

December 3, 2024

To the Community Preservation Panel of the Village of Aurora,

We write to request local historic landmark designation for the Campbell Art and Barler Music buildings on the Wells College campus. ("Designation of a historic landmark...may be proposed by...any resident of the Village of Aurora," 7.06.A.1)

The international reputation of the buildings' designer, architect Walter Netsch of the renowned Chicago-based firm of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, is a compelling reason for such designation.

Netsch had a long and distinguished career, receiving many awards and honorary degrees. He was named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. He was a chief architect and lead designer for the United States Air Force Academy campus including the distinctive Cadet Chapel.

During his career he designed fifteen libraries as well as academic buildings for colleges and universities in the United States and Japan, including the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. At the University of Illinois he designed blocks of buildings in functional clusters, a forerunner of his academic grouping of three buildings for Wells College.

Netsch designed Barler and Campbell, which opened in 1974, to harmonize with his nationally significant 1968 design of Long Library. The library was given local landmark status shortly after it turned 50. Now Barler and Campbell are eligible to share this status. They were designed as companions to the library, creating a cohesive "architectural necklace" of buildings.

This grouping is skillfully sited, nestled into a wooded hillside, "conceived ...to reflect the environmental harmony embodied in his design for Long Library."<sup>1</sup> They are outstanding examples of Netsch's signature design and aesthetic known as Field Theory, a highly versatile approach to the geometric generation of architectural structures that are intended to be uniquely suited to their purpose and environment.

The Wells College built environment is associated with 19th century buildings and traditional early to mid-20th century styles. The three later 20th century modernist

---

<sup>1</sup> "Fine Arts Center Construction Marked in September 24 Bricklaying Ceremony," Wells College Express, Vol. 2 No. 5, November 1973.

buildings by Netsch provide a dramatic yet harmonious addition to the campus. Harmonious because of the natural colors of brick and wood blending into the rural campus, and harmonious due to the buildings' relationship with the pastoral setting. Speaking of the project, Netsch said "it is a location out of time, a site of uncommon beauty."<sup>2</sup>

In summary,

- Barler and Campbell were designed by an internationally renowned architect.
- Together, with the award-winning Long Library, they form an integrated cluster of perfectly sited buildings.
- For a half century they provided an uplifting, creatively designed educational and public performance space for Wells College and the community of Aurora.

They are worthy of historic designation as landmarks (see 7.05.B.1, a through d).

Thank you,

Bill and Laurie Roberts

#### Additional Sources:

Betty J. Blum, *Oral History of Walter Netsch*, 1997-2000, <https://artic.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/api/collection/caohp/id/19289/download>

SOM, *A Radical Mind: The genius of architect Walter Netsch*, 2015, <https://som.medium.com/a-radical-mind-the-genius-of-architect-walter-netsch-ba0315069e31>

SOM, *Unraveling One Architect's Kaleidoscopic Design Theory in 9 Projects*, 2016, <https://som.medium.com/unraveling-one-architect-s-kaleidoscopic-design-theory-in-9-projects-725fe331b338>

Iker Gil, *Field Theory Under Threat*, 2024, <https://mascontext.com/observations/field-theory-under-threat>, 2024

Anon., *Walter Netsch: Biography*, n.d., <https://architectuul.com/architect/walter-netsch>

---

<sup>2</sup> "Bricklaying Ceremony for Wells College Fine Arts Center," *The Auburn Citizen-Advertiser*, September 23, 1974.