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If You Build It, They Will Come ... Won't They?

The University of Cincinnati is trying to raise its profile through a risky (but increasingly common) investment: expensive architecture.

By NIKIL SAVAL SEPT. 10, 2015

When you think of a classic American college campus, you probably envision a set of pastoral images: a demure brick rowhouse crowned with a white steeple, a gargoyle perched on a limestone archway, a domed library on a sunlit grass quadrangle. Often far from cities or shielded from them by gates and walls, campuses exude a sense of refuge. Thomas Jefferson famously wanted the University of Virginia to resemble a kind of “academical village.”

But the old pastoral atmosphere has given way to a new ethos. On campuses today, you will find neoclassical libraries cheek by jowl with glassy, postmodern student centers. From Rem Koolhaas’s aggressive cantilever for Milstein Hall at Cornell, with its concrete-and-glass horizontal slab jutting out from old brick, to Zaha Hadid’s razor-sharp Eli & Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State, many college campuses have become places to see the most daring, up-to-date work of globe-trotting “starchitects.” Nowhere is this truer than at the University of Cincinnati, where a murderers’ row of architects — Frank Gehry, of course, along with Michael Graves, Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi and Thom Mayne — has been involved with the most ambitious campus-design program in the country, a decades-long bid to turn a quiet commuter school into one with a global reputation.

Since the 1970s, when declining state funding and the replacement of federal grants with private loans began to raise the cost of going to college, universities, especially public ones, have tried to attract higher-paying students. They often come from out of state and, increasingly, from out of the country. (There are 1.1 million foreign students in America, an 85 percent increase since 2005, with the largest contingent coming from China.) Attracting more students also means attracting more applicants, while still keeping the acceptance rate relatively low — a way of increasing the university's selectivity and potentially improving its rank on the influential U.S. News and World Report list of universities. The University of Cincinnati first entered the list at No.156 in 2011 and reached the 129th spot in 2015. Its tuition has gradually risen, and its acceptance rate declined from 82 percent in 2002 to 73 percent in 2013. The number of out-of-state students increased 8.3 percent last year.

The hope is that buildings by starchitects will turn the University of Cincinnati into a desirable, glamorous place to spend four years living and studying. Mayne's imposing Campus Recreation Center — which includes four stories of housing, six basketball courts, lecture halls and bleachers for the football stadium — represents the university's commitment to improving the "campus experience." Sparkling new buildings encourage sparkling new neighborhoods. Just south of the university in the Clifton Heights neighborhood, a two-block retail, housing and entertainment complex called U Square @ the Loop, replete with a craft-beer emporium and a yoga studio, recently opened. It is part of a wider development of the area, where campus police patrols have also increased. (In July, a 43-year-old black man was shot and killed by a white campus officer in the nearby Mount Auburn neighborhood.) The university and its students now visibly set themselves apart from surrounding communities.

But expansion can come at a cost. Peter Eisenman's Aronoff Center for Design and Art at the university had cheap cladding slapped on during its

construction from 1989 to 1996, and over time it began to rot and peel away. Repairs and renovations on the \$35 million building cost \$20 million, and the university borrowed \$19.25 million to help pay for them. The university now has \$1.1 billion in debt — close to 20 percent more than it had in 2004 — largely because of its construction boom. During the same time, enrollment has increased by nearly 30 percent. The spending is predicated on the idea that new buildings can help turn provincial universities into outré, worldly “academical villages.” It’s a financial gamble — one that many public institutions find themselves driven to make. And it also threatens something more abstract but no less fundamental: that the university will turn into a luxury brand, its image unmoored from its educational mission — a campus that could be anywhere and nowhere.

Correction: September 14, 2015

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misspelled the name of the architectural firm that worked on the University of Cincinnati’s Richard E. Lindner Center. It is Glaserworks, not Glazier Works.

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