9. OPEN SPACE AND LANDSCAPE

Open space and landscape are related, but they are not the same. Open space is typically large areas that may or may not have landscape on or around them—spaces such as lakes or ponds, lawns, game fields, agricultural fields, and, perhaps, even parking lots.

Landscape on the other hand is that special area where plantings of any and all kinds of plant materials have been installed or preserved according to a visual and / or functional plan. Landscape areas can range from tiny to large.

OPEN SPACE

CORPUS CHRISTI BAY
The Island is surrounded by a vast open space of water. The largest open space is Corpus Christi Bay to the north. This body of water is more or less circular and is six miles in diameter. There is a special sense of place to the shore where one can see the edge of the Earth.

CAYO DEL OSO
The Cayo del Oso (“the Oso”) is a small and shallow estuary bay to the south of the Island. It is about two miles across at it widest dimension.

FRONT LAWN
There is a continuous lawn and artificial sand dune open space between the buildings of the campus and Ocean Drive along the edge of Corpus Christi Bay.

PLAYING FIELDS
Between the student housing and the campus core there are two large open spaces. One is a rectilinear grass playing field; the other is a pair of formal baseball fields.

RIPARIAN EDGE ZONE
To a certain extent the natural ecological zones that surround the Cayo del Oso sides of the Island could be referred to as significant open space, too.

LANDSCAPE

NATURAL

HACKBERRY [Celtis occidentalis] GROVE
There is a significant grove of the original native hackberry trees on the southwest edge of the Island which is a significant part of the natural landscape. The jogging trail passes through this grove and there are biologic information signs posted along it, causing it to serve as a nature trail, too. This grove should be preserved and the nature trail strengthened and extended.

RIPARIAN EDGE / ECOLOGICAL ZONE
The riparian edge is the approximate line of mean sea level (msl) at the edge of the Island. The ecological zone at the edge of the Island is more or less delineated by the riparian edge and a small but noticeable change in elevation (the “bluff”). This topographic line also delineates the line between the natural and the man made landscape. The natural or “native” plants are in the ecological zone. However, these plants are invasive opportunists.

There are several elements that can be added to strongly enhance the riparian edge and ecological zone.

JOGGING TRAIL
Where the jogging trail is in the ecological zone and serves as a nature trail, as well, it should continue to be enhanced as a nature trail.
CABANAS ("CHIKI" HUTS)
A series of tropical style cabanas can be added at the line of the bluff elevation and extend out over the ecological zone. They would be wildlife viewing platforms and perhaps outdoor classrooms for small classes. Perhaps they would have a stair down to the level of the ecological zone and a paved connector to the jogging trail. Proper access, safety, security, and lighting would need to be part of the design of these structures.

BOAT HOUSES
One or more of the cabanas could be extended out into the Oso with piers and become, instead, boathouses for kayaks, rowing boats, board sail boats, etc.

WETLANDS
The ecological zone is the ideal area for rebuilding the original wetlands as a true natural and native plant landscape. The wetlands could be used to blend the ecological zone with the man-made zone by smoothing the "bluff into a continuous slope of transition.

MAN-MADE
With the exception of the hackberry grove the remaining area of the campus is planted with palm trees, oleanders, and lush style plantings brought from elsewhere for their tropical visual effect.

SPINES / AXES
The most unique thing about the University’s campus besides being an island is the tropical jungle landscape planted along the entirety of the axis from the north end at Corpus Christi Bay to the south end at the Oso.

CROSS SPINES / AXES
The same dense and lush tropical planting has been continued into the cross spines, plazas, and courtyards of the east / west axes growing at right angles from the main north / south axis.

Illustration No. 9.1 USE OF PALM TREES AS LANDSCAPING THEME
OTHER

PALM TREES [Sabal palmetto or Cabbage palms]
Large numbers of Sabal palm trees have been planted as both street trees and as landscape specimens. The palm trees are very successful as symbols of the tropical island. Refer to Illustration No. 9.1 USE OF PALM TREES AS LANDSCAPING THEME. The Sabal palm of the Rio Grande River and the Gulf of Mexico interface would be highly valued as a native Texas palm that is also symbolic of conservation.

OLEANDERS [Nerium oleander]
For some reason non native oleanders have become a traditional Gulf Coast planting. They are probably favored because of their hardiness in a difficult environment. The University has made good use of oleanders in its landscape. Refer to Illustration No. 9.2, USE OF OLEANDERS WITH PALMS AS LANDSCAPE ELEMENT.

MESQUITE TREES [Prosopis]
The invasive and ubiquitous South Texas mesquite tree has been used beautifully in the man made landscape. Refer to Illustration No. 9.3 USE OF MESQUITE TREES AS MAJOR LANDSCAPE ELEMENT.
EDGE
Accentuate the edges of the Island with landscaping and landscape architecture whenever and wherever possible.

Edge is a very powerful, even unavoidable visual element on an island. It is always part of the landscape. On this Island there are more or less two contrasting edges. A straight edge on the north side of the Island is man-made. It is accentuated by Ocean Drive being located on it. The other edge is the traditional and natural edge of the Island on three sides. It flows continuously and irregularly from its intersection with the north edge on the east to its intersection on the west.

The edges of the Island (and of the campus) have not yet been celebrated or accentuated by the University.

SPINE
Continue to enhance the spine—the main axis and core of the campus. Develop both the north terminus and the south terminus to complete the spine.

The main axis or spine is largely complete with two exceptions. The exceptions are the north terminus and the southern terminus.

The northern terminus should be completed by extending the planting of the spine all the way to Ocean Drive. A pergola or loggia designed as part of this landscape could help direct those who arrive at the campus by way of the transit stop directly to the main core’s axis and landscaping.
The spine should eventually be extended over or under Ocean Drive to a terminus on the edge of the Bay.

While the northern terminus of the spine calls for pedestrian and landscaping linkage to the transit stop, the southern terminus is much larger in scale. It could be the site of an expansion of the student life facilities of some sort. Or it could be the location of a major landscape that “embraces” the Cayo del Oso. The spine could wrap around the Student Center and come through it to continue to a terminus on the south edge of the Island. Perhaps this terminating plaza could be of the quality of the plaza to the north of the Student Center but would use native plants, thus blending with the hackberry grove and the ecological zone. Another major feature could be the formal interface of the spine with the jogging / nature trail. Along that edge of the Island at the interface of the spine with the riparian edge could be a sweeping loggia / pergola with many shaded benches and tables for study and observation of the Oso.

**CROSS SPINES**

*Growth of the campus is to the east and west of the spine. Develop cross spines extending from the original spine into these parallel areas of growth. Design landscapes for the cross spines that are both different from and in harmony with that of the original spine.*

As the building sites along the spine and at the southern end were all filled with facilities, it became necessary to construct additional buildings to either side of the spine. The natural response to an axis as strong as the spine is to develop cross spines at right angles to the spine thus beginning to form a grid. Ideally these cross spines will literally cross the main spine providing access from both the east and west. These cross spines will naturally develop in response to the large parking facilities on either side of the core spine.

**PLAZAS AND COURTYARDS**

*In conjunction with the new growth areas on either side of the core and with the cross spines, develop major plazas and courtyards around all new building sites.*

The University has developed several very fine plazas and courtyards on the campus. Plazas and courtyards happen quite naturally along with the cross spines.

Plazas tend to be rectilinear open spaces with landscaping and walk ways that are perhaps as large as a building footprint. They tend to be delineated by surrounding buildings on their edges. They may be largely hardscape with little landscaping (the plaza on the north side of the Student Center) or they may be lushly planted (the Garcia Plaza).

Courtyards tend towards being squares and have a number of characteristics similar to a plaza, but on a smaller scale. A courtyard tends to feel less open than a plaza, sometimes even being totally enclosed by a building or two. Courtyards when landscaped tend to be more intensely developed, often including a fountain or sculpture.

**STREETS**

*The street pattern on the Island is largely complete. Continue to enhance the streets with pedestrian walks and landscaping.*

From the beginning the streets of the campus have been subjugated to the pedestrian core of the campus. They are relegated to the function of arrival and departure via the parking facilities to the east and west of the core. The streets are lined with palm trees, thereby contributing to the visual theme of the tropical island. The lining of Ocean Drive with these same palms would add greatly to this image.
PARKING LOTS
In all possible ways soften both the interior expanses and the defined edges of the parking lots with landscaping.

A necessary evil, the parking lots can be visually incorporated into the campus image by landscaping the edges with palm trees and lush plantings. The pedestrian collector and linkage systems on the edges of the lots should be a part of this parking lot landscape concept. In the larger lots internal islands of palm trees and landscaping can reduce the visual scale of vast expanses of paving.

Indistinct, non geometric corners of the parking lots can be utilized to great effect to join the lots to the campus

PEDESTRIAN LINKAGES
The essence of the campus plan became the long pedestrian linkage referred to as the core axis or spine which is intensely landscaped. Extend the pedestrian linkages from the main spine to the cross spines.

On few campuses is the power and primacy of pedestrian linkage more clear than at TAMU-CC. The core spine / axis is first and foremost a linear pedestrian linkage. The progression of the pedestrian linkage system at right angles away from the core axis embraces the cross spine concept and the plaza and courtyard concept. And of course the pedestrian linkage is the connector from the access and arrival function of the parking lots to the core.

Gradual development of a second level pedestrian connector system among the academic buildings is highly desirable. Such a system has been begun between the Center for Instruction and the Faculty Center on the north and between the Center for the Sciences on the west.

SUMMARY
The University has developed over time a very powerful and very appropriate tradition of landscaping and open space. This has largely been due to its unique position on a “tropical” island. The tradition consists of three major types of plants. The first type is the natural flora of the edges of the Island, especially the remaining grove of original hackberry trees, and the “native” mesquite trees. The second type includes the imported Sabal palm trees, as street trees, and the ubiquitous oleanders as shrubs. The third type is the main theme of the campus—the lush, extravagant, and exuberant jungle-like landscaping of the core axis and the cross spines, including several plazas and courtyards.

To a great extent the Island and the landscaping are the dominant visual theme of the campus and not the architecture of the buildings. This is considerable contrast to almost any other academic campus in the country.

Recommendations:
1. Preserve and perpetuate the existing tradition of landscape and open space for the campus.
2. Restore the wetlands on the perimeter of the Island wherever possible.
3. Preserve and enhance the existing grove of original hackberry trees.
4. Encourage the use of the Island as a laboratory for riparian flora; include the whole edge of the Cayo del Oso as the laboratory, especially the Hans Suter Wildlife Area.
5. Develop an arboretum collection of various specimen palms from around the Earth as an academic endeavor and to strengthen the existing tradition of palm forest appearance.
6. Create a rainwater / reclaimed water supply for irrigation of the landscaping.