

**In the Ecotone**  
**The UC Santa Cruz Campus**

**Part 3**



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## Utopia

In Thomas Church's vision, the architecture at UCSC would be as varied as the site. Given the separation of spaces imposed by the trees and topography, it made little sense to mandate a uniform style. The residential colleges, sited around the periphery, could all look different. The first LRDP specified their informality. The large structures of the academic core—library, administration and science labs—should be more dignified, worthy of a public research university. There was general agreement that the new campus needed to avoid a rustic look reminiscent of Lake Tahoe or the Bohemian Grove. Thus the academic buildings in the site's densely forested center would be imposing, but not monumental, constructed of reinforced concrete, with solid bases, vertical columns and copper roofs. Since ground clearing was to be minimized, the core buildings could seem less massive behind screens of mature trees.

The early educational visionaries saw the uneven landscape as an ally. Clark Kerr, the University President, took a personal interest in the new, "experimental" campus. With small liberal arts institutions in mind, he thought that UCSC's colleges should be independent and inward looking. Of course Oxford and Cambridge were models. But Kerr also found inspiration in the walled Mediterranean hill-town of Aigues Mortes where he vacationed one summer while the plans for UCSC were under development. The residential colleges were to house 500-800 students, a size that could foster a sense of community and authentic intellectual exchanges.

The legend that UCSC's decentered campus was dictated by a desire to avoid student demonstrations (no rallying place like Sproul Hall in Berkeley) dies hard. In fact the basic plans for UCSC preceded by nearly two years the Free Speech Movement of December 1964. An experimental university at Santa Cruz was conceived as a response to what Mario Savio would denounce on Sproul Hall's steps: the impersonal, soulless mega-university where students felt like "cogs in a machine." Kerr and his longtime friend Dean McHenry recognized the problem and imagined a new kind of research university, a place that would, as they put it, "grow large, while feeling small."

How well the experiment succeeded, especially after funding began to decline and the colleges lost their educational autonomy, is a matter of continuing debate. There is no doubt that the program at UCSC is now more conventional, with larger classes and standard disciplines. Loyalty to the colleges has waned, and UCSC is no longer perceived as an experimental campus in the UC system. Invocations today of its iconoclastic tradition (often in fund-raising contexts) tend to ring hollow for those of us who have lived through the changes.

When the campus was taking shape, the project of a free public university devoted to broadly-based humanistic and scientific thinking was alive and well. Speaking in 1965 at the founding ceremony, California Governor Pat Brown and Clark Kerr praised the value of a liberal education for all. It's painful to listen to recordings of their comments today. In California and beyond, the fiscal and political climate has dramatically changed. The trends are all too clear: inadequate state funding, higher student fees, "bottom line" thinking and narrowed career aspirations.

Of course the good old days at UCSC weren't all good. By the end of its first decade, as the three west side colleges opened, physical dispersal began to show negative effects. Students complained of boredom and isolation. Faculty, with offices located far from their disciplinary colleagues, could feel stranded. As economic recession deepened in the mid 1970s, the relatively expensive project of maintaining both a research university and robust, semi-independent colleges was harder to justify. Additional funding dried up, and for a decade campus expansion stopped cold.

In the period of retrenchment that followed, UCSC reorganized, dismantling the colleges' educational role and strengthening the academic disciplines. For many, this signaled the end of the Santa Cruz experiment. And no doubt the pioneer spirit had waned. But the university was also growing more diverse; its early faculty had been virtually all male and white. After the late 1970s, female faculty and administrators became more numerous. The campus today houses a much broader social and ethnic population (though representation is still uneven). And it sustains niches of risk-taking research and teaching, despite pressure for conformity and quantifiable outcomes.

Through all the changes, for better and worse, the physical campus remains a source of inspiration—something to value and live up to. It is, I've come to believe, UCSC's most unambiguous achievement.

A university with more than 17,000 students, ten colleges, and a major scientific infrastructure has been built here without wrecking an extraordinary site. We can all cite planning choices we regret, but overall, the vision of Thomas Church and his colleagues has held. The meadow remains undeveloped, the great views open. New buildings still collaborate closely with the trees (which grow steadily taller). The pathways and footbridges inspire reverie. More than half of the site's 2000 acres are now formally protected from development, reserved for wildlife and for natural history research. Overall, the campus embodies a tradition of ecological respect and careful transformation that needs to be understood, actively renewed, and protected.

If much that was daring from the early UCSC project has yielded to expediency, the physical setting still stirs the imagination. Anyone who sets foot here, at least for a moment, feels they are in an extraordinary place where thinking differently can, and should, be the norm. And in a world increasingly ruled by economic accounting and capitalist commodification, there is more than ever a need for radical imagination. Walking the campus trails or gazing out over Monterey Bay offers breathing space. The place stops you in your tracks. It reopens a utopian impulse, a sense of possibility without which thinking falls into conformity, accommodating itself to what appears to be inevitable.

Two radical visions are embedded in the UCSC campus. The first is a utopia of purity and separation, the second of process and transformation. The first is condensed in the phrase "City on a Hill," a name that was, early on, adopted by the campus newspaper

and has become attached to the university. This vision (Christian in origin), imagines a place apart, a charmed circle inhabited by an elect who prefigure a shining future. The risk for utopias of this kind is that they become self-regarding and exclusive. People at UCSC have at times succumbed to the temptation--an attitude holier, more political, more radical, more creative than thou. Over the years, as diverse California populations needed to be served by the university, an avant-garde campus in the redwoods would seem less like an incubator of progressive change and more a place of privilege. Emeritus Chancellor Robert Sinsheimer made the point sharply in his memoir, *The Strands of a Life* (1994):

The students at Santa Cruz come mostly from urban and suburban areas to the relatively open space of Santa Cruz where, oblivious to the developments that made possible their presence there, they are easily persuaded that not another tree should be cut nor a field built on...The inherent contradiction between their beliefs in universal education (especially for minorities), their admiration for the Santa Cruz college system, and their resistance to expansion of the campus to provide facilities for more students like themselves is lost on them.

The criticism bites. Even Page Smith, the Founding Provost of Cowell College, looking back on the university's first decades, came to feel it would have been better, less elitist, to locate UCSC in the town of Santa Cruz and not on a removed hilltop. Others have questioned the original decision to build a UC campus on the spectacular Cowell Ranch site and not in the more populous and "accessible" San Jose area.

Yet physical separation, when it provides safe zones for non-conformity, can be defended. UCSC, designed to be different, nourished radical alternatives "under the radar." The Chadwick Garden, first thought to be a hippie indulgence, is now

recognized as an important moment in the spread of organic farming. In her edited oral history, *Out in the Redwoods*, Irene Reti, documents the emergence of gay and lesbian life in a setting where, in the words of one of her interlocutors, “It was very easy to be queer, in the old-fashioned sense of the word. Everyone who came here was thought to be queer in those days.” And where else could an unclassifiable department called “History of Consciousness” thrive?

Innovations like these—and there are others—cannot be anticipated. Like the tree forts and art projects in the forest, they emerge on the margins of more formal structures. They aren’t brightly lit, imagined futures, but alternatives living in the chiaroscuro. This second kind of utopia doesn’t need to be free of contamination. It’s an ecotone—a borderland of mixed uses, frictions and adaptations.

Let me conclude with a (perhaps surprising) architectural example that addresses a perennial campus problem: parking. In the early years, Dean McHenry “hung tough,” as he put it, on limiting cars in the redwoods. He thought people should use the two remote parking lots or take public transport. The first campus plans included precise walking-time estimates between the colleges and core structures, estimates that now seem unrealistic. (In 1965 the Americans with Disabilities Act did not exist, and far fewer students than today needed cars to commute from part-time work.) As the university more than tripled in size, traffic problems inevitably increased; the remote lots began to spill over.



In 2001 the university opened its first, and so far only, parking structure. There were those who saw another example of decline, an urban encroachment into pristine nature. But the structure actually spared many redwood trees, providing parking on a small footprint for an expanding “Science and Engineering Hill.” Wandering around the building with my camera, I discovered a remarkable place, an adaptation to the site very much in the Church tradition. Unlike the box-like structures found at shopping malls (and UCLA), this concrete mass is variegated in form. By moving the load-bearing columns back from the edge it has been possible to spare the nearby trees. The building is well screened. And it’s remarkably light in appearance, with sight lines through to the opposite side. Every level is cantilevered, making you feel, when parking, that you’re in a tree house. There are two hanging gardens.

Another parking structure is surely in our future. The latest spurt of campus expansion—which must, one hopes, be nearing the limit—requires it. Will the next structure be so sensitively located, so ingeniously (and expensively) constructed? Nothing guarantees this. As funding shrinks, fidelity to the environment is more difficult to sustain, cutting corners more tempting. And the next generation of decision-makers may well be less committed to the tradition of environmental sensitivity that has made the place what it is—a legacy that needs to be remembered, defended, and made new.

Change has always been integral to UCSC’s ecology, The Cowell Ranch in 1960 was a site already much altered, first gently by Indians who tended its oaks with fire, then

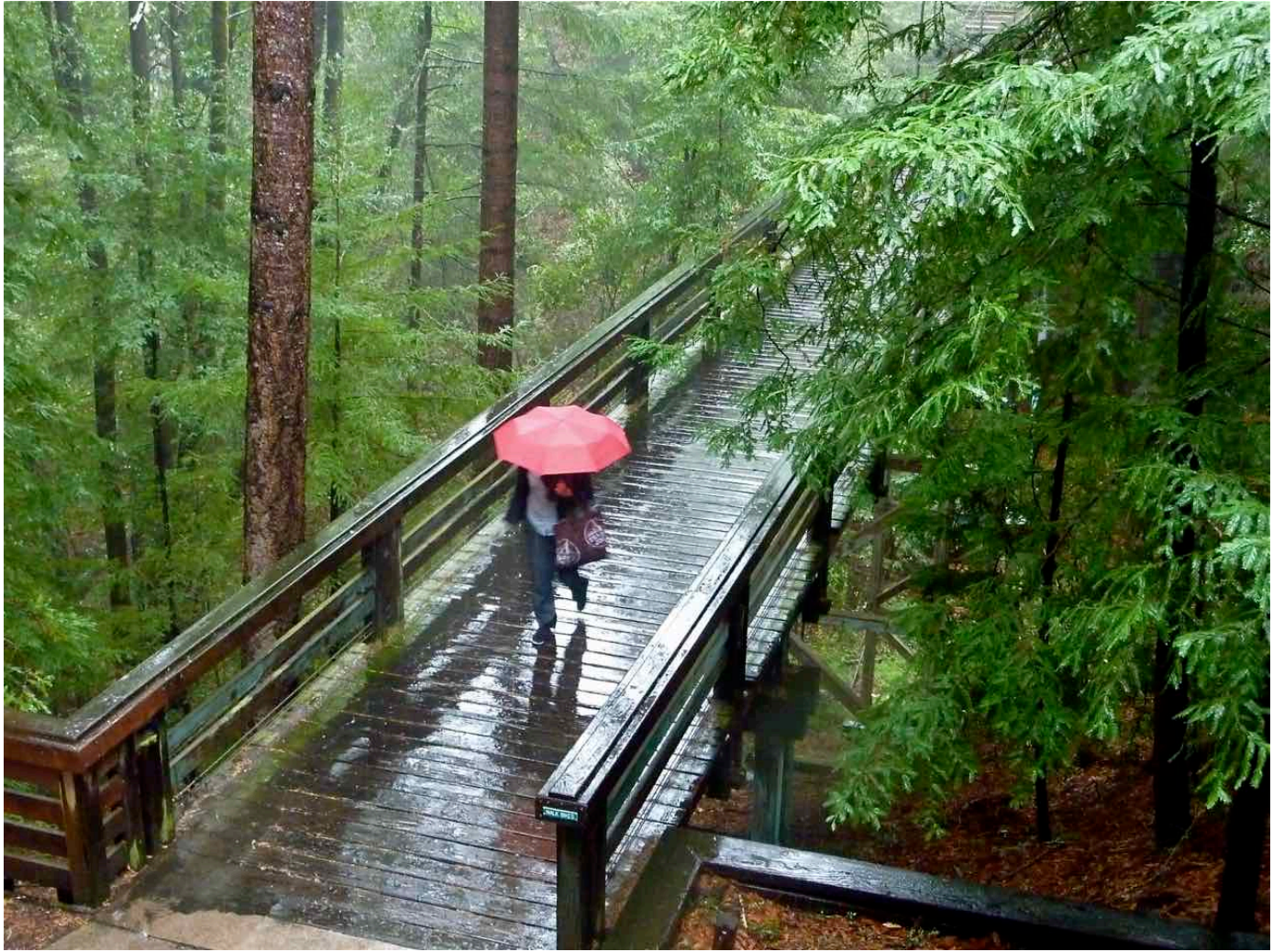
more violently by loggers, cattle, and the quarries of the lime industry. A wounded place, it has evolved into a kind of second nature or, in Church's sense, a garden—an indoor-outdoor living space for populations of students, researchers, teachers, plants and animals.

New things are happening in the ecotone. The Amah Mutsun Band of Ohlone Indians has recently reconnected with the site. Species diversity seems to be holding its own. There are more mountain lion sightings. And with drought conditions, the better adapted native plants have a chance to make a comeback. In the university, academic programs from every division pursue environmental sustainability, on land and in the ocean. The campus continues to harbor unplanned creations: artworks, climbing-trees, and other “heterotopic” places. Plants, animals, humans (and cars and buses) are all making the best of stressful situations. They manage, usually, to get along together in an ecology that leaves room for their different vitalities and needs. *A modus vivendi*—always precarious.

For me, the UC Santa Cruz campus embodies a sustained practice of restraint, careful innovation, and a feeling for complexity. It's an imperfect, really-existing utopia. An image of hope in a damaged world.































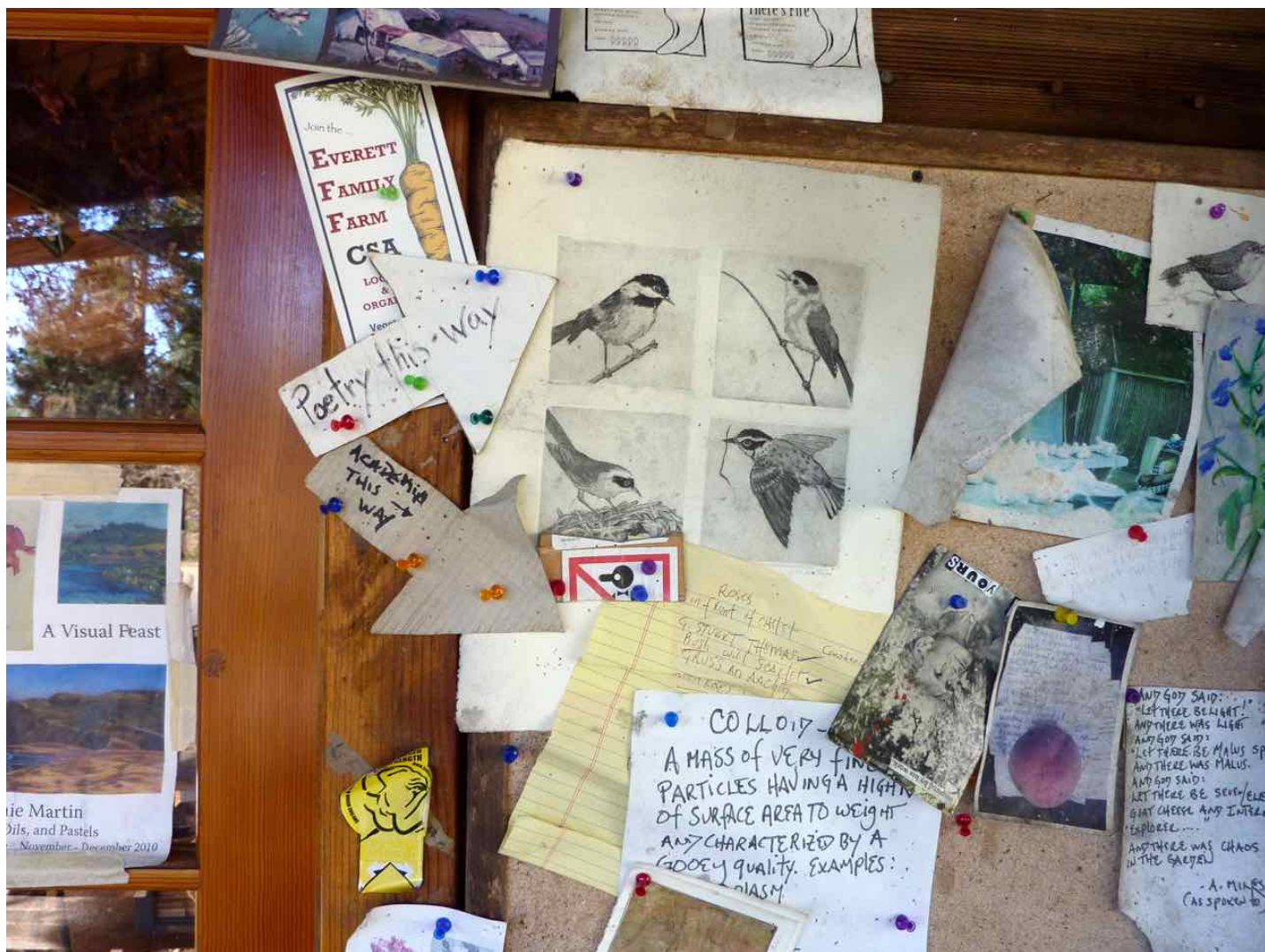












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