



The University of Indianapolis needed a "signature" that would help differentiate it from other colleges, and thus help attract top-quality students.

Significant Signatures

At the University of Indianapolis, a campus green subtly defies tradition in order to serve students.

BY PAUL BENNETT

T

welve years ago, Indiana Central College embarked on a journey to reinvent itself. Over its history, the school had been largely focused on attracting students from Indianapolis and the surrounding region; but beginning in the mid-eighties, under the guidance

of president Dr. Benjamin Lantz, Jr., the school decided to make a bid for national presence. After assuming a more impressive-sounding moniker, the University of Indianapolis set out to attract elite students from around the country. At the outset, the trustees understood that this transformation would have to be as much physical as institutional, and in 1991 the university embarked on a major capital improvement campaign, including a master plan, the construction of several new buildings, and a re-design of the campus core.

In the center of the campus lay a large parking lot, the most visible relic of the university's former self. In its master plan, the Indianapolis-based multidisciplinary architecture firm, Odle McGuire & Shook, called for the removal of the lot (enabled by the construction of several perimeter lots) and the design of a new campus center that would unify key buildings in the proximate area, including the library, Schwitzer Center (the student center), and Lilly Hall (a science building).

The guiding goal in the design of the campus was to provide a "signature" for the university, says Eric Fulford, who was brought on as consulting landscape architect. "It is a good university," he says, "but they're sort of on the invisible side of town. They are a private institution, and they feel a sense of competition to attract the really high-quality students. They needed the space to have energy." Creating this "energy" required delicate handling of the client, whom both Fulford and Odle McGuire & Shook project manager Ben Rawlins, ASLA, characterize as fairly conservative. Although Rawlins claims all parties started on the same page, Fulford says that Rawlins served as a buffer between him and the client, thereby allowing him the opportunity to offer more "radical" ideas than the university might have entertained had they come directly from the prime consultant. Rawlins agrees that the resulting design has a number of subtle innovations, but he reminds us that their "radical" nature is purely relative to the overall campus context, which is fairly restrained.

"What most campus planners think about when they look at a big space like this is circulation," says Fulford. "And they think about getting students from point A to point B." In a nod to this utilitarian tendency, the design team began with what Fulford calls the traditional "wagon-wheel"