

Home
 In the News
 University News
 Featured Stories
 Events
 Professors Who Do

Research
 Press Releases
 Newsletters
 Medical Campus News
 All News

Blogs
 Videos
 Photos

Subscribe

WAYNE STATE'S CAMPUS: WHERE PAST MEETS PRESENT



The word 'eclectic' often finds its way into discussions about the architecture located throughout Midtown Detroit and its anchor research institution, Wayne State University.

Midtown's landscape — which includes nearly 200 acres of Wayne State's campus — is dotted with architectural gems such as the Fisher Building, Detroit Institute of Arts and Detroit Public Library. A variety of period houses, apartment buildings, retail, theatres and office structures also are scattered throughout the area.

A bountiful collection of historic buildings is located on Wayne State's campus, including the historic Thompson Home (pictured), Jacob and Linsell Houses, Charles Lang Freer House (Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute), Old Main and McGregor Memorial Conference Center.

"I think that Wayne State is one of largest single owner of historic buildings in the city," says William Colburn, executive director of the Charles Lang Freer House and was founding executive director of Preservation Wayne (now known as Preservation Detroit).

According to Colburn, Wayne State has the unique distinction of "growing or developing out of an existing neighborhood in an urban setting," which is why so much period architecture is located on its campus. Colburn adds that the University of Michigan, Oakland University and Michigan State University were planned campuses – they did not grow out of existing neighborhoods.

"Wayne State's campus basically consists of a variety of buildings not specifically designed or constructed for an education function," Colburn says. "The university's nearly 100 years of development has been characterized by working within a neighborhood and using the resources that are available, such as existing buildings, some of which were historic regarding careful renovation and maintenance."

Colburn, who recently received the 2016 Lifetime Achievement Award from



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the Michigan Historic Preservation Network, says his years in the preservation field have been both challenging and rewarding, particularly the collaboration that has emerged with Wayne State University.

“As I look back, yes, we did wage some battles with the university as we maintained differing views about preservation versus demolition and rebuild. The successful battle to stop demolition of the Mackenzie house and, ultimately, restore the historic home of Wayne State’s founder was most gratifying and educational for both sides,” Colburn remembers.

“Since the 1970s and into the 90s, the university gradually changed its view of campus development, favoring preservation, when practical, over demolition. Wayne State has adaptively reused an old church, a former car dealership, and an old house into offices and classrooms while maintaining the historical integrity of each building.”

Colburn believes that the revitalization of Midtown has roots that go back to key preservation efforts and forward thinking of 25 to 40 years ago — in particular, the ongoing relationship with Wayne State as a key partner and stakeholder in the revitalization of Detroit’s core.

“As Midtown grows itself, so to speak, there is an educational component that emerges courtesy of Wayne State’s responsible actions over the years,” Colburn says. “The community will see the positive side of preservation through observing how the WSU campus was formed, how it grew and developed, and how it connects with Detroit’s development and architecture. This helps people feel a connection between the community and the university physically, geographically and architecturally, while creating public awareness of the importance of preservation.”

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