

## From “no man’s land” to Campus Community – Re-making a Campus at Oak Harbor High School –

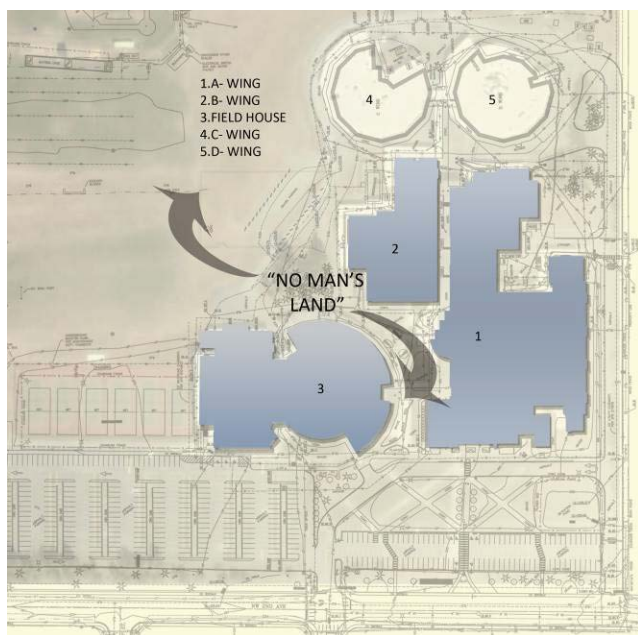
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When renovating a high school, sometimes the focus is so fixed on solving the obvious problems – adding space, fixing mechanical systems, adding technology, improving energy performance – that fixing problems of “place” get little attention. Yet establishing organization, creating identity, and crafting a “place”, not just creating a group of buildings, is vital in enhancing a sense of community in a school.

Many high schools grow incrementally over time, often with no master plan, responding to shifting population and academic needs. Over time this approach to development usually results in a school that is disorganized and difficult to supervise. There is no center of focus, no defining features, and no appropriate spots for people to congregate. In the words of Gertrude Stein: “There is no there there”.

Students, parents, and alumni rally around sports teams, and often to lesser degree things like music groups, or academic societies. But in large schools especially, these opportunities for belonging may not be enough and some students may feel marginalized. Reinforcing the idea of community - the idea of shared values and mutual obligations - in every way possible can help people feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves. The creation of “place” on a campus can be a significant contributor to building community in a school.

The redevelopment of Oak Harbor High School on Whidbey Island in Washington State sought to solve the “usual” problems of outdated systems and technology, poor organization, and adding space, but in solving these problems the goal was also to create a “place” for students, teachers, and the community.



The original school was built in the 1970’s and had additions in the early 90’s but only modest reorganization. The existing campus consisted of five separate one story buildings and was dominated by a domed roof field house that was used for physical education activities. School mechanical and electrical systems were worn out or out-dated and the school was overcrowded with narrow corridors and poor organization. Career technical courses were in two undersized buildings on the north end of the campus and under-served the school’s 1500 students.

*Existing Oak Harbor High School Campus*

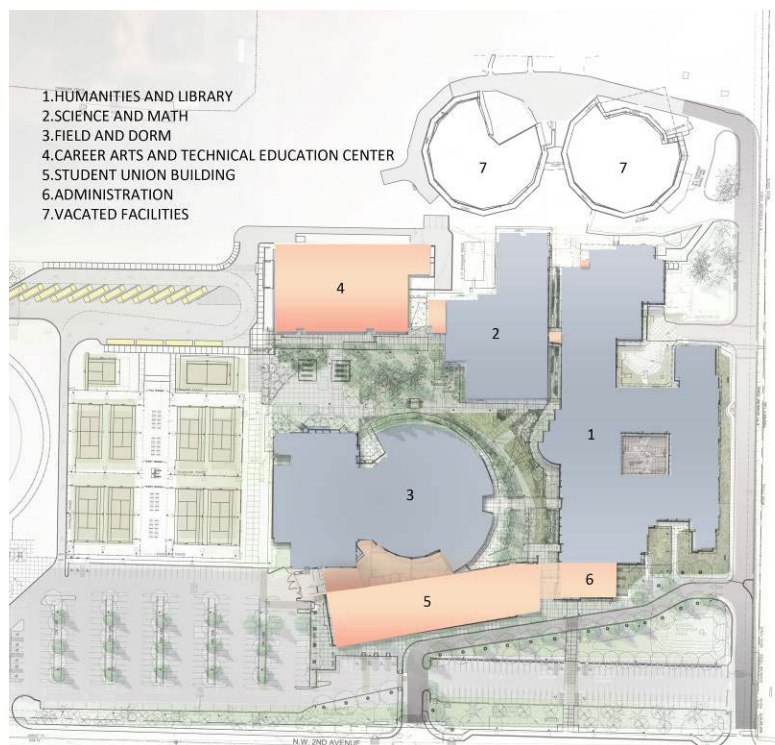


*"No Man's Land" with random scruffy planting, did nothing for the flow of students through campus.*



Beyond these deficiencies the school had no clearly defined entry, had little architectural character, and buildings were separated by a "no man's land" of exterior spaces that were alternatively dusty or muddy depending on the season. Students congregated in several areas including the cafeteria, outdoor locker bays, and behind buildings, but none of these spaces were designed for the sort of informal or supervised congregation that helps students feel that they are part of a community.

*Parker Hall was essentially a windowless box, which served as cafeteria and performing arts stage. Students were crowded into the space during lunch periods.*



*Reorganized campus with new buildings 4, 5, and 6*

The \$52M construction budget for the project needed to stretch over the renovation of the entire 243,000 SF campus either modernizing or replacing buildings while adding classroom capacity. Working with school staff, administration, facilities, maintenance, and with active participation of the school board, the project was developed during the rampant construction escalation of 2007. Budget limitations necessitated a limited intervention on the campus and in response the design developed two new buildings while vacating the two smaller career technology buildings on the north side of the campus.

The district's plans for the school were based on solving 13 key issues identified by the school board. These were translated into educational specification which called for such improvements as a new student commons and food service area, a better performance and music space, and the need for pitched roofs. New career technology facilities were called for along with additional classrooms. While the educational specifications detailed existing problems and new spaces required, it purposely gave no guidance on the location of new or relocated spaces. It was also silent on the need to create a sense of "place" on the campus. It was the design steering committee that began describing the refurbished school as welcoming, naturally lit, warm, accessible, and having a prominent front entry. All of these features contribute to creating a sense of "place".

The design team realized that even with limited interventions the cohesiveness of the campus needed to be upgraded. The existing campus sort of "leaked out around its edges" with no real unifying elements that assisted way finding, and no places that invited users to linger. From a community standpoint the school offered little opportunity for community use and engagement other than attendance at sports events.



To solve these problems and create a “place” out of Oak Harbor High School the design team determined to create a new Student Union/ Performance Center in a new building at the front of the school.

*The late afternoon sun grazes across the south elevation of the new - yet to be painted - Student Union Building.*



This glassy space serves as the indoor living room of the campus and also invites the community to use the campus in a convenient way. The Saratoga Chamber Orchestra and the WICA Conservatory Choir recently performed there to rave reviews.

*The audience enjoys a recent performance by the Saratoga Chamber Orchestra in the Student Union Building. The theatre seating retracts allowing for versatility in the use of the space.*



*Students enjoy the dynamic spaces provided by the architecture in the new Student Union Building.*

The building's scale provides a civic presence and character that never existed before, inviting the community, students, and faculty to feel ownership for the school.



*An entry portal and breezeway defines the entry into Campus.*



*The entry into the Administration Offices welcomes students and their families as well as the public.*



*Once inside visitors are greeted by the Receptionist and Attendance personnel for further directions.*



*The newly developed courtyard spaces provide orderly movement of students as they move from building to building as well as dynamic areas to interact.*

Way finding is greatly helped with a new entrance portal to the campus that is flanked by a new administration suite convenient to both students and visitors.

The entrance portal leads to the second community creating intervention – the redeveloped court that turns the former “no man’s land” into an active Outdoor Commons space.

What was once a zone to cross as quickly as possible has become a place that invites activity. Students eat lunch and gather at various times in the day while classes make use of the space as well. It becomes an outdoor lobby for community events in the Performance Center and a popular way to pass between buildings in order to see and meet friends.



Enclosed by the new Student Union and Field House on the south, the still under construction Academic Wing to the east, and the Science and Career Technology buildings on the north, new pitched roofs installed to house mechanical and electrical system add extra interest and diversity to the edges of this campus living room.

*Sloped roof overbuilds replaced the old flat roofed buildings providing protection for the new HVAC spaces and greater visual dynamics between building as seen on campus as well as from the neighborhood .*



The Outdoor Commons begins at the entry portal but extends to the west incorporating a copse of existing fir trees. These trees help to visually enclose the courtyard and add a natural amenity to it. The courtyard allows students an exterior place that is safe and pleasant. This is critical since plans call for making the school a closed campus when

*Students make their way to and from their classes through newly paved pathways in a unified campus.*

the project is finished. The courtyard is further enclosed by the new Career Technology building on its north side thereby making the campus more compact while enhancing the place that is the Outdoor Commons.

The project will continue to be constructed for several more months to complete the renovation of the main classroom wing, and the Student Union/Performance Center has yet to receive its final red color, but the Student Union/Performance Center and the Outdoor Commons have already created a "place" at Oak Harbor High School.



*The yet to be painted Classroom and Administration wing of the Student Union Building/Parker Hall Addition to Oak Harbor High School.*