HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1962 the New Bedford Textile School and the Bradford Durfee Textile School in Fall River merged and became the Southeastern Massachusetts Technological Institute. The following year, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts hired the architectural firm of Desmond & Lord who in turn retained the architect Paul Rudolph to create a master plan for a 710 acre parcel of land located in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, an equidistant location between New Bedford and Fall River. At the time, Rudolph was one of the leading young architects in the country, enjoying great notoriety at the recent completion of the Yale University Art and Architecture building, where he was also Dean of the School of Architecture. Rudolph had also been hired by the Commonwealth to work on some of the components of the emerging Government Center area in Boston. On the Dartmouth site, Rudolph was faced with a very different challenge than the urban conditions of the Boston...
Plan and perspective of the original Paul Rudolph Master Plan for what was then known as Southeastern Massachusetts Technical Institute
and New Haven sites. Because of this rural context and the *tabla rasa* nature of the site, Rudolph was given the opportunity to execute one of the most comprehensive explorations of his signature architectural style on what was for him an unprecedented scale. Rudolph ultimately produced a master plan from which emerged a powerful organizational framework and an architectural language that served, with some variation, as the source for the realization of campus buildings over the next 20 years.

Rudolph’s direct involvement in the design of the SMTI campus, renamed Southeastern Massachusetts University in 1969, would vary for many years. His role shifted from being hired by the Commonwealth, to working as an official and, at times, unofficial consultant to Desmond & Lord, the architects of record on most of University buildings. In the 1980’s, the Dion Science and Engineering building commission was awarded to Desmond & Lord who brought Rudolph in as a consultant. Completed in 1988, the building represented the last major building project on the main campus and, in some ways, the “completion” of the central core campus as envisioned by Rudolph’s original master plan.

Despite Rudolph’s fluctuating levels of involvement and the designation of several architects over the years in addition to Desmond and Lord, the campus was designed and built in a manner very faithful to the original Rudolph master plan concepts. In 1966, the Group I Liberal Arts and Science complex was completed with Rudolph as the architect of record. In Rudolph’s design of Group I, the architectural language was established that would serve as the mold for all future central campus development. The cast-in-place concrete frame with ribbed veneer block in-fill construction, the 3-story cantilevered levels, the ground level arcades of polygonal piers, the 45 degree cants and the shifts in plan are all elements within the Group I design that would be incorporated, indeed copied literally, in the design of every central campus building until the completion of Dion in 1988. Important elements of the initial
Rudolph design include the 3-story atrium spaces in which Rudolph revealed his remarkable volumetric and spatial explorations. The results of these ambitious designs are the most notable architectural spaces on the campus and remain integral parts of the physical and social fabric of the University. In the design of Group I, Paul Rudolph had cast the dye for the execution of his vision by subsequent designers faithful to his unique vision for the SMTI / SMU campus.

The Rudolph Master Plan

By 1966, not only had the architectural style for the campus been mapped, but the overall organizing principles for the master plan, circulation, open space and building siting had, in many ways, also been solidified by the strength and clarity of Rudolph’s original plan. At the time, the school served a commuter population. Even following the construction of the Phase I and II residence halls in 1972 and 1973, (approximately 1,600 beds) commuters made up the majority of the student body. This coupled with the fact that the campus site was fairly remote and not well served by mass transit or significant pedestrian access, made planning for the automobile central to Rudolph’s conception of the campus. By utilizing a ring road concept as an organizing element, Rudolph’s initial plan is characterized by the following achievements:

- The ability to accommodate large volumes of vehicular traffic with relatively little congestion
- A coherent arrangement and distribution of parking lots
- Good vehicular access to any part of the campus
- The preservation of a pedestrian-only central campus core
- A strong, formal organizing element to the campus plan

The strength of the ring road as a formal and spatial organizing element, gave Rudolph’s master plan a clarity and simplicity from its initial inception. The ring road’s efficiency in accommodating vehicular traffic and parking distribution meant that vehicular access to the campus and circulation around the campus would be well accommodated. In spite of the dominance of the automobile in the master plan, Rudolph ensured that the pedestrian experience was carefully considered and controlled. The inner ring of parking lots, always separated by “fingers” of landscaped spaces, are buffered from the campus core with grass berms which successfully screen the parking from view. The open space between the parking zones and the central campus are preserved as landscaped pedestrian zones, with the exception of service access drives to the central buildings.

Paul Rudolph’s consideration of the pedestrian experience between the car and the main campus is notable when one considers the general disregard for the individual pedestrian experience and deference to the automobile that was prevalent in planning and urban design of the time. In spite of the modern vocabulary, it is clear that Rudolph was very conscious of the traditional scale and spatial experience of the American college campus as a primarily pedestrian experience. It also evident that Rudolph aspired to European traditions of urbanism, where
the automobile was largely considered a threat to the historic core, best left to the perimeter. In a 1996 interview with CVPA Assistant Dean Lasse Antonsen, Rudolph says of the campus,

“The idea of working on a campus from scratch was most appealing to me because it could deal with urbanism, which involves how you get there and what’s there once you arrive, how you park your car and get from car to building, the relationship of all kinds of transportation systems including walking, the different experience from vehicular motion and the pedestrian circulation.”

The focus on the pedestrian was hardly limited to the movement from parking to the center campus however. From his earliest design sketches, Rudolph explored the notion of a powerful
and dramatic central campus “quadrangle” or open space. The presence of a central tower element or “campanile” appeared in the earliest sketches, as well as variations on a series of radial, terraced paths that resolved a complex geometry of circulation and the artificial change in grade that Rudolph introduced into the plan. Another dominant feature of the original plan is the swath of clear open space from the center of the campus toward Cedar Dell Pond. The resolution of the geometry of the paths, the strength of the open Cedar Dell vista and the visual axis of the campanile are all integral components of Rudolph’s original vision and of the execution of the campus and its distinctive sense of place defined by its architectural expression.

The unique and ambitious architectural language of the buildings, their heroic spatial explorations and the complex 3-dimensional geometries of the site patterns and topography are ultimately held together by Rudolph’s subtle yet deft understanding of the traditions of the American college campus. The strong sense of human scale, the unifying commonality of a singular architectural style, and the pastoral qualities of the quadrangle are all present in the Rudolph’s master plan. These traditional elements, although represented in a non-traditional way, distinguish the Dartmouth campus from many campus plans of its era.

This master plan strives to recommend methods of preserving the strengths of the original master plan, but also suggest a road map for growth that would allow for adjustments to some components, particularly related to the notion of vehicles, parking and pedestrians. These adjustments are dictated by the shift from a commuter campus to a residential population and the increasing importance of the pedestrian realm and the need to control the scale of the “walkable campus”. As Rudolph said in the 1996 interview,

“You must think of the campus as a clear backbone — or skeleton if you wish — which needs to be augmented by any number of activities not originally conceived of, including the idea of whether or not it is really a commuter campus predominantly, forever. It is not written in stone. It is only a point in time and space.”
Updated Master Plan

In 1971 an update to the original master plan was produced by the landscape and planning firm of Shurcliff, Merrill and Footit. This plan represents an ambitious series of academic, residential and athletic expansion. The subsequent construction of Group VI (College of Visual and Performing Arts) the Library, the Campus Center and the Residents’ Dining Hall all followed the framework of the plan to a certain degree. Beyond that, however very little else from the plan was realized. The current master plan involved analyzing the 1971 plan to identify some relevant principles and patterns. Among some of the components that do relate in principle to the current master plan are:

- The identification of opportunities for academic expansion behind Group II and the library
- The opportunity to reinforce the Cedar Dell vista with development along its edge(s)
- The potential expansion of on campus student residences
- The desire to improve the main vehicular entrance to the campus and create an improved, “formal” entry sequence
- The siting of an athletic field house facility
- The identification of potential parking expansion strategies

Beyond these principles, much of the potential expansion opportunities identified in the 1971 update are not feasible given today’s limitations in building within proximity to wetlands. The landscape analysis section of this master plan delineates the current wetland boundaries on the campus and the affect on potential development strategies.

Since the production of this 1971 plan there has not been a comprehensive review or update to the campus master plan for UMASS Dartmouth. While little has been built beyond those items mentioned above, the prevailing strategy for campus development has been to site individual buildings on an as needed basis. The ensuing master plan recommendations
An update to the Rudolph Master Plan from 1971

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Campus and Facilities Master Plan
attempt to provide a framework for future campus development that responds to current and future needs of the University as assessed and articulated throughout the master planning process. This findings of this iterative process attempt to reinforce the strengths of the original campus master plan while suggesting ways to improve upon some of its aspects that have not contributed as much to the environment of the University. While the ensuing recommendations are often specific and intentional, an overriding goal of this plan is to provide a clear framework, within which exists enough flexibility to accommodate shifts in future needs, goals and aspirations of the University.

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