

28 January 2025

Village of Aurora
Community Preservation Panel
456 Main Street
Aurora, New York, 13026

Re: Proposed Landmark Designation of Wells College Properties

Dear Village Clerk;

I am writing as a Partner at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), the firm where Architect Walter Netsch practiced while he designed the Louis Jefferson Long Library, Campbell Art, and Barlor Music buildings for Wells College. We consider all three buildings to be significant works of architecture and support the designation of the Campbell Art and Barlor Music Building as Local Landmarks in Village law. Like the Library, the Art and Music buildings not only exemplify and possess special character, historic, and aesthetic interest of value for the Village of Aurora, but they are also nationally significant as expressions of architect Walter Netsch's groundbreaking Field Theory and together the three buildings constitute what he believed to be his "best" work.¹ **If the Long Library is worth saving so, too, are the other structures.**

We have compiled archival materials supporting the preservation of these buildings into Google drive folder (<https://bit.ly/SOMWellsCollege>), including the resume and biography of Mr. Netsch, a selection of published press pieces on his work at Wells College, and some additional information about Field Theory.

As you'll see in that folder, Mr. Netsch's work at Wells College was published in several international magazines as exemplars of design excellence and, more specifically, as the very first built projects designed using Field Theory². Invented by Mr. Netsch, Field Theory is a recognized and published concept in architectural literature and noted by the profession, and still studied/researched today (we receive dozens of inquiries from academics and students every year specifically on this topic).

We do not agree with the characterization submitted on behalf of Wells College by Brody D. Smith, Esq., that the Barlor and Campbell buildings are less representative of the architect's work or a distinguishable design style than the Long Library. We know that Mr. Netsch did not feel that way, and—importantly—in his resume (also in the Google Drive) he listed them as separate projects, referring to the "Louis Jefferson Long Library" and "Wells College" as noteworthy projects in their own right, each worthy of recognition.

Although commissioned separately, it is clear that the three buildings were designed as an ensemble in specific contrast to the other, orthogonal buildings on the Wells College campus. Like the Long Library, the Barlor and Campbell buildings deploy the same principles of Field Theory in their design. In the words of my colleague **SOM Consulting Partner Craig Hartman, FAIA**—who worked closely with Walter Netsch on some of his most well-known Field Theory projects, including the Miami University Art Museum:³

A wide variety of connections between the basic rotated square modules is possible, yielding limitless variations on the theme. Walter Netsch called this system "Field Theory," implying a unified theory of design in which geometric patterns could be applied to the design of a chair, a building, a campus, or a city. It also implied a morphogenetic field, as in biology, in which organic form is built from a pattern of interconnected cells.

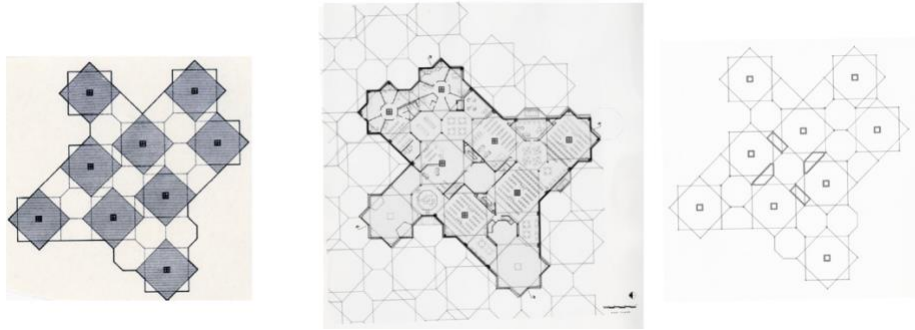
A very pure example of Field Theory is the repetitive "octagon and point-touching" Field shown here (what Mr. Smith refers to as "a pack of three and pack of four combinations of rotated squares") that Mr. Netsch developed for the Long Library, and which provides the organizational framework for the internal plan and roof form.

¹ *Walter Netsch interview with Detlef Mertins, SOM Journal 1 (2001).*

Online at <https://som.medium.com/a-radical-mind-the-genius-of-architect-walter-netsch-ba0315069e31>

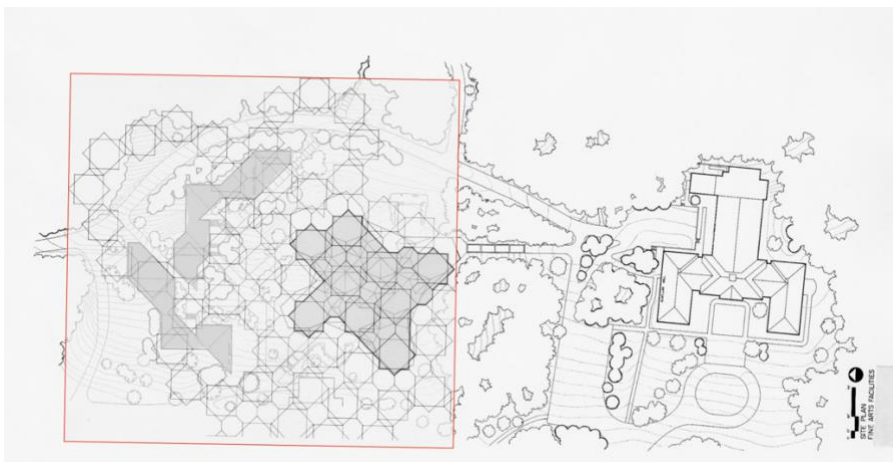
² *Progressive Architecture (March 1969) p.99*

³ *See Craig Hartman's 1979 lecture at Ball State University's College of Architecture and Planning, on youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAresp0pdQk>*

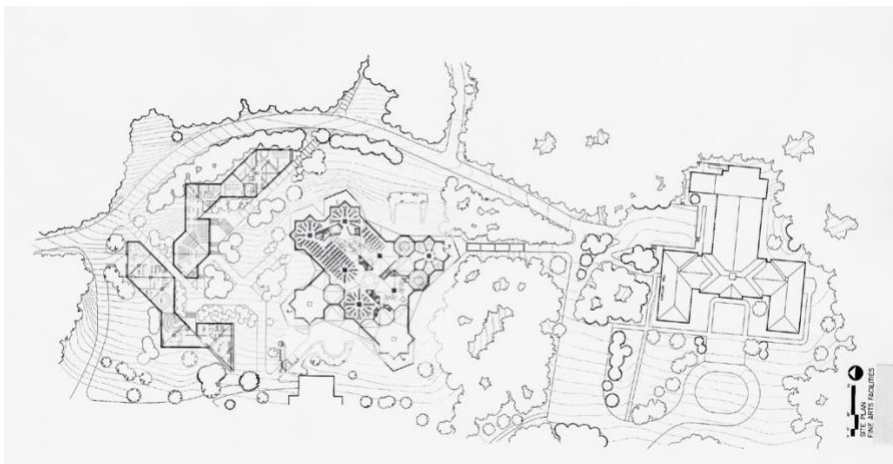


1 Plan Diagrams of the design of the Long Library © SOM

Crucially--and as was typical in Netsch's work--this Field was extended beyond the Library footprint to serve as an overall organizational tool to guide related future site development, landscape, and buildings. One can see in a plan overlay (shown below) that the subsequent commission for the Arts and Music was designed upon this same unifying Field, with an additional layered geometry to respond to the functional program and to preserve trees.



2 Diagram showing the Field overlaid on the plans of the SOM Buildings at Wells College © SOM



3 Ground Floor plan drawings of the Barlor, Campbell, and Long buildings © SOM

In the words of my expert colleague Mr. Hartman:

The design creates a unique fine arts and cultural center within the larger campus setting. It is based on a consistent approach to material and geometric form that unites the Library, Arts, and Music buildings. The result is a harmonious architectural ensemble in which each piece establishes additional meaning for its neighbors. Removing one piece weakens the whole. Together with their natural setting, these Field Theory buildings establish a harmonious, unique, and appropriate composition that no one of them could achieve alone. Netsch's work at Wells College was widely published in the US and abroad, and the historic architectural significance of this ensemble—Arts, Music, and Library—should be honored and preserved.

Lastly, in response to the idea that the buildings are not identified with persons or events significant in local, state, or national history, or that Mr. Netsch had no local connections, we would cite his Oral History housed at the Art Institute of Chicago, where Mr. Netsch discussed the importance of his relationship with former Wells College President Louis Jefferson Long:

You might say like a father, or the president at Wells College, the building was named after him. The library was named after him. All of these people really were father figures to me.⁴

While based in Chicago, Mr. Netsch was sought after by institutions around the country and was a licensed architect in the state of New York. Of the 43 projects listed in his biography, only eight are in the State of Illinois – less than 20%. In fact, many of his most widely cited projects were outside of the state – including the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado and The Richard and Carole Cocks Art Museum at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

I hope you'll help this important ensemble of buildings remain intact for future generations of scholars, New Yorkers, and architecture fans alike to experience and enjoy.

Thank you,

Colin Koop, AIA

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⁴ Oral history of Walter Netsch (1997), *Chicago Architects Oral History Project*, the Ernest R. Graham Study Center for Architectural Drawings, Department of Architecture, the Art Institute of Chicago.
Online at <https://artic.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/api/collection/caohp/id/19289/download>