a lawn is another typical phenomenon in American college culture.) Thus, in order to better understand the uniqueness of Chapin Lawn, I began to further examine the space in my landscape studies course.

After some investigations of Chapin Lawn and reflection on class materials, I concluded that the naturalistic characteristics and central location are main advantages for people to use the space. Two major activities usually happen on the lawn: school-level events and personal relaxation. First, the college and campus organizations arrange the convocation party, campus fairs, community information sessions, and other communal meetings on the lawn. Because the lawn is at the central campus, it is convenient for most people to get together and freely communicate with each other. Chapin Lawn has copious room to support a big population for a

liberal arts college, particularly when many visitors like the parents of students arrive at campus. Moreover, its open-air feature easily engages participants into a naturalistic, tranquil environment for informal communication. The naturalistic space, as introduced in the class, is referred to the man-made landscape mimicking the theme and feelings of natural environment, in which people can experience as if they were in nature through their sensation. During my observations, the activities organized on the natural lawn were able to attract many students and people in the neighborhood to participate. Chapin Lawn becomes the front yard of the institution to introduce Smith to visitors and receive guests.

Besides these important events arranged by the school, Chapin Lawn is a stress-relieving space for many Smith students in the most of the time during academic semesters. As some research showed, prospect landscape is highly helpful for people to seek internal peace when they are confronting pressures.³ As Chapin Lawn is mostly flat and has a clear sightline, the space helps produce a sense of safety for people to calm down. Even though a few big trees stand closely to the edge of the lawn, the center of the land is wide for students to sit without any burdens. People can enjoy the fresh air, warm sunlight, and comforting greenness of the space when the weather is good. During the lunch time and after-class periods, many students choose to sit on Chapin Lawn to switch their mental states away from the academic moods. The natural feelings of Chapin Lawn also loosen users' dress code and behavior norms. Many relaxing postures, such as sitting cross legged and lying, indicate that people feel less stressed in the circumstance. In *the Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Whytes argues that the waterfall and green plants of Greenacre Park invite passers-by into the space to temporarily retreat from the

3. William Browning et al., *14 Patterns of Biophilic Design: Improving Health & Well-Being in the Built Environment* (New York & Washington DC: Terrapin, 2014), 23.

fast life of New York City.⁴ Like Greenacre Park, naturalistic Chapin Lawn helps alleviate individual's tension and anxiety accumulated from daily college life, which gives people a chance to rebalance the fluctuating rhythms of their life. In fact, the current Chapin Lawn functions so smoothly in campus life that I had never questioned its previous appearance in the history.

After viewing several old campus maps, I noticed that the layout of Chapin Lawn has been modified from a triangular into an oval shape in 2003, so I further wondered about the untold changes of the land. In order to partially restore the history of Chapin Lawn before 2003, I relied on two main recourses from Smith College: 1) the plans and files of the construction project of the Campus Center in 2003 reserved at the college facilities office and 2) the campus maps and the photos of Chapin House preserved at the Alumnae Gymnasium. Because Chapin Lawn had mostly been regarded as a negative space, not many direct records of the lawn itself remained.⁵ Nevertheless, through the examinations of the files of the surrounding buildings, I found not only different appearances of Chapin Lawn in several historical periods but also some hidden relations between the lawn and other spaces. In fact, Chapin Lawn received much less direct emphasis before the building of the Campus Center in 2003, especially in the early stage of the campus development.

The maps of the Campus Center program produced by the architecture firm Weiss/Manfredi Architects indicate a coherent connection between the center and Chapin Lawn. In the comparison between the existing site plan and the proposed site plan, it is clear that the shape of Chapin Lawn has been redesigned: before the construction, the southeastern corner of

4. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, directed by William H. Whyte (1979; USA), Video.

5. The negative space is an architectural term referred to transitional spaces between one main building and another.

the current lawn belonged to the neighboring lawn where Hatfield Hall stands.⁶ In the new plan, Chapin Lawn was reshaped into a larger and elliptical layout, while other grass areas became further fragmented. In this way, the lawn was more visible because of its enlarged size and holistic appearance. Furthermore, the plans also present an explicit relation between the Campus Center and Chapin Lawn: the wide, flat steps of the front entrance of the Campus Center are extended into the closest part of Chapin Lawn.⁷ Although the path Chapin Way cuts off separate the steps into two sides, a bird-eye view clearly proves that the designers deliberately use the steps to bridge the two spaces. Such design intelligibly supports the original intention of building the Campus Center for the institution.

The integration between the Campus Center and Chapin Lawn is one component of the construction for elevating people's communication on campus. According to the statement of Weiss/Manfredi, the construction of the new Campus Center aims at providing a new space for students and faculty to interact with each other besides classes and house communities. Therefore, the architects chose to blur the boundary between indoor and outdoor places in their design. They created the skylit gallery, huge glass walls, ribbon windows, and other elements to introduce outside natural light and landscape into the building.⁸ As mentioned, the planners also weakened the role of Chapin Way a bit by designing the steps with same structures and materials at the entrances of both the Campus Center and Chapin Lawn.⁹ The trapezoidal steps leading to the lawn is a welcome to users, encouraging people to embrace nature after they leave the Campus Center. As a popular outdoor meeting site, Chapin Lawn further becomes the front yard

6. Fig. 1 & Fig. 2.

7. Fig. 3.

8. Weiss/Manfredi Architects, last modified 12/14/2016, <http://www.weissmanfredi.com/project/smith-college-campus-center>.

9. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The M.I.T. Press 1960), 47. In my own experiences, although the connection between the Campus Center and Chapin Lawn exists, it does not bother the indispensable function of Chapin Way – a main pedestrian path on central campus.

for students not just during important events but also in daily communication with others.

Because of the construction of the Campus Center, the appearance and functions of Chapin Lawn have been refined. 2003 is the watershed in the history of Chapin Lawn. In order to reveal the image of the lawn in the twentieth century, I traced back to the related documents of Chapin House in Alumnae Gymnasium which contains a profile of Chapin Lawn in front of the residential building from the late nineteenth century to the early 1990s.

Before 2003, Chapin Lawn was more associated with Chapin House and the broader landscape of the campus. The early existence of Chapin Lawn served no particular purposes besides corresponding with the notions of establishing a campus more meaningful for female college students: when Smith College was under plans in the 1870s, a core principle addressed by the founders was to “simulate family life within a New England town.”¹⁰ Therefore, the general arrangements of the campus geography in the following years aim at creating a close community for students. The distances between buildings were not too far, and many wide, straight roads were across various grass areas of the campus. In the early development of the college, the grass area later named as Chapin Lawn was no more than a common public area of the campus landscape. Thus, few records specified the role of Chapin Lawn.

In the same period, from 1903 to 2003, one theme unchanged of the Chapin Lawn was its naturalistic design. When Chapin House was built up in 1903, the path between the house and the western edge of the lawn was extremely narrow, compared to that one hundred years later.¹¹ Meanwhile, a road cut through the *current* center of the lawn, which might have remained until the Campus Center project was initiated.¹² (I assumed that this road was the one once dividing

10. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), Part One.

11. REFERENCE: *Dates of Building Construction, Smith College File.*

12. Fig. 4.

the triangular Chapin Lawn and the other lawn close to Hatfield Hall.) These roads drew close relations between the house and the lawn, and through the use of the roads, students could easily access to a naturalistic environment. During sometime from 1905 to 1910, the western part of the lawn had been reconstructed into a tennis court, but it disappeared in the following photographs.¹³ Then, from the 1940s to the 1990s, the state of the lawn remained mostly static, including the road as discussed.¹⁴ Moreover, the main trees had been planted on the lawn and many of them are still prospering today for the students and the school. The lawn, as a part of the larger campus landscape project, offers ordinary greenness for the campus, and it seemed that students had frequently interacted with the path in the middle of man-made nature at that time.¹⁵ Such phenomena implied that the lawn had successfully incorporated naturalistic environment for Smith students since the last century.

As a part of Smith College campus, Chapin Lawn was initially a common piece of grass area involved in the general landscape. It helped students to enjoy the intimate community of the institution by offering a sense of greenness. However, such trait had not been explicitly addressed until the accomplishment of the Campus Center. The newly established interactions between the center and Chapin Lawn has further enhanced the naturalistic functions of the lawn for the users of Smith to communicate with each other. Nowadays, Chapin Lawn is the front yard for the college to hold celebrations and organize activities, and for students to enjoy during their spare time. The journey of rediscovering Chapin Lawn was inspiring, and I believed many other seemingly ordinary places on campus also have many stories untold.

13. Fig. 5.

14. Fig. 6 & Fig. 7.

15. Fig. 8.

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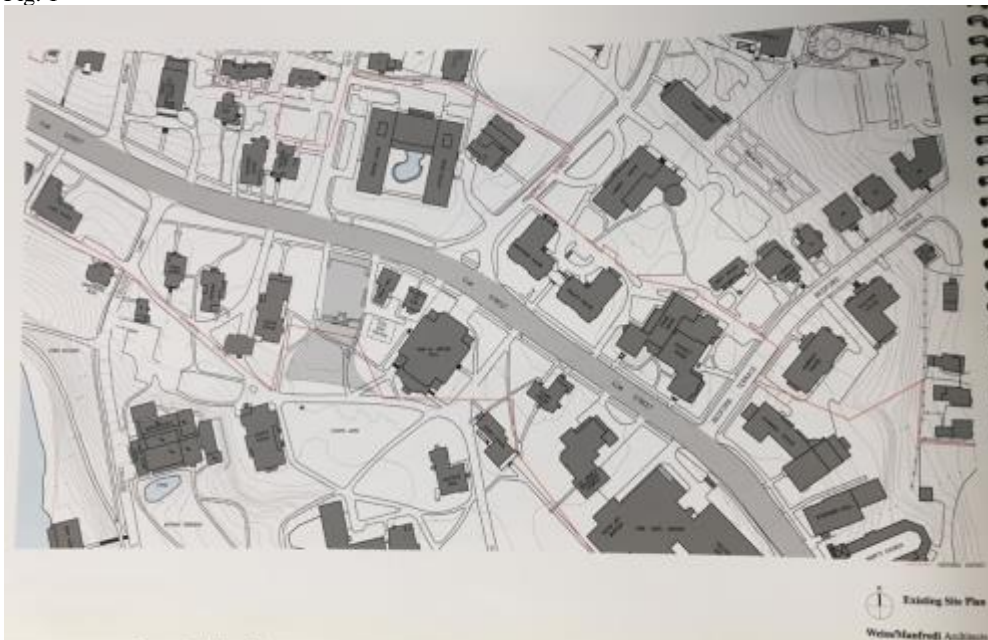
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Fig. 1



The Existing Site Plan of Campus Center Project, produced by Weiss/Manfredi Architects

Fig. 2



The Proposed Site Plan of Campus Center Project, designed by Weiss/Manfredi Architects

Fig. 3



The Site Planting Plan of Campus Center Project, produced by Weiss/Manfredi Architects

Fig. 4



Chapin Lawn, 1903

Fig. 5



Chapin House and Chapin Lawn in some time during 1905-1910

Fig. 6



Chapin Lawn, March, 1949

Fig. 7



Chapin Lawn probably in the 1950s

Fig. 8



Chapin Lawn in the 1950s. Two students are walking on the path in the photo.

Fig. 9



Chapin Lawn, winter, 1968

Fig. 10



Chapin Lawn with the fence to protect grass during 1976-1977

Fig. 11



Chapin Lawn, 1981