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Aesthetic/Design Guidelines for Campus Master Planning Bethel University

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Aesthetic/Design Guidelines for Campus Master Planning

by Eugene Johnson, 1963
with Annotations by Wayne Roosa, 2021

ge Master Plan 1973
ARCHITECTS, PLANNERS, INC.

KEY

Existing Buildings

- 1. Seminary Housing
- 2. Seminary Academic Complex
- 3. College Housing
- 4. College Academic Complex
- 5. Physical Education Building
- 6. Chapel
- 7. Parking Areas
- 8. Athletic Field



BETHEL
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- Minutes, “Board of Education” Committee on Campus Planning, March 15-16, 1963
- Original “Suggestions Concerning the Character of the New Campus,” by Eugene Johnson, submitted March, 1963
- Archival Materials (Archives of Bethel University and Converge):
 - > EJohnsonHistoricalOverview_1976: pp.10-18. (Eugene Johnson, “Historical Overview of Campus Planning and Development,” Planning Project 1976 Folder, Box 8, Carl H. Lundquist Papers, History Center, Archives of Bethel University and Converge.)
 - > for other primary documents: Digital Archives link on Library Website Homepage: <https://www.bethel.edu/library/digital-library/all-collections>

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- Proposed Campus Masterplan, submitted to the Board of Regents by President George Brushaber, September 19, 1995
- Bethel Seminary, St. Paul, Master Plan Summary, October 8, 1998
- Bethel University Campus Master Plan, Performa, Higher Education Consultants, 2010-2011.
- Appendix A: Landscape Guidelines, Bruner/Cott, Architects and Planners, January 2009
- Bethel University Master Plan, Bruner/Cott, Architects and Planners, May 2009

The need for Aesthetic Guidelines for Campus Master Planning

The situation that inspired and drove these aesthetic guidelines for campus master planning were unique to the history Bethel University and Seminary. By the early 1960s, Bethel was outgrowing its site on Snelling Avenue in St. Paul. The opportunity to purchase 160 acres in Arden Hills arose and the leap of faith was taken to buy this land and relocate.

But it was not that simple. More was involved than mere practical problems of too-little space solved by an abundance of new space. The new space was so radically different than the old space that far more than just “planning and expansion” was involved. A re-envisioning of the physical expression of “Bethel”—its meaning, mission and shaping of a community— was involved. The purchase of a large and basically “raw” wooded site called for a thoughtful and deliberate understanding of what the experience of students should be in their education at Bethel.

The old campus was an urban environment, where “nature” was fully domesticated, the land was flattened, the flora was pruned, mown and bordered by cement sidewalks and asphalt streets. This urban setting by structured on the grid of city planning, and surrounded by vehicular traffic, noise, and the lovely but densely packed neighborhood of houses that is Falcon Heights, Minnesota.

In radical contrast, the new site in Arden Hills was a different world altogether. Nature was unfettered. There was no grid and the land was not bull-dozed flat. The site was rolling hills, heavily wooded, and contained a lake and a flowing stream. The freedom to dream and design, to create an entirely new kind of campus was wide open. But what should it look like? How should a community “belong” here?

Nothing less than a new conception of “Bethel” vis-à-vis the expressive freedom for architecture, for integration into nature, and for the student

experience was needed. The “art of a campus” could now be designed to mesh with the spirit of education, the theology that had long informed what “Bethel” meant, and the community of students, faculty, staff and administration that work together. A new incarnation of “Bethel” was possible.

Then president Carl Lundquist understood this and appointed Eugene Johnson to craft a set of aesthetic design guidelines for the development of this campus. What Gene crafted became the “founding ideas” for how natural space, architectural space/function and landscape architecture could collaborate to express Bethel’s mission and give persons a lived experience by way of place that embodied the meaning of their education. This promised a fullness—or better, an embodied—experience of education that is inherently implied in the richness of the full liberal arts plus in-depth majors offered with a spiritual integration of faith.

Gene Johnson was the ideal person to do this. His undergraduate education at the University of Southern California was in philosophy. His graduate education was twofold: a graduate degree in theology and ministry at Bethel Seminary and an MFA in painting at the University of Iowa, Cedar Rapids. This deeply thoughtful and aware man—philosopher, theologian, pastor, painter, potter, educator—was himself an integrated personality, thinker, designer and mentor. Indeed, he founded Bethel’s art department. It is crucial to know that he also built things with his own hands (his house, his kilns, the mezzanine loft in the ceramic studio that works but was never code). He also built an art curriculum.

Gene was both dreamer and pragmatist, visionary and practical. He understood that there will always be painful limitation of money. But his brilliance was that he understood this, not as a binary, insurmountable impossibility; rather, he understood that limitations are an inherent part of all creativity, part of the problem to be solved, where the solving is itself creative. Part of the beauty and the humility. As Stewart Luckman, professor of sculpture in the art department, often used to recall of Gene, “Gene believed in turning sow’s ears into silk purses, and he knew how to do it.”

Gene’s Suggestions Concerning the Character of the New Campus (1963) became one of the important founding documents for shaping Bethel. Sometimes they have been in the foreground and used wisely; other times

they have been almost forgotten, and the results of bad building are still being overcome. The purpose of this document (containing Gene’s original Suggestions, Wayne Roosa’s annotations on those Suggestions, a few further recommendations, and a handful of archival appendices) is to secure the deep influence of Gene’s work into the future. The reader will immediately notice two things about Gene’s Suggestions. They are only three pages long; they are not a list or set of rules to follow for happy aesthetic results. Rather, they represent a creative way of thinking and designing as principles, ideas, insights for us to interpret and apply.

The Purpose and Use of this Document

That interpreting and applying has been personal. From the late 1960s through the late 1970s, Gene served on planning committees as advisor. In the 1970s through the 1990s, sculpture professor Stewart Luckman inherited this role and advised. In the mid-1980s through 2020, Wayne Roosa, professor of art history, inherited them and advised. Three generations of art faculty, over-lapping each other and then passing this tradition on, have helped to sustain Gene’s wisdom in campus planning. Although we still have the original three-page document, it is the oral tradition of interpretation and application to each unique new development in the campus that also matters. If Gene’s Suggestions are the founding “text” for planning, then this history of interpretation and application is the “midrash” of it. Upon Wayne Roosa’s retirement, Provost Deb Harless realized that no-one had newly inherited this “midrash of oral history and institutional memory.” So, she asked me to write it down. I have sought to do so in a way that is hopefully long enough to get in the important elements, but short enough to be usable.

*Wayne L. Roosa, Ph.D., Professor of Art History
February 2021*

by Eugene Johnson (1963)

Suggestions Concerning the Character of the New Campus

A continuation of our attempt to spell out the characteristics which will guide us in our campus planning.

The Character of the Site

The new site consists of approximately 160 acres of small rolling hills surrounding Lake Valentine with 3 or 4 rather heavily wooded areas. The present entrance road which winds about gentle wooded hills gives one the feeling of pleasant relief from the tensions of urban life and a refreshing realization of the beauty to be found in God's natural world. As one moves about, he is repeatedly confronted with delightful changes and pleasant vistas. It might be quite appropriate to try, as far as practical, to maintain this theme for our campus—to preserve and cultivate a quality of naturalness together with the element of variety and surprise. (I'm not suggesting here the bizarre but rather the delightful that occurs in nature when you unexpectedly come upon the unique and the beautiful.)

The Character of the Campus as a Whole

1. In character with the site, the campus should reflect a quality of naturalness. The buildings should seem to belong—as though they were a proper part of their setting. This is not to suggest a naturalistic orientation of theology but rather a recognition of the creative work of God in nature and that the Christian witness is not a contrived façade (artificial or pretense) but an elemental commitment that is genuine and compatible with all that God has done.

2. The whole campus environment should be viewed as a tool for learning. Educational values should be the guide lines for campus planning and attention given as to how the campus itself can be used as in the educational process, i.e., nature study areas and trails, observation points, places for quiet meditation and reflection, physical educational use of fields and lake.

3. Naturalness may result in a campus that is informal in plan rather than the urban grid pattern. It is believed that the informal might better express the personal rather than the institutional approach to education.

4. Ours should be a pedestrian campus. Although it is recognized that many of our students will be commuting, traffic patterns and parking lots should be as inconspicuous as possible, and the foot path the connecting link between buildings.

5. The lake should be considered an extra-curricular experience. Rather than slavishly trying to crowd the campus around the lake it might be better to let educational values determine the campus planning with only certain building, i.e., campus center, library, dining halls, etc. on the lake. The lake would be something to which you would go for a “change” from your academic work.

6. The Seminary and College should be so located as to foster distinct and separate academic and social communities.

The Character of the Architecture

1. Bethel is a Christian community and we are anxious that our buildings reflect this commitment. We realize that essentially this is impossible in buildings alone. A Christian is a person, but surely our architecture should be of such a character that it is compatible with the characteristics of a witnessing Christian.

- warm, friendly, receptive, open in spirit
- personal rather than institutional and ecclesiastical
- concerned (careful in detail, quality of construction & maintenance)
- interesting, depth of character
- genuine (avoid pretense, imitation, fadism)

- modest in manners
- careful in stewardship
- maturity
- serious and purposeful
- hopeful, aspiring and uplifting

2. The use of Christian symbols, although not a necessary part of our tradition, may be helpful at some points. They should be used sparingly and with meaning. A building itself, like the chapel, may well serve as a significant symbol for the entire campus.

3. Recognizing that God has revealed Himself to be a Person whose nature has many facets and that the Christian life is made up of a variety of experiences, it is felt that various building (and sometimes rooms) might also express this richness of experience by expressing singularly these traits in individual buildings, i.e., majesty of God in the chapel, the reflective mood in the library, His concern for children in the nursery, etc.

4. Scale—the buildings should be designed from the “eye level” point of view to emphasize again the personal qualities rather than the institutional bird’s eye view.

- we should think in terms of smaller complexes of one-, two- and three-story buildings
- rather than high rise structures.
- spaces between buildings should be easily grasped and given character and meaning.

5. Natural materials should predominate—brick, wood, cement, rather than the synthetic or imitative.

- careful use of textural materials in keeping with the natural setting
- durable, ease of maintenance

Summary

Simplicity without crudeness, excitement without being sensational, and functional without becoming institutional, should be combined to create a campus to the glory of God.

— Eugene Johnson

by Eugene Johnson (1963) with annotations, a history of interpretation and use by Wayne L. Roosa

Suggestions Concerning the Character of the New Campus

A continuation of our attempt to spell out the characteristics which will guide us in our campus planning.

The Character of the Site¹

The new site consists of approximately 160 acres of small rolling hills surrounding Lake Valentine with 3 or 4 rather heavily wooded areas.² The present entrance road which winds about gentle wooded hills gives one the feeling of pleasant relief from the tensions of urban

life and a refreshing realization of the beauty to be found in God's natural world.³ As one moves about, he is repeatedly confronted with delightful changes and pleasant vistas.⁴ It might be quite appropriate to try, as far as practical, to maintain this theme for our campus—to preserve and cultivate a quality of naturalness together with the element of variety and surprise.⁵ (I'm not suggesting here the bizarre but rather the delightful that occurs in nature when you unexpectedly come upon the unique and the beautiful.)⁶

¹ Gene Johnson's frequent use of the word "character" is important. What the reader soon learns is that these guidelines are *not* a list of aesthetic rules. Rather, they are about a *way of thinking creatively*. Mere rules tend to be either stogy classicism, trendy fads quickly out of date, or worse, someone's "taste" imposed onto design. Gene Johnson begins instead with "character," arising from a deeper understanding how the nature of a community and its values merge with thoughtful aesthetic principles to create something well-suited to the context. Expressive understanding, not rules, shape in a more profound way. His *Suggestions* are a set of concepts to be understood and applied creatively to each step in further developing the

campus within the living, dynamic context of community, culture and mission as it grows.

He sets out the idea of "character" in four ways:

1. The physical character of the site (nature);
2. The conceptual character of the campus as a whole (i.e., the total campus as "an environment viewed as a tool for learning");
3. The design character of the architecture (human-made building set into nature);
4. Summary (qualities of 1-3 understood holistically and symbiotically. He uses certain phrases and

adjectives to show what he means by “character”:
“Simplicity without crudeness,” “excitement without
being sensational,” and “functional without becoming
institutional,” these combined to create “a campus to
the glory of God”).

For Gene, the totalizing design should match the totalizing mission, i.e., the *full interaction* of persons (students, faculty, staff, administrators) united within the integrated mission of academic curriculum, spiritual development and student life experience, set harmoniously in nature. This total mission must occur *in a place*, and it is the task of good design/planning *to shape that place*, giving it a *character* that enhances, stimulates and promotes the *dwelling in this community* that is the campus. Gene understood that such a thoughtfully designed place infuses student experience, often unconsciously, with a deep sense of the glory of God.

Gene synthesizes all of this through the concept of character, not a simple list of “aesthetic rules.” Therefore, before any new campus planning (from new buildings to the plans for how to mow the grass), he invites us first to ask and analyze “what is the character of the natural site? “Of the architecture built in (not ‘on’) that site?” “What is the character of the total environment as a tool for learning?”

A much later iteration of this is found in the totalizing master campus plan developed through the consultants, Performa, 2010-2011. (Appendix F) This consultant group, more than any other, took Gene Johnson’s *Suggestions* to heart, treating them as part of Bethel’s deeper DNA. This shaped Performa’s thinking and process for Bethel. While their documents are now dated in terms of specific statistics, their *approach* to campus planning through the *experience of students* as they lived and learned on this campus is still useful. Their method is a solid example. However, for better or worse, they traded Gene’s word “character” for the word “ethos.” Both words are useful. Maybe both, used together, help future committees “hear” the fullness of the mindset needed by each committee member before they begin breaking ground or moving walls. Performa’s primary lens was, “What is the *total student experience* created by the physical environment’s design in relationship to the content of academic curriculum, learning experience, spiritual development and student life activity?” Performa sought a singular lens or focus through “ethos,” Gene Johnson sought it through “character.”

² With the acquisition of the Anderson Center, this acreage is greatly enlarged. More importantly, the Anderson Center adds a “second” campus, with its own buildings, to the master campus planning. But this “second” campus came as a ready-made, its building and landscaping already designed through the lens of a corporate setting and logic. Bethel should still follow Gene’s *Suggestions* as this campus is developed and maintained. It is a more pruned and park-like setting that is less “wild” than the natural setting of the 3900 site. But both are compatible in their preservation of wooded areas with buildings on site. The Anderson Center buildings are “harder,” more imposed *onto* nature in their more monolithic shape and scale, but not to an extreme degree at all. This can be successfully shaped to express the total mission of the university, but new thinking is required. The appropriate people might take Gene’s approach and guidelines, and thoroughly travel through the Anderson Center campus, in order to comprehend it for future development or maintenance. (This may have been done already.)

³ This is a reoccurring theme in the history of Christian (and all human) thought: what is the proper relationship between “nature” (what is “natural”) and the human built environment. Gene argues that several factors are important here: peaceful vs busy hustle; God’s more direct revelation through nature; Bethel as a site where the dynamics of this relationship and tension are not merely “resolved” or balanced, but are also *articulated* in a way *useful for pedagogy and student experience*, bringing awareness of how we should live in the world.

⁴ Note that he begins with the *experiential*, selecting the best of the site, and letting that be the guiding idea for design. Through his experience of the site, he discovers four qualities inherent to it: 1. delightful changes; 2. pleasant vistas; 3. Variety and surprise; 4. What happens when we are moving about. He will then apply these four qualities as the litmus tests for each design decision: The goal of making 1-3 happen as we live—or “move about”—in the space is his primary guideline for design.

⁵ So far in this section, he is talking about the landscape and its beautiful qualities. But here, when he says, “It might

be appropriate...to maintain this theme for our campus," he is beginning to ask how the best of nature can be maintained once buildings and roads are imposed. More importantly, he will ask how the best of nature can be *integrated* with buildings. Rather than imposing buildings *onto* nature, we should integrate them *into* nature so that "they belong."

Again, note how Gene is moving from direct, raw experience of the site to now developing a larger aesthetic principle from it, to apply throughout. That principle being, "to preserve and cultivate a quality of naturalness together with the element of variety and surprise." A helpful way for planning committees to evaluate each new planning project in the future is to ask if, when we "move about" will we experience "naturalness/variety/surprise" or will we have eliminated it?

Two examples, one flawed and one successful, help illustrate this. Both are examples of interior spaces where design changes affected the elements of "variety and surprise."

Flawed Example: AC Lounge: A flawed example is the two-story high AC lounge. In the original design, which embraced Gene's suggestions, this large open space that is a full two-stories high, was not the oppressive "silo" it is today. Originally, what is now the space where today's Copy Center is located was also an open lounge area that flowed into the third level hallways (rather balcony-like) on each end of the tall lounge. This made the total lounge area a two-level, open space with overlook and seating on both levels. A "stepped" quality broke up the large open space, giving it a welcoming human scale that flowed well into the hallways on both floor levels of this passageway. Angles of sight were varied and interesting from almost every spot within this double-leveled lounge, while pedestrian travel through both levels had ample room to flow around seating that was interspersed in each lounge space. The *experience* of this place invited sitting, reflecting, studying, and also allowing the pragmatic need to travel through to classes to occur easily and naturally.

Due to space shortages, the upper lounge in this design was filled in with walls to accommodate the need for a centrally located copy center. *Functionally* (what Gene would have called *institutionally*) this was successful. But in terms of human experience and design, it destroyed the "stepped" quality of the total lounge, leaving the AC lounge as a psychologically awkward giant "silo cube"

when experienced from below, and a too-deep "well" when experienced from above. When one enters on level two, the rise to the high ceiling with heavy walls all around creates a sensation of "walking at the bottom of a milk carton." Subliminally this is oppressive. The variety of views that are interesting is greatly reduced. Human scale is slightly uncomfortable. (This was slightly improved later with the remodeling of the AC lounge through adding skylights and designing larger scale, decorative relief elements that better unified the too-tall walls.)

Successful Example: Exterior Glass Staircase, CC building:

A successful example can be found on the west side of the CC building. Here again the shortage of space drove a change. As an addition was added to the CC building on the Kresge Courtyard side, an extra staircase for all four levels was required. As everyone knows, when one enters a staircase in any of the four college, box-like buildings, that staircase space will be a four-story block wall silo that works functionally but is brutal aesthetically and experientially. But in this case, two design ideas broke that mold. First, the staircase and its shaft were placed at an interesting thirty-degree angle to the wall of the cube building. And instead of a block walled shaft, the outer two faces were done in glass. The result is that when one enters the door into the stair shaft, the steps and their landings create interesting angles—both as positive forms and as negative spaces between those forms—that surprise while creating variety. Second, the glass walls immediately place the human experience in a space integrated between architecture and nature, creating open vistas. An integration of exterior/interior, built/natural, and our human experience as we ascend/descend the stairs is pleasurable, full of light and free (as opposed to the entrapped feeling of all other staircases in the four buildings). Improvements to the Kresge Courtyard that we see when traveling this staircase has also made the integrated experience more appealing.

(As long as we are, here, thinking about this glass staircase, this is a good moment to remember a little known and playful moment on the exterior brick wall of the CC building to the left of that staircase. High up on the plane of brick roughly at the third-fourth floor level, on the exterior, the master brick mason used the darkest colored bricks to leave his signature as a master mason. Subtly placed amongst the lighter red bricks is a series of darker bricks—significantly spaced apart like a barely discernible dotted line—are the initials of the mason's name.)

These two examples are fairly modest moments in campus planning. But these are spaces that hundreds of persons experience daily. Reflection on each, in light of working with or ignoring Gene Johnson's guidelines, quickly reveals how effective those guidelines can be (or not) if followed.

⁶ What Gene meant, in 1963, by "the bizarre" is speculation. But given his word choices and descriptions elsewhere in the document, it is safe to say he is advising us to avoid "spectacle," aesthetic cleverness, mere effects, surface kitsch, highly artificial materials and looks. Instead, his

language favors the simple, the elemental, the humble, the genuine, the "in character with...a quality of naturalness." In the concept-phrases of Scandinavian Modernism (best seen in the Seminary design), we should value a "truth to materials" and a clean "form follows function" integrity. This equally expressed, for Gene, the spirituality within the Pietist tradition of the Baptist General Conference, which favored humility and modest simplicity over big "showy" religious expression. It favored "the inward" more than the "outward," and "character" over "sensational."

The Character of the Campus as a Whole

1. In character with the site, the campus should reflect a quality of naturalness. The buildings should seem to belong—as though they were a proper part of their setting.⁷ This is not to suggest a naturalistic orientation

of theology but rather a recognition of the creative work of God in nature and that the Christian witness is not a contrived façade (artificial or pretense) but an elemental commitment that is genuine and compatible with all that God has done.⁸

⁷ Here Gene gets to the central question of *how* nature and buildings can be integrated. Now, when "we move about" experiencing "delightful change" and "pleasant vistas," it is more than moving through the landscape with some buildings "over there." It is about moving through nature *and* architecture as an integrated experience. It is about these two elements "belonging" together. This needs to be true for both exterior planning (buildings to nature) and interior planning (inside to outside). We should think of "exterior" and "interior" as woven, not slammed side by side. One of the architectural concepts from the Scandinavian Modernism that influenced Gene here is the concept of "indoor-outdoor integration."

So, "moving about" in Nature *and* in Architecture should preserve or produce "delightful changes" and "pleasant vistas" when moving about outside, when approaching buildings and entering them, and when moving through the buildings where we get indoor experience but also see outdoors through openings such as windows, doors and skyways. Even better, he will argue that the *relationship* between outside and inside can be intersected, such that from inside a building we get vistas of outside that delight

and give pleasure of God's creation. (indoor-outdoor integration) But even inside buildings, movement from one area to another should be more interesting and human than just a grid of rooms and hallways. Variety is needed.

A helpful way for campus planning committees to evaluate each section of our campus is to "move about" and see if we experience "vistas" and "pleasure" from the changing views. Are they interesting?

(An aside is helpful here. It is important here to ask why Gene favored Scandinavian Modernism. This design sensibility was inherently linked, for him, to what Bethel was all about in several ways. Its simplicity and honest use of materials echoed the Pietist sensibility of living humbly yet beautifully within modest terms, avoiding spectacle (showing off) either in our possessions or our spirituality. Big outward displays of piety were the wrong kind of spirituality, just as ostentatious design was the wrong architecture. Buildings that nestled into nature (God's creation), belonging there, versus buildings that conquered and dominated nature—or ignored and desecrated it ecologically—were all wrong. This was deeply part of

the Pietist theology in the Swedish Baptist immigrant population, out of which the Baptist General Conference emerged.)

⁸ Gene's resistance to "a naturalistic theology" is to avoid a Romantic orientation reminiscent of an American brand of Pantheism or Transcendentalism, where God is thoroughly immanent within Nature. Rather, his emphasis was about recognizing the trace of God's creative work in the Creation, and harmonizing with those created qualities in our human building.

We should notice here the needle that Gene is threading. On the one hand, he argues for an aesthetic that deeply

integrates human creativity within nature, but in a way that avoids a Romantic immersion; on the other hand (as will be explored below in point # 2.) under "The Character of the Architecture"), he argues that outward or explicit religious symbols should be used only sparingly. In that he wants to avoid outward corny or gaudy "show," in favor of a deeply inward, organic spirituality that "belongs." Gene maintained that a healthy Christian witness threaded the needle between too subtle and too literal, between too understated and too didactic. This insightful balance permeates Gene's thought and reveals a wisdom crucial to what he believed Bethel's character should be.

2. The whole campus environment should be viewed as a tool for learning.⁹ Educational values should be the guide lines for campus planning and attention given as to how the campus itself can be used as in the educational

process, i.e., nature study areas and trails, observation points, places for quiet meditation and reflection, physical educational use of fields and lake.¹⁰

⁹ In sections 1.) and 2.), Gene used three phrases that are his guiding lights. These are: "the campus should reflect a quality of naturalness"; "the buildings should seem to belong—as though they were a proper part of their setting"; and "the whole campus environment should be viewed [designed] as a tool for learning." These get at *how* buildings should be sited within the landscape. Gene and others worked with the first architect, Hugh Peabody, and with Sasaki Landscape Architectural firm, to infuse the whole campus with these ideas. However, their success was not universal.

Their greatest success of total integration is the Seminary building. Today, many at Bethel are not fond of the Seminary complex (too dark; too small; too high maintenance with those 1970s materials and constructions methods, etc.). This is understandable. But for the sake of understanding Gene's aesthetic guidelines, and how they should be sustained by way of adaption (not by way of abandonment) as times change, we need to set aside taste, issues and perceptions of 2020 in order to ask broadly, "How do we design a totally integrated campus that is true to a

community, its nature and its mission?" Whether or not one loves the Seminary complex, it achieved a brilliant wholeness *per the nature of the Seminary mission and community* at the time. A wholeness so successful that it is still deeply felt even by first time visitors who do not Bethel's history.

While many elements today are different, the question remains, "*how do we sustain that kind of integrity per the nature of our community and mission now?*" What can we learn from the Seminary complex that transfers to our situation today? To mediate feelings about the Seminary in order to learn from it, it is helpful to keep the following in mind:

- The Seminary buildings were conceived as serving the *nature* of the seminarians' community, scale and function. (Especially as seminaries were still conceived of in a more traditional model.) The building's integration of that community, within the natural site, blending indoor/outdoor, the contemplative, a graduate (not undergraduate) population, all executed

with a very refined attention to materials, details and craftsmanship, is really remarkable.

- The Seminary was built first and, per the priorities of the Baptist General Conference at the time, it received the greatest funding. Once built, it was time to develop the college buildings. We will never know what the college equivalent of the seminary's integration of mission *qua* architectural environment would have been. As we can read in Gene Johnson's later document, "Historical Overview" of 1976, a rich design was worked out to serve the college community's scale, nature and mission. But it was too expensive. Consequently, Hugh Peabody and Sasaki were let go, replaced by Ellerbe Architects, who were given the mandate to follow a hard budget, and told to "build a college complex...based on A.P.I. [computer] programing... [for a] fast-track system of construction." [see Appendix C, entries for 1968-1972, of EJohnsonHistoricalOverview 1976. (Eugene Johnson, "Historical Overview of Campus Planning and Development," Planning Project 1976 Folder, Box 8, Carl H. Lundquist Papers, History Center, Archives of Bethel University and Converge.) Boxes 8, 9, 24 contain interesting historical materials. My thanks to Professor Diana Magnuson, Director of Archives. For anyone wanting to get a deeper understanding of how the whole campus design ideas were developed, and of what the original vision for the college complex was like on a general level, see the many conceptual drawings of original campus layout in this document, pp.10-18.]

The result was the four brick boxes that house the college today. I say "house" the college because they did not "belong" to the total inherent nature of the community in the way Gene and Hugh Peabody envisioned. Their original forms—quite stark as great cubes set onto the site—bore minimal relationship to Gene's *Suggestions* and only nominal references to his ideas about "character." Bethel has spent fifty years mediating these chunky cubes and retrofitting them into Gene's original *Suggestions*, with some success. In many ways, the greatest success has been the absorption of the AC building into the CLC, the BC and the new science towers. These buildings have a far greater sense of indoor/outdoor relationship and more flowing, open interior spaces, than do the brick boxes. What was the outdoor space between the AC and CC buildings, for example, is now part of the atrium of the BC, and this space offers much light, glimpses of nature, variety

of changing views, delight, surprise and moments of more intimate seating interspersed with larger traffic patterns. Here, what was the exterior of the brick boxes become interior forms that are broken up into shapes that interact with new forms/materials often on an angle to the original boxes. In this, elements of the Seminary building—but now on a larger and more bustling undergraduate scale—are echoed.

¹⁰ This suggestion is one of the most central recommendations of all the *Suggestions*. The very pith of all campus planning is that Bethel is a teaching/learning community and, therefore, "educational values" should dictate design concepts. Whatever facilitates "learning" *qua* all design, should be woven throughout, enhancing that mission. Gene makes this clear in two sentences: "The whole campus environment should be viewed as a *tool* for learning" and "Educational values should be the guide lines for campus planning and attention given as to how the campus itself can be used as in the educational process."

However, if planning committees in 2021 and after are to understand this in a wise and useful way, we first should remember that Gene wrote this in 1963, ten years before any buildings actually existed on the site or were even designed on paper. From the vantage point of 1963, Gene offers three examples of how "the whole campus environment" might be "a tool for learning." But these examples, fine as they are, are stated generically. None are fleshed out in his *Suggestions*. And those offered are fairly limited in scope, in contrast to the number of majors and the student life programs that Bethel now offers. The meaning and subsequent history of how this has been fleshed out, evolving as Bethel developed into the 21st century is incredibly important for planning.

Therefore, I would like to enumerate a handful of examples in which different fields of study/learning and various dimensions of student life programming now work collaboratively with the "campus as a whole environment" serving as "a tool for learning." (This is no way a definitive list. It is only a set of examples. It would behoove Bethel to periodically evaluate the relationship of whole campus environment vis-à-vis each discipline area and student life programming to ask if effectiveness is occurring. This too is a good litmus test for evaluating design/space/budget decisions.) First, let us note Gene's original, generically stated examples. Then more recent examples—four that

are relatively successful and one that is deeply flawed—will be considered.

Gene's Examples:

1. "Nature study areas and trails, observation points": This was the generic wording Gene used in the first of his three examples. One supposes he had the natural sciences in mind. But since Gene's time, entire fields of study such as Environmental Studies, have emerged. Essential here is that "nature" be allowed to operate without undue human building or alterations. The natural environment is not only a "place for pleasant vistas" (aesthetic enjoyment), it is also an outdoor laboratory for scientific research and environmental studies.
2. "Places for quiet meditation and reflection": The second generically stated example Gene offered. This suggestion offers casual or meditative activity for all individuals within their private life and spiritual practice. As such it is of great value. But beyond that, several fields of study/learning use the natural campus effectively at a disciplined level: faculty teaching the visual arts, creative writing, environmental literature, and spiritual development, for example, all use it this way. (It would be interesting to poll faculty and students to discern how widely and effectively these activities are developed. Could there be a deeper and more deliberate use of this tool?)
3. "Physical educational use of fields and lake." The third of Gene's generic examples. Majors in Biokinetics, athletic training for all sports, individual fitness efforts and extra

Relatively Successful Examples Developed after Gene Johnson's initial Suggestions

(These are not about learning that happens within the dedicated spaces for each major. Those spaces are crucial, but these examples speak to Gene's more far-reaching philosophy of how holistic learning by the entire community is enhanced by designing "the whole campus environment...as a tool for learning.")

1. Visual Arts: From the beginning of the Arden Hills campus, the visual arts department has operated two major dimensions of using the whole campus for holistic

community learning. (This is obviously beneficial to those majoring in art, but it is deeply valuable to the community as a whole.) Those two dimensions are:

A. The operating of formal gallery exhibition space(s) with exhibitions from off campus artists in order to bring a wider cultural realm onto campus (our suburban location with little public transportation makes this extra significant). Exhibitions are intentionally from both regional and national level artists, and emphasize a diversity of male, female, artists of color, as well as a diversity of media.

B. Installing and curating the University Permanent Art Collection throughout campus. A decision and administrative commitment was made in the late 1970s and early 1980s to build this collection (as much as possible within budgetary limitations) and to exhibit it widely within the spaces that the community lives in. This is deeply within the Pietist spirit of our heritage. Instead of exhibiting the Collection in a separate, white-box gallery space where only those specializing in art tend to go (too elitist), the decision was to hang our Collection on the walls throughout campus, in the offices of administrators, admissions, the library and so on, where we all live and work. Art is made to be "lived with," not merely "visited in rarified spaces. Bethel is a living community. Blank walls, with no high-quality visual ideas and expressions are dull. And blank walls with the dark (slightly deadly) burnished block of Bethel's architecture can be almost oppressive. But for all to regularly encounter visual ideas, visual celebration offers an interior version of Gene's *Suggestions*, that "as we move about" we encounter "delightful surprises and pleasant vistas." Within a community of higher learning, these aesthetic "surprises and vistas" relate to ideas, meaningful expressions, visual literacy. The "delight" and "pleasantness" they offer is not trivial, decorative, spectacle or kitsch; rather it is thoughtful, expressive and stimulates the inner life of the mind and spirit aesthetically.

The long tradition of this function of the University Art Collection has also called for a collaboration between the various "communities" within Bethel. Thus, the Gallery Director, in consultation with the art faculty, have sought to collaborate with the "users" of each space where art works are installed. They hold conversation with those users to give options of works installed. They have developed professional didactics (wall placards) that give some insight into the artists and art works so that the

general public might read and gain helpful access to aid in understanding the works. This is a vital and always evolving part of “the whole campus...as a tool for learning.”

2. Cultural Connection Center (CCC): In the words of Bethel's catalog, “This Center *is designed* to promote understanding, friendship, and shalom. The space is intended for all College of Arts & Sciences (CAS) students, but with a special focus for students of color, and will offer a place for gathering, dialogue, and support. Research has shown that a space like this can help significantly for students who might not be experiencing a sense of *belonging* on campus. Bethel needs a *space* like this because, for many reasons, many students of color do not *feel at home on this campus*. Bethel needs the CCC because bad things sometimes happen and they need to be talked about and dealt with in a constructive manner.... [In one student's words], “Bethel needs this space because every day that I, as a student of color, come to Bethel I face scary things from ignorant comments said in the classroom to racist dorm pranks and Yik Yak posts, that often make me *feel like I'm not wanted at this school*. This space is a step for Bethel to tell me that I am indeed wanted on this campus, that my voice is both heard, and wanted here.” [Or, as another student said], “There are a number of consequences related to attending a ‘predominately white institution’ for students from non-dominant racial and or cultural communities that impact every facet of their *experiences*. *Spaces like this provide the opportunity* for students from these backgrounds to find a *space on campus that is reflective of who they are*, where they come from, and what they value. It also provides what I call ‘*off space*.’ Students don’t have to be the lone Asian or African student representing their entire racial, ethnic, or cultural community; instead, they *just get to be*.” (*italics emphasis mine*)

The Cultural Connection Center is a recent, 21st century space concept for Bethel's campus. It relates to the social suffering of students of color as well as to Bethel initiatives to bring Bethel into a place of *actual diversity*, not *token diversity*. Its space on the third floor of the Clausen Center is a first effort, a first step, and a first conception of what is, in fact, a major revolution in our total model, that needs to happen if Bethel is to be relevant to 21st century America.

The words I have put in italics (*design, space, belong, etc.*) are all word/concepts found repeatedly in Gene Johnson's aesthetic/design *Suggestions*. It is unlikely that Gene was thinking, in 1963, of what we now understand as systemic

racism and the need to revise campus design from the ground up to address Bethel's lack of diversity in the past. But it is now 2021. What is crucial here is the claim made by Bethel's catalog: “This Center *is designed to promote*” equality, diversity and the deconstruction of systemic racism. However, in terms of campus design/planning at the level of meaning/integration for learning persons that Gene urged, we can honestly say that *conceptually* the Center may be intentionally designed; but we cannot say that *physically* it is so designed. Once again, in terms of the actual design of physical architectural space and integration of the total environment and mission, of the need for “delightful changes, pleasant vistas, variety and surprise” (now also understood as a delightful diversity of persons) creating a “learning tool” for the whole campus, the CCC is at best another retrofitted space. In terms of real space/design totality, it is merely a “cubby hole” on third floor CC. Although it has functioned well as a beginning, America's recent increased awareness of systemic racism (especially through the jolts of George Floyd's death/ aftermath and the insurrection assault/aftermath of the US capital building) beg us to ask, “how do we deeply factor the diversity of America's population and the demographics of college enrollment today into Gene Johnson's *Suggestions*? How do we integrate color and diversity into *the experiential spaces* of campus planning on a holistic level?”

The current physical space of the CCC is serving a rich purpose and experience. But that physical space is a retrofitted space. As *space*, its original walls are like old wineskins being filled with the new wine of vibrant diversity. They will burst and fail us as we try to legitimately develop the University into an environment that authentically serves a diversity of Christian students. How does aesthetics/design make our campus environment into a place that looks like America, serving students of all colors who want learning/faith integration? I will dare to extend Gene's *Suggestions* into 21st century experience, and say that if Bethel is serious about achieving authentic diversity, is serious about creating a “whole campus environment” that is a “learning tool” for what American culture actually looks like today, then the CCC *space* in relation to the whole space needs to be *designed* in Gene's spirit but as interpreted in today's cultural reality.

This might be the most exciting and challenging component of present/future campus planning. In thinking this through, we should keep Gene's deep spirit of integration. That is, we should avoid designing “token” elements meant to appeal to various ethnicities.

Instead, we must search deeply for what Gene speaks of as “elemental,” “natural,” “receptive and open in spirit,” “genuine,” “avoiding pretense,” “hopeful,” “uplifting.” To do this means to consult deeply with persons of color from various sectors of American society, not merely to include them, but to learn and be changed by them. We must avoid white people thinking they know what “others” want without letting them teach us about who they are and what their experience has been. This would be a bold initiative, but given the demographics of enrollments and the moral issues we face today, how can we not do so?

3. Library and “Maker Space”: The library has obviously always been a central tool of learning. The function of providing books, journals, research assistance and more are crucially valuable, but well-understood examples of “tools for learning.” But two dimensions of Bethel’s library perhaps need highlighting here because they pertain to the environment of learning and its future in terms of design/budget issues:

A. The library provides multiple layers of learning beyond giving us access to books and other learning resources. The staff’s commitment to exhibiting student artworks from student exhibitions enhance both the library experience and the art program. The staff’s commitment to programming such as the annual research paper contest and student poetry readings enhances liberal arts, creative writing and literature programs, while lifting creative students into visibility by giving them a platform for their own voices. The staff’s commitment to programming such as “Not Ready for Prime Time” gives research faculty opportunities to present their in-progress research/ thinking to the whole Bethel community in an informal setting that stimulates interdisciplinary conversation and critique.

These “tools” are successful *programmatically*. But they are only partly successful in terms of *designed space* that is *integrated with program*. In terms of design/campus planning, could these functions of learning that are so effectively holistic, interdisciplinary and community-wide be better served, be extended outward? Like so many functions at Bethel, these programs currently make the best of spaces not designed for them, “retrofitting” one kind of space for the needs of their events.

B. Maker Space: Coupled to the problem of “retrofitted”—not designed—space in “A” above, is the library’s recent addition of a “maker space.” The maker space is a tool for

learning that potentially serves every student and major. It also represents new models for libraries where advanced technologies and digital resources are changing how students use libraries. Conceptually, this is a significant space for the 21st century learning community. The potential here is enormous, but the limitations of this actual space are challenging.

Once again, like so much at Bethel, it is a space originally designed for a different purpose being retrofitted as best as possible to meet a new learning need. Future campus planning, taking Gene’s *Suggestions* to heart, thinking holistically about the whole campus community, could greatly improve how this space serves a liberal arts university.

4. Other recent designed spaces that seem to be successful from this holistic perspective include: the Dining Center and most of the Brushaber Center spaces; the Admissions Center; the new Business/Economics department; the new Engineering space. (The new “science tower” is too new to tell.) Analysis of why these succeed involves how they all tend to be “transparent,” i.e., their purpose and their open, inside/outside integration, the use of materials (for the most part—LED screens are an unresolved design issue) all relate well to the communities using them and to the communities passing them by. Central to the successes of all these spaces vis-à-vis total campus environment, is that they *give a distinct sense of place and identity* to the functions within them.

Flawed Examples in relation to the original Suggestions

1. Liberal Arts: The success noted in number 4. above, lead us to examples of failed design for other spaces. The failures here are about the role of total campus environment design to *give a distinct sense of place and identity* to the functions within them. Ironically, while *conceptually* the Liberal Arts are literally the common ground shared by all students despite their major, as well as the common foundational platform of knowledge and cultural education needed by all citizens for wisdom and balance, the physical spaces of the Liberal Arts have no clear identity or deep character at all. They are generic. Boring. Deadly. Even though each department within the Liberal Arts has highly distinguished professors, passionate students, engaging class sessions and excellent curricula, a prospective student on a Bethel tour cannot distinguish these realms in any way beyond a few posters. Despite the Liberal Arts being the *very common ground and creative*

body of any culture (their history, philosophy, literature, art, journalism, music, theater and so on), there is not a single “delightful change, pleasant vista, sense of variety or surprise” to be experienced within the *physical spaces* of the Liberal Arts. This is not only an embarrassment; it is

a threat to our existence as the kind of institution that our mission statements claim.

3. Naturalness may result in a campus that is informal in plan rather than the urban grid pattern. It is believed

that the informal might better express the personal rather than the institutional approach to education.¹¹

¹¹ Here the “character” of “naturalness” that Gene argues for is given another dimension. Namely, the “personal.” This is another moment of the symbiosis between aesthetic and spiritual qualities inherent in “character.” He favors the “personal” over and against the “institutional,” and in parallel, the “natural” over and against the “grid.” In this view, the “personal” and “natural” suit education, which should also be personal and natural, not institutional or overly systematic.

natural theology), which he cautioned against in his first paragraph. Nor did he mean “personal” as in the super-individualistic or self-centeredness of American society. He believed each of us belongs to the community as well as to our personal relationship with God. These are both necessary and symbiotic. Such relationships should be “personal,” in the sense of being caring, intimate, warm, friendly, not as in super-individualistic. The implications of this for design were that spaces (indoor and outdoor) can either stimulate relationships, warmth, friendliness (as he says later in the document) or can institute hierarchy (whether institutional or ecclesiastical, as he also says later).

This perspective is deeply shaped by Gene’s sense of the Christian learning community within the context of the Swedish Baptist, Pietist tradition. We could say that Pietism too favors the personal (both in one’s relationship to God and to the community) over the “institutional” (the State Church and hierarchies left behind in Sweden). Also, when we remember that Bethel was leaving its urban setting in St. Paul where it was severely restricted by the grid of city planning on Snelling Avenue, and moving to the Arden Hills site with 200 some acres of relatively “natural” topography, rolling hills and heavily wooded flora, his suggestion makes sense.

Two good examples of the original vision illustrate this:

That said, this emphasis on “naturalness” as equated with “informal” and “personal,” and as opposed to institutions and grids, should be qualified. What Gene did not mean was “naturalness” as in “a naturalistic orientation of theology,” (any sense of pantheism, Transcendentalism or

1. The original layout was that administration offices, faculty offices, classrooms and lounge spaces were to be interspersed, distributed throughout the campus, and not each isolated into group silos. While this might create some inefficiencies in institutional operation, it stimulated many personal opportunities for persons from each group to run into each informally while passing in the hallways. Proximity in design creates personal community in practice.

4. Ours should be a pedestrian campus. Although it is recognized that many of our students will be commuting, traffic patterns and parking lots should

be as inconspicuous as possible, and the foot path the connecting link between buildings.¹²

2. Originally, as one walked through the central hallway, especially of the third level, there were numerous small lounge areas throughout the four buildings. *Spatially* these broke up the monotony of long, straight halls, creating variety and change. *Socially* these allowed students to gather in small groupings to talk or study, and allowed those walking down the hallway to meet members of the community informally, creating delight and surprise.

Since then, as Bethel grew and space became precious, almost all of these lounges were filled in to create more offices, whether faculty, departmental or the Copy Center. The result is that the interior feels less “natural” (fewer “branches of space off the main “trunk” of the hallway), walking down the hall feels more institutional (more about the efficiency of getting where you are going with less pulling over to chat), and more grid-like (the hallway is less varied, more geometric and straight-through).

A great deal was implied in this phrase, “Ours should be a pedestrian campus...”. Here Gene gets at a crucial element of all architecture and landscape design. Namely, “traffic.” We too easily think of a “campus” as two elements: buildings and the land or site. But “traffic” is an equally important third element. Traffic is the way we “move about” through the whole campus. Movement is a crucial design element. It is what gives variety, surprise and community. Gene was sensitive to two kinds of traffic:

1. automobiles arriving and driving rapidly *through* the site;
2. Human persons walking *within* the site. Automobiles involve machines in relation to nature, noise, safety, speed and leaving/arriving; walking involves the body in relation to nature, quiet, belonging, leisure and being at home. Gene argues for “a pedestrian campus.” (This is not spelled out in his *Suggestions*, but I know from conversations with Stewart Luckman and architect Norris Strawbridge of Sasaki Architecture and Landscape firm, that there was a holistic vision here.

The original conception was this: surrounding the campus was the world at large. Interstate highways, county highways, and suburban streets defined the perimeter

of the heavily wooded site. The woods created a ring of separation between vehicular traffic, rapid movement, noise and the intimate interior of campus which was for walking, quiet reflection, community and learning. The landscape design was intentional about this as follows.

An aerial view would show the bustle of traffic surrounding the island of the campus. Heavy woods and the lake served as a first ring of separation, a natural divider between two worlds. Since many people arrived by car, the cars were allowed to pass through that first ring, but then should be parked, not penetrating to the inner ring. Thus, parking lots were to form a second zone. The parking zone was then separated from the deeper interior by preserving a second, inner ring of trees that screened parking lots from buildings. (Many of those trees have since died and new solutions are evolving.) Persons parked and then walked through that second ring of trees, onto the pruned lawns and walk-ways, into the personal scale of the building interiors. Since the buildings are scaled to the rolling topography of the landscape, and have natural areas between them, this movement from roadway to classroom was a gradual experience from the outer world to the inner community.

Once inside the buildings, this was enhanced by the concept of how the hallways and glass skyways were conceived. They were conceived as “Mainstreet.” Each building, and especially each academic discipline, was thought of as a “neighborhood.” Running as an (almost) straight axis through all four academic buildings and all the liberal arts and different department areas, was this single, connective, main hallway (Mainstreet), stacked on three levels. The four buildings were thus connected in their interiors by three levels of Mainstreets that allowed one to stay inside during inclement weather. In terms of indoor/outdoor integration, glass bridges connected the third floor allowing sunlight to enter and pedestrians to see out; outdoor brick passages connected the buildings on level two, allowing one to go outside briefly between buildings; underground tunnels connected all buildings below ground on level one. Crucial to this very Minnesota concept, is the fact that once people entered the buildings, they can travel anywhere without needing heavy coats, gloves and boots, contributing to a sense of belonging. The entire academic complex is a variegated interior, where one is “at home,” walking and belonging. This is a designed experience that

fits the mission of a small college that emphasizes spiritual relationships along with academic programs.

A similar, but far more sophisticated, more reflective, more intimate experience happens in the seminary complex.

5. The lake should be considered an extra-curricular experience. Rather than slavishly trying to crowd the campus around the lake it might be better to let educational values determine the campus planning with

only certain building, i.e., campus center, library, dining halls, etc. on the lake. The lake would be something to which you would go for a “change” from your academic work.¹³

¹³ This advice has been followed and the experience of walking along the lake nicely fulfills the original vision. In addition, the buildings placed along the lake house the more socially oriented functions (dining hall, lobby of the concert hall and art gallery for the college, lobby space of the Brushaber Commons and its outdoor patio, and what was the dining center and patio for the seminary).

even to take the sidewalk between college and seminary.

In the effort to rid camps of geese, an even more unnatural the solution was embraced. An on-campus dog was acquired in the theory that it would chase the geese away. This did not work, although it added a lot of barking to the goose honking.

Gene’s vision of the lake as a site for an “extra-curricular” experience and his argument that the natural campus serves as “classroom or laboratory” for the disciplines such as biology or environmental studies offer an important, albeit humorous, example of how the holistic community vis-à-vis overall design stimulates learning. In the late 1980s-early 1990s, the preferred landscape aesthetic was to prune plant life at the edge of the lake in order to create places for people to walk to water’s edge as an inviting space into nature. Several architectural proposals for the design of the CLC argued that we enhance this by developing the shoreline more for recreational use. However, as that pruning happened, large flocks of geese invaded. The lawns and walk-ways were soon covered with goose droppings, accompanied by the raucous sounds of their honking, making it unpleasant to walk on the grass, or

Finally, in a moment of interdisciplinary dialog, the biology faculty (especially Professor Robert Kistler, an environmental studies scientist) pointed out that geese love a lake where it is easy to walk from water onto land. Our pruning aesthetic had made Lake Valentine a magnet for geese. He argued that a more ecologically natural approach was to let the water plants grow up along the lake edge. This was good for the science department curricula, good for the environment, and good for discouraging geese. Once the pruning approach was changed, the goose colonies disappeared. Quiet was resumed and we no longer had to clean our shoes before reentering the buildings.

6. The Seminary and College should be so located as to foster distinct and separate academic and social communities.

that essentially this is impossible in buildings alone. A Christian is a person, but surely our architecture should be of such a character that it is compatible with the characteristics of a witnessing Christian.¹⁴

The Character of the Architecture

1. Bethel is a Christian community and we are anxious that our buildings reflect this commitment. We realize

- warm, friendly, receptive, open in spirit
- personal rather than institutional and ecclesiastical

- concerned (careful in detail, quality of construction & maintenance)
- interesting, depth of character
- genuine (avoid pretense, imitation, fadism)
- modest in manners
- careful in stewardship
- maturity
- serious and purposeful
- hopeful, aspiring and uplifting

¹⁴ This entire section, “The Character of the Architecture,” addresses a central aesthetic challenge and defines a philosophy that is distinct. It begins with, “Bethel is a Christian community and we are anxious that our buildings reflect this commitment.” The big question is *how is this achieved?* The outcomes can be wonderful, but the dangers are immense.

While Gene thought that “we want our buildings to reflect a Christian community,” he did not believe that buildings should *illustrate* the faith of that community. “A Christian,” as he put it, “is a person.” But he did think that “the character” of “our architecture should be...such...that it is *compatible* with the characteristics of a witnessing Christian.” This deeply organic, natural, integrative sensibility is vintage Gene. His means of *translating* Christian meaning and experience into architecture is through the shaping filter

of *character*, instead of through the kitschy literalism of *illustration* or ornaments. This is profound if followed, and it serves Bethel well. Especially within American consumer culture which is spring-loaded towards feel-good kitsch and nearly hostile to spiritually earned depth.

Therefore, this first of five points in this section ends with a list of *characteristics*, of *qualities* inherent to both persons and architecture: “warm, friendly, receptive, open in spirit, personal rather than institutional and ecclesiastical, concerned (careful in detail, quality of construction & maintenance), interesting, depth of character, genuine (avoid pretense, imitation, fadism), modest in manners, careful in stewardship, maturity, serious and purposeful, hopeful, aspiring and uplifting.

2. The use of Christian symbols,¹⁵ although not a necessary part of our tradition, may be helpful at some points. They should be used sparingly and with meaning. A building itself, like the chapel, may well serve as a significant symbol for the entire campus.

3. Recognizing that God has revealed Himself to be a Person whose nature has many facets and that the

Christian life is made up of a variety of experiences, it is felt that various building (and sometimes rooms) might also express this richness of experience by expressing singularly these traits in individual buildings, i.e., majesty of God in the chapel, the reflective mood in the library, His concern for children in the nursery, etc.¹⁶

¹⁵ On “the use of Christian symbols,” Gene is similarly circumspect and restrained out of his of dignity. Symbols, he says, “should be used sparingly and with meaning.” The tendency of American culture in general, and of American religious culture in particular, is to take a very literal and illustrative approach to symbolism. Heavy-handed outward symbols, kitsch taste that dazzles, didactic, preachy or

entertaining signage and banners, and so on are the temptations often favored. In contrast, Gene’s deep aesthetic *is an understated—i.e., a humble—*aesthetic and his spiritual wisdom—influenced by the Pietist tradition—opposed gaudy or literalistic approaches. He opposed heavy or clever use of symbols because they are bad aesthetically and inadequate theologically.

Here again we return to Gene's emphasis on "character." His argument was that in the Gospel and Epistles we are told that "outward show and forms," that "praying on the street corner instead of in our closets," that announcing our piety with trumpets, are all spiritually false. Instead, we are told that inward character must be developed, we should pray privately in our closets, and when we do, then outward expressions of that deeper character will follow in dignified form. Our neighbors should come to know us by our love, intelligence and beauty, not by our symbols worn on the sleeve.

Bethel's campus does, indeed, make sparse use of direct symbols in a most refreshing way. A few examples are:

- A. the external wall of the Seminary building has two symbols worked out in brick relief and nicely present yet understated. One is a brick cross high up on the north facing wall of the chapel building. (Presently its cross-arm is covered in shiny metal due to erosion, which looks terrible. It should be replaced.) The other is a reference to the traditional bell towers of cathedrals. Instead of being free-standing or rising high above the natural landscape, it is embedded in the east facing wall of the chapel building, where its bells are visible within an implied tower.
- B. The front entrance to the Community Life Center (CLC) for the college also has a reference to the bell

tower or turret of earlier Christian architecture. This is a circular form, open at the front, offering the inner hollow of its form. Within that are limestone details, fairly subtle, one of which is incised with what might be a Greek Cross.

- C. A third cross—this time less restrained and very susceptible to the cleverness or literalism Gene worried about—is found in the oval shaped skylight above the pod of steps in the Brushaber Commons. During strong sunlit moments, it casts a cross-shaped shadow on the floor, exciting the warm and fuzzy cockles of our hearts.
- D. The Prayer Chapel, located on the CLC, third level, above the lobby. This room was intentionally designed for small groups or lone individuals to pray or meditate. Here, a large bronze cast cross made collaboratively by sculpture Stewart Luckman and twelve students, with compartments that house elements of Christ's Passion and Eucharist, directly addresses the content of faith in a meditative and intimate atmosphere.

¹⁶ This section is self-explanatory

4. Scale¹⁷ —the buildings should be designed from the "eye level" point of view to emphasize again the personal qualities rather than the institutional bird's eye view.

- we should think in terms of smaller complexes of one-, two- and three-story buildings
- rather than high rise structures.
- spaces between buildings should be easily grasped and given character and meaning.

¹⁷ Scale. We think of scale as size in relation to nature and our bodies. Gene did too, but here he added a crucial dimension to scale, namely, "point of view." He thought buildings "should be designed from the 'eye-level' point of view because that is "personal," whereas designing from a 'bird's eye' view (which most architect's models do) is too 'institutional.' He also emphasized a complex of smaller buildings in relation to each other, with open integration into natural spaces between them, as being better than

singular, monolithic or tall buildings that dominates nature and our body's size. In addition, the siting and scale of buildings should retain the original feel of God's creation: i.e., work with the topography of heavily wooded, rolling hills; the placing of buildings as nestled—integrated—into the site, neither dominating nor ignoring it is best. And the landscape should not be cleared or bull-dozed into artificial flat areas unless necessary. In thus preserving "naturalness," a sense of "belonging" by using proper scale

is created. And finally, the larger surrounding ring of nature should remain “wilder,” i.e., heavily wooded, less pruned or mown. As we move into the building complex, nature is gradually pruned and mown, with occasional trees left

standing. Thus, heavily wooded tapers off while buildings begin, integrating the two.

5. Natural materials should predominate¹⁸—brick, wood, cement, rather than the synthetic or imitative.

- careful use of textural materials in keeping with the natural setting
- durable, ease of maintenance¹⁹

¹⁸ “Natural materials should predominate.” Materials used should feel “natural” or “honest to its material,” allowing each material’s nature to be beautiful in itself while harmonizing with nature. Two good examples demonstrate this aesthetic suggestion: brick and glass.

A. Brick: The choice of brick makes all the difference. A sand-mold brick with a mixture of clay impregnated with coarse grit was chosen. The sand mold gives the brick a softened and slightly irregular edge, and a rough surface that creates more shadow as the light hits it. The effect is more organic and warmer than with other bricks.

If compared to more “finished” brick used in many 1970s applications, the difference in effect is obvious. “Finished” brick has crisp edges, clear geometric profiles, a strong grid, and harder, smoother surfaces. These qualities (while desired in some buildings) are far less integrated with the natural surroundings of our campus. Their crisp, hard grid and smooth reflection of light do not invite unity with the organic, wooded lines of Bethel’s landscape. Nor do they create a softer, modulated light that one finds in wooded areas. In contrast, the sand-molded bricks with grit in their clay mix have softened edges that are rounded and slightly irregular. This creates an organic quality and a softened grid to their surface. The gritty mix of clay makes each surface more porous-looking, rougher. This adds to the organic feel. Further, that rougher surface catches the light very differently than a smooth or polished brick. It gives each brick a fluctuation of light/shadow, enlivening it, making it warmer, and relating it more directly¹⁸ to the natural setting.

B. Glass: A second crucial example of materials is glass. The Seminary buildings and much of the Brushaber Commons lobby and dining center exemplify how planes of glass in relationship to planes of brick create the “belonging” or integration originally desired. In these spaces, the alternation between solid brick planes and transparent glass planes creates a dance between “indoor” and “outdoor,” forming what Modernist architecture (at its best) called “indoor/outdoor integration.” Here, what is “natural” is openly visible through what is “artificial.” In Gene Johnson’s words, “As we move about,” we “repeatedly [get] delightful changes and pleasant vistas...[that] cultivate a quality of naturalness together with the element of variety and surprise.” The result is a “sense of belonging.” For Gene, this is an excellent design achievement. It reflects a theological quality of how we, as believers, “belong to God’s creation.”

¹⁹ This last point, “durable, [with] ease of maintenance,” is vintage Gene and vintage Pietist Protestantism. This gets at Gene’s sense of economics and sustainability. He believed that materials could be used in a way that was not only “natural” and beautiful, but easy—i.e., inexpensive in terms of labor and replacement costs—to maintain. For him, this was a matter of good stewardship when resources are limited.

One place that this economy was used—both for its appeal but also as a financial compromise—was the burnished cement block used throughout the four college buildings. As already noted, the four college academic buildings

were designed by a computer fast-track method due to lack of funds. The burnished brown block used through their interior was one of the compromises in this decision. Although admittedly, this kind of block was fashionable at the time for public buildings that were functional but funded by tax payers' money, such as public schools, post offices, and so on. The improved aesthetic of this block over painted cinder block walls and the very low maintenance of their durable surfaces appealed.

The warm brown color and the pebbled aggregate surface were at least remotely "natural." But for decades, one can see Bethel's efforts to respect this industrial and economic solution while also trying to mediate its inadequacies. Originally, for example, track and can lighting were used in order to create warm washes of light in pools, softening the hard uniformity of these walls, making them more inviting and personal. They were never painted since painting them returned them to the genre of painted cinderblock that one sees in cheap commercial settings, as well as increases

maintenance costs considerably. But as lighting systems aged, there has been a gradual development to overcome their depressing, bland darkness. First was the desire to overcome the darkness of the hallways. Fluorescent fixtures replaced tracks and cans. Second—and this is a highly significant challenge in need of more discussion—came the need to better demarcate departments to give them identity. The original burnished block hallways were very generic. Stairways, entrances into side hallways and even into each department were so generic that nothing stood out. Signage was used, which helped but was not aesthetically an adequate *architectural* element. So, sheetrock and build-outs with greater dimension were built at some entrances to some departments, and the sheetrock was painted with colors. This helped feature entrances and the identity of departments, but also increased maintenance costs.

Summary

Simplicity without crudeness, excitement without being sensational, and functional without becoming institutional, should be combined to create a campus to the glory of God.²⁰

— Eugene Johnson

[This document was submitted to the Committee on Campus Planning, reviewed and affirmed for implementation on March 15-15, 1963. It was approved by the Board of Education, as reported in the Minutes. It was also instrumental in interacting with and choosing an architectural principle, Mr. Hugh Peacock, with the firm, Hammel and Green. Also involved, though not mentioned in the minutes, through Mr. Peacock was the landscape architecture firm, Sasaki Landscape Architecture. See Appendix X—the minutes, photocopy]

²⁰ This summary attempts to gather what Gene considered most essential on the conceptual level of thinking about design. It is worth noting that each of his phrases here not only cites *qualities* desired (simplicity, excitement, functional, glory), but they also acknowledge the *tensions* inherent in the challenge of good design. In other words,

a helpful way to ask, "What do we want?" is to ask simultaneously, "What do we NOT want?" (crudeness, sensational, institutional) Every planning committee might run all ideas through both of these word lists as tests of success or failure: "Is *that decision* simple? Is it crude?" And so on.

Further Thinking about the Design of Campus Sites: A Few Modest Recommendations

In the process of revisiting Gene Johnson's, *Suggestions Concerning the Character of the New Campus*, and writing commentary on them, in combination with my own thirty-seven years of teaching art history in these campus spaces and serving on numerous committees for planning and campus aesthetics, several aspects of the campus environment stand out to me as needing attention. There is never enough money to do all that should be done. Nevertheless, here are a few ideas to put on some bucket list somewhere to improve the university as it seeks to fulfill its mission.

1. Cultural Connection Center: A New and Creative Design Opportunity

The pith of Eugene Johnson's *Suggestions* for how to think about "the whole campus" was this: "The whole campus environment should be viewed as a tool for learning." One of the most exciting mission areas still in need of a deep application of this concept is the fairly recent development of the Cultural Connection Center (CCC), on the third floor of the Clausen Center building. (This part of the campus planning is discussed in the "Annotations" on Gene's *Suggestions*, p. 9, endnote #10, second example under Relatively Successful Examples Developed after Gene's initial *Suggestions*)

This space needs further thought and recommendations here. First, to restate the crux of the issue:

In the words of Bethel's catalog, "This Center is *designed* to promote understanding, friendship, and shalom. The space is intended for all College of Arts & Sciences (CAS) students, but with a special focus for students of color, and will offer a place

for gathering, dialogue, and support. Research has shown that a space like this can help significantly for students who might not be experiencing a sense of *belonging* on campus. Bethel needs a *space* like this because, for many reasons, many students of color do not *feel at home on this campus*. Bethel needs the CCC because bad things sometimes happen and they need to be talked about and dealt with in a constructive manner... This space is a step for Bethel to tell me that I am indeed wanted on this campus, that my voice is both heard, and wanted here.” (my italics for emphasis)

The words I have put in italics (*design, space, belong, etc.*) are all word/concepts found repeatedly in Gene Johnson's aesthetic/design *Suggestions*. Even though it is unlikely that Gene was thinking, in 1963, of what we now understand as systemic racism and the need to revise campus design from the ground up to address Bethel's lack of diversity in the past. What is crucial here is the claim made by Bethel's catalog: “This Center *is designed to promote*” equality, diversity and the deconstruction of systemic racism. But in terms of campus design/planning, while we can honestly say that conceptually the Center is designed, we cannot say that physically it is so designed. Once again, in terms of the actual design of physical architectural space and integration of the total environment, of the need for “delightful changes, pleasant vistas, variety and surprise” (understood here as delightful persons, diversity, new contributions) creating a “learning tool” for the whole campus, the CCC is only designed conceptually. In terms of real space/design totality, it is merely a “cubby hole” on third floor CC. Although it has functioned well as a beginning, America's recent increase in awareness of systemic racism (especially through the jolts of George Floyd's death/aftermath and the insurrection assault/aftermath of the US capital building) beg us to ask, “how do we deeply factor in the diversity of America's population and the demographics of college enrollment today into Gene Johnson's *Suggestions*? How do we integrate color and diversity into campus planning on a holistic level? How do we *promote* learning through this *space* as a new tool, bringing learning not only to persons of color now attending college, but also learning for white people who still have so much revision to do in their beings?

For what it is worth, I would like to speak to the “total design” opportunity raised by this issue. Bear with me as I use a significant analogy gained by insights from art history. Bethel needs this thinking. In the contemporary art world, the 1960s-1970s hotly engaged the issue of women's art and their marginalization in the institutions of art. Like so much else in Western Culture, visual art had long been dominated by white men. But in 1970, art historian Linda Nochlin, wrote a brilliant and ground-breaking essay titled, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” This essay changed the art world. Most importantly, Nochlin's *way of thinking* changed the art world. As an historian, she quickly traced the obvious: the social structures of power and money behind the institutions of art excluded women for many reasons. Older models of creativity excluded woman, given the gender roles assigned in earlier Western society. Of course, she called for modern institutions to become aware of this and change their outlook.

More importantly (and useful for our thinking at Bethel regarding matters of diversity), she asked “how do we rectify the situation *deeply*.” The first impulse—which is a good one—was for art historians to dig through archives and find women in the past who did exist and revive them, write about them, give them visibility and voices. All well and good. But Nochlin argued that this, important as it is, was essentially a kind of tokenism. It was inadequate to merely add women artists names to the structures of the art world because this ignored the question of “why were women systematically excluded in the first place?” To cite a few exceptions was not to solve the problem.

Nochlin called for something more and new. She called for scholars to rethink the very paradigms of culture and why those paradigms thought that women had nothing unique to contribute. How would the very paradigms of culture have been different if women had been valued? If women's *experience and perspective* had been valued as equally *human*, as equally *essential to knowledge and meaning*? Sexism, she argued, ran deeper than surface rules of patronage and old boys' clubs. It ran to the very depths of humanness, spirituality and power. Nochlin called for a re-examination of the very phenomenon of creativity and art-making. She was not asking, “what could women artists contribute to the traditional modes and theories of art?” (For Bethel, not “what could students of color add to the traditional whole campus/curricula/design?”) Rather, she was asking, “How are women and their experience inherently part of the entire human enterprise?” Not only “how has it hurt women to be excluded/” but “how

has it hurt humanity—both men and women—to exclude women through a hierarchy of value?” Nochlin was asking for a deep revolution in thought and orientation, not a retrofitting of old structure to accommodate a few more names.

The parallel of this for Bethel and the question of profound diversity—not token diversity—is obvious. The point I made in my “annotations” of Gene’s *Suggestions*, endnote 10, example 2, was that while the CCC is a good first step towards overcoming racism and inviting students of color to attend Bethel, it is a retrofitting. If Bethel is to be successful in creating diversity, Nochlin’s kind of revolution in holistic thinking and design is needed. In terms of “the whole campus being designed to serve as a learning tool,” what the current CCC represents *conceptually* as a segregated, retrofitted space needs holistic design as a space that *embodies* the experience of students of color while also encouraging white members of the community to re-envision their unconsciously held paradigms. Success in such campus planning/designing would be extremely exciting and innovative. It might even be crucial to Bethel’s survival in the 21st century with changing demographics, (pragmatically, enrollments; but missionally, “kingdom of God”). Increasingly American culture is being summoned to understand that *reality* is not white-centric. And to be leaders as Christ-centered contributors, Bethel’s mission is not a white-centric mission, but a fully and truly *kingdom of God* mission. On the design level, we need a revolution, linked to deep social/spiritual matters. It is not enough to simply “add” students of color into the mix, any more than it was enough for art historians to go out and “find” a few women artists to include. Nochlin called for a reconceiving of creativity itself. What is Bethel’s counterpart of such reconceiving? How do we make that *physical* in the campus design?

2. LRC Maker Space

Although a very different issue than the Cultural Connection Center, the Maker Space has a similarly radical design challenge. This kind of space is a new concept in higher education and in the design of libraries. It could easily be a fad that disappears. And yet the promise of it for “the whole campus being a tool for learning” is significant. Perhaps this is already underway, but this recommendation is that just as a deeper thinking is needed for the CCC, so too is such a different paradigm of thinking need for the Maker Space. It too can be more than a retrofitted

site. At the pith of this design/campus plan challenge is this question: “What is the place for interdisciplinary, collaborative, hands-on trial and error, thinking outside the box as part of education? Especially as technology continues to change us, as A.I., digitalization and other phenomena continue to alter—for good and bad—what ‘knowing’ and society mean?” What is the deeper nature of such activity, as complement/collaboration to the learning activity where the professor knows and students need to master? What is the total design environment for this?

3. The Liberal Arts

As discussed in the “annotations,” p.11, endnote 10, “Flawed Examples in relation to the original *Suggestions*, the student experience within the total environment design of the campus in relation to the Liberal Arts is one of our greatest failures. To restate the crux of this failed space:

Liberal Arts: The failures here are about the role of total campus environment design to *give a distinct sense of place and identity* to the functions within them. Ironically, while *conceptually* the Liberal Arts are literally the common ground shared by all students despite their major, as well as the common foundational platform of knowledge and cultural education needed by all citizens for wisdom and balance, the physical spaces of the Liberal Arts have no clear identity or deep character at all. They are generic. Boring. Deadly. Even though each department within the Liberal Arts has highly distinguished professors, passionate students, engaging class sessions and excellent curricula, a prospective student on a Bethel tour cannot distinguish these realms in any way beyond a few posters. Despite the Liberal Arts being the very *common ground and creative body* of any culture (their history, philosophy, literature, art, journalism, music, theater and so on), there is not a single “delightful change, pleasant vista, sense of variety or surprise” to be experienced within the *physical designed spaces* of the Liberal Arts. This is not only embarrassing, it is a threat to our existence as the kind of institution that our mission statements claim.

Bethel’s mission statement of developing “whole and holy persons” stands as a worthy purpose and concept. The fabric of this vision holds the liberal arts to be essential. And today, when several factors in American culture are

devaluing the liberal arts (the excessive turning towards economic pragmatism and profit; the problem of student loan debt; the present anti-intellectualism in flirtation with far-right extremism and white supremacy and racism; the doubting of why liberal arts are valuable in general), the danger to this heart of the university is significant. Per Gene's Suggestions, the need for campus planning/total design that makes the campus a tool for learning, there is an urgency for better designing of the spaces in this area.

How this is done from the deeper *embodying* design concepts of Gene's guidelines is an exciting and creative project. I believe this should be given priority in terms of a planning committee with clout, and consequently in terms of budget. The new facades and spatial use design for Business/Economics, for Engineering, and for the Sciences already offer good ideas for making distinguished aesthetic spaces that *invite* students to enter and belong. I have quietly followed prospective student tours and watched how potential students crane their necks to look through the new large glass windows into the Business/Econ and Engineering spaces during the tour; their body posture shifting as if they wished the tour would enter. Watching those same tours through the drab hallways with no identity of the Liberal Arts, these same potential students looked bored and do not look around. We should be concerned when entire sections of the school and curricula spark zero body or eye interest during tours.

4. Improving "Mainstreet"

The organizational/design concept of "Mainstreet," (discussed in endnote 12, p. 12) has served campus planning well. But as one walks down "Mainstreet," observing it through the lens of Gene's *Suggestions*, watching the actual bodily/social experience students are having as they travel this corridor, certain problem spots are obvious. I have already mentioned the loss of many small lounges—rest stops—along the way:

(Originally, as one walked through the central hallway, especially of the third level, there were numerous small lounge areas throughout the four buildings. *Spatially* these broke up the monotony of long, straight halls, creating variety and change. *Socially* these allowed students to gather in small groupings to talk or study, and allowed those walking down the hallway to meet members of the community informally, creating delight and surprise.)

It would be spectacular to restore these places.

A second problem area is the entrance/exit doorways to the staircases. One especially encounters this on the third level of Mainstreet in the Clausen Center where the landing is walled off and entrance into the hallways is through a narrow door. The stairs are broad enough that people travel up/down in both directions, often two or even three abreast. During heavy traffic times, the narrow doorways in/out of the stair shafts create bottlenecks that are awkward. Sometimes bodily collisions even occur. This could easily be resolved, improving the aesthetics of the overall space as well as the social awkwardness and inefficiency of traffic. Using a single steel column and steel I-beams as lintels, the walls could be removed by the entrance, opening the landing up into a receptive and free-flowing passage. Similar solutions could happen at other entry points along the way. (The staircases in the AC building do not have this problem as badly due to broader openings into hallways). If fire codes prohibit such opening up of stairs in CC, a second solution is that the block walls on each side of the narrow doorway could be replaced with large glass panels in order to *visually* open the space, and to allow people to see each other coming so as to avoid collisions. This is a less expensive resolution that would go a long way to making these bottle-neck moments more appealing. And closer to Gene's ideas of positive vistas.

5. Anderson Center

This may already be well underway, but the suggestion is simply that the appropriate committee thoroughly analyze the developing of the Anderson Center through the lens of Gene Johnson's *Suggestions*, as a helpful way of thinking that site through. As noted in the endnotes, this site has its own logic and consistency, having been originally designed as a business/corporate campus. That is a strong and appealing aesthetic, but some re-conceptions would be helpful to bring it more into line as a university/learning site.

What Does Pietism and Scandinavian Modernism Mean Today?

There are many cultural forces at work today that put pressure on Bethel. Some are for the good, inviting Bethel to change, while others are not for the good. Two major, identity giving components of Gene Johnson's *Suggestions* that run deep in Bethel's DNA are the influence of Scandinavian Modernism as a design source and its compatibility with Pietism as a theological, cultural source. In many ways, Bethel would be adrift if these were

dropped under the pressures of contemporary American culture. However, the questions of “how these values are received today?”; of “how they might better intersect with today’s sensibility?”; or of “how they might effectively resist and creatively challenge elements of today’s American sensibility?” are worth asking.

One of the tensions on institutions that have this kind of history and identity is whether they follow their roots into a rich, vibrant and relevant or pro-active engagement with the culture at large or whether they slip into a reactive, parochial posture. Is Bethel embracing its Pietist heritage in a parochial way (circle the wagons; be self-protective; be exclusionist) or in a broad creative way (travel in the wagons; carry the mission outward into new terrain while being advised by this heritage; be inclusionist within our values)?

I believe that an in-depth conversation between people across the whole institution would be healthy. One rich resource that could facilitate such a conversation is history professor Chris Gehrz. He and Mark Pattie, pastor at Salem Covenant Church in New Brighton, have co-authored a book on Pietism. In addition, Chris’ blogs explore American culture in relationship to Pietism, American history and

culture. An examination of these values and history in relationship to Gene Johnson’s *Suggestions* might produce new ways of designing the total campus experience. This should also address Bethel’s digital and website presence (involving web design, public relations/marketing, use of social platforms, and include Kent Gerber from the digital library).

Create a Useable Tool from Eugene Johnson’s *Suggestions*

In 2009, Bethel contracted Bruner and Cott, Architects and Planners to produce a graphic designed, spiral bound, working document, “Appendix A: Landscape Guidelines.” (see my Appendix G) This is an excellent working tool that is usable by everyone from campus planners, architects, foresters, the maintenance crew, and those who mow the lawn. A similar useful tool should be design and produced that has Eugene Johnson’s *Suggestions* as a simple working document, accompanied by the interpretive annotations by Wayne Roosa, to get at a way of thinking for planners and others. This simple and direct booklet could become a pragmatic guide to help sustain consistency of the campus environment.

All creative making--whether a single pot or an entire campus--requires a fine blending of materials, craftsmanship, ideas and meaning. Trained in Fine Art, Theology and Philosophy, Gene Johnson understood this holistic beauty. Although his "Meditations" is about being a potter, it also works as a parable, showing how a creative way of thinking works.

by Eugene Johnson

Meditations of a Potter

The most valuable tools of a potter are his hands and fingers. And, most of his time is spent working his craft. But it is not contradictory to point out that making of pots is also a cerebral activity. At best the potter is continually making judgments about shapes, proportions and the expressiveness of each curve. There are times however when the mind moves beyond pots and reflects upon life in general and issues in particular. I majored in philosophy at the University of Southern California and it's my bent to find order and meaning in life's experience.

The idea that a potter might be involved with "meditation" may be a new thought. The term is often used rather broadly but here the meaning of meditation is to "contemplate and reflect" on ideas: The mind is very active, focused and exploratory. Yes, I do a bit of meditating while working on wheel.

In the studio the potter often works alone. It's a quiet time. The turning of the wheel invites speculative ideas. There is no one to challenge your thoughts. You have time to let them play out in your mind.

Additionally, there is something about functional pots which seem to have kinship with the human spirit. We give human names to the various parts of the pot. We talk about the lip, the neck, the shoulder, the belly and the foot. We also describe the expressiveness of the pot in human emotional terms. We might say that a pot seems to expand and reaches upward. Or that the colors seem to flow. Or that the handle begs to be held, etc.

It may be that this suggestiveness in functional pots is what leads the potter to see strong analogies between making pots and the shaping of one's life. I would like to share some of these analogies.

Centering

The first thing potter must do is center the ball of clay on the wheel. The clay must be distributed equally around an imagined vertical axis. This is done by exerting pressure with the hands on both sides of the ball. Potters develop individual methods but the usual way is to hold their left hand very steady and form it like a round cup shaped mold. With the stronger right hand they push the clay toward the center. The ball of clay, which was wobbling at the beginning, now seems almost motionless, although it quietly keeps spinning.

Are there analogies here to life? On a day to day basis, life has a lot [of] wobbles. There are so many demands which fragment our attention. We're frustrated because we feel we're not in charge.

But, when we become serious about a new task or new opportunities it's necessary for us to center ourselves. Most of the struggle is with irregularities at the edges of our life, not the core. You discover that most of your energy is being spend on unimportant things. When you decide to get rid of the wobbles you discover life is so peaceful, easier and productive. *Centering is never easy. pressure never is.*

Opening

The clay ball is usually opened with the thumbs. The potter finds the center and firmly presses down on the clay opening it. Pulling the thumbs apart one can determine the initial opening and the depth of clay at the bottom.

The clay has now become a pot, albeit a very rudimentary one. The essence of a pot is emptiness. The potter shapes

the clay but he is actually shaping the interior space of the pot. The function of the pot lies with the emptiness within.

We usually think of emptiness as negative but, in pot-making it's a positive factor. The pot is essentially a container to be its source of supply.

What has this to do with life?

The amount of openness we have will effect our usefulness in the world. Tolerance, understanding and our ability to take on the burdens of others depends upon the amount of openness we have in our own lives. Most of us struggle with the fact that our days are over-booked. Someone said, "*Show me your checkbook and your day calendar and I'll tell you what kind of person you are.*"

As I move the clay about with my fingers I am giving shape to this interior space. As I do, it's not hard to start questioning the amount and character of space in my own life. Nothing will change my life quicker than examining and reordering my inner space.

Lifting the Walls

Students assume that the way you form your pot is by squeezing. I admit to some squeezing, but it's accidental. Squeezing makes the clay move in all directions at once. There's no control. To raise the wall, a groove must be made with your finger tip at the bottom on the inside and another groove on the outside. In doing so, you have isolated a certain amount of clay. From this point on the trick is to LIFT this lump of clay from the bottom to the top. Starting from the bottom, you slowly lift this lump upward as the wheel turns. Almost magically the height of the wall increases.

I have a mirror mounted on the wall in the front of my wheel. As I work I am looking down on my pot, and I see its prominent circular form. When I look up into the mirror I see the side view and can evaluate the silhouette. It's useful to see things from differing points of view.

So too in life, it's useful to see oneself from a different perspective. Try to see yourself as others see you. A good friend might be helpful if he will be honest and open sharing how others view you. This is more likely to happen if this is a shared exercise. You mutually agree to help each other and make suggestions how to improve your lives as it affects others.

Understanding God

One of the strongest metaphors regarding the work of the potter as it relates to life comes from the account of God's instruction in The Old Testament to the prophet of Jeremiah as recorded in Jeremiah 18:1-6.

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. *"Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my messages."* So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot that he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me; *"O House of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does? Declares the Lord. Like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in my hand."*

God works like a potter. We are clay in his hands. I never understood this until I had worked a few years as a potter. I knew God is omnipotent, all powerful. Clay is soft. Of course he can achieve what he wishes. Not so.

God does not work like a bull-dozer operator. He works like a potter. And a potter can achieve only what the clay allows. The potter must sense how far he can push the clay and when he must pull back. It's more a matter of coaxing than imposing.

There is something else interesting in the account. The pot he was making was marred in the potter's hand. Can things go wrong even though you are in God's hand? Yes, after all he is working with human clay. But the good news is that God, like potter, does not give up. He takes the same clay and starts over again. He does not abandon you. He will continue to remake you. He is a God of beginnings.

A potter works with two hands

There was one thing Jeremiah did not see. That was the potter's left hand. It was in the pot.

It takes two hands to make a pot of consequence. The inner hand works to expand the inner space. It pushes outward. The potter doesn't see this hand. He must rely on touch.

I like to think of the inner space as being more subjective. It's here that God breathes his spirit. The work of the

outer hand is more analytical. It's under the control of the eye. It judges each curve and each detail. Although their roles are different they work together to achieve harmony.

I like to think that God uses both hands when He works on human clay. Within the inner space we feel the prompting of our conscience and his *"still small voice"*. On the outside God allows circumstances and crisis to put pressure on us and shape us.

Improvisation

I'm often asked, *"Do you know what you're going to make when you start?"* Not always. You do have to know whether it will be a tall vessel or a bowl shape because each has its own beginning. But from that point on you can do some improvising.

Clay is a marvelous material. It is so yielding, so patient, and so responsive to the slightest pressure of the potter's fingers. It almost invites you to try different ideas. And, if the clay can no longer respond to you, it just slumps down into a lump.

Nothing is lost except your idea and even that hasn't been lost because you have learned something from it. The clay remains and can be wedged again and made ready for another try.

Some of my most original shapes have come about because an idea failed. Rather than giving up I went ahead and tried a different solution. I would never have made this type of pot if I had not been forced to explore a new shape. This is why working with clay is so rewarding.

I try to approach life in the same way—to explore ideas and see where they will lead. In fact, the whole process of creativity is based on the "What if" approach. What if I tried this, what if I tried doing it that way? Being creative has little to do with one's I.Q. but much more with your willingness to take chances—to explore ideas. A creative person is a curious person, a "What if" person.

Developing personal ideas

Every young artist at some point becomes concerned about developing a uniquely personal style in their art. They are aware that they have been unduly influenced by first one mature artist and another. Although they try hard to vary their expressions they recognize that the

strength of their work is derived from others and not their own.

How does one develop a personal style? Not by self consciously trying, that is self-defeating. It only prolongs a look of artificiality in their work.

A personal style develops when you forget about trying to be different and just work, work, work, and work. If you do, it will just happen. Quite likely it may take some time before you see that your work is truly and uniquely your own. Just keep working.

A lesson from nature

In nature, beauty seems to just “happen”; clouds pile up in the beautiful configurations; sunsets become a

stunning display of colors; weathered tree trunks become rich pattern of textures; water has worn timeless shapes out of rock. There is no record of man’s manipulations. Beauty just happened.

In some small related way, I would like to glaze my pots in such a manner that their beauty seems just to have happened. You are not aware of the potter. The pot seems to be as authentic and genuine as does a weathered rock, a sunset or a rose. I seldom fully achieved this, but that is my goal—that my pots seem to have “just happened.”

