Architectural Character: How to Identify the Important Elements on the Sheldon Jackson Campus

The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties embody two primary goals that reflect the importance of the architectural character of any structure. First is the preservation of historic material and finishes that contribute to the general aesthetic of the structure. Second, and slightly more vague, is the preservation of a building’s distinguishing character. Every historic structure is unique, with its own identity, history, and distinctive character. It is important to specify the definition of character from the view of historic preservation professionals and the Department of the Interior. In the world of preservation, character refers to “all those visual aspects and physical features that comprise the appearance of every historic building.” A good guide for exploring the concept of character is Historic Preservation Brief #17: Architectural Character, distributed by the National Parks Service. To summarize, character-defining elements include the overall shape of the building, its materials, craftsmanship, decorative details, interior space and finishes, and the cumulative environment surrounding the structure.

Identifying the Character of Sheldon Jackson Campus Buildings

Outlined here is a three-step process that can be used to identify the materials, features, spaces and structure that contribute to the visual and historic character of the historic buildings on the Sheldon Jackson Campus. This approach treats a building in a manner reflecting the everyday use of all historic structures. The first step involves examining the building from afar to understand its overall setting and architectural context (here, the campus plan of Sheldon Jackson). The second step involves moving closer, to evaluate at “arm’s length” the details involved in the exterior construction of the building. The third step involves going into and through the building to perceive those spaces, rooms and details that comprise the building’s interior visual character, often drastically different from the historic exterior character of the building.

Step 1: The Overall Visual and Aesthetic Setting

To truly understand a historic structure, one must start with an examination of the historic (and present) landscape surrounding the building. On the Sheldon Jackson College campus, this involves a detailed examination of structures as they relate to the campus plan, both historically and today. The major contributors to a building’s overall characteristics are embodied in the structures’ relation to other buildings on the Sheldon Jackson College campus. Simply, a building’s architectural character may be rooted in its relation to other similar structures surrounding it.

This is exemplified in the historic structures of the Sheldon Jackson College campus. The general setting of the Sheldon Jackson College buildings has a drastic affect on the overall feeling of the place. Boxy forms with low-pitched gable roofs and false projections of structural members characterize the style. A general aesthetic is maintained on the campus and thus helps to establish a historic identity.
As previously discussed in the campus history section, Ludlow and Peabody’s design of the Sheldon Jackson College campus is attributed in part to the design of the University of Virginia, built between 1817 and 1826. Designed by Thomas Jefferson, the University of Virginia campus adheres to a strict formal plan. This plan, designed in the Beaux-Arts tradition, possesses a central quadrangle with an anchor building and symmetrical buildings flanking both sides. This is reflected in the original plan of the Sheldon Jackson College campus.

A general approach to looking at the buildings and site will provide a better understanding of their overall character. A strong understanding of the character of the site must be understood to evaluate the character of individual buildings on campus.

Recommendations:

- **Site Plan**
  a.) The plan is an integral element to the overall visual character of the Sheldon Jackson College campus. It is imperative to maintain the symmetry and axis originally intended for the campus. At all costs, maintain the historic character of the quadrangle by leaving the open space between structures and the open lawn.
  b.) The feeling of the campus stems from a series of transitional spaces. In other words, the character of the campus is made up by the combination of both open and enclosed space. The landscape must support the use of the space between structures while also fulfilling function.
  c.) Always review the impact of landscaping on the sequence from outside to inside. Ask questions that explore how a change in the landscape will affect the use of a particular door or path. Will the addition of a path or parking lot change how people approach a structure? Always keep in mind the movement of people though the space, and how this they will experience the space.
  d.) View Corridors: Always remember the impact that changes can have on the views of and from other structures. Historic views are part of the original character of the campus, and thus should always be maintained.

- **Vehicular Traffic**
  a.) Always remember that the primary user of any college campus is the pedestrian. Vehicular access must be limited to allow the pedestrian to feel safe and separated from the vehicular traffic.
  b.) It is imperative to keep in mind the historic entrances and series of entrances into a structure. The presence of vehicular traffic has drastically altered the Sheldon Jackson College campus since its period of significance. When possible, emphasis on historic pathways will promote the understanding of the overall campus.

- **Campus Buildings**
  a.) The shape of the buildings is perhaps the greatest contributing factor to the feel of the Sheldon Jackson College Campus. It is vitally important maintain these forms when working in the historic part of the campus. Notable deviations, such as is seen in Sage Hall, should be embraced as contributing to the variety of architectural experience on the campus. Yet, it is important to note the location of deviations. These are not part of the original campus plan. When construction involves the original campus buildings, adhere to the general forms established in the original plans.
b.) Roof Shape is tightly bound to the overall shape of the structure. Maintain forms like the clipped gable where appropriate.

c.) Openings determine the sequence of entrance into a structure. Always maintain historic porches and opennings. These are contributing factors to the architectural character of the buildings and thus should not be altered.

- Campus Plan
  a.) In terms of the setting and campus plan, it is important to simply maintain the historic fabric and integrity of the original campus layout. Do not alter the main quad space or the formal axial plan.

Step 2: Visual Character at Close Range

The quality of the materials and craftsmanship in the buildings is vitally important to the architectural character of the Sheldon Jackson College campus. These materials are important because they demonstrate a sense of craftsmanship and age that is felt on the campus. The use of split shingles as exterior siding is a defining element to many of the structures on campus. Each unique finish material adds a distinct architectural feel, which influences the character of the individual building and campus as a whole. Furthermore, many of the exterior details are a result of the care and craftsmanship initially put into the building of the structures. This high quality of craftsmanship is often referenced as one of the primary differences between modern and historic structures. The craftsmanship must be relished and expressed for all to see.

Recommendations:

a.) Exterior Finishes are as important to the building as the overall shape of the structure. The historic integrity of the structure is closely tied to the maintenance of the shingle work on the campus. The shingles are a character-defining feature of most buildings on campus.

b.) Windows are as important to the building’s appearance as the exterior sheathing. The windows cover roughly half of the exterior façade. It is important that all windows contribute to the feel of the building and thus should not be altered. The original windows constitute the main character of the building.

c.) Projections such as dormers, porches, fire escapes, and staircases add to the historic feel of the structure, as well as adding eye-catching details to the general mass of the building.

d.) Structural members often determine the shape of a structure. The main campus has clipped gables determined by the shape or an interior roof truss. In other places, the shape of the structure is determined by the use of concrete. Always research how the material affects the shape of the building.

e.) Paint and color are important factors in giving a building a certain feel. Sheldon Jackson brown is a signature color on campus and references the historic look of the buildings as well as giving them the rustic overtone that fits them to their environment.

Step 3: Identifying the Character of Interior Spaces, Features and Finishes

The character of the interior space of a structure may be somewhat more difficult to ascertain due to the relatively narrow field of vision. This difficulty is due, at least in part, to the fact that so much of the exterior can be seen at one time and it is possible to grasp the essential character rather quickly on the outside. Perhaps most important to understanding of the historic character of a building is to move through the structure one room at a time. Step 3 concerns the
understanding of the interior quality of space, and individual feeling given by each room or the combination of these individual elements.

At Sheldon Jackson College, there is the added difficulty of multiple layers of reconstruction within each building. Few buildings on the campus retain their original floor plans, yet obvious connections to the historic design exist. Careful examination of the sequence of passages through the buildings reveal a link to the historic order within each structure. Most of the buildings have retained the historic entrance and entry hall. Thus, the entrance and sequence of movement from the front door to the lobby, to the central hall or stair, and finally to the individual rooms, is an integral element of the historic structures. In most buildings on the Sheldon Jackson College campus, it is possible to perceive visual links between a series of spaces. Closing off the opening between these spaces would change the character from “open” to “closed.” It is important to remember that the character of a building is not just the exterior finishes and visual characteristics, but also the sequence of entry, which lends to a feeling given by the building.

Recommendations:

a.) The importance of interior features and finishes to the character of the buildings should not be overlooked. Although there is a relatively diverse range of interior finishes now present on the campus, the historic structures possessed a relatively restrained palette. To restore the interior character of the structure, it is important to limit the number of materials used within the buildings. This will establish a uniformity and reserved feeling once present on the Sheldon Jackson College campus.

b.) Remember that all interior spaces have an impact on the general feel of a structure. The historic use of a room may indicate an appropriate modern use. To maintain the historic integrity of the campus, it is important to recognize the historic use of a structure, not mask it.

c.) Interior Spaces are a continuation of the sequence from exterior to interior. It is always important to understand the impact that will occur from a change in the sequence of spaces. Each building was intended to have an experience from public (lobby, classrooms, etc.) to private (dorm rooms, offices, etc.). It is vital to maintain this sequence.

d.) Details, even those as small as window muntins, cannot be replaced without changing the character of the structure. Try, wherever possible to always use the historic hardware and maintain historic details. It is often the details that provide the sense of authenticity in a historic structure.