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Neilson Library: Use of Outdoor Space

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Olmstedian Influence

The library is the heart of the Smith College campus. Architectural additions over time have constricted the social flow of the space and disrupted natural movement and sightlines through the academic and social landscape. The design approach advocated by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. emphasized themes of accessibility, picturesque view, long curving pathways that encouraged walking, and his plantings not only being naturalistic but also educational.

The new Neilson library should make it such that Burton Lawn can be more widely utilized without sacrificing the openness of the Science Quad. Ideally a space could be created by activating the landscape at the back of Neilson such that the building reaches out to the landscape and creates a transitional space where the landscape and building connect. This space would make the interface between the two more welcoming, easier to navigate, and preserve the original Olmstedian integration of building and land to create a naturalistic flow of movement.

Proposals: Back Entrance

Landform Garden
In landscape design, the use and manipulation of landform is often understudied and underrated. Creating a landform garden on Burton lawn could be useful to enhance the beauty of the landscape as well as show the importance of art, design, and landform manipulation in landscape design.

Patio with Water Element
A patio would serve as a dry place to study or socialize, with tiers that could create extra seating and an extension of a cafe on the first floor. Having accessibility from Burton lawn would bring visitors from all over campus and the community to activate the space. By bringing a water element onto the lawn and using organic shapes to construct the patio, Burton lawn would become an elegant allusion to the surrounding landscape of the Connecticut River Valley.

Proposals: Front Entrance

The primary node of current social interaction outside of the library is situated at the crossroads of the pathways between Seeley Hall, the oak aisle, and the entrance to the library. This poses a problem as this area is also the location of the library loading dock, vehicles, bikes, and students making their way to classes. This area has most likely become a social space due to lack of forethought in planning social areas into the fabric of the original library design, and due to the presence of ledges and benches that students sit on.

To combat this, a greater variety of seating types, such as benches, ledges, and steps should be added to the front of the library as well as any new entrances created as part of the project. Greater accessibility could be achieved through more easily navigable ramps and parking, as well as better placement of bike racks and the book drop, and the removal of the unused flyer kiosk.

What kinds of places to sit or gather do we have now?
How and why are outdoor spaces different than inside ones?
What kinds of outdoor uses or types might be considered?
What qualities make for a good outdoor space?