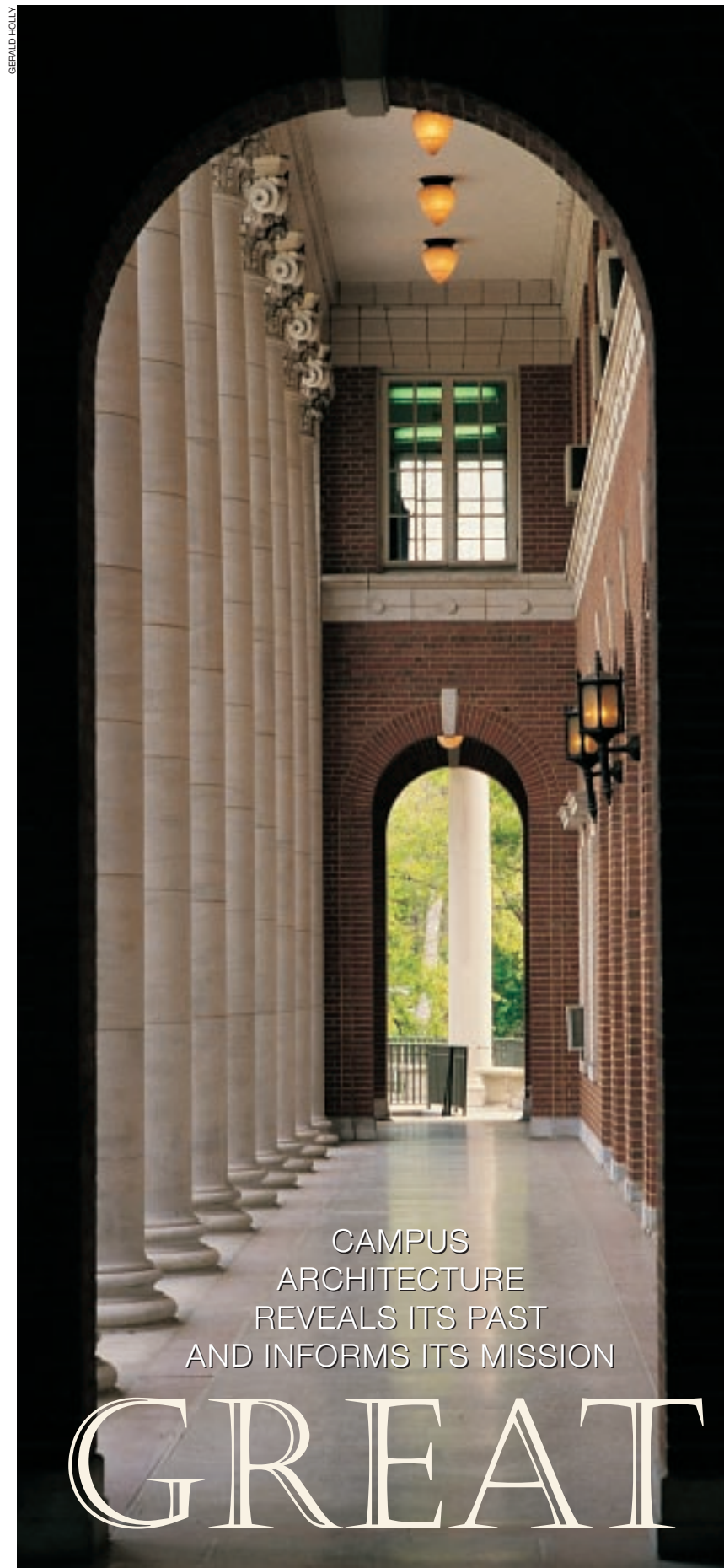


Architecture is an empty vessel into which we pour meaning. Buildings look the way they do because of what we expect them to contain. And buildings contain not mere functions, but aspirations as well.

The academic campus holds meanings beyond the architecture of its individual structures. Thomas Jefferson's belief in mind over matter—in the power of rationality to subdue chaos—is expressed on the grounds of his University of Virginia in Charlottesville no less than on the hilltop called Monticello. In the United States we have been front-loading the campus plan with ideological significance ever since.

In Nashville are two formerly unallied campuses resting side by side—Peabody College and Vanderbilt University—that convey two very different architectural messages while at the same time representing the same institution. And I know of no better way to explain the Peabody campus than by verbally crossing 21st Avenue to the Vanderbilt campus. For the wandering and sometimes confusing paths of Vanderbilt illuminate, by way of contrast, the clarity and order that is Peabody.



GERALD HOLLY

CAMPUS  
ARCHITECTURE  
REVEALS ITS PAST  
AND INFORMS ITS MISSION

GREAT

Side view of the columns of Peabody's Wyatt Center (formerly known as the Social Religious Building)

**A Celebration of Nature**

The Vanderbilt campus is a place for insiders, for people who already know their way. As a stranger to Vanderbilt in 1985, I needed a map and explicit instructions to find my way through the campus. Once across 21st Avenue, however, I needed nothing but the words “continue straight ahead to the lawn, then turn right and it’s at the top of the hill” to locate the Social Religious Building (now known as the Faye and Joe Wyatt Center for Education). As the inset 1897 map of Vanderbilt by Granberry Jackson illustrates, the plan determined that the campus would function in this way from the beginning. Architectural historians would describe the Vanderbilt campus as an example of the Romantic or organic ethos, with few right angles and lots of curves. And the architecture is primarily medieval in inspiration, with uneven roof lines and textured facades characterizing such early buildings as Kirkland Hall and the Old Gym.

The landscaping style is also organic, with irregular massings of trees scattered about. The impression that the trees just grew up naturally—with the buildings springing up later—is, of course, a fiction, but one that is intentional. Bishop Holland McTyeire, Vanderbilt’s co-founder and first president of the University’s board, was a compulsive planter, and the largest of the magnolias are his handiwork. Nevertheless, we feel when we walk the Vanderbilt campus that we have wandered into a beautiful, natural arboretum. That is by design.

The informal and Romantic plan appeared in America in the second half of the 19th century, first in cemeteries and slightly later in suburbs, with their curving tree-lined streets

and cul-de-sacs. We call this plan “organic” because the intention was to celebrate the irregular shapes and textures of nature at a time when industrialism was replacing nature with roads and factories, right angles, and machines. The buildings of this vintage are medieval rather than classical in inspiration because the Victorians felt this style of architecture was more organic in outline.



NEIL BRAKE

The Romantic philosophy contended that a human being is at his or her best when closest to nature. And to the extent that we imitate the irregular forms of nature in the built environment, we create a place in which man and woman feel most at home. Such places are the very opposite of the urban grid and call attention to themselves as the “not-city”: where we reside, not where we do business.



Above: 1897 map of the Vanderbilt campus, a design of few right angles and lots of curves  
Left: Built in 1880, the Old Gym, now home to the Department of Fine Arts and Fine Arts Gallery, is a gem of Victorian architecture. In 1970 the structure was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Inset: portion of one of the ornate arches over the main entrance to Kirkland Hall

**A Celebration of Rationality**

The Peabody campus operates from an entirely different perspective on what is the best human environment. Peabody is a place any outsider can quickly and easily comprehend. Its plan and its architecture celebrate the obviously manmade: a world of right angles and symmetrical facades, of straight *allées* of trees and smooth rectangular lawns.

This is the more ancient language of classicism, a language of calm and order designed to encourage people to think clear thoughts and believe in the perfectibility of mankind. It was the language of Thomas Jefferson, who believed that the architectural style of the Greeks and Romans could be used to tame the wilderness of his Virginia.

In the Peabody plan, the buildings grouped along the central axis define the central mission of the college—teaching and learning, library, and administration—with the space for communal gathering, where all were to come together in social and religious equality, holding pride of place at the crest. The

ASPIRATIONS

buildings for residence and eating are grouped around the secondary axes because, while necessary, they do not define the primary purpose of Peabody. The Peabody plan celebrates rationality as the highest of human virtues.

Both Vanderbilt University and Peabody College were the result of northern philanthropy in the post-Civil War South—Yankee gestures on the part of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt of New York and George Peabody of Massachusetts to help heal a devastated land by means of education. In 1873 the Commodore gave \$1 million to realize Bishop McTyeire's vision of a central southern university to rival such northern institutions as Harvard and Yale. In 1867 George Peabody established the Peabody Education Fund with an eventual endowment of \$2 million to grant funds to teachers' schools in the South. At that time, no southern state had free public schools, and as the states moved to establish them, they needed teachers to teach in them. The Peabody Fund was to provide the help necessary to train those teachers.

### The Kirkland and Payne Philosophies

The money might have come from similar impulses, but the Vanderbilt and Peabody campus plans and their architectural styles reflect the distinct educational philosophies and missions of their institutions. Vanderbilt evolved into a place for insiders because James H. Kirkland, the Vanderbilt chancellor who really shaped the character of the University, was an educational conservative, a man who believed in a certain degree of intellectual and social elitism.

Bruce Payne, the president who oversaw the planning of the Peabody campus, was



The 1912 original plan of George Peabody College for Teachers celebrates classicism—a world of right angles, symmetrical facades, and rectangular lawns.

an educational egalitarian. Payne believed strongly in education for the masses, for social outsiders as well as insiders, and wanted to use the latest in progressive techniques to provide that education.

Payne came to Peabody from the University of Virginia in 1912 and wanted to create in Nashville the same kind of college environment Jefferson had established in Charlottesville. To do so Payne hired the New York firm of Ludlow and Peabody and the eminent landscape architect Warren Manning to design an “academical village” like Jefferson's.

The University of Virginia plan is simpler than Peabody's. Jefferson grouped his buildings along a single axis and assigned primacy to the library's rotunda. The two-story structures contained a series of departments, with professors living in the pavilions marked by columned facades and the students living

below in rooms that flanked the central green. Each pavilion reflected a different classical order—Doric and Ionic, Corinthian and Tuscan—so students could study the classical styles, the only styles Jefferson thought worth studying, in three dimensions.

### The Campus as a City

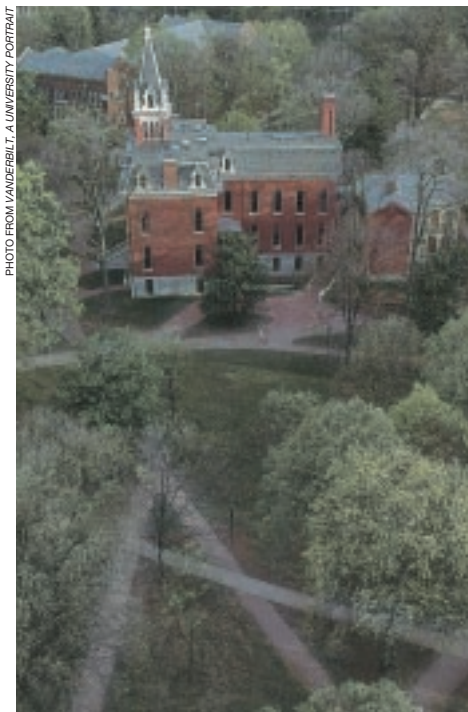
By the turn of the 20th century, when the Peabody campus was planned, the “academical village” had evolved into the ideal of the campus as a city unto itself. But these academical cities would not be the morally, ethnically, and physically disorderly spaces of the Industrial Revolution metropolis. These academical cities would be disciplined by the theory of urban planning derived from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and known in this country as the “City Beautiful” movement.

The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago—with its hierarchy of primary and secondary axes, its strong sightlines, and monumental buildings—had demonstrated to America these principles of city planning. Fragments of the City Beautiful survive today in such cities as San Francisco, but we find the most complete manifestations at colleges and universities, where a controlling discipline is more easily achieved because there is a single property owner.

Vanderbilt administrators, inspired by City Beautiful theory, hired a series of nationally known planners and design professionals to make rational order from their organic campus. But plans for the Vanderbilt campus by Richard Morris Hunt (1902), the

Vanderbilt family architect, and George Kessler (1905), the designer of the City Beautiful plan for the St. Louis World's Fair, as well as the 1920s Day and Klauder plan, faced physical challenges that hindered implementation.

Unlike the rectangular Peabody campus, the Vanderbilt site itself is irregular, bounded on the north by West End Avenue and then by 21st Avenue as it heads south and curves west. And at the heart of the old Vanderbilt campus, the buildings known as Old Central and Old Science (now Benson Hall) are not aligned with any street axis but are located at the intersection of these curving coordinates. This is why any attempt to add



Bird's-eye view of Benson Science Hall, a composite of two historic structures, Science Hall (1880) and adjacent Old Central (abt. 1859), which sits in the heart of the Vanderbilt campus

a more classical order to the placement of buildings at Vanderbilt called for the demolition of these two buildings. Vanderbilt administrators eventually came to realize that a formal regularity could not be made from irregular parts; Old Science and Old Central still stand today.

Peabody did not have to be retrofitted to express City Beautiful theory because President Payne and his team of designers were starting with a blank slate of land. The George Peabody College for Teachers was built on the site of what was once Roger Williams University, an institution founded shortly after

the Civil War for the education of emancipated African Americans. By the time the Peabody Fund purchased the site, the university had been abandoned, its buildings damaged by fire.

### Buildings That “Talk to Each Other”

The first new buildings on the Peabody campus were the Industrial Arts (Mayborn Hall) and Home Economics buildings, both of which opened in 1914. The Social Religious Building (Wyatt Center) followed in 1915, and soon after the Jesup Psychological Laboratory. All were designed by Ludlow and Peabody. The Carnegie endowment, which paid to construct Nashville's old downtown library as well as still-standing branch libraries in north and east Nashville, funded the Peabody library. This 1918 building by Edward Tilton suggests the abundance of knowledge contained within the collection of books through the roof cornice detail of stone baskets filled with sculptural fruit.

The best structure on the Peabody campus from the standpoint of purity in classical styling is the Cohen Building, erected in 1926 and designed by New York's McKim Mead and White. Despite gems like Cohen, however, the real importance of the Peabody campus is not lodged in the design of any individual architect but in the aggregate collection of buildings that talk to each other in a common tongue across time.

Until the 1950s Peabody was architecturally unified because the Beaux-Arts plan disciplined not only the placement of buildings but their style as well. Because the campus plan is so orderly, it was visually difficult to imagine non-classical architecture as part of the college fabric. Until the late 1950s and early 1960s, with construction of the Hill Student Center and John F. Kennedy Center buildings, no architect had the nerve to attempt it.

In the 1970s, Peabody College faced a series of economic crises that ultimately led to merger with Vanderbilt in 1979. Today, however, despite the alliance of the two institutions, the Peabody campus retains a distinct architectural identity because its original outlines have not been blurred, as Vanderbilt's have, by the accretion of later buildings in various styles.

Architecture is not merely a range of styles, but a way of perceiving the world and using

the art of building to persuade others to see it likewise. A walk across the Vanderbilt campus is—for all but the incoming freshman who must navigate from dormitory to registration—a stroll through buildings in a park, where learning grows as naturally as trees and where knowledge is acquired by individual



Erected in 1926 as a gift from Nashville art collector George Etta Brinkley Cohen, the Cohen Building represents the purest example of classical styling on the Peabody campus. The building's elegant interior features marble columns, balustrade, wainscoting, and marble mosaic flooring.

minds as unique as each blade of grass on the lawn. A walk across the Peabody campus tells teacher and student alike that they have arrived in a place where they can focus on the rationality of intellectual discipline, the clarity of social purpose exercised democratically, the belief that we all share a common and harmonious culture.

And the Peabody message gains greater strength and greater distinction from its proximity to the Vanderbilt campus, with all its organic complexities. Nowhere else in America can we find, side by side across one busy avenue, such contrasting examples of collegiate architectural history, such clear expressions of opposing philosophies of what shape the best human environment should take. In western architecture there have been, since the Renaissance, yin-and-yang revivals of the classical and medieval styles, always with new permutations that signify evolving ideologies. The campuses of Peabody and Vanderbilt illustrate this tension in one place, and simultaneously.

Freelance writer Christine Kreyling, MA'97, studied art and architectural history at Vanderbilt and is the award-winning architecture and urban planning critic for the *Nashville Scene* newspaper. She also contributes to national architecture and planning magazines and is coauthor of the book *Classical Nashville*, published in 1996 by Vanderbilt University Press.



The majestic Wyatt Center, completed in 1915, crowns the Peabody campus mall with its ten Corinthian columns. The building was a personal gift from philanthropist John D. Rockefeller.