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December 7, 1965

To: George Holt, Chairman, Art and Architecture Committee

From: Rush Welter, Historian

Subject: The architectural site plan

You have invited the considered reaction of members of the faculty to the current site plan for an expanded Bennington College. I trust that the judgments of a single faculty member may be useful to you. I append a list of major anxieties caused by the plan you recently showed to the Social Science Division (among others).

1. I seriously question the appropriateness of the symmetrical layout for the new student houses. I grant that the plan may multiply the number of courts and closed vistas that are so attractive in the present housing. But it also represents an almost inexcusable reduplication of what was in the first instance a totally inexcusable architectural error. Instead of making use of the landscape, the original site planners eradicated it in order to impose their version of colonial Williamsburg ~~or~~ the University of Virginia on the landscape. Fortunately the Depression caused them to build in wood rather than brick; hence the present "New England village" effect. But even a New England village has more character than this synthetic scheme.

Instead of continuing it, we should attempt to rectify our early errors in our second generation of buildings. To do so, we would need only to establish a second cluster of buildings northwest of the Commons building. There too it would be possible to build around half-closed courtyards; but it might also be possible to build a single structure like Saarinen's dormitory at M. I. T., in which each entry would constitute a student "house," but in which each room would have a glorious view of the natural environment.

Whatever form such a new building complex took, it would solve difficult technical problems the present plan does not take into account. Under it, we will have grave difficulty in expanding beyond the number of students the six new houses permit, and we will find it impossible to change to a full-fledged coeducational institution even if we want to. (I assume that even at Bennington boys' housing would be separate from girls'.) If a new housing complex were begun, on the other hand, no such difficulties would present themselves.

2. Quite apart from the arrangement of the new student houses, the plan to put art buildings on the edge of the pond due North of the Commons building is preposterous. In the first place, the plan as drawn presses symmetry to an absurd conclusion; symmetry becomes an end in itself without serving any demonstrable need. More important, it will deprive those who live and work at the College of any direct communications with one of its loveliest features--the pond and the meadow behind it sloping up to Jennings Hall. If a large traffic

circle were established between the present Barn and the prospective Science building, its crowning feature and best possible justification would be the vista it created through the birch spinney, summer and winter. Any buildings erected on the north edge of the circle would substantially cut off that vista and reduce it to the kind of view that may be a glory in suburbia but that is hardly appropriate in Vermont. There seems to me no reason in the world why the various arts buildings should not be moved East, and some of them perhaps across the road to the Southeast.

3. The site of the proposed Science building is inappropriate if it is to be anywhere near as large as the plan indicates or if it will convey anything like the sense of mass the site plan suggests. If it is a relatively small squat building it should not in my opinion oppress the eye, and probably its axis should correspond with the main axis of the campus, if only to reinforce the independence of the Barn. But even if the building is reasonably small the traffic circle that it calls for will be almost impossible to manage successfully. True, the vista to the North will take our minds off it; but the circle itself will be too small to be a green and too large to be a simple break in the buildings. It will, in short, be a traffic circle with cars parked around it and muddy footpaths worn across it. How Bennington!

4. I realize that various members of the faculty will express different attitudes toward the proposed site plan; but I hope that you will not take advantage of their disagreements to persevere in this unimaginative plan. Of course the members of the art faculty are likely to wish to place their studios on the South edge of the pond; I question, however, whether they should be permitted to monopolize advantages that can be truly common property every day of the year.

I will add one more remark, generated by the unhappy experience of the Library Advisory Committee. That committee was unanimous in voting for a slightly different siting and orientation of the new library, and they were later dismayed to discover that their judgment, which represented the views of a great majority of the faculty, had been flouted by the then architects. I hope that you will remind the present architect that the College belongs to those who have to live in it, and that an architect who builds only for the pages of Progressive Architecture is not worth his keep.

cc: Mr. Bloustein