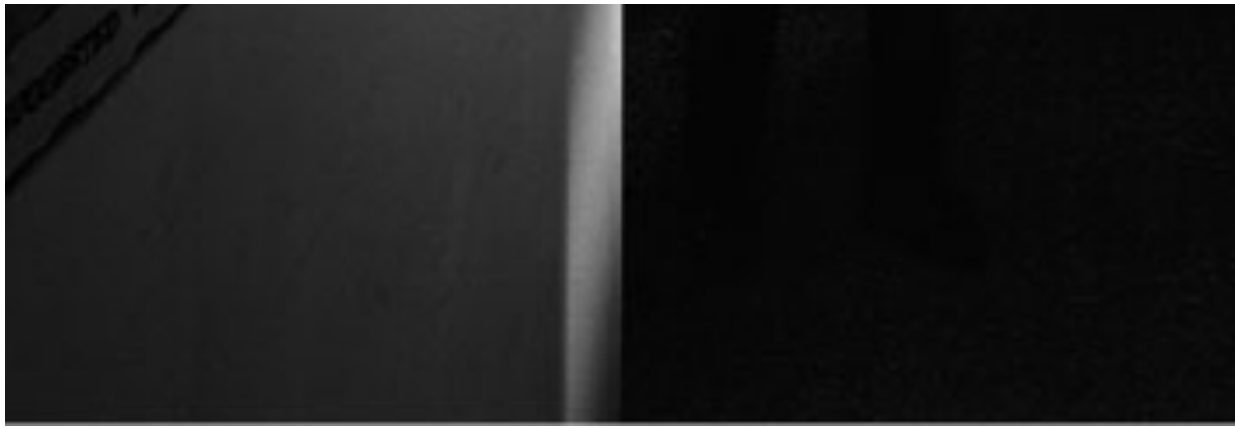


Erasing Pereira

William Pereira's meticulous master plan for UC Irvine has not just been ignored—but undone. Our critic, architect Alan Hess, calls for a philosophy.

By **Alan Hess** - June 30, 2014





What do California's cultural institutions have against William Pereira?

The Chicago native, seeing Orange County transitioning awkwardly from orchards to housing tracts after and building opportunity that came his way. Two of the architect's biggest plums: the master-planned city President Lyndon Johnson dedicated the university site in 1964, this new campus boldly pointed the way to him Orange County's Pierre L'Enfant, the planner of Washington, D.C.; Christopher Wren, the rebuilder of London in 1666; and Daniel "Make No Little Plans" Burnham of Chicago, all rolled into one.

Pereira was not just celebrating the Golden State's newfound power and wealth. He already was predicting urban density and reduce dependence on the car, to protect the rolling coastal landscape from muddled sprawl through passive design—all decades ahead of other thinkers.

Yet today, UC Irvine and LACMA are erasing Pereira's—and California's—midcentury legacy. The art museum is replacing its original buildings for a large tar-colored concrete blob. And as its 50th anniversary celebrations get underway, the vision Pereira designed for it.

Like the works of other artists who were ahead of their time, Pereira's have been misunderstood, but now he finally is being rediscovered as a major Southern California architect. The first retrospective of his career at the Nevada Museum of Art. And while some of his buildings have been demolished, LAX's Theme Building was a success with widespread popular support, in 2010. But will enough of his buildings remain to be enjoyed?

Pereira (1909-1985) was a big-picture guy. He could build for industry and aerospace (campuses for Chrysler and Autonetics—now a federal building—in Laguna Niguel), jet ports (Eddie Martin Terminal), and modernist hotels (the Hotel, plus an early—and unbuilt—plan for Disneyland). These were elements of the suburban metropolis of Southern California, and Pereira, who'd made L.A. his home since the '30s, helped define that metropolis.

He created landmarks outside the county as well: Los Angeles International Airport, with its spidery, Space Age jewel; San Francisco's Transamerica pyramid, whose sloping sides allow sunlight to penetrate the narrow corridors; the ultramodern factory for the nation's newest electronics medium; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, a world that there was more to L.A. culture than surfing and skateboards.

A walk through the UC Irvine campus today still shows us Pereira's ideas for California's golden future as of October 1965. But be prepared—our tour also will visit many detours and demolitions that have undermined many of his considered plans.

We begin at the threshold between town and gown: the shady terrace between Langson Library and the William Pereira Associates in association with Jones & Emmons, and Blurock Ellerbroek Associates. Like

seem to float, slightly above us, on either side. They even look a bit like vessels—notice the broad “deck” and the “gangplanks” (the stairways) leading up to the entries.

His designs reflected these concerns: the slender fins running up and down both buildings are built-in sunscreens that are the architectural signature for the entire original campus. Each academic department has its own. On the Gateway Study Center, they are slender fins that shield occupants from the heat and glare; Pereira integrating passive solar features such as this. At top and bottom, the fins loop and meet, casting playful shadows as the sun moves across the sky.

We stroll now in the shade of the plaza’s tree canopy—each tree in its own planter box lined up as carefully toward Aldrich Park. From here, we gaze into the heart of the campus. The mature urban forest spreading across the plaza considering that this was all a treeless cattle pasture in 1965.

We move easily down the wide steps from one orderly, formal terrace to the next, but we’re about to cross through groves of trees. The smooth, straight trunks of the eucalyptus seem to be a model for the tall slender columns of the Library. Actually, landscape architects Robert Herrick Carter, C. Jacques Hahn, J. Charles Hoffman, and Francisco Pereira to make the park’s irregular appearance look natural.

It’s also important to notice what’s not here: an imposing administration building. Pereira left the center of campus to another famous American architect did at the University of Virginia. Just as Thomas Jefferson wanted his buildings in balance with nature, so did Pereira.

Let’s walk back through the gateway plaza and turn left along the Outer Ring Road that circles Aldrich Park and academic buildings. On school days, the broad road is crowded with pedestrians. Cars and trucks have a hard time dividing cars and people was a daring urban planning idea. Just after we pass the Student Center on the left, we turn right to one side and notice the elegantly arched tunnel carved through the berm below. This is part of a design that allows service vehicles to reach buildings inside the ring without crossing the pedestrian road. Arriving at Krieger Hall on the left, we cross one of the radial pathways that extend outward from Aldrich Park. This is how Pereira planned for rational growth; looking to the right we can see the pedestrian bridge that connects the humanities buildings and the Claire Trevor School of the Arts, which Pereira designed in the ’70s.

But right now, let’s explore the humanities and Krieger halls, and the steps and terraces between them that connect them to the ground. This is another example of how Pereira balanced nature and architecture.

To appreciate this radical design, remember that it was common practice in Southern California in the 1950s to bulldoze hills into large, flat building pads—obliterating the natural topography. Pereira had a different idea: to leave the land intact and let the buildings “float” above the rolling terrain. But just how do you make large concrete structures weightless?

First, the buildings never seem to touch the earth. Pereira accomplishes this illusion beautifully by setting the buildings back slightly, and circling them with wide terrace balconies, so the ground floor is hidden in shadows. You can still connect with the earth. Meanwhile, the main parts rise into the sunshine above the floating terraces. The buildings float with the undulating landscape.

For the university’s first dozen years, Pereira’s plan inspired other notable architects to build in the same style. In the distance you can just glimpse off in the distance the six-story Engineering Tower by Kistner, Wright and Wright stands on sinewy, muscular legs, pressing its upper floors high into the air.

Even the smaller-scale student housing units reflect Pereira’s forward-looking vision. Across the bridge and

Plaza, Mesa Court Housing by Pereira and Grillias Savage Alves—the architects of Dana Point Harbor—the commons building. Beyond the Engineering Tower, the dormitories in Middle Earth rely on cleanly cut clerestories for balanced light within, but avoiding the boredom of Bauhaus boxes.

Futuristic buildings, living lightly and respectfully on the earth, blending with nature: This is the core of the future of the American city. But by the '80s, the university turned its back on this vision. Why? We'll get to that background.

Fashions changed. A new style called postmodernism arrived, and it had to cut Pereira's brand of modernism.

"In the view of many observers," said Los Angeles Times architecture critic Leon Whiteson in 1988, UC Irvine was boringly detailed. Campus wags dubbed the modernist concrete boxes that enclose UCI's inner ring mall "the concrete boxes."

Events such as the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill took the shine off the spirit of optimism inspired by technology. By 1972, the same buildings that had been regarded as a grand, positive vision seven years earlier for the dystopian parable of the fourth Planet of the Apes movie, "Conquest of the Planet of the Apes," were seen as a warning.

David J. Neuman succeeded Pereira as campus architect in 1977, and announced that "UCI is growing up from a suburban college to an urbane campus with an ambition to be academically and architecturally first-rate."

Changing course, Neuman brought in international architects, postmodern stars, each of whom went in a different direction from Pereira's holistic plan. Charles Moore, architect of the 1987 University Extension buildings, wrote that the optimism of the 1960s. ... But as we all know, the '60s dream faltered." Moore's buildings, among them the imaginary Italian hill town's church and city hall, not Pereira's exuberant futurism. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's Business School is a handsome import from an Ivy League university, while Robert A. M. Stern's Studio 4 is a Rome, complete with acroteria, those pointy ears at the corners of the roof.

Let's continue up the hill from Krieger Hall, where we'll see two of these postmodern monuments, Ayala Library on the right, and McGaugh Hall by Arthur Erickson, on the left of the ring road.

Though Stirling was one of the most original designers of his era, his stout British forms on Ayala Library were in stucco. Only Erickson's McGaugh Hall kept the faith of Pereira's futurist technological optimism, but today it's gone.

Across from McGaugh Hall we see an even sadder sight: Pereira's Steinhaus Hall stripped of its signature old sunscreens were replaced during an earthquake retrofit in 2008, there was little support within the architecture community for decades when Pereira's ideas were dismissed took their toll. The screens were replaced with a plain flat surface, a shadow of the original.

This remodeling was partly due to campus officials incorrectly tagging Pereira's buildings with the least flattering architectural style: brutalism.

Brutalism isn't quite as bad as it sounds. Its proponents used raw, unadorned concrete directly, just as they would with raw steel. But UC Irvine's original buildings were never brutalist. Krieger Hall's smooth surfaces were painted a color, not roughly hewn. Where brutalist buildings settle solidly on the ground, the Gateway Study Center's columns, accenting how it floats above the earth.

But, as I said, fashions keep changing. In the '80s, postmodernism was seen as the antidote to Pereira's. He thinks postmodernism needs an antidote. It already has demolished a 1986 building by Frank Gehry, once the School of Architecture. The intentionally raw forms of the now-destroyed Information and Computer Science Building had been an early milestone in Gehry's development as a world-class architect.

Since the early '90s, current campus architect Rebekah Gladson has led the campus in yet another direction. She stands Donald Bren Hall by Esherick, Homsey, Dodge & Davis, from 2006. To see it, walk up the outer rim past Rowland Hall (an original building by architect Kenneth Wing, following Pereira's lead, but now part of the new campus). Hall on the right is one of the more distinguished of the newer buildings, but unlike any of Pereira's designs. Clustered closely together with Engineering Hall and the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology, it is more like a traditional mid-rise from a crowded, dense city center than part of an open, futuristic campus in a new landscape. And so has our tour.

It's true that universities inevitably change over 50 years. New needs, new technology, even new academic buildings are used and new ones are designed. But it's just as true that if you have a good, strong design, it can last even as you adapt to new times.

Pereira's work is not flawless. He pushed boundaries. His vision of corporate and university collaboration in the '60s. But today the biases that put Pereira's reputation into a tailspin in the '80s are themselves being questioned. As the brews over the demolition of Pereira's LACMA buildings, we can reassess his place in architectural history. He is a major visionary.

Pereira dared to take new planning ideas further than most mainstream architects. At a time when Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" was beginning to awaken the nation to an awareness of ecology, Pereira advocated for preserving natural wetlands and hillsides, using passive energy design, reducing dependence on the auto, defending natural wetlands and hillsides, using passive energy design, promoting a rational high-density, pedestrian-oriented town center (which was never built) at the heart of the city.

So while cycles of fashions are sure to keep changing, they also are sure to circle back to recognize good design. And it is in step with the latest trends in architecture: The honeycomb geometry of Krieger Hall's sunscreens and the facades of the Broad Museum now under construction on Los Angeles' Bunker Hill by Diller Scofidio + Renfro architects.

We expect a university to be efficient and up-to-date. But we also expect a university to preserve our heritage. The Irvine campus started in 1965 as a showcase of California's bright future, but since the '80s it has abdicated that role, becoming more mundane, like an ordinary business park.

1960s-era photograph by Ansel Adams

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