

Observatory Hill— A Sense of Place?

History 460
Instructor: Bill Cronon
11/29/04
Cortney Cain

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Introduction

Observatory Hill, located on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, has a complex history. Prehistorically, Observatory Hill functioned as a ritual and sacred ground of Native American indigenous peoples. Later, astronomical research, agriculture, recreation, and residential activities developed on the hill. Clearly, throughout the years, land-use change was significant. In due course, each land-use activity created a set of values and experiences. With time, these experiences created a significant place for many individuals. Ultimately, personal experience, history, and aesthetic views created and continue to create a special place on Observatory Hill.

What does a sense of place mean? J.B. Jackson believes that a sense of place “is something that we ourselves create in the course of time. It is the result of habit or custom.”¹ According to Jackson, this idea conflicts with other scholars in the field who believe that a sense of place is achieved as a result of “...features that are already there.”² Conversely, Yi-Fu Tuan believes that “sense of place is rarely acquired in passing. To know a place well requires long residence and deep involvement.”³ Furthermore, Tuan indicates that “it is possible to appreciate the visual qualities of a place with a short visit...[but] to know a place is also to know the past: one’s own past preserved in a schoolhouse, corner drug store, swimming pool, and first home; the city’s past enshrined in its architectural landmarks.”⁴ While Jackson and Tuan have differing views concerning the concept of sense of place, both believe that it is an collective achievement that takes time and commitment.

¹ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, A Sense of Place a Sense of Time. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 151.

² Jackson, 151.

³ Yi-Fu Tuan, “Place: An Experiential Perspective,” Geographical Review 2 (1975): 65.

⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, 65.

Unfortunately, most people who encounter Observatory Hill do not have long residence or deep involvement in its landscape. However, according to Tuan, short-term visits *do* allow the passerby to appreciate the visual qualities of a place. But does this mean that people can have a sense of place experience in a short time? I would argue that there is something enchanting about Observatory Hill and the views of Lake Mendota and Picnic Point from its vistas. Unfortunately, this enchantment may not be enough to create a sense of place within a short visit. A relationship needs to be developed through time, as both Tuan and Jackson indicate. In addition, an understanding of the past development and history of Observatory Hill is important to form a sense of place.

Clearly, many individuals associated with the University of Wisconsin and the city of Madison feel a sense of place when visiting Observatory Hill. However, this idea or feeling of sense of place is not something new. People have cherished the views and the landscape of Observatory Hill since the prehistoric period.

Landscape History

Prehistorically, Native American people have used what today we refer to as Observatory Hill in a symbolic and ritual manner. Traditionally, Native Americans constructed mounds or earthworks on locations that were situated in topographically high areas, usually on hills or bluffs overlooking bodies of water. The construction of four mounds on the northern slope of Observatory Hill is physical evidence that this prominence was highly revered. Unfortunately, two of the four original mounds on Observatory Hill were destroyed as a result of the erosion associated with a cattle pasture on the lower slope of the hill.⁵ The two remaining mounds are in the form of a “two-

⁵ Madge Yohn, “All Around the Town,” Newspaper source unknown, July 1943. (Part of the Charles E. Brown Papers, Box 21, Wisconsin Historical Society.)

tailed turtle” and a bird.⁶ (Fig. 1.) Additionally, a conical mound was destroyed when Agriculture Hall was constructed.⁷

As Euro-Americans moved onto Observatory Hill, the views and topography of the hill continued to play an important role in site selection. The first Euro-American structure on Observatory Hill was constructed circa 1855. The edifice known today as the Observatory Hill Office Building was constructed for Loring Guild, a Madison merchant.⁸ (Fig. 2.) Several years later, in 1864, Professor Daniel Reed bought the home and lived there until 1866 when the University of Wisconsin purchased the home from him.⁹ During this period of time, the structure served as the home of three presidents of the University of Wisconsin. Later the structure became the residence of the director of the Observatory.¹⁰

In 1877, it was announced by the university that ex-Governor Cadwallader C. Washburn planned to construct an observatory on university grounds during the coming year. Construction officially began on the Washburn Observatory in 1878 and was completed by 1882.¹¹ Sources indicate that the “observatory site was lovely—100 feet above Lake Mendota to the north, isolated from Madison to the east by the University campus, and surrounded by orchards and a vineyard.”¹²

⁶ National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, Observatory Hill Mound Group, 2004.

⁷ National Register Nomination, Observatory Hill Mound Group, 2004.

⁸ National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, Washburn Observatory and Observatory Directors Residence, 1985.

⁹ National Register Nomination, Washburn Observatory and Observatory Directors Residence, 1985.

¹⁰ Jim Feldman, The Buildings of the University of Wisconsin (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1997), 14.

¹¹ National Register Nomination, Washburn Observatory and Observatory Directors Residence, 1985.

¹² Bob Bless, “Washburn Observatory 1878,” May 1978, 1-2.

The following quote from Professor Holden's description in Volume I of the Washburn Observatory Publications represents his enthusiasm for the site and observatory.

The site of the Observatory was selected by the Hon. C.C. Washburn upon one of the hills of the University Park, about 2000 feet west of the main entrance to the grounds....*There are fewer finer sites in the world for quiet beauty.* To the north is Lake Mendota, some four miles wide and ten long, a beautiful basin with verdant banks usually sloping gently to the water, but in places high and bold. To the east lies the town of Madison, embowered in trees...Between the Observatory and the town lies the University Park with the college buildings and the Campus....To the south, country is lower than the Observatory site and is gently undulating to a range of hills some ten miles away.... No better site could have been selected, situated as it is in the midst of a green plain, and protected on all sides from encroachments.¹³

Clearly, the views from Observatory Hill were important to early University and city of Madison officials. At this time, the hill provided uninterrupted views to the skies that were essential to the success of astronomical research in the Observatory.

Additional early construction on Observatory Hill included the Student Observatory and the Solar Observatory. (Fig. 3.) The primary function of the Student Observatory was to free up space in the main observatory, while the Solar Observatory was constructed to find a hypothetical planet near the sun.¹⁴ Unfortunately, both of the Student Observatory and the Solar Observatory are no longer evident on the Observatory Hill landscape.

The Observatory and its associated buildings visibly altered the Observatory Hill landscape, but the impact was relatively moderate. Agriculture on Observatory Hill, changed the appearance of the landscape in more dramatic ways. (Fig. 4.) A predominant feature on the hill included an orchard that was planted as early as the mid 1870s. (Fig.

¹³ Charles M. Huffer, "When It's Dark on Observatory Hill, the 100th Anniversary of the Washburn Observatory."

¹⁴ Feldman, 38.

5.) As the years progressed, the Agricultural Experimentation Farm on the University of Wisconsin campus continued to grow; the orchard was extended and small fruit crops were grown on the slopes of Observatory Hill. Additionally, cattle were allowed to graze on the hill. (Fig. 6.) Interestingly, today, several terraces still remain on the northern slope of Observatory Hill thus indicating the location of the historic orchard on the hill. Undoubtedly, the selection of Observatory Hill as an orchard site was due to the topography of the hill. Its north-facing slopes were ideal for apple growing. Additionally, air drainage was achievable in this location.

Agriculture on Observatory Hill and its surrounding areas continued to grow until the mid 1920s, when housing and land became sparse on the eastern side of campus. As a result, the Adams and Tripp Dormitories for men as well as a refectory were constructed at the western edge of Observatory Hill. The dormitories were erected and ready for occupancy by 1926.¹⁵ A reporter from *The Wisconsin Country Magazine* indicated his approval of the new structures in the following manner: "with paths laid out and velvety lawns, varied by shrubs and trees, for a setting, this new beehive of student activity which nestles under Observatory Hill, will take on added beauty and be a harmonious and beautiful addition to the buildings already on our campus."¹⁶ In the same year, the orchard on Observatory Hill was moved to a new location. (Fig. 7.) The following quote indicates land-use changes that occurred as a result of residential activity on Observatory Hill.

The possibility of housing five hundred students in the heart of the agricultural campus is already beginning to cause changes. The horticultural plots and orchards are being moved near Hill Farm, two miles distant. Many of the nearby

¹⁵Ralph K. Jacobs, "Another Symbol of Advancement," *The Wisconsin Country Magazine*, June 1926, 284.

¹⁶The Wisconsin Country Magazine, June 1926, 284.

experimental fields will be used for athletics, making it necessary to establish new agricultural plots. The pressure of increased enrollment is thrusting the agricultural buildings and activities farther westward, rather than toward the closely built up eastern side of campus.¹⁷

As the university continued to grow, it was clear that the agricultural portions of campus were destined to move westward. The construction of a residential housing district in 1925-1926 was symbolic of a new attitude towards Observatory Hill. This attitude exemplified the idea of development and progress, which meant that Observatory Hill was not safe from eastward university expansion. Unfortunately, its views, aesthetics, and sense of place were secondary in the face of a growing student enrollment at the University of Wisconsin.

Shortly after the construction of the Adams and Tripp dormitories, the 1927 Campus General Plan of Development was assembled. The new plans indicated wide-scale student housing development on Observatory Hill. Two years later, in 1929, Michael Olbrich conducted a study of student housing and wrote an ambitious two-phase plan of development for the University of Wisconsin.¹⁸ The proposed development site stretched along the northern edge of Observatory Hill near the shoreline to Picnic Point. Ultimately, this development planned to include a large number of dormitories, fraternity and sorority houses, and perhaps faculty housing.¹⁹ Within the year, the Great Depression struck the university and both this vision of development and the outlines proposed by the General Plan of 1927 were not possible. Hence, the views and associated integrity of Observatory Hill were temporarily saved.

¹⁷ The Wisconsin Country Magazine, June 1926, 284.

¹⁸ David E. Cronon and John W. Jenkins. The University of Wisconsin: A History: Politics, Depression and War, Vol. 3 (1925-1945). (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 120.

¹⁹ Cronon and Jenkins, 120.

After the General Plan of 1927, development on Observatory Hill proceeded gradually. In 1934, Observatory Drive was realigned to provide an efficient circulation route on Observatory Hill. (Fig. 8.) An article from *The Daily Cardinal* indicated that:

Work has been started on a new road around Observatory Hill. The new road, which will practically replace the present route to the top of the hill and around the observatory, is located on the north slope of the hill about 30 feet below the old road. The new road will present to users an uninterrupted view of Lake Mendota and will extend around the hill passing between the Soils Building and the Men's Dormitory Refectory, to connect with the present road leading to the University Dairy. Work on the road is done by hand and is being paid for with C.W.A. funds.²⁰

Prior to the realignment in 1934, Observatory Drive consisted of curvilinear, romantic roads that wound around the Observatory, then behind Agricultural Hall finally meeting with Linden Drive. Additionally, other drives on Observatory Hill may have been associated with the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association. Not surprisingly, the addition of a new road on Observatory Hill created new problems. According to an article in the *Wisconsin Alumnus*:

Modern romance has been barred from Observatory Hill. Chains have been placed across the road leading to the hill because headlights from cars interfere with work at the Observatory. Thus the modern romance which flourishes in a parked car is no more on Observatory Hill....The chains do not bar the strolling couples who wander to the hilltop to sit on the grass because shining light orbs apparently do not distract scientists as do gleaming headlights.²¹

Sadly, as "romantic" sentiment on Observatory Hill gave way to functionalism, physical traces of its past slowly disappeared from the existing landscape.

Ironically, as development continued, views of Lake Mendota also continued to maintain importance. Moreover, people never lost their connection to hill. Arguably, views and aesthetic beauty were still important when defining the sense of place there.

²⁰ Leslie G. Janett, "Campus Gets New Road," *The Wisconsin Engineer*, January 1934, 59.

²¹ Harry C. Thoma, "Up and Down the Hill," *Wisconsin Alumnus*, June 1937.

By 1938, the University was again facing a housing shortage. As a result, a strip of dormitories was constructed west of Observatory Hill near Lake Mendota. At the same time, the university began construction of Elizabeth Waters Hall near the northern base of Observatory Hill. During this period of rapid university expansion, the views of Lake Mendota from Observatory Hill played an important role in university recreational and social life; however, development did not stop on the hill.

After the construction of Elizabeth Waters Hall, the university developed a new campus master plan in 1941. The 1941 plan expressed the idea that Observatory Hill was to remain free from future development. Furthermore, the plan indicated the importance of views from the hill by establishing a marked location with the best view shed from this location. (Fig. 9.) Clearly, Observatory Hill and its views have been important for a long time, yet development continued. What happened to change the ideology of university officials and planners from the development of Observatory Hill in the 1927 General Plan to the idea of preserving the character of Observatory Hill through view sheds in the 1941 plan?

After the creation of the 1941 plan, the physical character of Observatory Hill remained stable for several years. The next period of change occurred as a result of the abandonment of the astronomical research on Observatory Hill. The first of the three astronomy research facilities removed was the Solar Observatory in 1949.²² Only a few years later it was obvious that the Washburn Observatory could not function due to increased pollution and light from the encroaching university and the growing city of Madison. Thus, it was abandoned in 1959.²³ Finally, with no primary observatory for

²² Feldman,39.

²³ Feldman,33.

instruction, the Student Observatory was disassembled and moved to another location in 1960.²⁴ The removal and abandonment of the structures related to astronomical research ended Observatory Hill's function related to research in astronomy.

By the late 1950s, the importance of views from Observatory Hill emerged with ferocity. In 1959, Andrew W. Hopkins, a professor of Agricultural Journalism, wrote several articles concerning the need for protecting important scenic views on the University of Wisconsin campus. Hopkins believed that "from points on Observatory Drive, high above Mendota's waters, may be seen one of the finest views on any American campus....Many of those, who have visited universities throughout the country, vote this view from Observatory Hill one of the most beautiful to be found anywhere."²⁵ Furthermore, Hopkins vehemently urged the university to provide a parking spot or overlook where visitors and students alike could enjoy the views from Observatory Hill. Ultimately, Hopkins voice was heard, and in the early 1960s a small parking area was constructed parallel to Observatory Drive.

On a few years later, in 1961, James Wartrous wrote a powerful article entitled "The Wisconsin Campus of the Future." In this article, Wartrous discusses the importance of Observatory Hill, its views and campus development on a larger scale. Clearly, Wartrous represented a new philosophy regarding campus development, which focused on the conservation of important spaces and places on campus. In the following paragraph Wartrous pleads the case for conservation of our natural spaces on campus.

The panorama of the lake from Observatory Hill is matched by few in the Upper Midwest despite its interruption by ponderous masses to the East. We take

²⁴ Feldman, 43.

²⁵ Andrew W. Hopkins, "Nation's Most Beautiful Campus," November 1959. (Part of the Andrew W. Hopkins Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.)

delight in Lake Mendota when its presence is not obscured or stingily revealed at street ends and through peek-holes between buildings and trees.”²⁶

Furthermore, Watrous indicates,

We no longer have a pastoral or “ivy-covered” campus. If we are to save woods and vistas, and produce greenways and concordant architecture, which will provide a sense of space and beauty, we must build upward in combinations of low and high-rise structures. To continue to build out over every parcel of land will doom the campus to being two enormous piles of brick and mortar. What once was Bascom and Observatory Hills will become sprawling mounds of masonry.²⁷

Observatory Hill undoubtedly permits the finest views of Lake Mendota from the University of Wisconsin campus. This landscape also asserts a sense of place for many individuals within the university and the city of Madison. Today students, faculty, and Madison residents treasure Observatory Hill. It is widely understood that such a landscape cannot be reproduced. As a result, it is obvious that this landscape needs to be preserved. Unfortunately, the threat of future development continues to plague Observatory Hill. While most campus planners admit the importance of the site, they are continually forced to consider construction and development on any open, green space on campus. Today, views from Observatory Hill are threatened by proposed development on Lot 34. Any development on Observatory Hill would hinder not only the views of the lake, but it would also destroy the integrity of both the cultural and natural landscape associated with Observatory Hill. It is clear that Observatory Hill needs to be maintained and preserved for future generations at any cost.

Final Thoughts

Observatory Hill unquestionably has a complex history. Prehistorically, Native

²⁶ James S. Watrous, “The Wisconsin Campus of the Future,” Wisconsin Alumnus, February 1961, 22.

²⁷ James S. Watrous, February 1961, 24.

American mound builders were the earliest documented human occupants on Observatory Hill. The succeeding period of landscape occupation was defined by the arrival of the Euro-American. During this period, construction, development and agriculture significantly changed the character of Observatory Hill. Later, recreational and residential activity edged agriculture westward and off Observatory Hill.

Without a doubt, the history of Observatory Hill is important. Additionally, the views associated with Observatory Hill have been a defining characteristic of the landscape for thousands of years. But there is something larger than simply the views. The experience of place as defined by the feeling of sense of place is inherent in this landscape. While experience varies according to user and time, ultimately, the views, aesthetics and history still maintain importance. Some users may remember tobogganing down the hill; while another may cherish the times that he or she stole apples out of the orchard. Personal types of experience associated with sense of place qualities are fondly remembered for a lifetime.

Ultimately, the landscape associated with Observatory Hill incorporates history, aesthetic beauty, romantic ideals, and experience to create a powerful sense of place that is cherished by many past generations. With any luck, the integrity of Observatory Hill will be maintained for future generations to create their own sense of place based on similar values, and aesthetic ideals.

Illustrations



Fig. 1. “Two-tailed turtle” effigy mound on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus outlined by melting snow. Note the presence of the bird mound on the upper left hand corner of the photograph. Photograph taken by Melvin Diemer. Date unknown. (Source: Wisconsin Historical Society, www.wisconsinhistory.org)



Fig. 2. The Observatory Hill Office Building. (The original home of Loring Guild.) Other visible structures in the photograph include a barn and the Student Observatory. Date unknown. (Source: CLP Photo Gallery, H0010.)



Fig. 3. The Washburn Observatory in the background and the Solar Observatory in the foreground on the University of Wisconsin campus, circa 1910. (Source: CLP Photo Gallery, A0120.)



Fig. 4. The University of Wisconsin-Madison campus. Structures include: the Washburn Observatory far left; Solar Observatory center; and Bascom Hall far right.

Note the agricultural fields behind the Washburn Observatory. Date unknown, circa 1880-1916. (Source: CLP Photo Gallery, image number not available.)

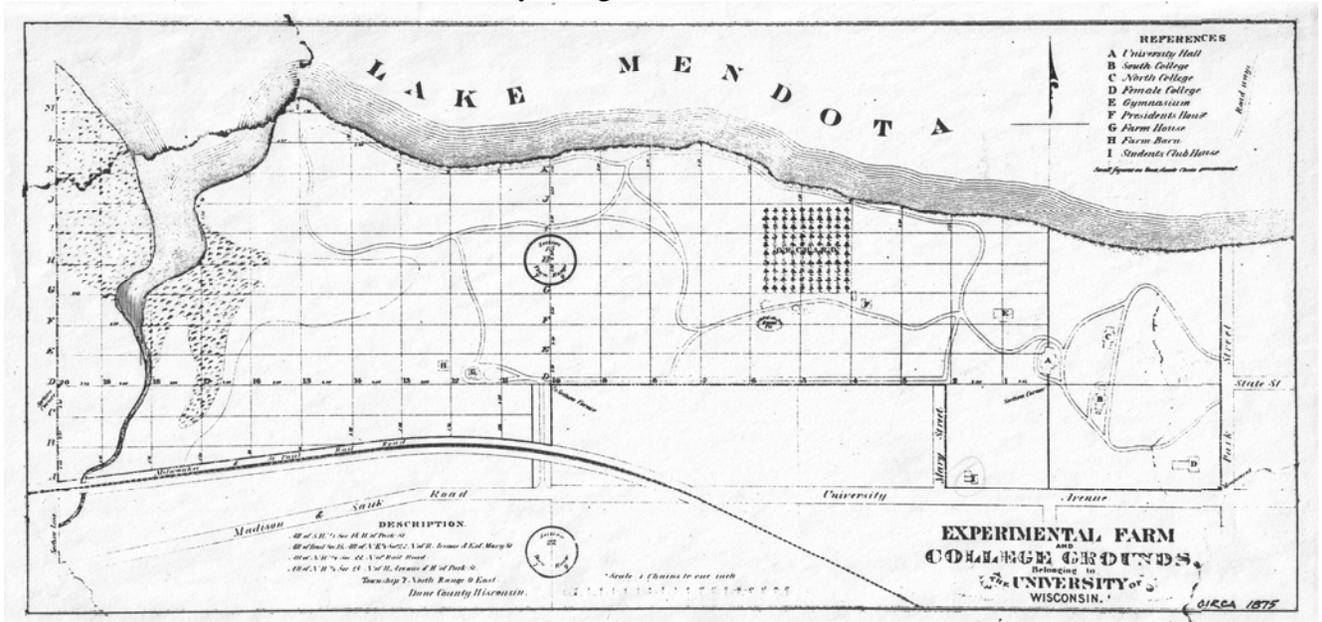


Fig. 5. University of Wisconsin Experimental Farm, circa 1875. (Source: CLP Photo Gallery, M0002.)



Fig. 6. This photo shows cattle grazing with the Student Observatory in the background. Date unknown. (Post 1880) (Source: CLP Photo Gallery, H0011.)



Fig. 7. University of Wisconsin campus, circa 1926. Note the orchard on Observatory Hill. Additionally, notice this photograph was taken during the construction of Carson Gulley Commons. (Source: CLP Photo Gallery, A0044.)



Fig. 8. This photograph of Observatory Hill indicates a shift in land use. Notice, the orchard is in dramatic decline. Furthermore, notice the construction of lot 34, the realignment of Observatory Drive and the construction of Elizabeth Waters Hall. Date unknown. (Post 1940) (Source: CLP Photo Gallery, A0043.)

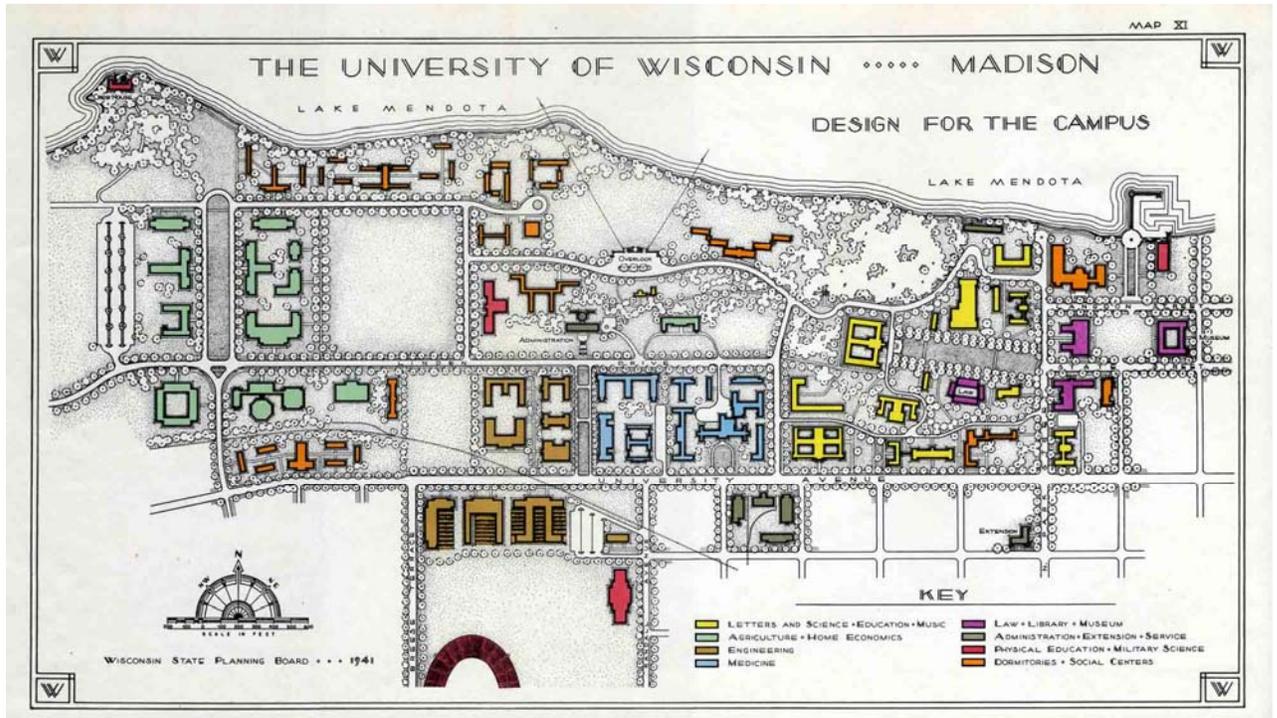


Fig. 9. The 1941 Campus Master Plan map. Note that there is no planned development on Observatory Hill. Additionally, note the emphasis on the view shed from the overlook on Observatory Hill.

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