# St. Mary's College of Maryland: A Case Study in Campus Planning with Particular Historical and Environmental Challenges

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Many college and university campuses are among the most beautiful places in the nation. Students, faculty, and visitors walk onto such campuses and immediately feel a sense of place. The natural setting, architectural design, arrangement of buildings, open space, and landscaping together create an inviting and supportive atmosphere for the community of learning that school represents.

This atmosphere does not happen by accident. The most beautiful and functional campuses have been carefully planned to achieve their goals. The most fortunate institutions adopted a campus planning process early in their history, and have followed and modified it as necessary, through years of expansion.

Many campuses, however, are not so fortunate. Even when plans had been developed, the tremendous expansion of higher education in the 60s and 70s encouraged colleges to abandon their plans or proceed with expedient projects without sufficient regard to the total campus environment. In the ensuing years, outside concerns and forces have increasingly influenced campus development--city and county planning, environmental regulations, historic preservation issues, traffic patterns, and residential and commercial development among them. Given these pressures, the college that seeks to develop a functional as well as a beautiful campus must bring a good deal of creativity and collaborative thinking to its campus planning process.

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The recent history of St. Mary's College of Maryland illustrates the complex issues attending the process of campus planning in the 1980s and 1990s, and exemplifies the benefits to be gained from wrestling with those issues for the sake of a thoughtfully designed campus. The issues stand out with peculiar relief because of the College's distinctive, and unusually sensitive, surroundings.

A public liberal arts college serving 1500 students, St. Mary's College of Maryland is located in St. Mary's City. Considered the most historic site in Maryland, St. Mary's City was the Maryland colony's first settlement and first capital (1634-1694). Virtually all of the College's 275 acres rest within the boundaries of a National Historic Landmark that preserves the colonial site. The Landmark District includes about 800 additional acres as well.

St. Mary's City is regarded as one of the premier 17th century archaeological sites in the United States, one of the best preserved sites of the English colonization of North America. Although no structures remain above ground from the colonial occupation, the archaeological riches below ground have only begun to be discovered and interpreted. The historical significance of St. Mary's City includes a number of very significant "firsts" for both the nation and the state of Maryland. (See box on page 47)

St. Mary's City is also an exceptionally beautiful area. A patchwork of woods, open fields, shaded lawns, bluffs, and beaches, the College campus stretches along the shores of the St. Mary's River, a tidal tributary of the Potomac just upstream from that greater river's juncture with the Chesapeake Bay.

In this lovely historical setting, St. Mary's College doubled in size during the 1960s without a good plan. By the mid-1980s, it was growing again, enhancing the quality of students, faculty, programs, and facilities, with

the aim of becoming a truly extraordinary public college with a national reputation. At the same time, the College was growing increasingly aware of and sensitive to the needs of its setting. In 1984, the celebration of the 350th anniversary of Maryland's founding at St. Mary's City had greatly increased the visibility of the historic area. Meanwhile, new environmental legislation aimed at protecting the Chesapeake had imposed strict regulations over land use in any "critical area"--lands lying within 1000 feet of the Bay or its tidal tributaries. Most of St. Mary's City, including much of the College campus, lay within a critical area.

Clearly, the prospect of expansion in such an area would pose difficult challenges. Fortunately, the College's Board of Trustees and administration recognized the importance of planning and responded to the challenge with determination and creativity.

St. Mary's is now well into a decade-long process of transforming its campus, with strong attention to historical, archaeological, and environmental features. Progress has been steady, but significant challenges have arisen along the way. Largely because they had embraced a planning process, the College's leaders have been able to turn those challenges into opportunities.

## A College with Roots in the 1840s

What is now St. Mary's College of Maryland, a public honors college of 1500 students, was founded in 1840 as a female seminary (school for girls) to commemorate the significant 17th century events in St. Mary's City.

The small school grew slowly in the 1800s, developing into an excellent high school by the turn of the century. In 1927 it added a junior college division--the first junior college in Maryland and one of a very few public junior colleges nationwide. By 1964 the high school division had been phased out; the junior college enrollment was about 250; the school had five major buildings and two small houses; the campus had expanded from a mere 11 acres to more than 270; and some people were dreaming of making St. Mary's a four-year college. Leading the dreamers were then-president May Russell and the Board of Trustees. Effective promoters of the College, they convinced the Governor and Legislature to invest heavily in the expansion of College facilities. Twelve of the college's present 24 buildings were built between 1964 and 1970, and one was converted from a gymnasium to a science building. Unfortunately, the buildings, while functional, were undistinguished and placed without benefit of a total campus plan.

*Aerial photograph of the St. Mary's College Campus showing a portion of Historic St. Mary's City in the right foreground.*

By the late 1960s, the seminary became St. Mary's College of Maryland and the dream of a four-year college was realized. Its full-time enrollment jumped from 350 to 1100 in just over a decade. But only one building, a fine arts center, was constructed. The need for more facilities, student housing and academic, was pressing.

## Poised to Expand

By the mid-1980s St. Mary's College of Maryland was poised for expansion. A new president--Edward T. Lewis--arrived in 1983, bringing energy and vision. Within two years of his arrival, planning for two major building projects had begun, and ideas for other development were under discussion.

The key to this era of campus development was identifying the long-term physical needs of the campus to enable the College to achieve its goals. A new position, Vice President for Planning was created to guide a master planning process. The first step was the drafting of a Facilities Master Plan, which cataloged all existing space, evaluated efficiency and function, and defined new spaces needed. The College needed new student residences, for example, as well as a substantially larger library. At least three other major projects were on the list, along with a number of renovation and reconfiguration projects. All this major activity was anticipated for the period 1986-1995.

New funding helped the College begin to implement its plans. In the fall of 1984, St. Mary's was selected as one of eleven schools to receive a three million dollar federal loan, for 30 years at three percent interest, to build new student housing and renovate existing student residences. Also, shortly thereafter, the state approved the facilities plan and provided eight million dollars in design and capital construction funds for the library.

## A Comprehensive Plan

In the late spring of 1986, the Board of Trustees recognized that the facilities plans under way were only the beginning of a major transformation of the campus. J. Frank Raley, vice chairman of the Board and a member since 1967, was the first to give voice to a concern that had been nagging a number of people both on the Board and in the administration. It was clear that the College would grow bigger; the question Raley and others asked was, "How are we going to make it better as well?"

With the Board having posed the question, the administration considered various answers. The conclusion was that the College needed a comprehensive plan that addressed qualitative design issues in the context of the whole institution--campus, facilities, and programs--and that worked to help the College achieve its goals. The College decided that the way to create such a plan was to seek experienced and highly regarded outside help in campus planning and the Board authorized immediate action.

To engage the best people in the campus planning field would cost money, money the College did not have in its operating budget. The Trustees, underlining their commitment to do something very special for the College, something that would be a legacy, agreed that this effort should be supported by private funds. They pledged their own resources and their assistance in securing the necessary additional funds. It was a bold decision that set St. Mary's on a course that would transform the campus.

A search began immediately for a consultant with master planning experience on a college campus in an historic setting. One of the persons identified was Jacque Robertson, then Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia. Robertson had recently been honored for his planning work at the University. Like many schools which expanded rapidly in the 60s and 70s, Virginia had departed from its classic campus plan, created by founder Thomas Jefferson. Robertson had put corrective measures in motion there. He was intrigued by the tidewater setting of St. Mary's and its intimate connection with the colonial capital, Historic St. Mary's City--which research had shown was built upon a well-defined concept of baroque town planning. He agreed to take on the College as a client.

### Significant Firsts at St. Mary's City

St. Mary's City is one of the most historic locations in the United States. Recognized as a National Historic Landmark since 1969, it it the best preserved archaeological site of a 17th century English city in North America. St. Mary's was the scene of many notable events in America's early history and some of these are listed below.

#### Events of National Significance

- First Settlement by Marylanders, The 1634 Fort
- First Catholic Chapel in English America, 1635
- First Black to Vote in a Legislature in America, Mathias de Sousa 1642
- Only Evidence of English Civil War in America, Pope's Fort, 1645
- First Practice of Separating Church from State in America
- First Request for Vote From Woman in America, Margaret Brent, 1647
- First Official Religious Toleration in America, The Act of 1649
- First Use of Sophisticated Town Planning in America, circa 1668
- First Example of Georgian Architecture in America, St. Peter's 1677
- First Printing Press in the South, William Nuthead, 1685

#### Events of State Significance

- First Mill in Maryland, 1635
- First Public Inn in Maryland, circa 1638
- First Industrial Activity in Maryland, Iron and Brick Making, 1630's
- First Protestant Church in Maryland, 1642
- The First Official City in Maryland, 1668
- Maryland's First Statehouse, The Country's House, 1662
- First Monumental Brick Structure in Maryland, The Great Chapel, 1668
- Focus of the 1689 Protestant Rebellion
- Home and Burial Place of First Governor, Leonard Calvert
- Home and Tomb of First Royal Governor, Sir Lionel Copley

Robertson's impact was immediate. In October of 1986, before he and his team even began their evaluation, they were shown the plans for new student housing, a townhouse complex. Groundbreaking was set for November 1, and construction on a design-build basis was to begin immediately thereafter.

"Oh, but it's all wrong," Robertson said bluntly, referring to the placement and orientation of the buildings. The original plan did not take into account an exquisite water vista or an opportunity to create natural green areas that would foster personal interaction and a sense of community. Robertson offered specific suggestions, which the College took back to the architects. Within weeks, the entire site plan was revised and the exterior of the buildings redesigned to address the issues that Robertson had raised. Construction began in December of 1986--as planned.

Robertson moved quickly to begin his analysis, collecting information on the College's history, goals, and plans for the future. He also explored the local history, examined the campus carefully for sensitive environmental and archaeological zones, and interviewed faculty, staff, and students.

By June of 1987, the analysis was concluded. At a public meeting attended by the Board of Trustees, staff, faculty, and many community members, Robertson presented his observations and recommendations. Most of the points he made were self-evident, but the connections he drew between them and the vision he described for the St. Mary's campus of the future were extraordinary. His ideas won broad acceptance and praise, and had immediate impact in shaping and reshaping thinking about the campus. His principal organizing theme was to develop the St. Mary's campus as an "academic tidewater village." Among the recommendations were:

- Establish village limits.
- Establish more and enhance existing "precincts" within the village.
- Connect the precincts with a strong pedestrian circulation system.
- Establish new building sites to unify and integrate the precincts.
- Use landscaping and the creation of "outdoor rooms" as unifying elements.
- Transform the state highway that divided the campus into a unifying boulevard.
- Develop campus design guidelines.

Robertson viewed the tidewater village concept as the best model for St. Mary's. It would draw upon the local architecture, honor the College's historical setting, assure preservation of the attractive natural environment, encourage pedestrian circulation, encourage collegiality and community, and work toward realization of the College's goals. Adopting this concept while developing well-articulated design guidelines, he said, "would enable St. Mary's College to remain a gentle village which makes it an ideal setting for the high caliber of academic achievement." (St. Mary's College Master Plan, p. 40)

The Board accepted the preliminary recommendations in June of 1987, and the "Academic Tidewater Village" quickly became the prevailing theme of campus development. Even as Robertson was preparing the final version of the report and developing the detailed design guidelines, a number of his principal recommendations were put into action. The College contacted the State Highway Administration regarding changes to the highway which bisects the campus. The final design of the commons building that was part of the townhouse complex reflected his recommendation. The design of the library, which was under way during Robertson's work, also followed his concepts and incorporated the new campus standards for architecture. And, more subtly, throughout the campus a new attitude crept into considerations of remodeling or redesigning. Gone was any thought about "good enough." Plans, work, and furnishings were viewed from the perspective of the new design precepts. Throughout the campus an increased appreciation developed for the idea that quality of space--interior and exterior--has a great impact on the experience of students, faculty, and staff at the College.

The plan had accomplished many goals, just as Robertson had anticipated. As he wrote in his report, the master plan "is not so much a set of specific solutions as an attitude about the character of future design decisions. It can and will be amended and reinterpreted but should give guidance and consistency to future development of the campus." (St. Mary's College Master Plan, p. 39)

## Planning as an Ongoing Process

By the fall of 1988, when Robertson's final report was submitted, the Board and the College felt very good about their master plan. The townhouse complex had been completed. Construction had begun on the eight million dollar library. Campus attitudes about the plan were positive. The State Highway Administration was working on a plan to change the look of the state road to village boulevard instead of rural highway. And the College had achieved a major breakthrough in discussions with the state about a new science building, one of the key projects of the master facilities plan. The state agreed to place the building in the capital funding schedule for 1990-91, moving it up several years. In return, the College agreed to raise private funds for one fourth of the $16 million project.

The College was making excellent progress on other fronts. Applications were up; average SAT scores of the

freshman class had risen more than 100 points in five years; the size of the faculty was expanding; a new general studies program had been implemented and was enhanced by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities; private fund-raising was up tremendously; and the College had an excellent relationship with the Governor and Legislature. Momentum was strong and getting stronger. But in the spring of 1989, a major challenge to the plan emerged. Robertson's prediction that the planning effort "is and will continue to be an ongoing process" proved true.

## THE SCIENCE BUILDING SITE CONTROVERSY

By early 1989, people in the local community had begun to notice the changes at the College. Things were actually happening. The townhouses were complete, and the library was going up fast in the center of the campus. The library, indeed, became a conspicuous presence: a 28,000-square-foot addition to the existing library, rising on a hillside not far from the waterfront, and within sight of the state road. To some local residents, the visual impact was startling. They began to wonder about the next project of the master plan, the 50,000-square-foot science building, which would be located in the same vicinity.

The Robertson plan had proposed putting the science building close to the library and the student center, in order to create more density in the heart of the campus, a central "precinct." In addition to providing a critical mass of activity, the cluster of buildings, Robertson suggested, would offer an architectural and aesthetic structure that would give the campus more unity and cohesiveness and would encourage more pedestrian activity.

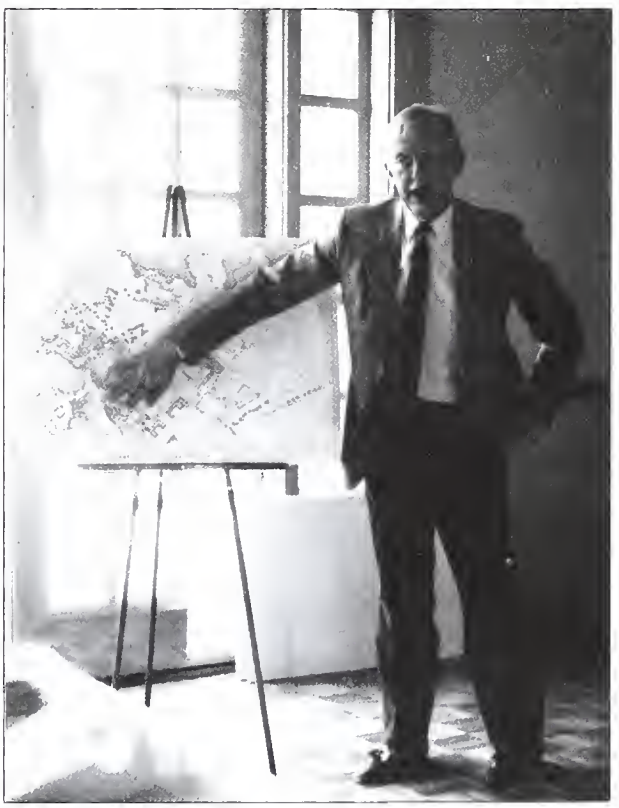
Many people in the local community understood Robertson's plan and supported the College's need for a science building. But some were bothered by the denser development and the visual impact of so many buildings, particularly in a location which they believed was such an important part of the historic district. The area designated by the College for its new science building had not yet been surveyed but was within the historic townlands of colonial capital days. During the master planning process, archaeologists had been consulted about the area; they recommended a survey be made of the site but did not, at that time, assert any need to avoid the historic townlands in new construction.

In the spring of 1989, while an archaeological survey of the proposed site was in progress, opposition to the site began to emerge. A group of local citizens formed an organization called the Historic St. Mary's City Rescue Coalition and mounted a public campaign urging the College to reconsider the site of the science building and to adopt a policy of avoiding the most historic areas completely by placing all new construction on the north side of campus, well away from the waterfront and the center of the original capital. Also, the group urged that before any other construction occur, an archaeological survey of rest of the campus be completed.

The stage was set for a classic confrontation between preservationists and developer, with the College wearing the uncomfortable hat of the developer. It was especially difficult for the College because of the positive feeling internally about the campus plan and because of the urgency the College felt about the need to begin work on the science building. It was also difficult for some in the Coalition who had connections to the College as alumni or community supporters and wanted to see the institution progress.

But the issues were clear and the preservationists' voices strong. The College felt they should be heard. The Board of Trustees established a special committee comprised of Board members, local residents, a faculty member and a student. The committee's task: review the information relative to the issue and make a recommendation to the Board.

Public meetings were held. Information from the archaeological survey, the state's Critical Areas Commission (overseeing the Chesapeake environmental regulations), and the local community group was pre-



*Public meetings were held in response to community concerns about the College's development plans.*

sented. A major issue was the archaeological survey. While its results were not conclusive, it did show several areas of interest which needed to be further excavated for a better evaluation. The big question was whether the areas were significant enough to be preserved, or could they be excavated and interpreted. The community group embraced the preservationist argument, particularly because of the location adjacent to known important and significant areas.

The controversy transcended the site of the science building. It was also about aesthetics and history. Some people felt the pastoral waterfront setting of the campus could not support the proposed density; others questioned the College's commitment to the historical treasure beneath and surrounding it.

The master plan had incorporated the historical significance of the campus into its major concept--the Tidewater Village of early St. Mary's City--and specifically addressed historical, environmental, and aesthetic issues. But the original plan did not have the benefit of archaeological surveys of the campus. The plan did, however, create a framework for evaluating this new information. Robertson had written that he hoped the plan would "elevate the level of awareness and sensitivity of those who administer and design components of the future campus, to impart a real understanding of the critical issues involved, and to protect and improve the physical setting."

After the public meetings, and considerable media attention on the issue, the President and the Board made a decision: respect history; find another location for the science building; look to the north side of campus for future development. The headline in the Baltimore Sun was "St. Mary's College defers to the past." In the local paper, the Enterprise, the editorial was titled "Both Sides Win."

## Selecting a New Site for the Science Building

The science building controversy was a watershed in the history of the College. It was painful and uncomfortable, but also probably inevitable. The College fully realized that even a carefully crafted plan cannot anticipate all situations; that a plan can only provide a framework for thinking about campus development in a holistic way. The original site recommendation for the science building was abandoned, but a process for selecting an alternative site--a planning framework--was in place. And that framework now included an important new element--the College's stated public commitment to the historic site it occupied.

The original master plan had made few recommendations for the north side of campus. It was clear that more analysis needed to be done and that archaeological surveys were critically important to the process. The College contracted for the surveys, while also contracting with a highly regarded landscape architect to review the north campus area and find a new site for the science building.

In addition, the College formally opened its review process so that the public would have a forum for involvement. The Board of Trustees created a Design Advisory Committee composed of board members, faculty, staff, a student, and members of the local community. This committee would hold public meetings to receive and review information about any College construction project or master plan revisions. It would evaluate the information in light of the master plan framework, design guidelines, and archaeological and environmental issues, and make recommendations to the Board.

The Committee was convened in January of 1990 to review the recommendation for an alternate site for the science building. The archaeological survey revealed a large area of high sensitivity on the north campus, an area the College pledged to preserve. The landscape architect, Michael Vergason, working in consultation with the College and architects, incorporated this site analysis into a plan that opened up many opportunities for the campus. In proposing the site for the science building on an existing parking area, Vergason offered a plan that would give the College the opportunity to create a commons area between buildings on the north campus and give more definition and cohesiveness to that area.

His recommendation was a creative solution to correct some problems of the past. In his analysis of the existing campus, Robertson had noted, "Each project undertaken in the past was regarded independently and not as a component of a larger order." His recommendation--and challenge--was clear: "Each proposed project...must be henceforth treated as both a valuable piece of the larger 'puzzle' as well as specifically responsible for achieving those intended goals."

In January the alternative site was approved by the Board, and the science building project began to advance. The Critical Areas Commission approved the site plans, and the architectural design contract was awarded to Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, who were selected in part for their experience and design excellence in areas of historic significance. A spokesperson for the Rescue Coalition gave the Trustees "a high compliment for having the courage and wisdom to move the science building site." She suggested that this decision had "turned the corner to moving the Coalition from activists as opponents to assistants in the project."

Because of the continued public interest in the building, Peter Bohlin and his team of architects visited the campus to present their preliminary ideas and receive public comment. They also visited historic sites in the area and, at the invitation of local residents, several

*Architect's rendering of the science building*

tidewater manor homes.

Yet another challenge appeared. In March of 1990 a contract was let to complete the archaeological survey of the north campus. Because the science building would be built upon an existing parking lot, areas for replacement parking lots had to be identified. The archaeological survey revealed some 18th and 19th century resources in one of the proposed parking areas. Of particular interest was the suggestion that the site had evidence of 19th century inhabitation. The College had to face yet another decision about archaeological remains. The same questions arose: Are all areas of previous settlement untouchable, or just the areas with 17th century evidence? Could this site be mitigated (excavated and interpreted)? Should it be preserved? Were there other alternatives for a parking area? What are the costs?

The College sought advice from many sources, seeking solutions other than the most traditional, expensive, and time consuming. A suggestion from the National Park Service proved especially helpful in fashioning a plan for the parking area. The solution was to lay a protective fabric over the ground and build the lot by bringing in gravel on top rather than excavating. The buried artifacts remained undisturbed, available for excavation some time in the future when time, technology, and funds might be more available. Plans were approved by the Maryland Historical Trust and other agencies, and the lots were finally constructed in the summer of 1991, with full preservation of the site and significant cost savings.

Another concern was the environment, an issue that had been recognized and addressed in the original master plan. The College hired a consulting firm to review the campus and, in particular, to offer advice for handling runoff from the planned science building, the new parking areas, and other north campus development. A plan was developed to reduce stormwater runoff well in excess of State of Maryland Critical Areas Commission guidelines. The plan also suggested a way to create infiltration basins that would be both a natural amenity and an outdoor laboratory in the biology program.

By December of 1991 all the necessary elements were in place and construction of the science building was begun. It was a creative design that would transform the character of the north campus, giving it integrity and beauty. Drawing from the architectural style of the region, the design incorporates elements of 17th and 18th century Tidewater Maryland architecture: brick construction, paired chimneys, peaked roofs, and simple lines. The building also encloses and forms a green--another "outdoor room" consistent with the master plan recommendations.

## Engaging "Creative Tension" to Complete the North Campus Plan

Having set the science building project into motion, the College now turned attention to completing the plan for the north side of campus. The archaeological survey identified areas of sensitivity and ranked them in order of importance. The area surrounding the St. John's site, for example, was deemed highly sensitive and was considered completely off limits for development. Other areas were designated as sensitive areas that needed further exploration and possibly mitigation, but could support some development. Finally, areas with no significant cultural resources were identified.

Next, needs for future construction were more clearly defined--housing for an additional 160 students, expansion of the gymnasium, dual auditoria seating 400 and 1100, and the possibility of one more classroom building.

Finding proper sites for these buildings within the imperative of preserving historical and environmental resources called for a highly creative effort. In truth, precious few of the 275 acres of the campus was deemed "available" for new construction. To confront this challenge, the College took the unusual approach of hiring two very talented professionals, Peter Bohlin and Michael Vergason, to work collaboratively to create the master plan for the north campus.

Both had worked with the College before. Bohlin, the architect of both the library and the science building, was primarily interested in building form and character. Vergason, whose initial analysis of the north campus resulted in the new site for the science building was primarily interested in interrelationships between buildings and the natural environment. For College staff, watching the two work together was witnessing creativity in action. The positive tension between the two generated a solution that all agreed would not have surfaced without the collaboration. Once having arrived at the broad outline for siting buildings, the two worked further to develop specific elements of the most creative piece of their plan--the site and design of the new townhouse-style student housing.

Identifying the site for the housing was a breakthrough in the collaborative process. With archaeological and environmental considerations limiting the space available for construction sites, the planners focused on an otherwise ignored area at the west end of the track and stadium. They proposed a novel crescent design following the lines of the track's oval that would accommodate the 40 townhouse units as well as establish relationships with the existing townhouses and commons building and the science building. A "hammerhead" design was used for one end of the crescent and a traditional Tidewater "telescope" design for the other. Chimneys, windows, and walk-through archways were incorporated to strengthen relationships with existing buildings.

By May of 1992, the team was ready. The Board's Design Advisory Committee held public meetings to review the plan for development of the north campus and the preliminary designs for the new housing. The Board of Trustees approved both plans enthusiastically at its June, 1992, meeting. Bohlin and his team were engaged to complete the design of the housing. The project was bid in the fall of 1992; construction began in February of 1993. Twenty of the forty units are expected to be ready for occupancy by the fall of 1993, the same time the science building is scheduled for completion.

## More to Come

The St. Mary's plan is far from complete, but part of its strength is its capacity to absorb each project without a feeling of incompleteness. As each project comes to fruition, it contributes to the overall sense of place on the campus, but it does not require a subsequent project for closure, that is, it does not create a "tragic flaw" architecturally or aesthetically.

The State Highway Administration has begun work on the state road through campus which will transform the existing country road into the long-planned village boulevard. Gymnasium expansion, including outside field development, is on schedule for 1995. This project, in addition to creating much-needed athletic and recreational facilities, will further develop the commons area created by the science building. The dual auditoria await decisions on funding. When constructed, they will complement the other buildings on the north campus. Elsewhere on campus, an expansion of the student center is set for 1994-95--another project that will require considerable creativity and enormous sensitivity to both the adjacent historical sites and the environment. It will be designed to form stronger relationships with the library and its courtyard.

Will the College face more complex challenges as the projects continue? Probably. The needs of the academic community juxtaposed with the sensitivity of the environment and the historical setting will always need careful evaluation. But St. Mary's College is well-situated to meet those challenges. It invested in a complex and sophisticated master plan and design guidelines, based on the theme of an Academic Tidewater Village, that established a framework for planning and project evaluation. Most of all, the College understands that its sense of place is central to the overall success of its academic community.CP