

Beyond the Classroom Walls

The Importance of Activating Outdoor Spaces on Collage Campuses

by Ed Ball

Today, the need has never been greater to create new outdoor spaces on higher education campuses that bring learning outside, offer an inspiring sense of place, and reflect the unique identities of their institutions. And this need is well founded—utilizing biophilic design on campus can significantly enhance education experiences and effectively bolster student health, well-being and performance. To explore this topic more deeply, we brought together a panel of industry experts for a live webinar discussion of the importance of connecting people with nature in built environments, and how designers can apply this vital, innate human need to college and university campus settings.

Moderated by Aan Garrett-Coleman, ASLA, LEED, AP, and President and Founder Coleman & Associates, the panel for this discussion included Byron Sampson, University Landscape Architect and Associate Director at Arizona State University; Roberto Rovira, PLA, ASLA, Professor and Chair of Landscape Architecture & Environmental Design at Florida International University and Principal of Studio Robert Rovira; and Tom Flynn, RLA, Landscape Architect at Penn State University. After brief introductions by moderator Garrett-Coleman, the panel kicked off with an overview discussion of each panelist’s experience in addressing the opportunities and challenges of designing for students on their respective college campuses.

Detailing the landscape architecture of Arizona State University, Byron Sampson describes working at the intersection of desert design and campus space design. “We’re looking for ways to make the campuses in our system more indicative of the Sonoran Desert and the environment in which we live,” he says. Sampson dives into his key planning considerations, identifying

the need to correlate campus traffic patterns and student feedback with location-specific factors like mitigating climate change’s impact on the desert landscape. In the post-occupancy evaluation of recent changes to the ASU campus, Sampson and his team identified the important role that visibility plays in communicating senses of comfort and safety. “Even more so than access to our blue phone campus emergency access system, being able see and be seen and being in proximity to high-traffic areas proved very important to our students,” Sampson describes. Armed with this information, Sampson goes on to describe his approach to merging the need for visibility with the need for climate adaptation, detailing different methods of structural and vegetative shade that gather students in spaces that are both physically and emotionally welcoming.

Roberto Rovira joins the discussion, describing some of the significant changes he’s experienced at the Florida International University campus brought on both by the advent of remote learning and the changing desires of university students. “Universities are becoming more and more like small cities, and their needs and services don’t end at any specific time,” he says. Rovira continues on to stress the importance of viewing campus design through both the dimensions of space and time. He describes the need for outdoor space to be able to adapt to both organized and unstructured activities, offering inspiring collective and individual experiences at different points throughout the day. He shares examples of dynamic design on the FIU campus—quads that become hubs of evening activity, passthrough spaces that become canvases for presentation, and façades that become outdoor theaters after dark.



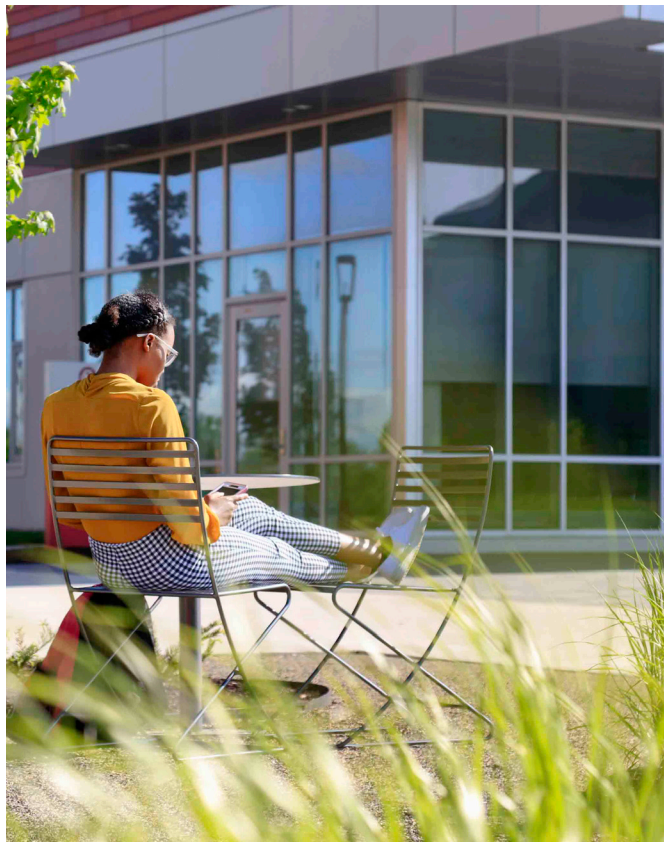
“The conveniences of remote learning are plenty, so in the design of our university campuses, it’s all the more reason to make them more inviting and engaging. Outdoor spaces should allow us to be more social, more human and more connected to our universities.”

— Jimmy Chan, Vice President
at RHAA Landscape Architects + Planners

Building on the discussion of the changing nature of higher education and its implications for campus design, Tom Flynn takes a zoomed-out approach identifying four trends influencing the composition of civic space on campus. He begins with a discussion of affordability, describing his experience with Penn State University administrators and the higher value they are placing on the quality, durability and maintainability of outdoor space. Flynn’s trends two and three closely echo the sentiments of Roberto Rovira, highlighting the importance of campus space that is flexible and designed to foster a sense of community. “Lastly and I think really importantly is the idea of biophilia,” Flynn says as he arrives at his fourth key trend. “Whether it’s depression, sleep deprivation or financial pressures, a large percentage of students are experiencing mental health issues. So as landscape architects, we need to create the spaces that make people want to get outside, unwind and be a part of nature.”

As the discussion progresses, moderator Aan Garrett-Coleman zooms back in, sharing a collection of design examples and strategies she has identified as authentically embracing and enhancing the way today’s students utilize campus space. To hear the full scope of topics discussed in *Beyond the Classroom Walls: The Importance of Activating Outdoor Spaces on College Campuses*, to see the visual examples provided by each of the panelists, and to check out the extended audience Q&A portion, you’re encouraged to watch a [full recording](#) of our roundtable webinar.

Contact us to learn more about Landscape Forms’ premium product offerings.



Beyond the Classroom Walls: Webinar Q&A

Linda: In urban campuses with space restrictions (LA area), have you been successful in creative pedestrian spaces integrated with fire lanes?

Alex: We've found fire roads to be significant issues in our campus designs also. Have you seen successful strategies to utilize that space for gathering / furniture, while maintaining compliance with fire codes? Does movable furniture in those areas work, for example? I did like the food truck example as one possibility.

Byron: ASU places non moveable site features along the edge of the fire lanes. The moveable furniture is allowed to lightly encroach into the area and can be "sacrificed" in an emergency event. They do their best to move it out of the way if they witness a constant issue.

Claire: What was the book Byron mentioned?

Byron: The book is *Urban Design and the Bottom Line: Optimizing the Return on Perception* by Dennis Jerke ASLA | Nov 1, 2008. It was available on Amazon at one time, and it was published by the Urban Land Institute (ULI). The study I referenced was on page 61 – "Noel Levitz study". I worked with Dennis for about 4 years many years ago and was honored to receive a sign copy of the book. One quote from the book that I have on my office wall is this, "Open space is the embodiment of our values". Since the work we do is beyond our needs and time, I feel it is imperative to keep that in mind.

Daniel: What was the name of the survey that Byron mentioned regarding why prospective students decided to attend a particular university?

Byron: The "Noel Levitz Study" is on page 61 of the book *Urban Design and the Bottom Line: Optimizing the Return on Perception* by Dennis Jerke. It is available on Amazon.

David: Have you noticed in general there have been more university/college clients inquiring for better outdoor spaces after the pandemic or has it been relatively the same since?

Tom: Penn State requests are still higher than they were pre-pandemic but not as high as during the height. Increasing the quality and functionality of outdoor spaces was already an active concern pre-pandemic so they weren't caught too off guard. Most of what they did in response to the pandemic was temporary (particularly tents) and they've shifted back to something resembling normal.



Byron: Confirmed they are seeing a demand for more seating and tables. The students at ASU prefer to be outside and feel that it improves their overall study experience and well-being.

Eileen: Byron...was the information for the graphs at the beginning of the presentation specific from your university. You credited Whyte?

Byron: The data in the graphs was from the post occupancy survey he did as part of his thesis work for graduate school. The results were specific to the Tempe campus within the ASU system since that is where they installed the outdoor rooms as part of the COVID response. He credited Wm. Whyte due to his research findings and the issues he addressed in his writings.

Melinda: How do you keep individual/freestanding smaller furniture pieces (chairs, tables) from disappearing? We have had benches and picnic tables regularly make their way to the river that runs through our campus... so we tend to stick to oversized and heavy pieces (as we don't want to anchor most pieces).

Jackie: Our experience with theft is very different. We lose furniture that is unfixed within days of being out if the area is not highly supervised and the furniture is put away outside of regular daytime use hours.

Byron: ASU places loose site furniture in high traffic zones where there are more eyes on the malls/gathering spaces than not. This has significantly aided in reducing theft. Byron wanted to know if the pieces are making it alongside the river or into the river. If you do not have any places to sit or eat in that area, he suggested programming the space along the river to allow for those activities.

Janel: Do any of the presenters have experience designing skateboarding areas on campus and can share ideas and recommendations for do's and don'ts? There is a big interest at our campus community for this right now.

Roberto: Miami has seen a resurgence and acceptance of skateboarding as an urban activity that creates community and activates social space – specifically Lot 11 is a huge success story. A skate park built under the I-95 overpass that is a coveted destination for music videos, competitions and influencers. It was organically planned for and advocated by the community and the group has done others. The skateboarding community has great advocates and any planning for skating on campus should involve them. Fun Fact: his son is a fanatical skateboarder and he always runs his landscape plans by him to see how he would interpret it from the unique skateboarder perspective!

Byron: ASU looks for ways of armoring the edges and grinding areas so that if it occurs, it looks as though it was designed to be there. If not, they still have a nice-looking detail.

Jennifer: Have any of your campuses recommended a specific square footage per person of outdoor space that should be maintained on campus, in order to preserve and prioritize outdoor spaces for the well-being of students, staff and faculty? If not, how do your campuses preserve or balance critical outdoor spaces with new buildings and development?

Byron: Byron and he recommended the work of Jan Gehl – Cities for People to be good reference. Here is the link for a quick reference.

Jim: How does Penn State deal with snow removal in the outdoor spaces.

Tom: This is a broad question simply because so much goes into snow removal. We essentially have 3 different crews that handle snow operations. 1 crew will handle clearing of snow from streets and parking lots using larger equipment. Our custodial staff is responsible for clearing snow to a point 10 feet from building entrances. Our landscape operations staff picks up everything in between...walkways, malls, plazas, etc. For this part of it our primary equipment is a skid steer with a brush on the front. Interestingly, many years ago when we were proposing switching much of our hardscape to unit pavers you would have thought that it was going to be the end of the world for the folks that need to clear snow because we were asking them to use brushes. Now they admit that the brushes are easier and more efficient than blades for the types of snows that we get.

Julian: With FIU being located in a more car-centric part of Miami, wondering if there any of the trends mentioned are also spilling out into adjacent communities.

Roberto: The character and nature of adjacent development, there has been a significant amount of construction in the community to the north of FIU known as Sweetwater and some have integrated ground level loggias in front of commercial spaces, although there haven't been any pocket parks, courtyards, or spaces like those we showed yesterday to complement these that I am aware of. The buildings are mostly housing/apartments that cater to students and faculty. The volume of apartments is substantial and many walk across the wide SW 8th St. right of way (~120ft wide from curb to curb) to our campus just south. The current crossing is not very pedestrian-friendly (lacking wayfinding, spatial cues/hardscape, wide medians, canopy trees). The car-centric mentality of Miami planning and development has taken a while to change, but there are positive signs. Nevertheless, the streetscape design hasn't caught up with what we would like to see for such a vital connection to an area that is becoming far more important for FIU and this community as a place for commerce, housing, and hanging out. It's still a passthrough.

Mark: Byron mentioned the ASU campus as a living laboratory. Do your universities have a process for evaluating and incorporating campus group, student, and faculty-initiated projects into the campus landscape?

Byron: Currently beta testing a process to get student and staff involvement in the ideation stage of a project. They have included students and faculty in the master planning/concept stage as a way of creating legacy moments for them. As support staff, he recognizes that the student population turns over completely every 5-7 years and what may have been important to a certain freshman class may not resonate with a new one. They are also seeing the overall diversity of the student population change dramatically – all he considers to be good things.

**Beyond the Classroom Walls:
The Importance of Activating Outdoor
Spaces on College Campuses**

landscapeforms®

Panel Includes:

Byron Sampson –

University Landscape Architect
& Associate Director, Arizona State University

Tom Flynn, RLA –

Landscape Architect, Penn State University

Roberto Rovira, PLA, ASLA –

Professor & Chair FIU Landscape Architecture
+ Environmental Design, Florida International University,
& Principal, Studio Robert Rovira

Moderator:

Aan Garrett-Coleman, ASLA, LEED, AP –

President & Founder, Coleman & Associates