

Greek columns traded for hodgepodge of architecture

UNL in the '90s fails to match 1920 plan

BY ALAN PHELPS/STAFF REPORTER

In 1920, University of Nebraska officials drew up a bold plan for the future layout of the school — a plan that was never realized. According to the 1920 Cornhusker yearbook, planners envisioned the construction of that new university by 1940.

Today's university is far from the dreamy counterpart of the 1920s. While the real UNL is marked by a hodgepodge of architectural styles, the 1920 design consisted of classically inspired buildings clustered around a central mall.

The Nebraska Mall, a tree-lined boulevard, was to run the east-west length of the campus, down the center of what in reality became a parking lot and is now the area around Love Library North. At one end would have been a Greek Amphitheater, in keeping with the classical style, built on the natural hill that today slopes downward between Neihardt and Pound residence halls.

"... if surrounded by tall-growing trees," the plan said of the theater, "and given proper architectural dignity, a theater here placed could and would become not only the crown of the campus, in the matter of beauty, but the center of all those fine activities, dramatic and festal, which the glorious sunshine of Nebraska invites to the out-of-doors."

In the opposite direction of the mall, an imposing engineering hall was proposed for about the same location as the present one-story 501 Building.

The authors of the 1920 plan were enthusiastic about the prospect of a mall as the focal point of UNL. "This mall would become the veritable campus center," they wrote, "affording a site not only for the varied student life of passing generations, for the processions of commencement day and other academic functions, for fetes and celebrations as picturesque as fancy could make them, but also for constant beautification with statuary, tablets, fountains or other memorials, as the grateful classes should leave these monuments behind them."

An imagined conversation between two university graduates visiting their alma mater in 1940, printed in the 1920 Cornhusker yearbook, also

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—1920 Cornhusker Yearbook

mentions the proposed mall. "What the Roman Forum was to Rome, the Acropolis Road to Athens, the mall is to the U. of N. We've had some wonderful spectacles here, I can assure you," one of the alumni says.

Intersecting the mall in the 1920 plan was the main north-south avenue through campus, 12th Street. The street was to be called the "Street of One Thousand Columns" because of the column-laden buildings proposed for either side.

A Social Science Hall (now the College of Business and Administration), Avery Hall, and Bessey Hall had already been constructed by 1920 along the lines of that plan. If the rest of the design had become reality, similar structures would have been built where the Sheldon Art Gallery and

Hamilton, Oldfather and Burnett halls now stand.

Square with 12th Street at its north terminus would be Memorial Gym, one of the proposed campus' most important buildings.

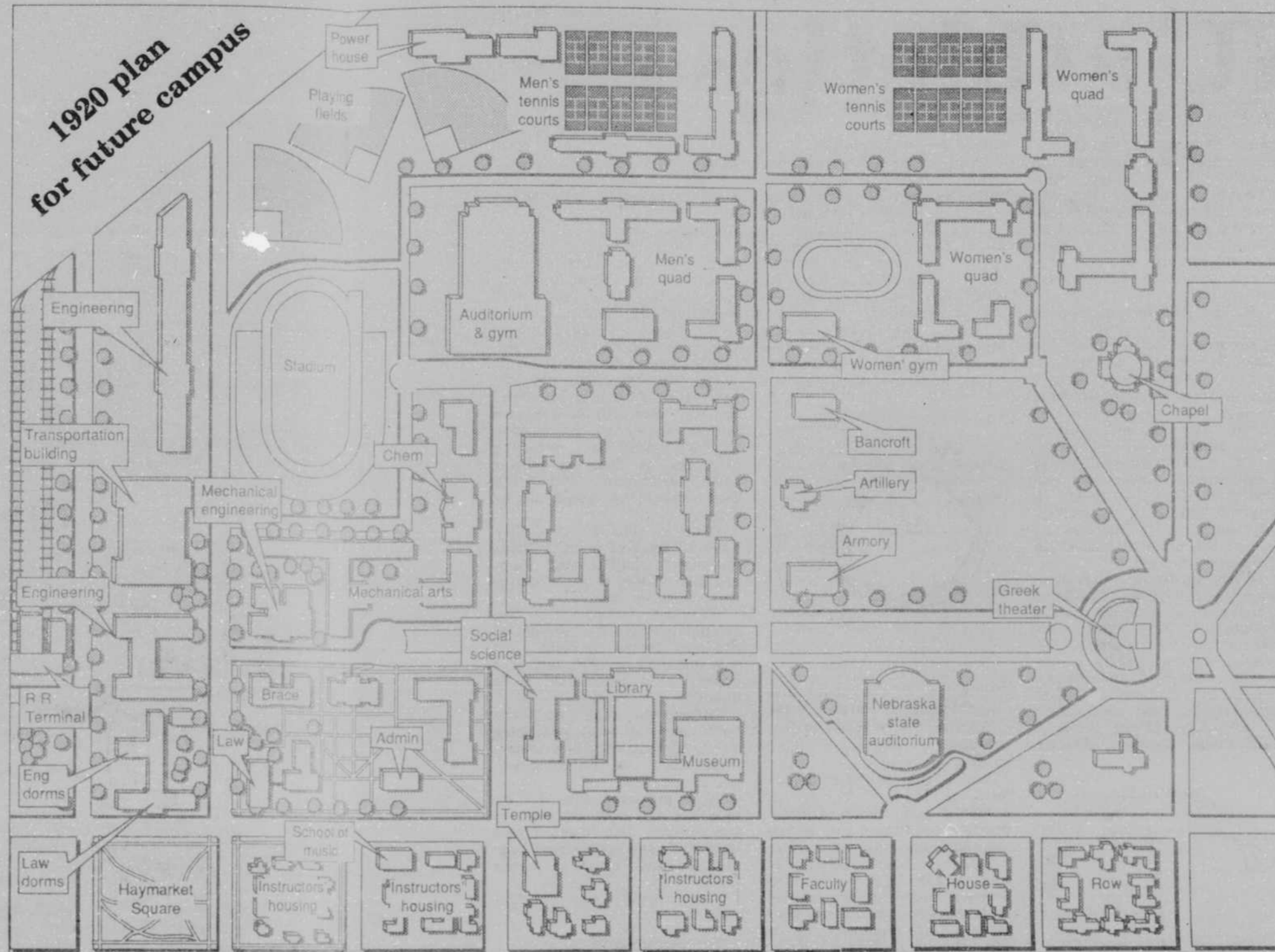
"The Memorial Building," the plan said, "will be a magnificent architectural creation, adequately expressive of the wealth of admiration and veneration felt by Nebraskans for the men who marched to battle to vindicate the principles of democratic government."

A huge marble-encrusted Memorial Hall would have been the main interior feature of the gym, immortalizing in stone the names of Nebraska's fallen World War I heroes. The entrance to the gym "could become a columned court of great majesty, in fact, it might well be called the Court of Columns," the planners wrote.

Near Memorial Gym would be Memorial Stadium, which actually was the only building to be constructed on its site as planned.

At the end of 13th Street, between the Nebraska Mall and R Street, was to be the cornerstone of the UNL of the future, the university library/museum/fine arts college. The combination of these three entities, the planners wrote, "would not only be of continuous service to the students of the university, but especially in its museum, would invite visits from the savants of many lands."

And, the imaginary returning alumni from the 1920 yearbook lauded the plan, saying, "The core of every college is its books, printed by man on paper, by nature in the rocks.



John Bruce/Daily Nebraskan

Here we bring them together."

Despite the enthusiasm of planners and students, only a library eventually was built on the site.

Facing the State Capitol at the end of 15th Street (today's Centennial Mall), where the Nebraska State Historical Society now stands, was to be another monumental structure, the Nebraska State Auditorium. Bristling with classically inspired columns, the huge building would have seated 6,000.

The location was chosen to serve both the university and the state.

"Facing the Capitol . . . is the logical site for a monumental building, and the needs, not only of the university and the city, but also of the state, call for a large assembly or convention hall, more than for any other structure," planners wrote.

In the aftermath of World War I, planners allocated more than a city block for a Drill Plaza and an Armory,

located across the mall from the Auditorium. Those sites were necessary, they wrote, to "enable that training in the use of arms which all free states must have, not for the encouragement of militarism, but for the preservation of the national liberties."

Rounding out the campus, at the north edge of the Drill Plaza, was to be the Girl's Quad, a dormitory area complete with tennis courts and softball fields. Between the Girl's Quad and the Gym would have been the Men's Quad.

The residents of those dormitories were to be inspired with a sense of pride in their university and its proud, classical hallmarks.

The yearbook's imagined 1940 conversation between two university graduates called on alumni to help make the new campus a reality.

"You surely have transformed things in 20 years — unimaginably,"

one of the fictional characters says. "What I should like to know is how you did it."

"It was the grads' part to do that," answered the other, "and '20 did her share."

"I'm proud of the old class, I can tell you!" said the first. "True to the dot! But I wonder, when I look about, what there is left for . . . the class of 1940 to do. The university seems so — finished."

However, with or without the help of alumni, the university was never to reach this "finished" state. The intervention of the Great Depression and World War II meant that such a campus was not to be. New generations of administrators, new technology and the proliferation of the automobile — the 1920 plan doesn't mention parking lots — brought with them different ideas about how the campus should grow.

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—1920 Program of Development