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Grand plans

Architectural exhibition illustrates lines between dreams and reality

SWEET BRIAR, Va. (Jan. 18, 2011) — In the life of every institution there is an inevitable intersection of aspiration and reality, where an architect's vision is reconciled with the resources at hand.

Architectural historian Marc Wagner of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources argues that can be a good thing. He'll talk about why he thinks so at the opening of "Unbuilt Sweet Briar," an exhibition in the College's Benedict Gallery, on Feb. 3. A reception will begin at 4:30 p.m. in the gallery.

At 5:15 in the adjacent Tyson Auditorium, Wagner and Vincent T. Brooks, senior archivist at the Library of Virginia, will present "Visionary Architecture: Rendered but Not Wrought" in conjunction with the show. The blueprints and presentation drawings on display depict what the physical campus might have been had all of supervising architect Ralph Adams Cram's plans come to pass.

It's a study in exactitude and symmetry, said Nancy McDearmon, registrarial assistant at the art gallery, whose work last year with assistant Sandi Prentice '10 inspired the exhibit. They were working to accession some of the more than 800 pieces related to the College's physical plant into the permanent collection. Several caretakers over the years — particularly former buildings and grounds supervisor Charles Kestner and art history professor emeritus Aileen Laing — have ensured the artifacts are preserved for viewers to appreciate.

Cram's Boston firm, Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson and later Cram and Ferguson, designed Sweet Briar buildings constructed between 1906 and 1929 when Cochran Library was completed. Cram continued to work with then-President Meta Glass until about 1940, proposing during that time a chapel, a fine arts building and a grand entrance gate to the College.

"It's wonderful to see [Cram's] design aesthetic and to get a feel for his complete vision. It was so thought out and ordered in the placement of everything — and it was all very concise," McDearmon said, noting Cram thought of every amenity the College has now, but tightly contained within the academic village.

Yet Cram's vision was big and elaborate, says Wagner, with highly geometric formal spaces and gardens resembling 18th-century European estates. "Architects dream beyond budgets," he said, explaining that many such plans never come to fruition. Sweet Briar, the first of several college commissions for Cram, is in good company with West Point, Princeton, the University of Richmond and others in that regard.

It's a theme Brooks explored as curator of a Library of Virginia exhibition in 2008, "Never Built Virginia." He'll talk about some notable projects that languished on the drawing board for lack of money or support.

Wagner will provide context for Cram's choice of the predominantly Georgian Revival style at Sweet Briar, which was a singular departure from the Gothic architecture he favored throughout his career. He will also discuss Cram's use of topography and how it lends to an unintentional but pleasing effect. Instead of the quad closed in on all sides, "you have the formal campus in one corner that opens up and drops off to a natural landscape," he said.

Karol Lawson, a protégé of Professor Laing and current director of the Sweet Briar galleries, notes the placement of the original buildings to afford a view of the mountains was no accident. "It is interesting, too, to see how Cram and his firm wrestled with the same issues that face the College today — making an impact on campus visitors, creating an environment for learning, adequate space for classes, access for service needs, parking and socializing spaces," she said.

The exhibit will remain on view through March 27. Admission is free. Gallery hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday. For more information, call (434) 381-6248 or e-mail klawson@sbc.edu.

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Sweet Briar College is a nationally recognized all-women's liberal arts and sciences college near Lynchburg, Va. Information is available at www.sbc.edu.