

**Association of University Architects
2007 Case Study Competition**



“The University Forum”

Submitted by Andrew S. McBride, AIA, LEED AP
University Architect
University of Richmond

“The University Forum”, a recently completed pedestrian plaza which transformed the heart of our campus is a great example of how the University of Richmond has a “Sense of Place”.

Background:

An “Ah Ha” moment occurred the summer of 2000 during a design charrette while working on the University’s master plan. The true center of campus had been identified! Prior to that moment, the University of Richmond had essentially two centers, one for each of the original colleges: Richmond College and Westhampton College which are on opposite sides of our lake. Old Chapel Circle, a dead-end road, provided vehicular accesses to several buildings and was the major cross campus pedestrian way. Woe to unfortunate delivery man or stranger that found himself on that road during the change of class! What was initially

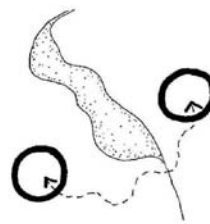


Figure 1: Past

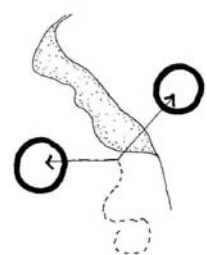


Figure 2: Present

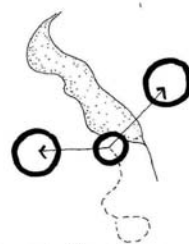


Figure 3: Ten Years

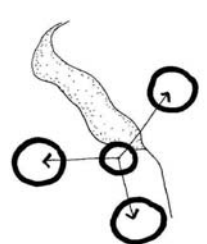


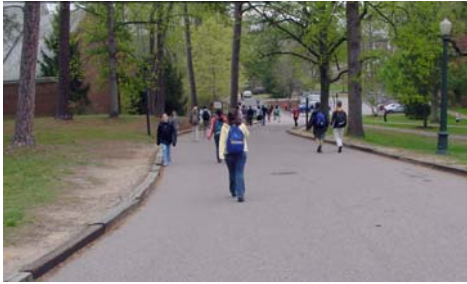
Figure 4: Twenty-five Years

The University Forum

considered to be a vehicular/pedestrian conflict problem grew into an opportunity to enhance the uniting of two colleges.

The Story:

In his presentation to our board of trustees requesting support for “The University Forum”, John Hoogakker – Associate Vice President for Facilities teed up the project’s concept as follows, “If you had the opportunity to design an ideal university campus on a clean sheet of paper, you’d start from the center and work outward. For the center, you would assemble your most important buildings around your most significant geographical feature; say a hilltop or a lake. Then you’d tie them all together with a magnificent centerpiece.



Fortunately for us we didn’t need a clean sheet of paper. Westhampton Lake is at the center of our campus and arrayed around the south end of the lake is Boatwright Library, Heilman Dining Center, and Cannon Chapel...the mind, body and soul of our school. The fact of the matter is we needed to erase our sheet. What needed to be erased was Chapel Circle, a narrow asphalt road with railroad ties for curbs that dead-ended with a tight radius turning circle in

front of the chapel. It was an under utilized piece of real estate with a prime location...**The Heart of Campus!** Not only did we strive to solve our vehicular/pedestrian problem, we set out to create a magnificent centerpiece.

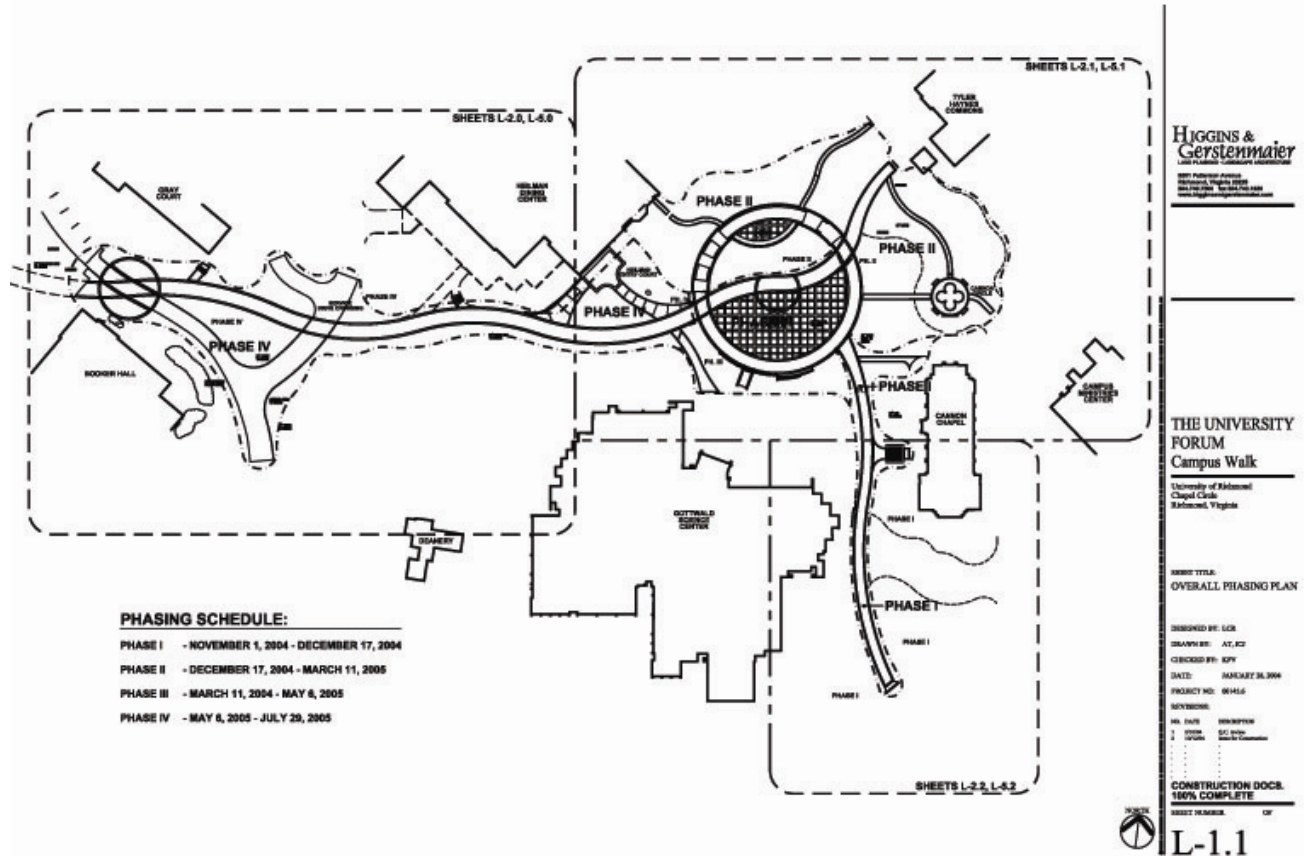
As the concept for the project developed, we looked to the town centers of antiquity for inspiration, but in particular the Roman Forum. It was situated in the center of town where passersby could hear others speak their mind or witness events as they went about their daily business. Common themes of these centers included: a gathering place to hear speeches, a market place to sell things, or simply a place to meet. Our central plaza aspired to facilitate those same themes. In addition to being the large gathering place for important University announcements like the Common Ground initiative it is also used by the Sierra Club to conduct a waste audit. Just this past spring, the Speech Center held a debate there on “Creationism versus Evolution” which was widely attended. We even have a block of limestone carved to look like a soapbox for people to stand upon and give speeches reminiscent of the “Speakers’ Corner” at Hyde Park in London. In addition to being a great place to meet friends between classes, the Forum also attracts vendors and student organizations that set up tables along its edge. By far the most gratifying use of the University Forum is as the staging point for seniors as they begin their parade to the commencement ceremony.



Being nearly a quarter of a mile in length, The University Forum is divided into several main components: Chapel Circle, Booker Circle, Upper Forum, Lower Forum, and Wilton Way. The center piece of the composition is the 180’ diameter circle formed by The Upper and Lower Forums.

The Upper Forum, a level masonry plaza, transitions down to the Lower Forum like the pocket watch in a Salvador Dali painting. The Lower Forum, a promontory from which to view the lake

more closely, is accessed via two sets of granite stairs along the outer ring. The area between the Upper and Lower Forums and the stairs was left natural in an effort to soften the hardscape.



Where the Forum meets the front of the Gottwald Center for the Sciences we incorporated a salvaged artifact from the original downtown campus, a set of granite steps from the old main building. Booker Circle, a much smaller masonry plaza, is the beginning or end (depending on the direction one travels) of the University Forum and connects it to Westhampton Green, the center of Westhampton College. Wilton Way, built on top of the old dead-end road, links the large Forum to Booker Circle and like all of the other areas is paved with masonry. At the opposite end of Booker Circle is Chapel Circle which takes the place of the old turn around and is truly pedestrian in scale. A grass area in the center of this small circle is designed to look like a giant quatrefoil, a shape that is frequently used on campus.



In order to block normal traffic from going down Wilton Way yet still allow emergency vehicles to enter the Forum, we designed an innovative custom built break-away bollard. The brick pavers along with the stone and sand sub-grade had to be designed to withstand the weight of a fire truck. Other infrequent vehicular traffic we had to take into consideration was hearses and limousines for funerals and weddings held at the chapel. The bollard is hinged at the base and held upright with a plastic pin. During an emergency a fire truck will simply bump the bollard breaking the plastic pin causing the bollard to fall out of the way between the wheels of the truck.

In addition to being a member of the design team in my role as University Architect, I along with Meghan McLoone, my intern architect who had just graduated from college, oversaw the construction of this project since the University acted as its own general contractor. Numerous challenges were encountered during construction; such as: maintaining the number of parking spaces, hurricanes Isabel and Gaston, protected waterway issues, building next to Gottwald Center for the Science “affectionately known as the project from hell”, water main breaks, and interference from pedestrians and vehicles. Put simply...a logistical nightmare!



Even before the design of the Forum was completed, the first order of business was to relocate a highly coveted faculty/staff parking lot that was located smack dab in the center of where the Forum would be built. What should have been a six to eight week project turned into a four month adventure with mud. The project started out great and then it began to rain and rain and rain only to be topped off with Isabel! Although the parking lot was completed, a year later we were flooded with 12” of rain in as many hours when Gaston hit. Since the Forum was built within 500’ of Westhampton Lake, which ultimately feeds into the Chesapeake Bay, a protected water way, best management practices had to be followed. Building next to Gottwald while it was under construction delayed the Forum project by three months. Originally scheduled to be completed before the students returned to campus for fall ’05, the Forum was completed just in time for its dedication later in the fall. In addition to having Gottwald construction traffic tear up our work, we had to deal with sink holes from a couple of water main breaks.



The last couple of months of construction, when we were racing to complete the project, were almost comical. On numerous occasions, three or four of my staff had to help guide people through the construction zone. The brick contractor had an army of masons laying the sand-set brick pavers and could pave an 8’ x 20’ section of Wilton Way every hour. They would work on one side of the road while the pedestrians walked on the other side and then switch sides. It was literally an obstacle course. Seeing the amazed faces of students as they passed by late in the afternoon was gratifying. Many of them would see it in the morning

and then not pass by again until the end of the day. They literally could see the space transform in front of their eyes.

As you can imagine the disruption and destruction in the center of campus caused by two major projects being built simultaneously side by side over a period of 15 months and then add another project, the addition to the Heilman Dining Center, for the last 5 of those 15 months frustrated many in the University community. Fortunately, all was forgiven when we finished the project in time for the dedication and within our allocated budget. Everyone loves the space! Ed Slipek, architectural critic for Style Weekly wrote, “One deft move whipped a forlorn piece of no-man’s-land and a surrounding group of stylistically disparate buildings into a highly dramatic and useable public space.” He added, “U of R has always recognized and built upon the tremendous equity of its campus architecture and landscape. Few projects in recent years have done more to reinforce this commitment than the Forum...”

Lessons Learned:

- Clearly define construction sites – “What belongs to whom?”
- Limit the number of projects being built at the same time in the same location.
- Allow more time for construction delays due to hurricanes.
- Even when lines are properly marked, DIG CAREFULLY!
- Do not change detour routes more than once a day.
- Schedule work in high traffic areas during down times.
- Do not use rock salt for slip prevention...you'll wash and wash the brick!
- From my intern, “Don't throw young people to the wolves”.

Vital Statistics:

- Budget: \$2,650,000
- Funding Source: E. Carlton Wilton and the University's endowment
- Schedule: 6/03 – 10/03 and 11/04 – 10/05
- Landscape Architect: Higgins & Gerstenmaier
- Civil Engineer: Draper Aden Associates
- Prime Subcontractors:
 - Excavation & Construction Co. (site work)
 - Southern Brick Contractors (masonry)
 - James River Nurseries (landscaping)