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SEPTEMBER 2025

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE THEORY AND PRACTICE

HISTORIC LANDSCAPES

FIG. 1

Some landscapes emerge from repetition, stones gathered into circles, paths pressed into grass, cairns aligned with wind and slope. Others are scripted, axes drawn across ground, façades marshalled to frame vistas, lawns stretched as civic stage. J. B. Jackson (2002) names the first vernacular: unselfconscious expressions of culture, shaped through habit and necessity (pp. 11–18). Laurie Olin (2002) gives us the second: designed landscapes, deliberate compositions that encode order and value through form (pp. 77–80). Neither is pure. As Peter Jacobs (2002) reminds us, landscapes are palimpsests where natural process and cultural practice accumulate (pp. 116–121).

Saskatoon holds both traditions in striking juxtaposition. Wanuskewin Heritage Park is a choreography of people, animals, and prairie: bison driven along ridges, camps oriented by slope and water, stones aligned to stars. Its form is authored collectively and iteratively, vernacular in Jackson's sense, but also legible as what Ann Whiston Spirn (2002) calls landscape's "language," where natural processes provide the grammar for cultural expression (pp. 125–130). The University of Saskatchewan Bowl performs a different script: a Beaux-Arts oval framed by Collegiate Gothic façades, monumental and deliberate. Its form is intentional, professional, institutional. Yet both sustain meaning for their communities, and both teach through form.

What makes this comparison compelling is not simply the contrast between "architecture without architects" and a carefully drafted master plan. It is that both landscapes, despite their differences, have endured as cultural anchors in Saskatoon. Their persistence, whether through ecological intelligence or institutional reinforcement, reveals how landscapes function as living texts of memory, identity, and belonging.

Cosgrove (2002) reframes landscape as a cultural way of seeing, a lens through which societies order land and assign meaning (pp. 165–166). The Bowl and Wanuskewin are therefore not only spaces but cultural texts: one projecting permanence and academic prestige, the other encoding survival and ceremony. Reading them requires recognizing how each vision arises from a different cultural vantage point, European-derived Beaux-Arts classicism in one case, Indigenous ecological knowledge in the other.

Corner (2002) urges us to treat theory as generative, a way of "keeping the field open" rather than closing it with rigid categories (pp. 19–20). This prevents Wanuskewin from being relegated to "heritage" and the Bowl to "design," instead allowing both to be read as dynamic processes where form and use evolve together. His emphasis on process sets the stage for understanding persistence as a continual negotiation rather than a fixed achievement.

Spirn (2002) argues that landscape is a language, with natural processes functioning as grammar and human interventions as syntax (pp. 125–130). At Wanuskewin, wind, slope, and water shape how people positioned camps and cairns; at the Bowl, symmetry and axis impose order on prairie soil. Jackson (2002), by contrast, stresses the unselfconsciousness of vernacular design, arising through repetition rather than master drawing (pp. 11–18). These two positions sharpen the contrast but also remind us that all landscapes, vernacular or designed, are forms of literacy.

Olin (2002) underscores design's reliance on form, hierarchy, and composition (pp. 77–80). He insists that order communicates cultural values, whether through axial lawns or rhythmic façades. Meyer (2002) extends this by arguing that beauty must be sustaining, woven into ecological systems and cultural practices so that meaning endures (pp. 21–31). Jacobs (2002) offers the broadest view, situating landscape in an expanded field between nature and culture, always layered and palimpsestic (pp. 116–121). Together, these theorists provide tools to analyze Saskatoon's two landscapes not as opposites, but as variations within a broader spectrum of human–land relations.

FIG. 2

WANUSKEWIN

SASKATCHEWAN

Wanuskewin is a record of over six millennia of occupation: bison jumps, tipi rings, hearths, and a medicine wheel inscribed into the Opimihāw Creek valley. Archaeological studies have uncovered layers of cultural deposits embedded within glacial terraces, showing long cycles of use and reuse. Hillslope sediment research reveals incision and aggradation phases that created flat terraces where camps clustered, offering shelter and access to resources (Rutherford, 2004). For Jackson (2002), these traces exemplify vernacular practice, dwellings and boundaries shaped by ecological intelligence rather than architectural intention (pp. 11–18).

FIG. 3

FIG. 4

The bison jumps epitomize this intelligence. Hunters choreographed topography by aligning cairns, brush, slope, and wind to funnel herds toward cliffs. Spirn (2002) would call this the grammar of nature translated into cultural syntax (pp. 125–130). The land itself became infrastructure, turning ecological process into a collective survival strategy. Around the jumps, tipi rings and hearths demonstrate attentiveness to microclimate, slope, and water. Corner (2002) would read these as processual design, camps appearing and dissolving with seasons, layering rhythms into space (pp. 19–20).

Around the jumps, campsites left behind tipi rings, storage pits, and hearths. Their placement shows attentiveness to wind, slope, and water, vernacular site planning guided not by a master plan but by lived ecological knowledge.

FIG. 5

The medicine wheel turns geometry into cosmology: stones radiating from a hub to align with celestial cycles. This exemplifies Meyer's (2002) sustaining beauty, where beauty is not ornamental but survival itself, ritual alignment ensuring continuity of meaning across generations (pp. 21–31). Jacobs (2002) would frame Wanuskewin as a palimpsest: glacial terraces, cultural deposits, stone alignments, and now the reintroduction of bison, each layer deepening legibility (pp. 116–121).

FIG. 6

Equally powerful is the wheel's placement: set high on a ridge, it commands sweeping views of the river valley. The horizon becomes part of the design, enfolding sky, water, and prairie into ceremony.

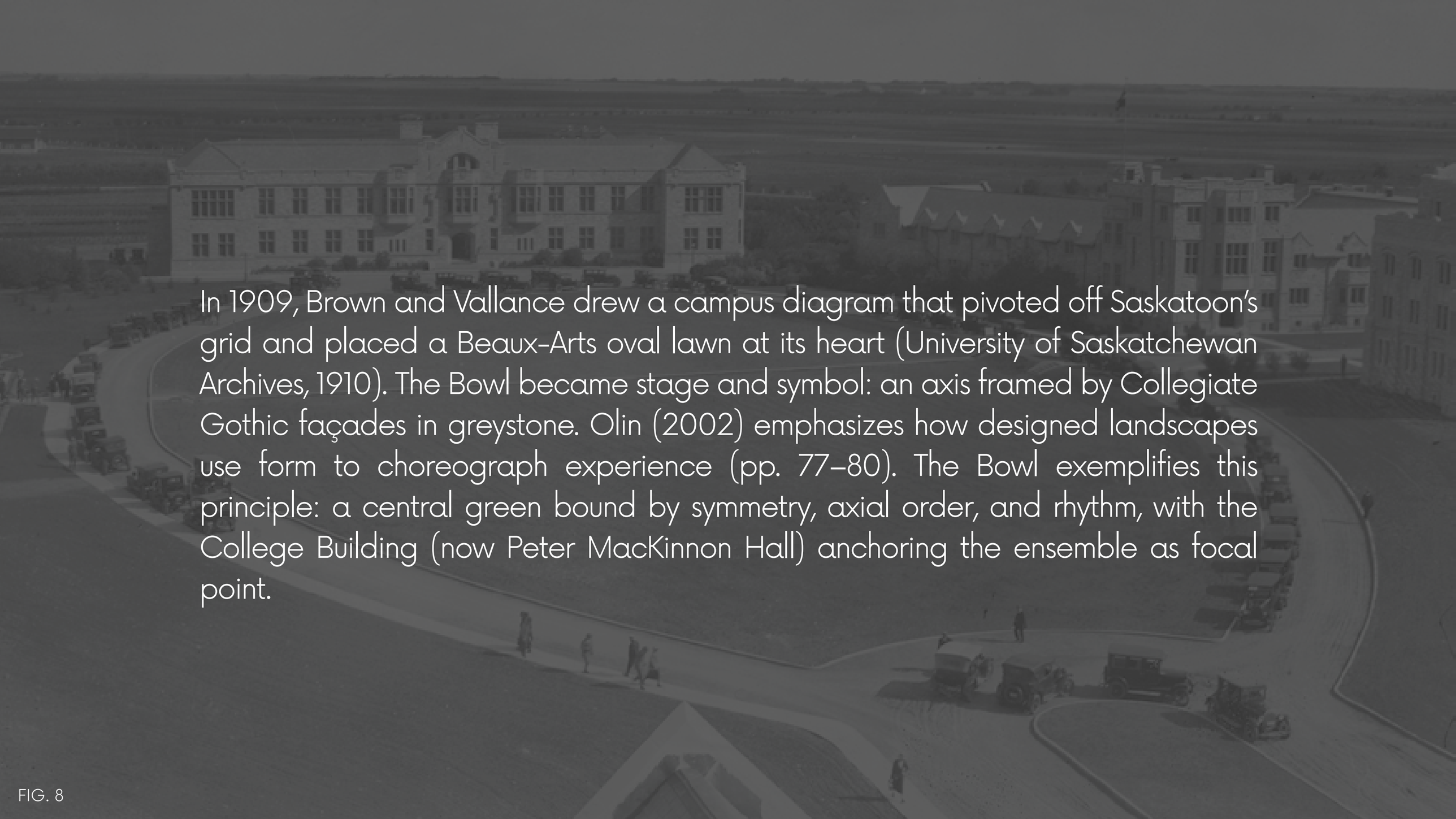
From this vantage point, the alignment of stones reads not only as geometry but as choreography between earth and cosmos, situating human ritual within a larger order of land and sky.

Even more recently, the discovery of petroglyphs carved into rock has expanded the site's cultural significance, providing rare material evidence of symbolic practice on the northern plains (Wanuskewin Heritage Park, 2021). The return of bison has reanimated long-dormant ecological and cultural practices, linking present-day Indigenous communities to ancestral knowledge (Burt, 1997). These events underscore Wanuskewin's vitality as both ecological system and cultural text.

Wanuskewin persists because it is more than a preserved heritage site, it is an active cultural landscape. Its archaeological richness has supported designation as a National Historic Site, embedding it within federal heritage frameworks. Community stewardship, led by Indigenous nations and supported by provincial and federal partnerships, has ensured its protection and interpretation. Ecological restoration projects, including the bison reintroduction and native grassland management, connect ancient practices to contemporary renewal (Rutherford, 2004). Economically, Wanuskewin has persisted through tourism, educational programming, and international recognition, which provide resources for continued care. Its endurance lies in adaptability: a site able to absorb seasonal use, shifts in climate, and changing cultural needs without erasing itself.

FIG. 3

FIG. 7



In 1909, Brown and Vallance drew a campus diagram that pivoted off Saskatoon's grid and placed a Beaux-Arts oval lawn at its heart (University of Saskatchewan Archives, 1910). The Bowl became stage and symbol: an axis framed by Collegiate Gothic façades in greystone. Olin (2002) emphasizes how designed landscapes use form to choreograph experience (pp. 77–80). The Bowl exemplifies this principle: a central green bound by symmetry, axial order, and rhythm, with the College Building (now Peter MacKinnon Hall) anchoring the ensemble as focal point.

FIG. 8

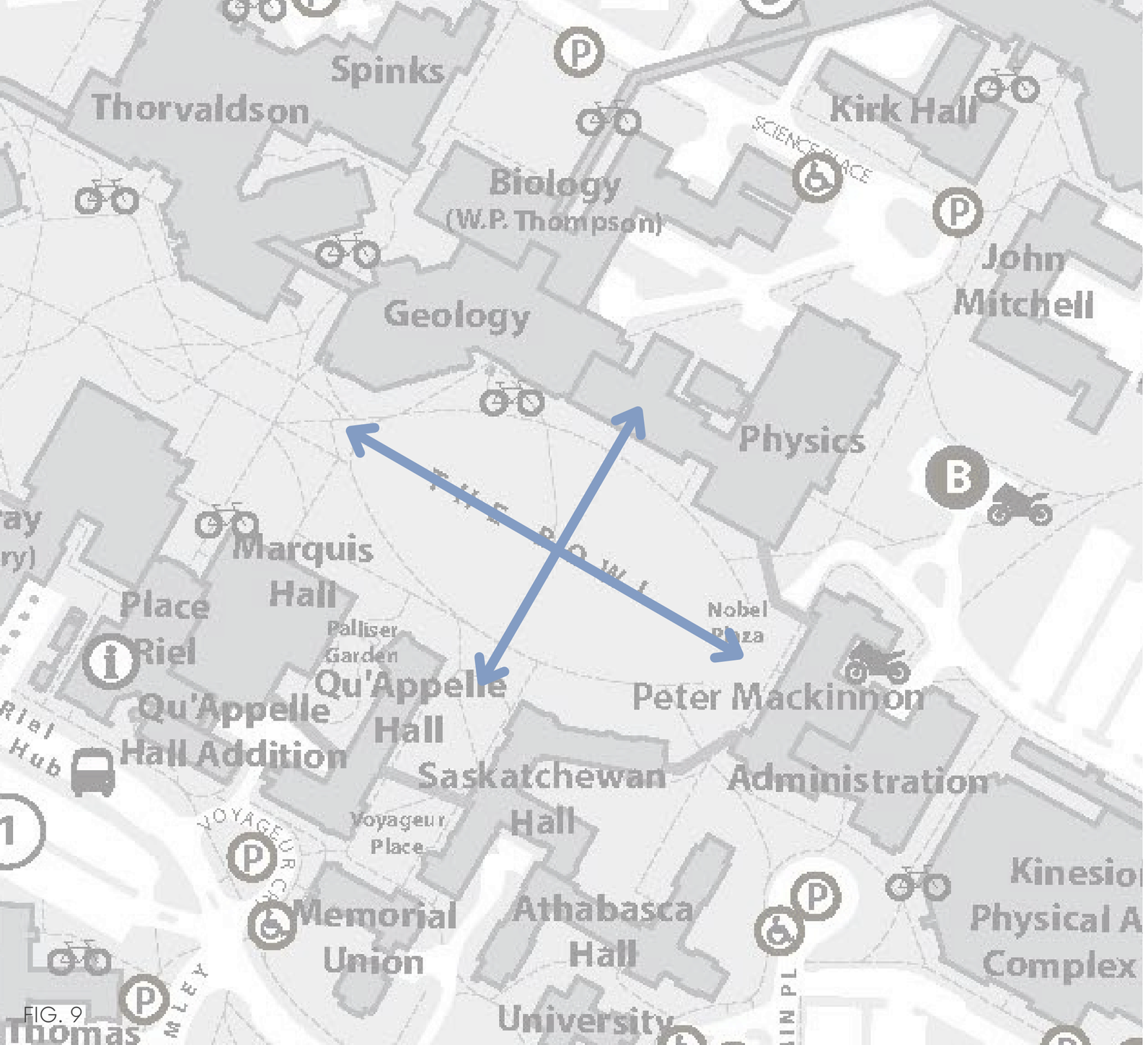


FIG. 9

Cosgrove (2002) reminds us that landscape is cultural vision, the externalization of social values in spatial form (pp. 165–166). The Bowl was the university's self-image: permanence, seriousness, and academic ritual inscribed in stone and lawn. Collegiate Gothic architecture, imported from older North American universities, reinforced the institution's prestige by linking a prairie campus to venerable academic traditions. Yet landscapes shift. Corner (2002) calls them processes, not products (pp. 19–20). The Bowl was re-scripted as new buildings edged in, roads intruded, and students carved winter paths across snow, creating ephemeral counter-diagrams that challenged the rigidity of Beaux-Arts form.

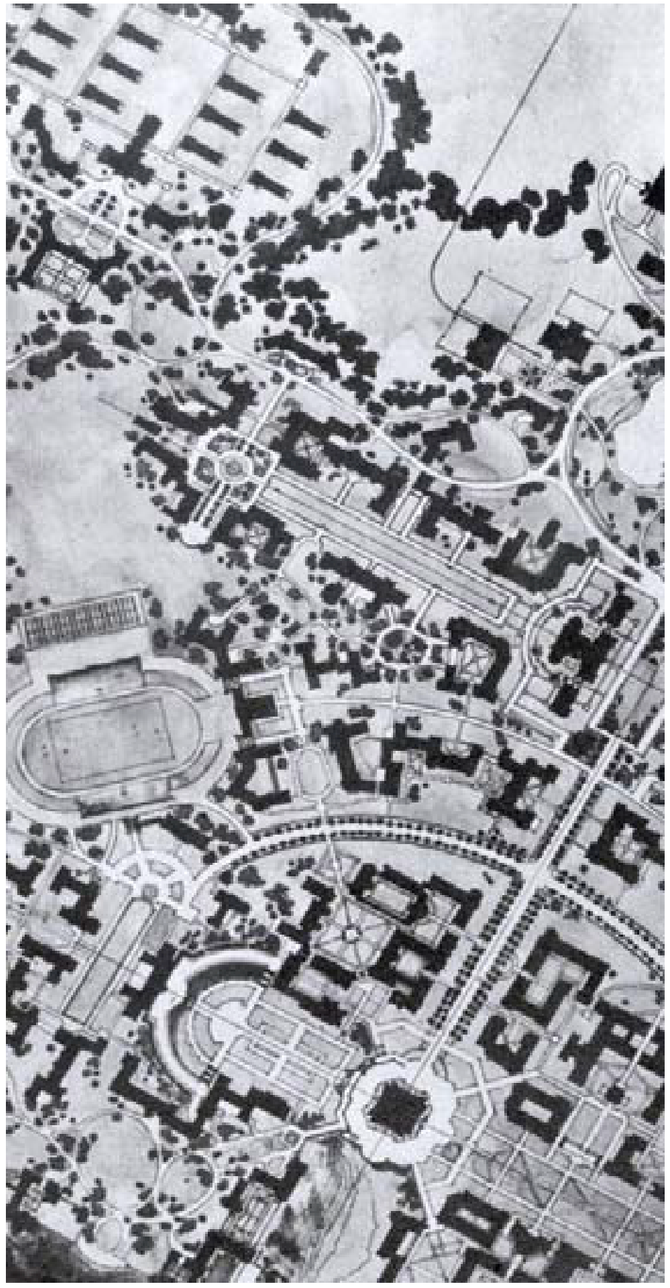


FIG. 10 - 1909 Plan by Brown and Vallance

Still, Meyer (2002) shows how beauty endures when memory and ritual are sustained (pp. 21–31). Convocations, rallies, and seasonal gatherings continue to renew the Bowl's meaning. Jacobs (2002) situates it as a palimpsest: 1909 ideals layered with mid-century disruptions, informal desire paths, and twenty-first-century sustainability concerns (pp. 116–121). The 2003 Core Area Master Plan (right) explicitly acknowledged the Bowl as the campus's "major organizing device" and recommended strengthening its pedestrian role while reconnecting it to the South Saskatchewan River corridor (Brook McIlroy, 2003).

FIG. 11 - The Master Plan

FIG. 8

FIG. 7

The Bowl persists because it is symbolic capital. Its greystone façades and central lawn anchor the identity of the University of Saskatchewan; ceremonies, photographs, and rituals reinforce its centrality year after year. Institutional investment has preserved its form despite pressures of modernization, with campus plans continually reaffirming the Bowl's primacy (Brook McIlroy, 2003; Campus Buildings and Land Use, n.d.).

Its endurance is institutional as much as physical: sustained by alumni nostalgia, donor funding for heritage preservation, and branding that foregrounds the Bowl as the image of the university. The Bowl demonstrates that designed landscapes endure when they become indispensable to the identity of the institutions they serve.

Together, Wanuskewin and the Bowl sharpen the vernacular–designed divide but also reveal its porosity. Jackson (2002) distinguishes landscapes made by living from landscapes made by drawing (pp. 11–18). Wanuskewin belongs to the first, the Bowl to the second. Yet Spirn (2002) reminds us that all landscapes translate nature into culture (pp. 125–130). Hunters designed with slope and wind; architects designed with stone and axis.

Olin (2002) highlights order through geometry, symmetry, and hierarchy (pp. 77–80). The Bowl exemplifies this, while Wanuskewin reveals order through ecology and ritual. Both landscapes discipline movement: bison funnelled into cliffs, students channelled into quadrangles. Jacobs (2002) frames both as palimpsests (pp. 116–121): Wanuskewin layered over millennia, the Bowl over a century.

Meyer (2002) insists beauty is sustained by resonance, landscapes endure not because of formal qualities alone, but because they continue to matter (pp. 21–31). Wanuskewin sustains beauty through ritual continuity, ecological vitality, and Indigenous stewardship. The Bowl sustains beauty through ceremonies, seasonal rhythms, and institutional reinforcement. Cosgrove (2002) adds that these values are not inherent but constructed through cultural vision (pp. 165–166). To settlers, Wanuskewin was once "just land"; to Indigenous peoples it was archive and classroom. To alumni, the Bowl is the university's image; to passing students, it is a shortcut cut through snow.

Corner (2002) binds them both as processes, always shifting and never complete (pp. 19–20). Wanuskewin evolves through rediscovery, petroglyphs, archaeological digs, ecological restoration, while the Bowl evolves through layering, new buildings, desire paths, master plans. In both cases, persistence is less about preserving original form than about sustaining ongoing dialogue between land and people.

Wanuskewin Heritage Park and the University of Saskatchewan Bowl represent distinct design traditions: one adaptive, iterative, temporal; the other formal, monumental, planned. Both are pedagogical. One teaches resilience and ecological intelligence; the other teaches identity and civic ritual. Each persists because it sustains meaning across generations.

Their endurance affirms Jacobs' palimpsest, Spirn's inseparable nature–culture, Corner's process, and Meyer's sustaining beauty. Read together, they complicate Jackson's vernacular–designed divide, showing that both forms of landscape are equally capable of producing identity and continuity.

Globally, this pairing illustrates a broader lesson. Vernacular landscapes such as Wanuskewin demonstrate resilience through adaptation to ecological process, while designed landscapes such as the Bowl demonstrate endurance through institutional reinforcement. Both persist when they resonate with community needs, whether those needs are survival and ceremony or identity and prestige. Saskatoon's two landscapes remind us that design is not only a matter of form, but of persistence, the capacity to hold meaning across time, to remain legible to those who dwell within them.

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FIGURE REFERENCES

Figure 1 - https://wanuskewin.com/our-story/the-site/

Figures 2-6 - Photographed by Ava Wagner

Figure 7- https://news.usask.ca/articles/general/2017/2017-in-focus-10-favourite-u-of-s-photos.php

Figure 8 - https://news.usask.ca/articles/general/2020/if-these-halls-of-learning-could-talk-the-heritage-buildings-of-usask.php

Figure 9 - https://uclub.usask.ca/club-information/uofsmap.pdf

Figure 10 - https://leadership.usask.ca/documents/administration/2021-02-06-usask-core_area_master_plan-2003-bmi.pdf

Figure 11 - https://leadership.usask.ca/documents/administration/2021-02-06-usask-core_area_master_plan-2003-bmi.pdf