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Art History 343

23 April 2018

The Southwest Residential Area: Outdated and Isolated

The infamous Southwest Residential Area (Southwest) is a complex of nineteen buildings at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass Amherst) campus (composed of eleven low-rise buildings, five high-rise buildings, and three dining commons).¹ It is known for its ‘party atmosphere’ and its population density of approximately 94,828 students per square mile, making Southwest the preferred housing location for many incoming students.^{1,2} Hugh Stubbins and Associates designed the complex and its construction began 1964 and was completed in 1968.³ Southwest has been labeled as “a visual gateway” to the UMass Amherst campus and once one enters the area, one can surmise why it has this moniker—it is monumental, bustling with people, and seems to be guarding the innards of the Southwestern portion of the UMass Amherst campus.⁴ As one approaches the campus via Massachusetts-116, North University Drive, or North Hadley Road, the stately twenty-two-story modernist high-rise building are on a steeper section of site’s hill and are clearly visible as they jut up into the sky.⁵ As one moves closer to Southwest, the low-rise

¹ University of Massachusetts Amherst. “Southwest Area.” Living at UMass Amherst. Last modified 2018. Accessed April 21, 2018. <http://www.umass.edu/living/residence/southwest>.

² Maps.ie. “Measure Distance / Area on Google Maps.” Maps.ie. Last modified 2018. Accessed April 21, 2018. <https://www.maps.ie/distance-area-calculator.html>; University of Massachusetts Amherst. “Southwest Area.”

³ University of Massachusetts Amherst. “150 Years of UMass Amherst History.” 150 Years | UMass Amherst. Last modified 2018. Accessed April 21, 2018. <https://www.umass.edu/150/timeline>; UMass Amherst Libraries. “Southwest Residential Area.” Special Collections & University Archives. Accessed April 21, 2018. http://scua.library.umass.edu/youmass/doku.php?id=s:southwest_residential.

⁴ Modified UMass Amherst Zoomed-Out Screenshot. Map. Google Maps. Accessed April 21, 2018. <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Southwest+Residential+Area/@42.3855216,72.527662,16.72z/data=!4m8!1m2!2m1!1ssouthwest+umass+tour!3m4!1s0x89e6d20d4027fc41:0x86f439d6616f640e!8m2!3d42.3827202!4d-72.5308813>; “Southwest Residential Area.”

⁵ Modified UMass Amherst Zoomed-Out Screenshot. Map.; “Southwest Quadrangle, University of Massachusetts.” In *Process: Architecture*, 110-19. no. 10. 1979. PDF, p. 111.

dormitories reveal themselves, gently moving down the hill. They respect and call attention to the site's slope, while creating a sprawling urban fabric, helping evoke the feeling of a small city. Its visual prominence and complicated circulation design might contribute to its label, as 'a visual gateway' to the campus, but at this point, the Southwest residential area is undeserving of this mighty title and is not living up to its potential. When compared to the grandiose Fine Arts Center (FAC) gateway Southwest is nothing more than a series of guard towers on the fringes of the UMass Amherst campus.^{ii.6} It is outdated and isolated, far-removed from the central core of the campus withholding and protecting little (as it is incredibly permeable), with pedestrians and cars passing right by it without having to acknowledge its presence. The UMass Amherst administration is taking aims to alter the current state of Southwest.

Southwest is like a miniature city in itself, and relates to Josep Sert's idea, put forth in his Peabody Terrace project, which stated that the architect should consider the urban city fabric, and not just individual buildings.⁷ Southwest begins to tackle Sert's vision by compressing a massive population and standardized materials (like unadorned concrete) into buildings that are 'in a dialogue with one another', sharing sightlines and positioned in tight-knit clusters.⁸ Just like in Sert's scheme, Southwest furthers the connectedness and community in the clusters of buildings by providing students with clearly-defined pedestrian throughways, sound infrastructure, and an accessible transportation system.⁹ There is a definite hierarchy of dormitory layouts just like skyscrapers in a city, with the low-lying buildings surrounding the proud, towers.

⁶ Campus Beautification Committee, *Three Architectural Tours: Selected Buildings on the Campus of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst* (Amherst: UMass Arts Council and the University Gallery, 2000), 10.

⁷ Michelle Miller. "AD Classics: Peabody Terrace / Sert, Jackson & Gourley." ArchDaily. Last modified March 13, 2014. Accessed April 21, 2018. <https://www.archdaily.com/486015/ad-classics-peabody-terrace-sert-jackson-and-gourley>.

⁸ "Southwest Quadrangle, University of Massachusetts." In *Process: Architecture*, 110-19. no. 10. 1979. PDF, p. 113.; William Curtis. "The Unite d'Habitation at Marseilles as a Collective Housing Prototype." In *Modern Architecture: Since 1900*, 437-451. (New York, US: Phaidon, 2001) pgs. 448-49.; Miller, "AD Classics: Peabody Terrace / Sert, Jackson & Gourley."

⁹ Curtis, pgs. 448-49.; Miller, "AD Classics: Peabody Terrace / Sert, Jackson & Gourley."

Upon entering Southwest one can quickly spot the differences between the high-rise and low-rise buildings. The high-rise buildings are on the steeper portion of the hill boosting their prominence and low-rise buildings gradually and unobtrusively descend the low-grade slope, subtly deemphasizing them. The high-rise buildings are 'less human' and hospitable, while the low rise buildings seem to better consider the occupants. The high-rise buildings are twenty-two stories tall, dwarfing the three-story low-rise buildings, and are not realistic for the needs of young and old. The high-rise dormitories are more private and sealed-off, when compared to the low-rise dormitories, with their circulation serves (elevators and stairs) obscured and hidden, and reduced window surface area. The low-rise buildings appear more public with the exposed stairwell circulation services and larger windows—which show activity inside the building. Similarly, the low-rise buildings revolve (in a pinwheel-like manner) around quads, providing students with a view of nature and a 'borough community'. Students in the high rise buildings have no close proximity to nature and have views primarily of the urban infrastructure. The closest things they have to the low-rise neighborhood communities are the "social groupings of 192 students," termed "Houses".¹⁰ Windows on both the low-rise and high-rise dormitories demarcate spaces for the individual and collective (and are stylistically different). The window indentations on the high-rise buildings are terraces and indicate communal spaces. 'Seamless' corner windows indicate meeting areas in the low-rise buildings and give groups an unadulterated view of nature. Despite their dissimilarities, there are some similarities the two dormitory types. The buildings are all made of a combination concrete and red brick and are generally unvarying and minimalist. The uniformity may be an attempt to bring equity to living spaces (as no one dorm stands out as being 'the best'). The brick on the exterior of the high-rise dormitories coupled, with their twenty-two-story heights relates them directly to the Du Bois

¹⁰ Modified UMass Amherst Zoomed-Out Screenshot. Map.; "Southwest Quadrangle, University of Massachusetts." In *Process: Architecture*, 110-19. no. 10. 1979. PDF, p. 2.

Library, helping better connect the complex to the rest of the center of campus. The similarities continue, in the finite detailing which reinforces the language and intentionality established by the buildings. The outdoor staircases and ground tiling in the original 1960s scheme were all made of concrete and continued the aesthetic of modernism and brutalism. The weighty concrete brise-soleil and pilotis are another commonality amongst the Southwest buildings and are taken from Corbusier's Five Points of Architecture.¹¹ The pilotis are reminiscent of the Unite d'Habitation, lifting-up the buildings, allowing for better circulation and storage.¹² The buildings have a 'layered cake appearance', as the bottoms are primarily crafted out of concrete, with brick introduced on the 'repeating/layered' floors above the first floor(s). This makes sense, because the concrete (1) covers the steel supports, (2) is fire repellent, and (3) absorbs noise.¹³ The bricks do not offer these structural features and are therefore used as an exterior cladding, like Le Corbusier's "free façade" system.¹⁴ More so than the bricks, the concrete material is largely unnatural in appearance and serves to detach the buildings from the ground floor and landscaping. The new landscaping is a welcome addition to Southwest, reworking previously clumsy circulation patterns and beginning to add sustainable features to Southwest.

At the time of the Southwest Complex's construction, architects throughout the United States were designing buildings and planning urban communities with an equal emphasis on pedestrian and automotive accessibility.¹⁵ There are (and were) a number of mazelike, narrow walkways and 'alleyways' not fit for a car. There is (and was) an unnamed street that cuts through Southwest ("north-south") and creates the "concourse" and a mall with a horseshoe-shaped road

¹¹ William Curtis. "Le Corbusier's Quest for Ideal Form." In *Modern Architecture: Since 1900*, 163-81. (New York, US: Phaidon, 2001) pgs. 176-81.

¹² Curtis, pgs. 437-38.

¹³ "Southwest Quadrangle, University of Massachusetts." In *Process: Architecture*, 110-19. no. 10. 1979. PDF, p. 2.

¹⁴ Curtis, p. 176.

¹⁵ Timothy Rohan, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Amherst, March 23rd, 2018)

(called Southwest Circle) encompassing it—both help people quickly enter and exit the Southwest complex.¹⁶ Before the 2012 landscaping overhaul in Southwest, the complex was not totally fulfilling the needs of the entire UMass Amherst community. It did not provide pedestrians with effective and safe circulation and promoted the use of polluting vehicles.¹⁷ The new landscaping project attempted to address the problems plaguing Southwest and reduce the size of “impervious concrete concourse landscape from 70% to 30%”.^{iii, 18} The infill that goes from one end to the other end of Southwest discourages the use of cars, removes vast portions of concrete, helps hide the loading docks, and promotes traveling by foot.¹⁹ Portions of the infill have seating and foster outdoor collective meetings. The new landscaping and use of granite slabs in contrast to the original concrete slabs call attention to the expanded, concourse that cuts through Southwest and is reminiscent of the granite used at the Honor college. From a sustainability point of view, the landscaping additions are a great update—even though they are subtle, they are still very useful. The landscape architects utilized the topography for “bioswales” and added “runnels” to the concourse to effectively redirect unsanitary “storm water” runoff, avoid erosion, purify the water, create landscaping features (like “basins of water”), and ultimately recycle water (helping growing plants in gardens).²⁰ The landscaping in-conjunction with the complex’s architecture is in-tune with the New England setting. The use of red brick relates to the institutional East Coast Ivy League colleges that use brick and the

¹⁶ Modified UMass Amherst Zoomed-In Screenshot. Map. Google Maps. Accessed April 21, 2018. [https://www.google.com/maps/place/Southwest+Residential+Area/@42.3855216,72.527662,16.72z/data=!4m8!1m2!2m1!1ssouthwest+umass+tour!3m4!1s0x89e6d20d4027fc41:0x86f439d6616f640e!8m2!3d42.3827202!4d-72.5308813](https://www.google.com/maps/place/Southwest+Residential+Area/@42.3855216,72.527662,16.72z/data=!4m8!1m2!2m1!1ssouthwest+umass+tour!3m4!1s0x89e6d20d4027fc41:0x86f439d6616f640e!8m2!3d42.3827202!4d-72.5308813;); “Southwest Quadrangle, University of Massachusetts.” In *Process: Architecture*, 110-19. no. 10. 1979. PDF, p. 111.

¹⁷ Kleinfelder. “Umass Amherst Southwest Residential Area.” Kleinfelder. Last modified 2014. Accessed April 21, 2018. <https://www.kleinfelder.com/index.cfm/resource-library/project-briefs/umass-amherst-southwest-residential-area.pdf/>.

¹⁸ Dennison, Carol. “Schooled in Sustainability.” Storm Water Solutions. Last modified August 7, 2012. Accessed April 21, 2018. <https://www.estormwater.com/schooled-sustainability>.

¹⁹ Dennison, Carol. “Schooled in Sustainability.”; Kleinfelder. “Umass Amherst Southwest Residential Area.”; University of Massachusetts Amherst. “Southwest Concourse Renovation.” Facilities & Campus Services. Last modified 2018. Accessed April 21, 2018. <https://www.umass.edu/cp/southwest-concourse-renovation>.

²⁰ Dennison, Carol. “Schooled in Sustainability.”; Kleinfelder. “Umass Amherst Southwest Residential Area.”; University of Massachusetts Amherst, “Southwest Concourse Renovation.”

quadrangle that is typical of many New England college campuses. That being said, the new landscaping project is not without its faults and is still not fully attuned to the New England context. There is still the ever-present problem of wind roaring through the buildings—which creates a wind tunnel. The landscape architects did not consider precipitation—as the outdoor gathering spaces and pedestrian walkways are not covered well—making them unusable when it rains and/or snows. The landscaping and dining commons in Southwest have gotten major updates but the dorms have been left untouched and need to be updated.

At the time of completion, the dormitories were trendy and respected. Hugh Stubbins had created two distinct dorm room types (one rectilinear layout and one Z-shaped layout), both with ‘flexible’ layouts.²¹ They have some collective uniformity, however, students have the freedom to choose the dorm room of their choice, so they have some individualism. Dormitory room options include a single bedroom dorm, double bedroom dorm, and the triple bedroom dorm. The rectangular room shape in the low-rise dormitories is adaptable; while the Z-shaped rooms in the high-rise dormitories require additional thought and may appeal to students who look for something more dynamic. The rooms in most of the dorms in Southwest are designed as blank slates with no visible dividers to get in the way of creative expression and are flexible. Dorms in different wings on both the high-rise and low-rise buildings provide students with different viewing angles and once again encourages freedom of choice. Stubbins may have taken inspiration from Alvar Aalto’s 1928 Paimio Sanatorium, when Stubbins designed the dorms to provide all students with access light and generously gave them larger rooms than those in other areas of the campus (Aalto had used the same technique, trying to improve the lives of patients suffering from tuberculosis).²² The dorm

²¹ “Southwest Quadrangle, University of Massachusetts.”, p. 113.; Hugh Stubbins. PDF. In *Plans of Southwest Dorms*, edited by Timothy Rohan, 1-4. PDF.

²² Michael Trencher, “The Individual and Mass Housing: the Delicate Balance,” *ARQ: Architectural Research Quarterly*, v. 4 (2000) p. 250.

rooms have little in common with Le Corbusier's "medieval monk's cell" living units, but there is a definite pressure on individuals to get out of rooms.²³ There is no blatant attempt to make the gathering spaces vastly superior to the individual spaces, as they feel modest (there are no showy curvilinear forms designated for communal areas like on Le Corbusier's Swiss Pavilion).²⁴ There is subtle social engineering happening and could be part of a larger social engineering process. The communal spaces in all of the Southwest area are the more hospitable areas and appear at first glance to be ideal for parties and other gatherings, as they are airier and have greater sunlight exposure idealizing them to some degree—but they are far from ideal. The communal spaces are positioned so that there are sightlines to the ground level and to other communal spaces allowing for security to closely monitor these communal areas. Presumably, these sightline establishments are the other part of the social engineering process. The process might be that: (1) students are pushed from the privacy of their rooms into more public gathering spaces, where they could feel more relaxed and feel free to discuss riot plans but they (2) monitored from afar. This social engineering would make sense given the violent Vietnam War riots that were taking place in the 1960s and 1970s on the UMass Amherst campus—since the UMass Amherst administration may have wanted to squash any underground movements (before they could gain traction), and this social engineering helped them do so.²⁵ This is ironic, since these social engineering decisions may be a contributing factor in the UMass Amherst huge riots happening to this day. The students do not feel comfortable partying in their dorms, because they feel like they are cramped and being watched so they take-to-the-streets to riot (where they have more room) and are able to gather as a crowd, with little consequence. This unrest makes it clear that the dormitories in Southwest are not fulfilling the individual needs of the

²³ Trencher, p. 248.

²⁴ Trencher, pgs. 248-49.

²⁵ History.com Staff. "Vietnam War Protests." History.com. Last modified 2010. Accessed April 21, 2018. <https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-protests>.

students—as the students are ‘coerced’ into public communal areas and are stifled in their living quarters (unable to express themselves in a more productive fashion). Southwest is meeting the needs of the student communities who want to party, since the ‘party-oriented mentality’ permeates the communities and connects them. But Southwest is not meeting the needs of the whole UMass Amherst community, it is a breeding ground for crime and unrest—it has smeared the reputation of the larger UMass Amherst community.

Currently, Southwest is not a visual gateway to the UMass Amherst campus—it is isolated, outdated, and not an adequate expression of the progressiveness that lies beyond. At one time, Southwest aligned with the ideals of the United States, the UMass Amherst administration, and the student body, but this is not the case anymore. Part of Southwest’s decline may lie within the general student body living in Southwest and their self-degrading mentality. There are a large number of students who are still attracted to the complex for its party traditions and its proximity to: (1) the ‘superior’ dining commons, (2) the recreation center, and (3) sports arenas. Conversely, its non-central location and its infamy are deterrents for students who are more serious and academic. The UMass Amherst administration is aware that Southwest is falling-apart and is beginning to address the sustainability features to make sure the area does not fall into further disrepair.²⁶ However, the administration does not seem fully committed to making more changes. One promising intervention that could improve Southwest, is the removal of entire floors on the high-rise buildings. This would: (1) make room for open-air recreational green spaces, (2) move students closer to nature, (3) give them a place to expend pent-up energy, and (4) help dissipate sound. This is just one possible addition to Southwest that would suggest the progressiveness that lies beyond—ensuring that Southwest lives-up-to its title as ‘a visual gateway to the UMass Amherst campus.’^{iv}

²⁶ Dennison, Carol. “Schooled in Sustainability.”; University of Massachusetts Amherst, “Southwest Concourse Renovation.”

Endnotes:

- i. The ‘total number of students living in Southwest’ was divided by the area (in square miles) of Southwest

- ii. The brutalist Fine Arts Center is also referred to as a gateway to the UMass Amherst, and proves that it is a gateway, by truly withholding the view of the central part of the UMass Amherst campus from passersby.²⁷

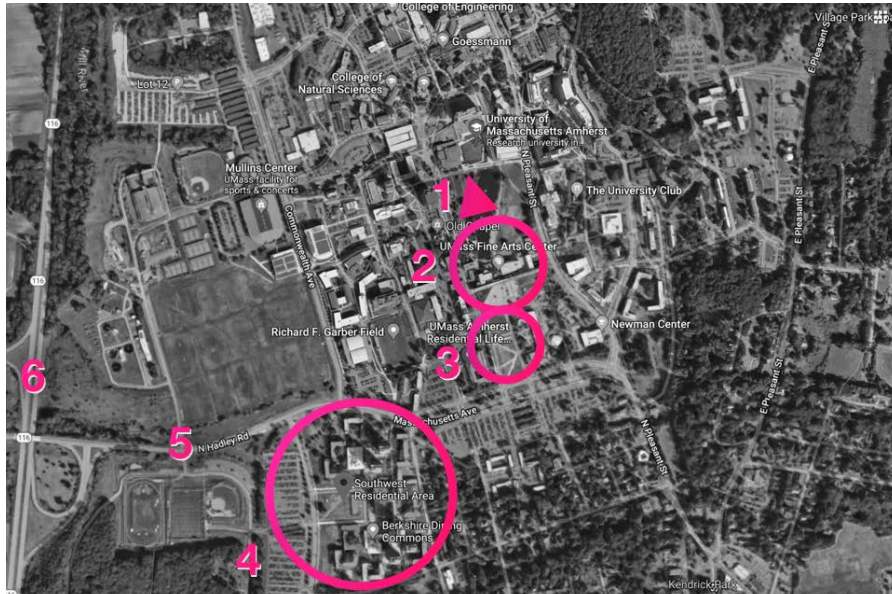
- iii. Kleinfelder was responsible for the “engineering and architecture” and Stephen Stimson Associates was responsible for the “landscape architecture” in the 2012 Southwest concourse update.²⁸

- iv. Some other additions include, but are not limited to: (1) Adding space for self-expression (i.e. public art projects) might be enough to refocus the energy of the students—causing an increase in student content and a decrease in aggressive behaviors. (2) Adding colorful banners and/or cladding to the exterior of the buildings might add dynamism to the buildings and begin to address the dreary color palette. (3) A curvilinear, steel canopy above the major thoroughway and with wind blocking features might be enough to make the outside areas more hospitable in the winter and encourage more students to go outside. (4) Soundproofing high-rise dormitory rooms to help block out unwanted/disruptive noises. (5) Taking interior gathering areas and reallocating portions of them for spaces dedicated to individuals, with simple metal dividers—giving students private and roomier individual spaces (outside of their rooms). (6) A public bike share program that harkens back the equity that was part of the original scheme and possibly eliminates the need for buses altogether—promoting sustainability to a larger audience.

²⁷ Campus Beautification Committee, 10.

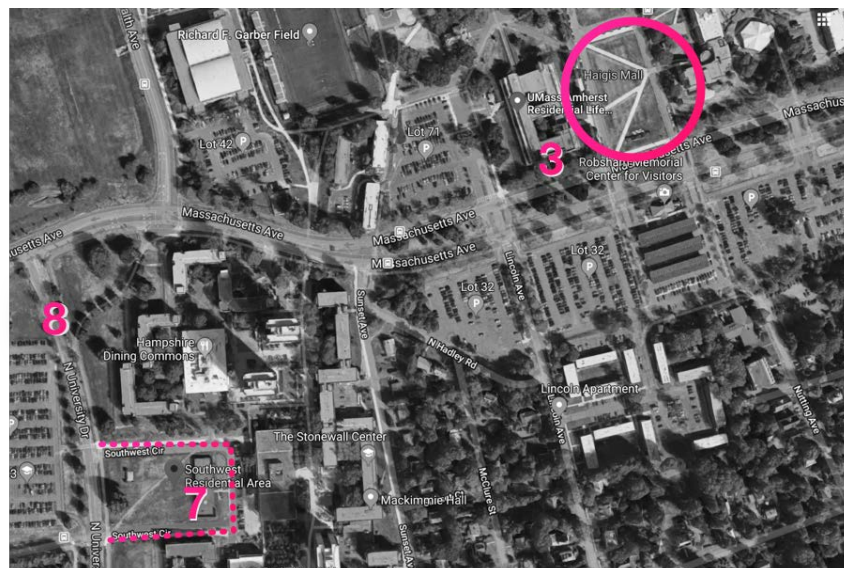
²⁸ Dennison, Carol. “Schooled in Sustainability.”; University of Massachusetts Amherst, “Southwest Concourse Renovation.”

Appendix



Map 1.²⁹

1. Center of the campus, 2. Fine Arts Center, 3. Haigis Mall, 4. Southwest, 5. North Hadley Road (which merges with Massachusetts Ave), 6. Massachusetts-116



Map 2.³⁰

3. Haigis Mall, 7. Southwest Mall and Southwest Circle (the smaller version of Haigis Mall), 8. North University Drive

²⁹ Modified UMass Amherst Zoomed-Out Screenshot. Map.

³⁰ Modified UMass Amherst Zoomed-In Screenshot. Map.

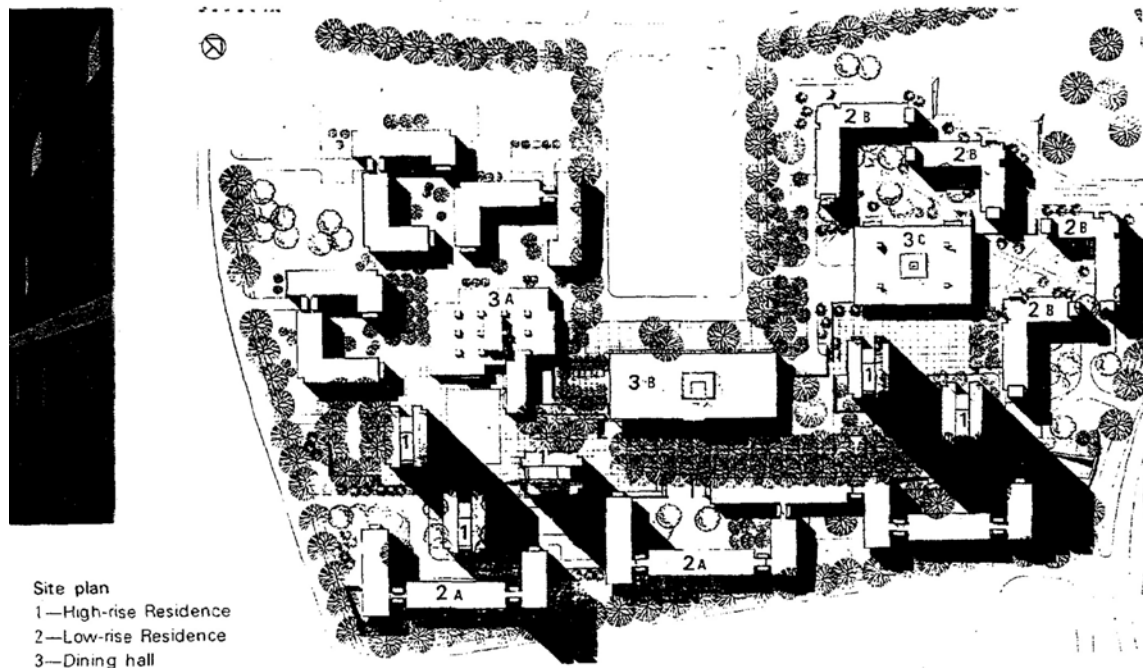


Figure 1: Plan of the Southwest Residential Area³¹

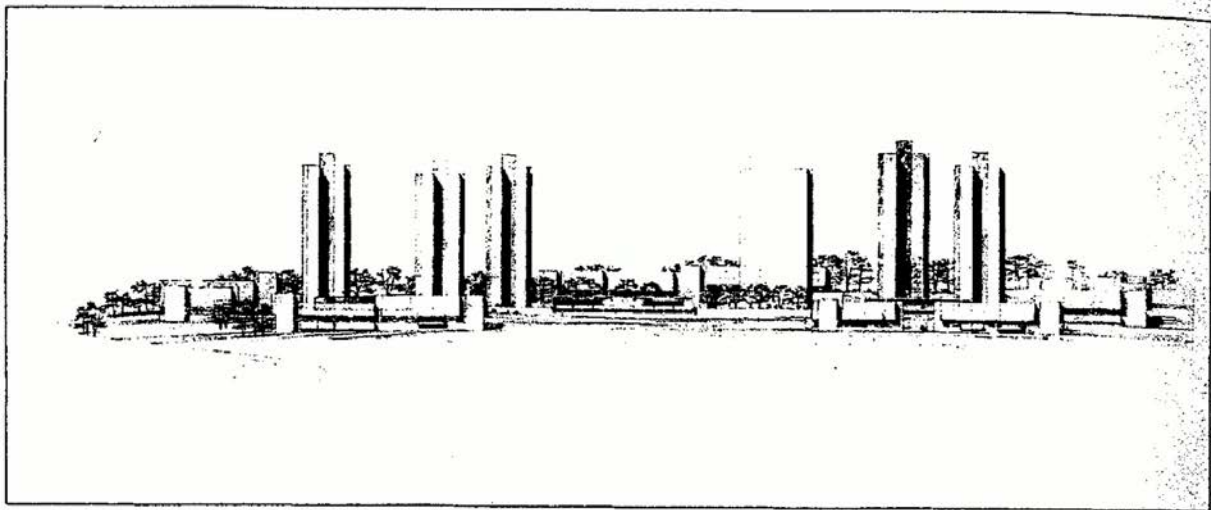


Figure 2: An elevation of the Southwest Residential Area³²

³¹ "Southwest Quadrangle, University of Massachusetts.", p. 110.

³² "Southwest Quadrangle, University of Massachusetts.", p. 111.

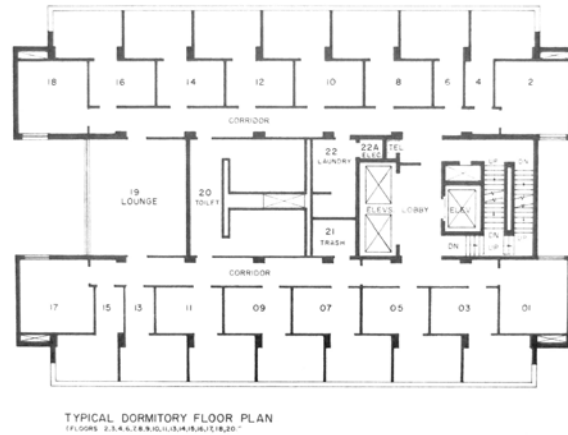


Figure 3: High-rise dormitory layout³³

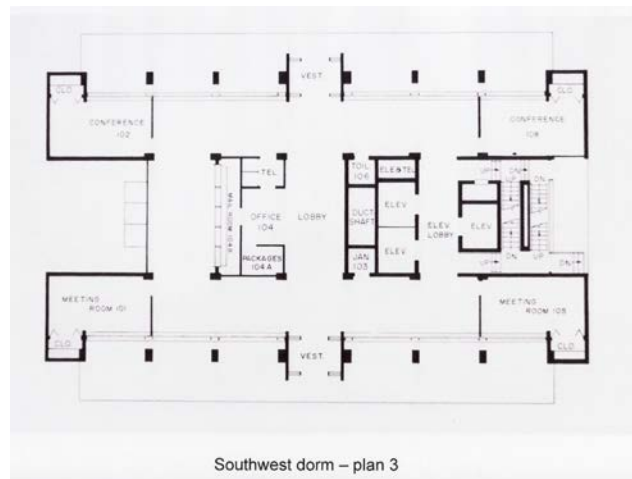


Figure 4: High-rise layout showing the placement of the meeting rooms³⁴

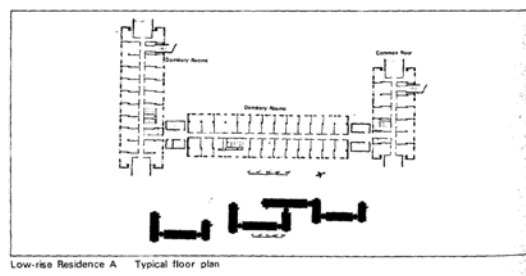


Figure 5: Plan view, showing the clusters of low-rise buildings, evoking pin-wheel shape³⁵

³³ Stubbins, p. 1.

³⁴ Stubbins, p. 4.

³⁵ "Southwest Quadrangle, University of Massachusetts.", p. 113.

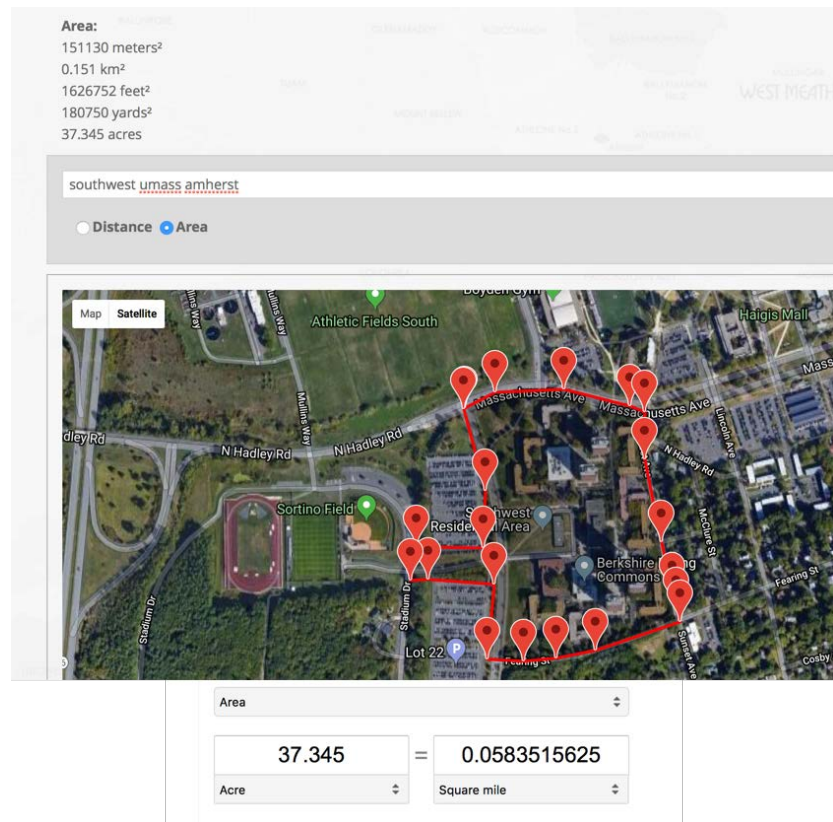


Figure 6: Map with Southwest area marked-off. Conversion from acres to square miles. The student population of 5,500 divided by 0.058 square mile = 94,828 students per square mile in Southwest³⁶



Photo: A calm gathering outside Southwest in Spring, showing that the students population does utilize the green spaces provided to them—indicating that these public spaces are important³⁷

³⁶ Maps.ie. “Measure Distance / Area on Google Maps.”

³⁷ Belisle, Cade. *Southwest Beach*. Photograph. Flickr. April 15, 2015. Accessed April 21, 2018.



Photo: A riot, showing that massive crowd that has gathered outside and that lack of security monitoring the riot³⁸



Photo: Façade treatment on Coolidge Tower and the subtracted voids/terraces that indicate meeting areas³⁹



Photo: Pierpont low-rise cluster⁴⁰

³⁸ Belisle, Cade. *Southwest Gathering*. Photograph. Flickr. October 30, 2012. Accessed April 21, 2018.

³⁹ Uminski, Maria. *Southwest Buildings: Coolidge Tower*. Photograph. Flickr. April 14, 2011.

⁴⁰ Uminski, Maria. *Southwest Buildings: Pierpont*. Photograph. Flickr. April 15, 2011.



Photo: Pilotis 'lift-up' tower and shelter bikes⁴¹



Photo: The 'cold' materiality that appears extremely bleak⁴²

⁴¹ Uminski, Maria. *Southwest Buildings: George Washington Tower*. Photograph. Flickr. April 14, 2011.

⁴² Daily Collegian. *sw*. Photograph. Flickr. April 23, 2009. Accessed April 21, 2018.

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