

Planning and Power: Architectural Reflections of Student Minorities at Cal Poly

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ABSTRACT: This paper will dissect the power dynamics of the built environment at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly) as it relates to spatial representation for minorities on campus. By observing campus growth throughout the university's history through the lenses of campus minorities, including women, black students, queer students, and disabled students, a pattern of dismissal and reluctant compliance comes to light. While the administration's rhetoric often reflects goals of inclusivity and diversity, the architectural history of Cal Poly reflects a lack of investment and reaction to the concerns of student minorities.

KEYWORDS: Universal Design, Julian McPhee University Union, Critical Design Pedagogy, Student Groups, Co-Education, Cal Poly Strategic Plan, President Jeffrey Armstrong

Written policies and procedures are often used to determine a campus political climate in university politics. However, the tangibility of the built environment leaves no room for an eloquent policy or well-intended referendum. No matter what intent administrators may have, their priorities are reflected in campus architecture in ways that outlast and overpower written policies. Architecture, in many ways, assumes the final say for acceptance of groups on campus, serving as a validation of spatial needs and a promise of investment for the represented parties. Historically, Cal Poly, an institution without any outspoken civil rights history, has failed to accurately reflect diverse student demographics in its built environment. This paper will analyze the history of Cal Poly's architecture as it pertains specifically to campus minorities, including students of color, women, queer, and disabled students. This paper is not a thoroughly inclusive study of all student minorities, nor does it seek to weigh the disparity between injustices faced by these groups, but simply widen the scope of this type of analysis. As the first examination into Cal Poly's architectural inequality, this paper relies on tangential research by other students, student newspaper articles, Cal Poly records, and master plan documents. By cataloging changes in the built environment, this paper will show that the university administration has taken an egregious amount of time and used a meager amount of resources to make physical spaces in support of minorities on campus. The historical development of Cal Poly's built environment asserts the administration's paternal dismissal of minority struggles on campus.

Historiography

Both architecture and universities are inherently political processes and reflections, and should therefore be analyzed in tandem. This paper will observe how architecture reflects and supports the power structures of university institutions. As architect Bradford Grant writes in *Campus Design and Critical Pedagogy*, "Through aesthetics, styles, and the organization of

space, campus architecture has often been complicit in reproducing the dominant ideologies and social relations of society, undermining diversity and its critical possibilities.”¹ College campuses, unlike other civic institutions, are permanent structures made for a temporary and transient population. Universities are sites of educational curiosity, youth engagement, and industry research, which must maintain adaptability as completely new groups of people and waves of popular opinion may inhabit the same building across a short span of time. This flexibility is difficult to maintain, and requires considerable forethought from administrators in the form of a campus master plan. As I will argue, when administrators drag their feet on establishing centers of equity for disenfranchised students, such as a pride center or ensured housing for Black students during times of redlining, they are committing to maintaining the current inequity until funding and external pressure surmount their initial decisions. Richard Hatch, another architectural theorist, maintains that, “Architecture is the concrete manifestation of the institutions that make up society... architecture is the reification of social roles and a set of three-dimensional statements about power relationships.”² Hatch argues that ordering spaces distills into ordering social relationships; therefore, the space granted to certain groups validates their presence on campus, while a lack of space downplays or denies their presence at the university. Michael Foucault, a French philosopher, refers to architecture as a ‘dispositif,’ or a tool/structure that maintains and reinforces societal power dynamics.³ These dynamics mean that architecture has the power to either support or subvert societal norms, in essence defining the campus climate. Paul Turner, a university planning historian, writes that architecture on college campuses is “shaped by the desire to create an ideal community ... a vehicle for expressing the

¹Thomas Dutton and Bradford Grant, “Campus Design and Critical Pedagogy” *Academe* 77, no. 4 (1991): 39.

²Thomas Dutton and Bradford Grant, “Campus Design and Critical Pedagogy,” 42.

³Farzaneh Haghighi, “Study. Be Silent. Die: Indeterminate Architecture and the Dispositif of Studentification,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 22, no. 1 (2018): 62.

utopian social visions of the American imagination.”⁴ Historically, minority populations--people of color, people with disabilities, women, and queer people--have been excluded from any ostensible American utopia. Moving forward, it is essential that we expand this vision to truly reflect the various groups on campus. This action not only affirms the current student population in its entirety, but moreover suggests to future applicants that whomever they are, they are included in Cal Poly’s vision. Unfortunately, Cal Poly has not demonstrated a willingness to implement these changes architecturally. This paper will attempt to address architecture as a power structure in relation to minorities on Cal Poly’s campus.

Women

During the Great Depression in 1929, Cal Poly barred women from enrolling. They claimed the financial stress of educating both men and women was too great, a claim supported by California Governor C.C. Young’s legislative act. Though this mandate was repealed in 1937, women did not enroll again as students until 1956.⁵ President McPhee battled to keep Cal Poly a single-sex institution after 1937, openly saying “I have... been bluffing a whole regiment of girls who have applied for admission. Our Admissions Officer has a tremendous file of correspondence with girls who have wanted to enroll in existing courses.”⁶ Whatever his motivations for excluding women, McPhee cited housing women as a financial barrier. The assumptions that both President McPhee and Dean of Students Everett Chandler made about housing women, particularly the school’s ability or inability to regulate women’s social lives, are reflected in both the 1954 Coed Housing Report and his letters to McPhee. Chandler asserts that

⁴ Peter Allen, “End of Modernism?” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 70, no. 3 (2011): 356.

⁵ Bryce Owens, “The Heroic Role of Women at Cal Poly” (Senior Project, California Polytechnic State University, 2007).

⁶ Letter from Julian A. McPhee to Burton Vasche, 4 September, 1954, Special Collections and University Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

“we would not want them just wandering around any old place, any old time,”⁷ which would be very difficult to regulate in a dorm atmosphere. He also warns that, “unless there are at least a minimum of conveniences and a homelike atmosphere, the more desirable students will not come, leaving us with those who may become a disciplinary problem.”⁸ This assessment that women have vastly different and greater housing needs than men is an attempt on the part of Cal Poly’s administration to use spatial means to justify inequity. While Cal Poly claimed to simply lack funds to house women, the women’s dorms remained #16 on their building priority list - behind another men’s dorm and a Feed Storage unit - until 1954, when they rose to #7 after external pressure from the public.⁹ When the dorms finally were established, they were located at the southwestern end of campus, near the President’s House, apart from the dining halls and social spaces of campus. A map of the 1959 campus is included in the appendix.¹⁰ The assertion that women were undesirable on campus is reflected in the disparate and inconvenient building placements, echoing Hatch’s statement on social behaviors and beliefs mirroring the built environment. Cal Poly’s slow process of prioritizing women’s dorms, along with their placement of the dorms apart from other hubs of student life, reflect a reluctant acceptance, rather than celebration, of women returning to the university campus.

⁷Letter from Everett M. Chandler to Julian A. McPhee, 11 October 1954, Box 11, Co-education 1954, Special Collections and University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

⁸“Coed Housing Report” (June 23, 1954), Box 11, Co-education 1954, Special Collections and University Archives, Robert E. Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California. Page 12.

⁹“Budget Assessment” (December 1949), Box 141, Cal Poly Master Plans 1949, Special Collections and University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

¹⁰ Campus Map, 1959. Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

Disabled Students

The Disabled Student Services began in 1974, but lacked a permanent physical position on campus for years.¹¹ In a 1976 Mustang News opinion piece, one student advocates for the DSS to be relocated to the University Union rather than the pinball machines that then occupied the space.¹² In his research paper, “A Long, Slow March Toward Accessibility: Cal Poly’s Effort to Eliminate Barriers for Physically Disabled Students,” Tyler Lopez notes that after the 1973 Rehabilitation Act which required accessibility as a civil right, Cal Poly ranked only “middle of the field”¹³ in improving campus accessibility. However, while their removals of architectural barriers were only average, in 1976-1977, Cal Poly enrolled the highest number of disabled students of all California State Universities and Colleges.¹⁴ Therefore, the institution proportionately falls below the average in providing accessibility, failing their students with disabilities when they had the enrollment numbers to become a champion and pioneer of universal campus design. While Cal Poly spent a considerable amount of state funding on curb cuts, drinking fountains, access ramps, and other supplemental moves toward accessibility, thirty-seven buildings on campus lacked two or more accessible entrances, nineteen of which had no or only ineffective accessible entrances.¹⁵ After the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a further piece of accessibility legislation, was passed in 1991, Cal Poly took a second look at accessibility on campus. In a 1993 report on removing architectural barriers on campus, Cal Poly

¹¹ “Disabled and Undaunted” Mustang Daily. October 3, 1990, 5.

¹² “Pinball Or Child Care? A Question Of Values.” Mustang Daily, March 4, 1976, 2.

¹³ Tyler Lopez, *A Long Slow March Toward Accessibility Cal Poly’s Effort to Eliminate Barriers for Physically Disabled Students* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 2017), pg. 6.

¹⁴ “1976-1977 Evaluation of Disabled Student Services in the California State Universities and Colleges” (1977) Division of Student Affairs, Office of the Chancellor, Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California, 17.

¹⁵ “Architectural Barrier Removal Program Transition Plan” (1993) The California State University Office of the Chancellor, Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California, 213.

estimated that it would cost another eight million dollars to make the campus fully accessible.¹⁶ Cal Poly measures its success in accessibility by the lowest legal bar - federal regulation - rather than student experiences and the reality of life on campus for disabled students. As Cal Poly only checks off minimum technical requirements set forth by the Rehabilitation Act, the burden of developing truly accessible spaces through universal design falls to future generations. The ADA Compliance Assessment of Cal Poly reflects the administration's most basic compliance with federal standards rather than a true shift in campus design and planning for accessibility. What would serving needs, rather than editing mistakes, look like for accessibility at Cal Poly? If universal design was prioritized in campus master planning, rather than relegated to architectural change orders years after construction, what would our campus look like today? The university's hesitancy to cater to its students in need of infrastructural support has limited accessibility across campus.

Black Students and the BSU

Students of color faced barriers to organizing and gaining recognition on campus; this paper will take a closer look into pursuits from the Black Student Union (BSU). In a later section, this paper will also address organizing space for the BSU in the University Union. The BSU, first formed in 1968, made a variety of requests to the administration, one being a Black-only dormitory.¹⁷ President Robert Kennedy dismissed this request, claiming disbelief that Black students actually wanted their own dormitory and asserting that Cal Poly would not segregate its dorms. However, the BSU's request reflected frustration with off-campus housing at the time, as many landlords refused to rent to Black residents and students.¹⁸ Cal Poly's dismissal of this

¹⁶“Architectural Barrier Removal Program Transition Plan” California Polytechnic State University, 209.

¹⁷ Megan Manning, “The Civil Rights Movement at Cal Poly,” *The Forum: Journal of History* 5, no. 1 (2013): 102.

¹⁸Megan Manning, “The Civil Rights Movement at Cal Poly,” 103.

frustration, and denial of the racist reality students faced, disappoints as well as endangers students. The university continued to deny Black students their own dorm, and the matter has not been readdressed. This decision, framed by the administration as a defense of civil rights, invalidates the needs of students in one of the most basic rights they deserve on campus - housing.

Queer Students

In 1972, Cal Poly students began applying for a recognized Gay Student Union on campus. President Kennedy opposed this formation, and the ensuing legal battle reached the State Attorney General in 1976, where the by-laws of the GSU were altered. President Kennedy warned the campus of the dangers of allowing groups that claim to be non-discriminatory in membership and doubted that the group would stick to only ‘studying a phenomenon’ with no stated intention of practicing what was studied,” a strange requirement for a public university GSU at the time. Kennedy goes on, arguing “Must we have no choice in denying recognition to the Ku Klux Klan, the American Nazi Party, the Symbionese Liberation Army? If their by-laws as submitted stated, ‘we won’t discriminate’ and we will ‘study’ such phenomena as racial superiority of whites, racial inferiority of Jews, and guerilla warfare tactics, should they be recognised?”¹⁹ Kennedy’s analogy to these hate groups shows his disdain for validating queer students on campus. Despite the 1971 formation of Cal Poly’s Gay Liberation Front - the first queer student organization on campus - the only reflection of queer space in the campus’s built environment came in 2002, when the Pride Alliance Center opened on campus in a temporary trailer. In 2009, the Pride Center moved to a small room in the University Union, and requests

¹⁹“The Kennedy Interviews,” Mustang Daily, October 11, 1976, 8.

are currently being made to move to a larger, more accessible space.²⁰ One student in a 2003 Mustang News editorial criticized Cal Poly for its slow movement towards queer inclusivity. Maya Andlig remarked, “(That this took so long) says something about this campus...When it comes to that kind of stuff, we’re a throwback to the 50s.”²¹ Cal Poly has shown a pattern of both denying spatial access to students and granting it to groups in conflict with students’ civil rights. Last May, President Jeffrey Armstrong and the Academic Senate began discussions of canceling Chick-Fil-A’s contract with Cal Poly, due to Chick-Fil-A’s millions of dollars in donations to anti-LGBTQ organizations in 2017 alone.²² President Armstrong defended Cal Poly’s association with Chick-Fil-A, stating “Who decides what values? Who decides what’s bad? What’s the next topic? What’s the next company? Are we going to expect the [Cal Poly] Corporation to investigate, look at every company? Where do we draw the line? It’s a very slippery slope.”²³ While this discussion does not surround offering physical space to minorities on campus, the reasoning and approach that the university has taken echoes its earlier hesitancy to begin validating student concerns. It seems that the “slippery slope” argument has been a backbone of the administration’s defense in halting social change on campus. Cal Poly’s initial vehement rejection of a GSU, coupled with their small concession of a temporary trailer parked outside of the University Union as an interim pride center until 2009, reflects Cal Poly’s low priorities of validating queer experiences on campus, and complacency with keeping discussions of sexual orientation out of campus spaces.

²⁰“Cal Poly Hxstory: Transgender & Queer Student Union,” Cal Poly TQSU, Accessed February 9, 2020, <https://calpolytqsu.wixsite.com/index/cal-poly-hxstory>.

²¹Samantha Yale. “LGBT Center Celebrates.” Mustang Daily. October, 9, 2003, 7.

²² Aiden McGloin, “Academic Senate Proposes Resolution in Support of Kicking Chick-Fil-A off Campus,” Mustang News, May 3, 2019.

²³ Aiden McGloin, “Academic Senate Proposes Resolution,” Mustang News.

University Union

The University Union (UU) building - constructed in 1978 - created new spaces and opportunities on campus for student groups to gather. In Curtis Shupe's "Design Analysis Of Two Buildings On The Campus Of Cal Poly: The University Union Building And The Architecture Classroom Building," he describes the lack of student gathering areas on campus before the University Union, which were limited to the garden outside the architecture building and the lawn in front of the Kennedy Library.²⁴ He adds, "Prior to this time, the only structure serving as a Union was a small wood constructed building labeled, "Temporary College Union," which was located across from the present administration building."²⁵ This building only provided offices for established ASI groups, rather than informal student meetings. The addition of larger space with the UU opened up potential for further student organization and sociological reflection. While the administration expressed intent for creating co-ed social game rooms within the UU, Shupe claims that during the entire first year of its operation women were absent from the new game areas and billiards room in the UU.²⁶ While this statistic could reflect either a self-segregated student body or a tone-deaf activities program, the result is a university space touting itself as inclusive, while not effectively catering to its complete demographic. Similarly, the BSU was excluded from the UU for years after its opening. During the 1970's, the BSU headquarters were located in downtown San Luis Obispo office building.²⁷ While minority groups lacked the space on campus to organize, the administration planned on implementing both a bank and a barber shop inside the student union, which were both later dismissed before its opening in 1978.

²⁴ Curtis Richard Shupe. *The Design Analysis Of Two Buildings On The Campus Of Cal Poly: The University Union Building And The Architecture Classroom Building* (San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University, 1978), 8.

²⁵ Curtis Shupe, *Design Analysis*, 9.

²⁶ Curtis Shupe, *Design Analysis*, 11.

²⁷ Jackson, C.E. "BSU, administration discuss black issues." *Mustang Daily*, April 2, 1969.

Shupe describes tables in the UU during 1978 that “all black students seem to use... as a base of operations,”²⁸ but the Multicultural Center, a resource center and lounge for students of color, did not open in the University Union until 1982.²⁹ By denying minorities protected space within the University Union, Cal Poly weakened the organizing abilities and voices of such groups forced to meet off campus.

Conclusion

In recent years, Cal Poly has been accused of fostering a hostile climate for minorities and, as the university expands to create new student social hubs, housing, and educational spaces, the spaces that are missing may say even more than the spaces built. The current draft of Cal Poly’s Strategic Plan (2018- 2023) outlines plans for a new Greek Village on campus as part of residential expansion in the northwestern quadrant of campus (map included in the appendix).³⁰ The Mustang Daily reports that the administration believes the Village would unify Greek life, “creating a safer place to live, a lack of sensitive neighbors and an on-campus location for meetings.”³¹ Many consider the administration’s prioritization of Greek students’ needs over other students is a betrayal to the inclusive rhetoric administrators have been spouting in recent years. Historically, the misbehavior of fraternities and sororities - from hazing to sexual assault and displays of blatant racism - have not been punished at Cal Poly to a degree on par with other universities.³² Despite Cal Poly’s justification of the Greek life village fostering a healthy Greek system, the administration has failed to provide any evidence on this front. Rather than protect

²⁸Curtis Shupe, Design Analysis, 16.

²⁹“Timeline of Cal Poly’s History,” California Polytechnic State University Robert E. Kennedy Library, Accessed February 9, 2020, <https://lib.calpoly.edu/search-and-find/collections-and-archives/university-archives/timeline/cp-history/>

³⁰“DRAFT Strategic Plan 2018-2023” (September 2018), Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

³¹Isabella Paoletto. “A Greek Village Could be Coming to Cal Poly.” Mustang News, February 11, 2019.

³²Matthew Haag, “Blackface Leads to Fraternity Suspension at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo,” The New York Times, April 11, 2018.

other students placed at risk by the actions of fraternities, Cal Poly has chosen to prioritize Greek life over vulnerable students. Gamma Zeta Alpha's diversity chair, James Abundis, struggles to see the justification for Greek housing on campus: "Why should we get housing? There's students who are homeless on campus who can barely afford tuition. I can't help to think that people probably need it more than me."³³ As the cost of living in San Luis Obispo continues to rise, housing has become a controversial and divisive issue, pushing students off campus in search of cheaper rent. In 2016, two years before Cal Poly released this strategic plan, the university published that 12.3 percent of students reported being homeless.³⁴ Fraternities and sororities require members to pay dues, and coupling this expense with the added charge of living on campus, the price of an apartment at the Greek Village would likely be prohibitively expensive for many. Why champion students in Greek life rather than minority students who are attending the whitest³⁵ and wealthiest³⁶ public university in California? President Armstrong has repeatedly dismissed the notion that the litany of racist incidents on campus correlates to a racist campus climate, and denied that racism is an issue at Cal Poly.³⁷

Architecture reflects a promise of investment and a prioritization of spatial needs, and plays an integral role in defining social and power dynamics. Each year for the past decade, student enrollment has surpassed the school's projections, and Vice Provost for Enrollment Development James Maraviglia reports that campus infrastructure at Cal Poly has exceeded

³³Isabella Paoletto, "Greek Village," Mustang News.

³⁴Isabella Paoletto, "Greek Village," Mustang News.

³⁵ Julia Jacobo, "Milo Yiannopoulos appearing at Cal Poly amid racially charged climate on campus," ABC News, April 26, 2018.

³⁶ Brendan Matsuyama, "Income Diversity at Cal Poly Among Lowest in California," Mustang News, February 4, 2017.

³⁷Julia Jacobo, "Milo Yiannopoulos," ABC News.

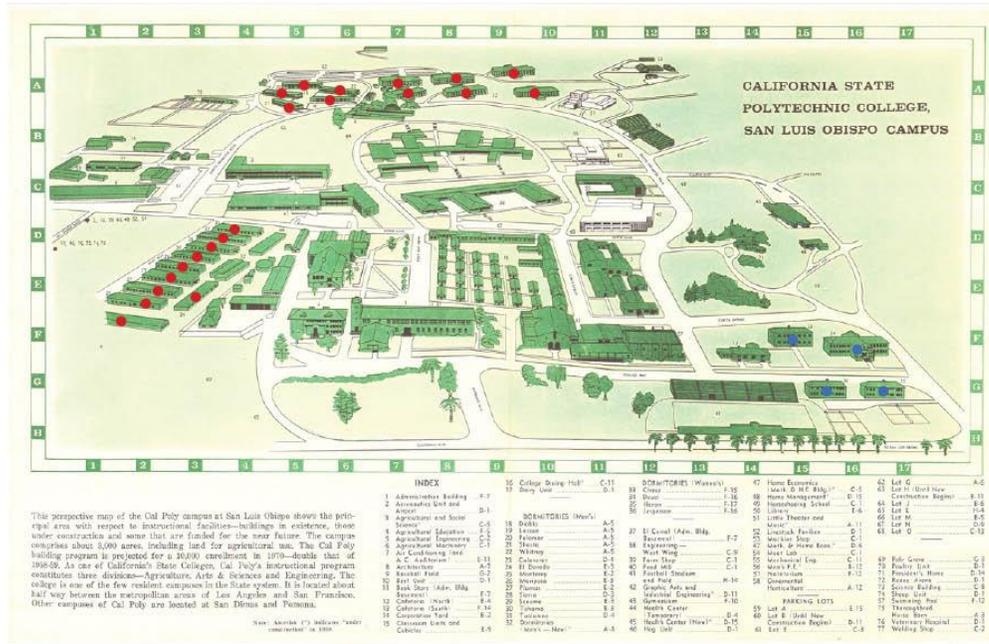
capacity.³⁸ Now, Cal Poly must decide where and what to build, in collaboration with the campus master plan. Which aspects of student life will Cal Poly give spatial validation to, and what groups will be denied access to campus resources? As each new facility is built, Cal Poly has the chance to make a statement louder than any email or policy, an investment much more telling than hosting cultural celebrations. As students, community members, and we must make it clear to the administration that we see and acknowledge the deep power they are wielding, and we will be listening to their actions rather than their words.

³⁸ Bryce Aston. "Class and Office Space Stagnated as Cal Poly Gained More Students and Faculty." Mustang News, September 27, 2019.

APPENDIX

MEN'S DORMITORIES ●

WOMEN'S DORMITORIES ●



Annotated by Author. Campus Map, 1959. Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.



Photo of Pride Center Trailer Opening, UA0008, Pride Center Records, Box 4, Pride Center Scrapbook, 1973-2010. Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

ILLUSTRATIVE CAMPUS MAP
Greek Life Village Highlighted In Red



Annotated by Author. Strategic Plan Draft, 2018. Special Collections and University Archives, Kennedy Library, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California.

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