

The Master Plan

Penland has grown from its inception, guided by an infusion of craft, into a beautiful campus that is integral with the program. To define the process that charted the evolution of the campus is difficult, but the fundamentals are as follows: a clear sense of programs as a defining priority, a respect for place, a genuine involvement of the people who use and take care of the place, and a continuing evaluation and repair of the campus. **From the preliminary draft of the Penland Campus Master Plan.**

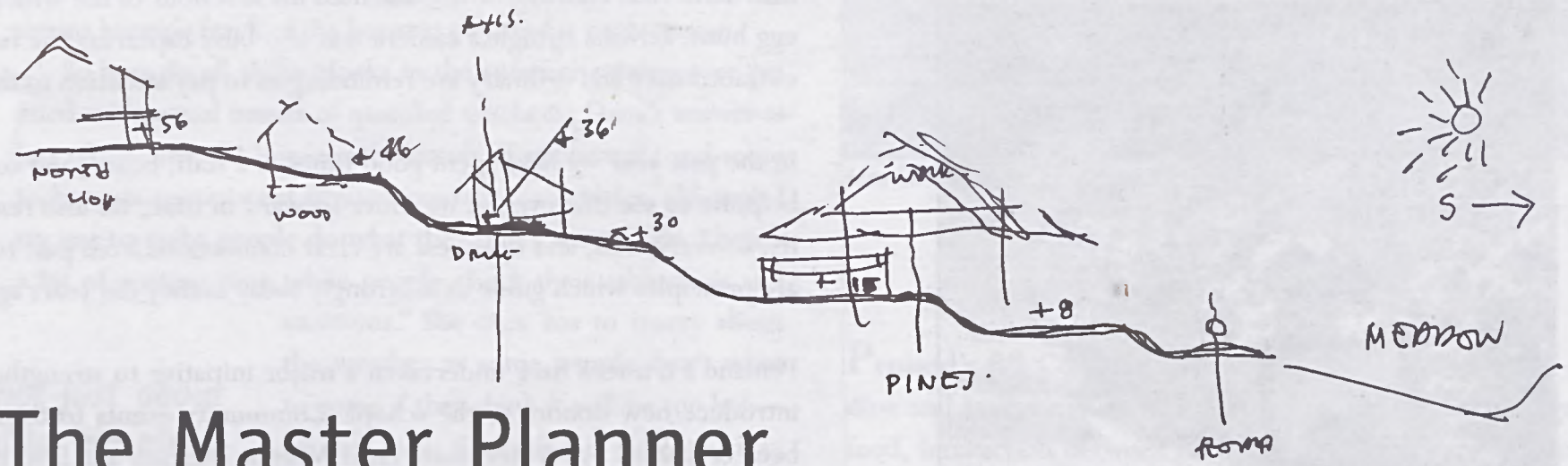
One of the important charges given to Director Jean McLaughlin by the Penland Board of Trustees was the creation of a comprehensive physical plan for the school. Under the gentle guidance of Edwin "Abie" Harris, the recently retired campus architect for N.C. State, this plan is becoming a reality.

Abie's process has had more to do with asking questions than providing quick answers: during numerous visits to Penland over the past six months, he has interviewed staff and community members about the school's needs, made sketches, met with Jean and Facilities Director Feet Williams, consulted with other professionals, and engaged in a patient and thorough process of observation.

Direct feedback was solicited from board members and instructor, along with nearby and distant members of the Penland community. They were asked what they liked most and least about the campus, what they felt were the school's pressing infrastructure needs, and what qualities they thought were essential to Penland's character. The responses were detailed and passionate, and reflected the strong connection that so many people feel with this place.

The end product will be a comprehensive documentation of the campus. The topics range from general design principles that will guide future building and landscaping decisions to detailed description, analysis, and recommendations including new building needs and location, lighting, water management, walks, plantings, roads, parking, utilities, accessibility, and safety. This information will be supported by charts, diagrams, analytical sketches and the first accurate topographic map of the Penland property, which will precisely locate aspects of the campus including structures, walkways, utilities, and plantings.

The initial draft of the plan is a document of great reverence. It attempts first and foremost to describe and define the physical, aesthetic, and social characteristics which reveal the essence of Penland's character. When it is complete, the plan will be an essential guide for the staff, the community, architects, and other professionals as they make decisions about the Penland environment for years to come.



The Master Planner

A Conversation with Abie Harris

In addition to Penland's master plan, Abie Harris continues to do some work for N.C. State. He's also designing a new community college in Wake County, and he's consulting with Wake Forest University, Guilford College, and the Arthur Morgan School. This is an excerpt from a conversation about his process and his impressions of Penland. —Robin Dreyer

What has been your strongest overall reaction to Penland?

On a personal level, it is that each time I come here I discover something I didn't know before and that gives me a strong sense of humility about master planning. There's so much here and I feel a strong imperative for preservation, of not affecting what's here. I guess the words I've used in some of the drafts are preservation and enhancement, and any development should meet those goals.

So a big part of what you are trying to do is create definitions of what already constitutes Penland so that planning can take place within that framework.

Right. Yesterday we were talking about the location of the maintenance facility and it pleased me that [Trustee] Jon Ellenbogen was referring to one of the diagrams I made defining the core campus and showing walking times. The feedback I got was that while this is routine stuff for me, it gave him a conceptual framework so he could start to think about Penland in those terms. I think that one thing the master plan will do is analyze the campus in terms that might give people a new way of looking at it.

For me the bottom line is process and I really want to help define a process. I think what's going on with the new iron studio is a wonderful thing. There are professionals involved, there are multiple points of feedback, nobody is unilaterally doing things. Everything is going through a lot of filters and critical eyes. This takes more time, but I think as more eyes are brought to it and there is an increased emphasis on the process, that will really make a

difference. The master plan will provide the framework but I think it's the process that's going to make it happen.

I imagine that some people may be nervous that a "campus plan" means growth but what I've seen is not so much about growth but about making things function better.

Yes, I agree. I think the nervousness that I've observed stems from the idea of someone who's not from here—who's not grounded in this place—coming in. I would be nervous over that, too. I think the other reason to be nervous is the concern about over-institutionalization. If I were a long-term resident, I would probably be nervous that someone with my kind of experience would bring in a set of rules, rather than having recommendations spring out of the uniqueness of this place.

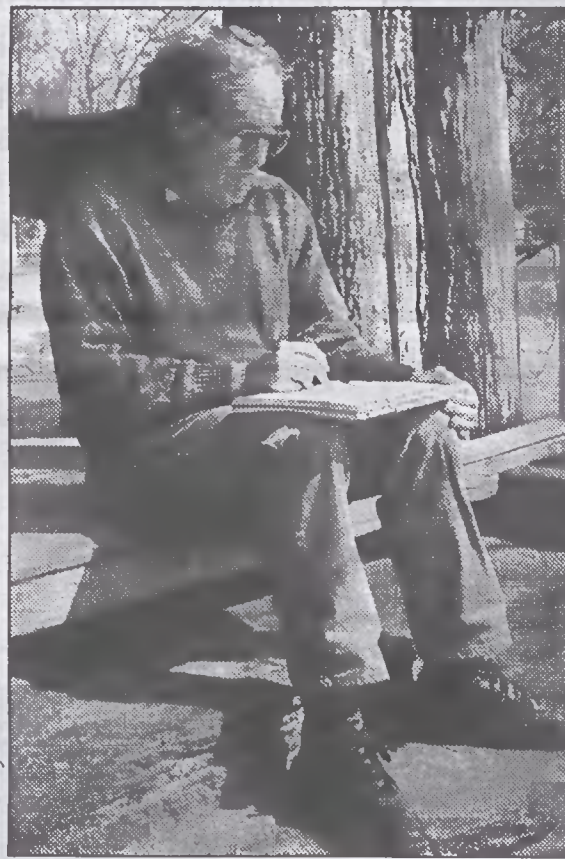
Another thing that's impressed me is the amount of feedback that's been involved, and I was interested that some of the same things are cited as positives and negatives. How do you react to this?

Parking is a good example of that. Some people complained about not enough parking almost as if they were going to a shopping center, and then there were those who felt that there are too many cars around. I think that the differences really speak to the character of the place. However, I feel that the most immediate thing we need to address is the condition of the buildings, and there seems to be general agreement about that.

I was also interested that although your questionnaire was about a physical plan, in most cases the answers included social factors; people couldn't separate out the purely physical aspects of the school.

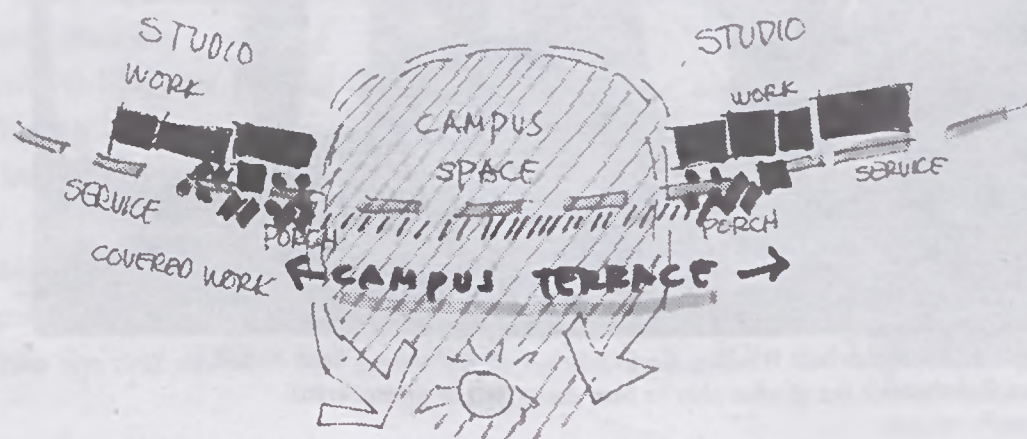
I think that's really neat because the facility is here to do things that are meaningful to people. It needs to function—the ventilation needs to work, the grinders need to grind, and the saws need to cut, but in addition to that, the things that people take away from here include the things that happen in between what's supposed to happen. Looking at the spaces and the time in between is critical to a lot of environments, certainly here. That interaction is a fundamental part of the program. The campus is just chock-full of places where people can interact much more spontaneously than what's scheduled, and I think that's part of the essential character of Penland.

Note: As we were going to press, we received word that the A.J. Fletcher Foundation has made a \$50,000, two-year grant to Penland to support the master plan.



Robin Dreyer

Abie Harris, the recently retired campus architect for N.C. State University, is coordinating the development of Penland's master plan.



Drawings by Abie Harris.