

Exhibition of Original Campus to Coincide with LSU Sesquicentennial

When LSU celebrates its 150th anniversary next year, one of the highlights of the year-long celebration will be the unveiling of an exhibition that depicts the historic buildings of the original campus.

But this won't be any ordinary diorama. The three-dimensional exhibition, which will be displayed in the LSU Union Gallery, is the culmination of a three-year project conducted by Architecture Professor J. Michael Desmond, and is the final piece of an ambitious endeavor to create a catalog of the original campus along with a blueprint for how to repair and preserve the historic buildings.

Desmond has been working on the project since 2006, when he received a grant from the Getty Foundation. He was originally scheduled to complete it in late 2008, but he received an extension after the University asked him to time the release of the exhibition to coincide with the sesquicentennial. LSU Press is also planning to publish a book in 2010 about the architectural history of the campus that will be based in large part on Desmond's work.

That body of work is considerable. Over the past three years, Desmond and his team of graduate assistants have collected dozens of drawings from the Boston archives of the Olmstead Brothers, the architects who designed the original campus. Their research has revealed much.

"We've discovered a lot of things we didn't know before," says Desmond. "Like why they used the Italian Renaissance as an architectural style and how the landscaping developed on campus."

Desmond's team has also done extensive technical work, surveying all the windows, doors and exterior surface cracks in each building. They've compiled literally thousands of documents and photographs and have organized them in an HTML file that works like a web page. Users can click on an individual building and see actual images and documentation of that structure's condition.

"No one else has done anything like this and Getty was real interested in our creation of that tool," says Desmond.

The study is significant for several reasons. Among the most obvious is that it will give LSU a complete working inventory of the maintenance problems of the exteriors of the oldest buildings on campus. That will help planning officials make realistic budgets and approach the state with firm

estimates of how much will be needed to fix those problems, which are considerable.

Desmond and his team are also creating a standardized set of door and window replacement details. These will be useful because as the older doors and windows are gradually replaced and modernized.

“The campus originally had solid wood, exterior doors,” Desmond explains. “Those were all replaced in the ‘50s and ‘60s with white aluminum doors that don’t fit in at all. This will help restore them to how they need to be.”

Perhaps the most significant contribution to come from the project is that it will help create awareness about the significance of the campus and a greater appreciation for the beauty and symmetry with which it was designed. Desmond hopes that may one day even lead to serious discussions about demolishing Middleton Library, which was constructed in the 1950s and obscures the view from one end of the original quadrangle to the other.

“That’s something that happened at a lot of campuses in the 1950s around the U.S.,” he explains. “They built these modern buildings that didn’t really fit in and that didn’t respect the older things. It would be wonderful if one day we could return LSU’s beautiful, historic quadrangle to its original design.”