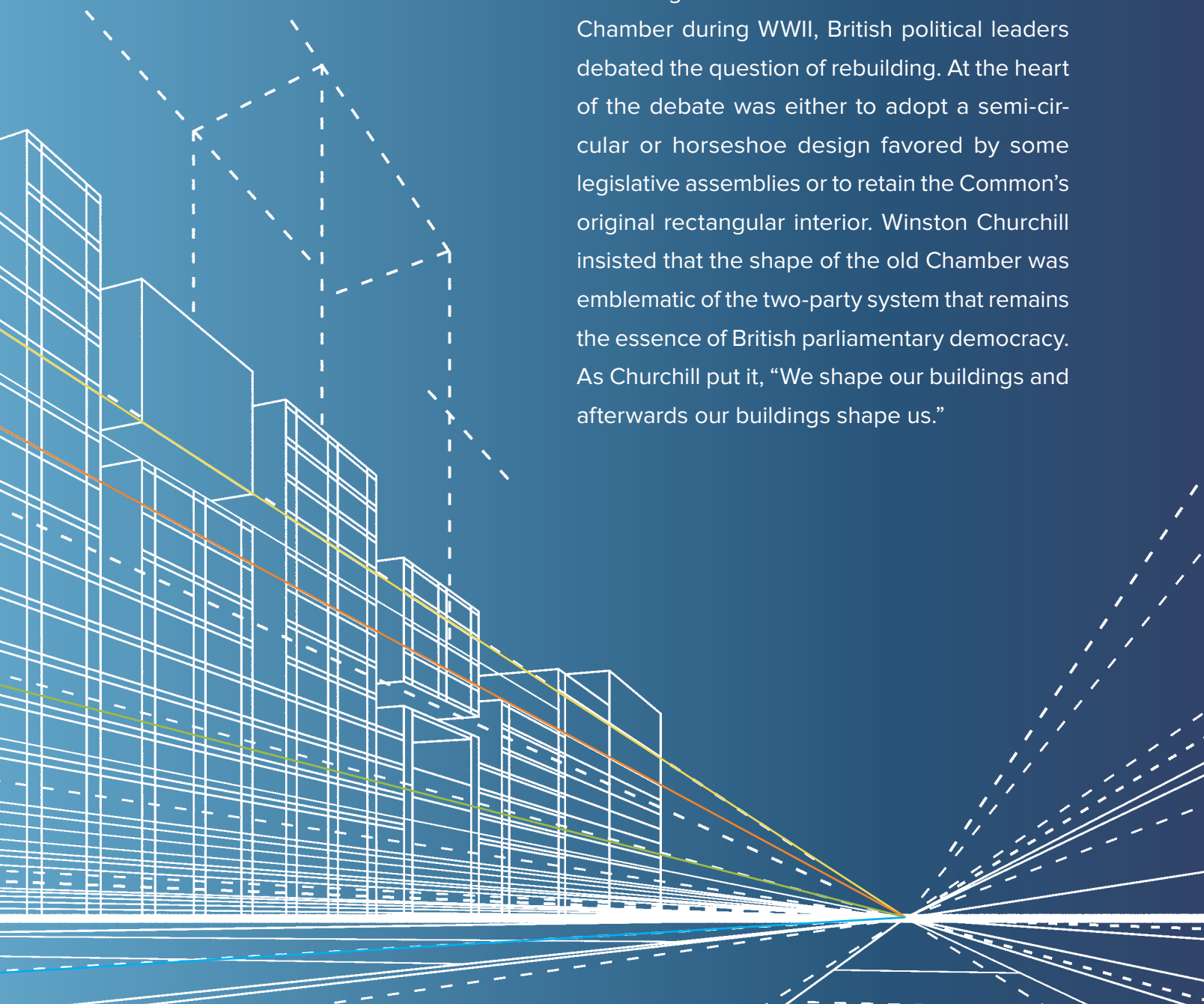
WORKING WITH ARCHITECTURAL FIRMS

TO MAXIMIZE THE CAMPUS EXPERIENCE

BY DAVID VINSON, PHD

Following the destruction of the Commons Chamber during WWII, British political leaders debated the question of rebuilding. At the heart of the debate was either to adopt a semi-circular or horseshoe design favored by some legislative assemblies or to retain the Common's original rectangular interior. Winston Churchill insisted that the shape of the old Chamber was emblematic of the two-party system that remains the essence of British parliamentary democracy. As Churchill put it, "We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us."



Churchill offers a valuable lesson—the idea that the buildings we inhabit shape us, and that we have a say in how design reflects our needs and core values. In terms of higher education, architectural design has the potential to be both symbolic and practical. It can signal not only institutional values but also impact our levels of comfort and mood, as well as how we socialize, work, collaborate, and learn. As the needs of students, faculty, and staff continue to evolve, so, too, does the demand for selecting architectural firms that can translate the symbolic and practical needs of each campus into material, lived reality.

Researchable Benefits

Thanks to many modern psychological studies, we have a greater scientific understanding of the types of environments that campus-based communities prefer. Select studies have attempted to measure participants' physiological responses with smartphone apps that ask them about their emotional states throughout the day. In some cases, research methods even include EEG headsets that measure brain activity relating to mood, stress, and state of mind. These studies show a direct relationship between campus architecture and the mood and well-being of those who frequent campus grounds. Researchers have also determined that specialized cells in the hippocampal region of our brains are attuned to the geometry and arrangement of the spaces we inhabit. Perhaps the most crucial takeaway is that one's psychology is altered by environment. When the campus environment is improved, the outlook of those who spend the majority of their time on campus is also improved.

How Architects Approach Campus Design

A thoughtfully designed campus is a powerful tool for both recruitment and retention tool for students, faculty, and staff. Our campuses should make us feel at home. They should be navigable, safe, and aesthetically appealing in every space—landscaping, interiors, and exterior architectural design. Moreover, when architects design campuses with an institution's core values in mind, the campus community feels more connected to the university culture. Students look forward to going to class each day; this arena may be where effective university campus design is most impactful. One major difference that sets universities apart from other higher education institutions such as community colleges or vocational schools is that many students, particularly first-year students, live on campus. Architects, as they plan campus design, are compelled to consider details that full-time, live-in students value. Students want variety in function and design, as well as spaces that are amenable to productivity, fun, and community-building. Architectural planning and execution are central to each of these wants and needs. Further, studies show that when students form close friendships,

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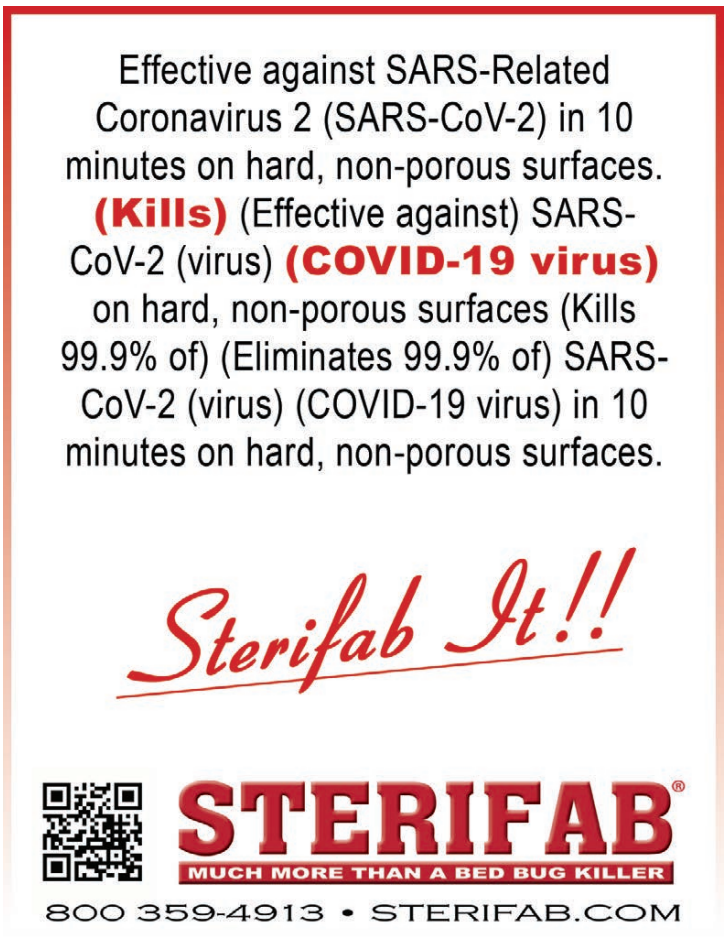

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they are far less likely to drop out or transfer to another institution. Correlations have also been demonstrated between student happiness and improved academic performance.

Socially-centered campus design can positively impact students who live off-campus and commute to class, as well. More spaces made available for students to connect with their peers or to relax outside of class makes staying on campus all day all the more likely. To address student needs, architectural firms work to make spaces warmer, more inclusive, and more functional. These spaces most often include classrooms, dining halls, outdoor spaces, recreation rooms, and student housing. Campus design, when oriented in a way that prioritizes the needs of students, makes a lasting impact on students' social and intellectual development. A quality university education is achieved with a balance of academic productivity and healthy social bonds. If a space lacks functionality, students will struggle to work; they may be prone to distraction and discomfort, and their education will suffer. The same applies to socialization on campus. If there are too few comfortable areas for students to relax after class or spontaneously gather, they are more likely to become overwhelmed and burnt out by their responsibilities.

"We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us."

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

Architects must consider a variety of design opportunities to support students in every aspect of campus life. Take learning spaces, for example. Classrooms and lecture halls are often larger than those students have experienced in high school or community colleges. When encountering these unfamiliar faces and spaces, coupled with the possibility of sensory overload, most people would feel a little overwhelmed. Perhaps more detrimental is the likelihood of students feeling disconnected from their peers or professors. To address these challenges, architects can install larger desks and swivel chairs in lecture halls to make collaboration easier. They can design multipurpose classrooms with amenities that students can use for their own projects when classes aren't in session. Similarly, architects can create fewer lecture halls, using instead more intimate learning spaces that encourage engagement rather than passive listening.

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Choosing the Right Architectural Firm

Step one of transforming university spaces with architectural design is tapping into the needs and wants of the campus community. Step two involves addressing the practical matters of remodeling or constructing a new facility altogether. Financing the project may prove a challenge. Determining the best location is imperative. If a building is torn down or becomes the focal point of major remodeling, the occupants and essential equipment of offices and classrooms must be at least temporarily relocated. Somewhere along the line, the university must also find the architectural firm that best suits its particular needs.

For those choosing an architectural firm, several factors come into consideration. First, it is essential that the architectural firm grasps the particular vision for the campus and has a firm plan for executing it. Collaboration will be necessary; the experts will identify unforeseen challenges and provide solutions. That said, a top architectural firm should also be open to external ideas rather than pushing its own vision. Second, the firm's reputation, one foremost based on its quality of work, can inspire confidence and set the tone for the project. The firm should employ top-class architects and use expert contractors. Moreover, it should provide an extensive portfolio that confirms its competency in tackling the kinds of projects a university may have in mind. Customer feedback can offer invaluable insight, but first-hand experience with the residential architect(s) may tell campus planners even more about the compatibility of personalities, the ease with which both parties can communicate and understand one another, and whether the vision for what's ahead in the project is in clear alignment. A virtual reality rendering will go long in determining these considerations. Third, clear and transparent fees are necessary—no one wants to be caught off guard by escalating costs.

A Student-First Approach with Design

The skills students acquire in higher education are impactful, resonating well beyond graduation. However, students must feel fully supported from the start. A student-first approach with an architectural firm may prevent students from feeling isolated and overwhelmed, which in turn may stunt their social and intellectual growth. Architectural firms can meet with students in person to discuss what they need and want in campus design. In fact, when architects encounter students' perspectives, they gain a keener understanding of how the campus can better support students at such a crucial time in their early adulthood. Campus design entails far more than adding technology to the classroom or coming up with innovative designs. The biggest motivator is to design spaces that empower students to put them at ease and offer them the best chance at success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.

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