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The Best-Laid Plans: Building on the
Hill

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To most onlookers, construction on Western's campus brings nothing worse than dust and detours as it rises, in accordance with some mysterious scheme of intelligent design, to meet new needs. For those inside the circle of planners, administrators and contractors, however, developing the Hill over the past century has been a far more complicated process. From the beginning, problems of funding, feasibility and deadlines have made construction a nerve-wracking affair, and for every design actually translated into brick and mortar, many others have never made it off the drawing board.

Western's first construction project was a baptism-by-fire for President Henry Hardin Cherry. In August 1909, six months after purchasing the Hill, he hired Louisville contractor Jacob Bornstein to build Van Meter Hall. Cherry enthusiastically announced to students that this grand edifice, scheduled for completion in May 1910, would host commencement exercises in July, then open for the regular fall session.

By mid-September 1910, Cherry had swallowed a dose of reality. Not only was the building unfinished but the general pace of activity on the site was downright leisurely. Instead of the expected beehive of workers, only "little squads" of men were populating the site. "They have not made an inch of roof for the last week," Cherry grumbled to the architect. Embarrassed by his optimistic forecast of a completion date, he asked contractor Bornstein to justify the delay.

The stonemasons, Bornstein insisted, were the culprits holding back the rest of the work. In a masterful bit of equivocation, he then assured Cherry that while it had been "absolutely out of my power" to finish the building on time, he would "do everything in my power" to have it ready by January 1, 1911.

Cherry, unappeased, could only warn Bornstein of the fallout from another missed deadline. Without the new building, Western would collapse under its large winter enrollment. "Nothing could happen that would be so devastating to its life and so hazardous to its influence as an experience of this kind," he complained. After publicizing the new January completion date, Cherry's personal credibility as well as that of the institution would be on the line. "It is just as serious as it can be," he intoned.

For Bornstein, apparently, it was not quite serious enough. Van Meter Hall's foyer and steps were still unfinished when Western finally gained possession of the building—and the rest of the Hill—on February 4, 1911.

Probably the longest-lived but never-realized campus building scheme was for the area behind Potter Hall, the highest point on the Hill and once the site of a Civil War fortification. As part of a long-range plan, in 1923 President Cherry urged support for a memorial clock tower, complete with a 100-foot-high observation deck, to stand at the center of a group of classically styled buildings.

Unfortunately, the space was also coveted for a much more utilitarian structure, an elevated water tank. Unwilling to abandon his plan, Cherry proposed constructing the memorial tower around the tank. Water flowing from an elegant housing of Warren County limestone, he explained to a potential benefactor, would carry with it a message not only of health and vitality for Bowling Green but of the “more abundant civic, social and industrial life” to be gained through education on the Hill.

Financial support, however, remained scarce, and by 1929 only the unsightly water tank had been erected. In another attempt to conceal it, Cherry commissioned Van Meter Hall’s architect, Brinton B. Davis, to design a new and improved memorial tower, a grand obelisk rising almost 200 feet and featuring a clock and chimes, a beacon light for airplanes, and space inside for 20 classrooms.

A year later, as Western approached its 25th anniversary, landscape architect Henry Wright climbed halfway up the still-undisguised water tower to contemplate the view looking south over the Colonnade. What he imagined for Western’s main north-south axis was an even grander (but also unrealized) scheme reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson’s design for the University of Virginia: a large, open commons flanked by clusters of academic and dormitory buildings, including dining and gymnasium facilities and cottage-style residences for up to 30 students. Although he assumed that the customary approach to the campus would always be from downtown Bowling Green, Wright’s plan had regard for two other increasingly relevant perspectives: the view from automobiles streaming in over the Russellville and Nashville Pikes, and the view from the air.

Throughout its history (it was finally dismantled in 1971), the troublesome water tower continued to inspire remedial designs. In 1963, President Kelly Thompson revived the idea of a tower-like structure, a 20-story “hilltop skyscraper” with 100 classrooms, administrative offices and an observation deck, to replace the unwanted landmark. University departments and offices began eagerly jockeying for prime space in the building’s upper reaches but logistical problems, most notably the provision of elevators for students moving between classes, shelved the plan within a year.

Other proposals of varying size and grandeur—a circular, open-air theatre where the north wing of the Thompson Complex now stands, an ROTC building and, more recently, a pedestrian bridge over University Boulevard and even a statue of Big Red in the Preston Center—have come and gone. As long as Western’s programs remain innovative and ambitious, however, so too will the supply of ideas for making the Hill a more beautiful and functional place.

Sources:

Board of Regents Minutes, University Archives
 Henry Hardin Cherry Papers, University Archives
College Heights Herald
Park City Daily News