

A Place That People Long For
By LISA JONES
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In architectural lingo, there are “30-year buildings,” designed to last a few decades; then there are “100-year buildings,” built to last for generations — the kind that people look at and sigh, “They don’t make ’em like that anymore.”

A team of Southern California consultants and contractors have a rare opportunity to work on structures of the latter type at Soka University of America’s new campus, where everything from the buildings to the administrative policies are geared toward the next two centuries.

SUA — an independent, private, liberal arts university based on Buddhist principles, located just east of Laguna Beach, Calif. — is designed to be student-centered. For example, seminar-style classrooms will be conducive to dialogue, with a 12:1 student/professor ratio. To reduce hassles and time spent standing in lines, students can electronically register for and add/drop classes, purchase textbooks and access library reference materials — all from their dorm rooms, if they so choose.

SUA is the first new residential university to be built in the United States in 45 years, and upon completion, it will be one of the most technologically advanced universities in the world. Still, the campus design emphasizes human interactions.

“We’re using technology only when it’s humanistic, appropriate and student-centered,” says Eric Hauber, SUA’s vice president for academic affairs. A sense of campus-wide community and appreciation of human diversity, says Dr. Hauber, is central to the Soka spirit.

Soka means “to create value” in Japanese. The goal of Soka education is to foster people of character who continuously strive for the sake of peace.

Displayed on Dr. Hauber’s desk is a photograph of a monument emblazoned with Japanese characters. “That’s the sign in front of Soka University of Japan,” he explains. “It says *Soka University* in Tsunesaburo Makiguchi’s own hand. He wrote those characters and passed them on to Josei Toda, who passed them on to Daisaku Ikeda to fulfill the dream. SUA is the fruit of the mentor–disciple relationship.”

Makiguchi, an educator and author, was passionately dedicated to reforming the Japanese educational system, which emphasized rote learning over critical, independent thinking. He strove to develop modes of education that would unleash the potential of the individual. In 1928, he committed himself to practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism along with a young teacher, Josei Toda. Both were imprisoned as thought criminals in 1943 by the Japanese militarist government for refusing to compromise their religious beliefs. Makiguchi died in prison. Mr. Ikeda met Mr. Toda at the age of 19 and practiced under his direct tutelage until Toda’s death.

In 1971, Mr. Ikeda founded Soka University in Japan, which currently enrolls about 8,000 students and hosts the most diverse international student exchange program in Japan. SUA will ultimately enroll about 1,200 undergraduate and 200 graduate students. SUA’s first class — of 100 students — will matriculate in 2001.

“I could compare SUA to prestigious institutions such as Claremont–McKenna,” Dr. Hauber says, “but really, there’s no comparison. We are not aiming to be the best of similars but a unique institution for the 21st century. From the ground up, we’re re-designing the university experience. It’s hard to anticipate what the future will bring in terms of technology. But we know for certain that you can’t get wisdom from a machine — wisdom comes from people. SUA exists to develop outstanding human beings for the next

200 years.”

The curriculum and university policy are being developed by a diverse committee comprised of educators, advisors from the arts community, business and legal professionals, Buddhists and non-Buddhists. While the curriculum has yet to be finalized, Dr. Hauber says that SUA’s foreign language/internship abroad program will set it apart from other schools. Students will be required to take three years of foreign language courses, and in their third or fourth year of instruction, they will be placed in an internship abroad.

“Students will get the opportunity to use their language skills in a real-life work situation,” Dr. Hauber says. “That’s more challenging than merely studying abroad. Students who enroll in this type of program have to be very dedicated to functioning in the international arena.”

The 103-acre site of the future campus is atop a hill overlooking southern Orange County. On a clear day, students will be able to see mountains near San Diego to the south, the Saddleback Mountains to the east, and Mount Wilson and the San Gabriels to the northeast. Only three miles from the ocean and bordered almost entirely by protected park land, this is a site fit for million-dollar homes.

“We didn’t go looking for this land,” Dr. Hauber says, “It found us.” Aliso Viejo developer Steve Delson wanted to find someone to use the site in a way that would enhance the surrounding residential community. At the time, the Soka University campus in Calabasas, Calif., was in the news.

Mr. Delson investigated the university and the SGI and got approval from the Orange County Board of Supervisors to approach SUA with a proposal. “It was win-win,” Dr. Hauber says. “Community leaders have welcomed us.”

In the early planning phase of the new campus, Mr. Ikeda offered the directive “This should be a place that people long for.” The designers and consultants have taken this to heart and produced blueprints and renderings of a campus with a classical ambiance.

The terraced landscape will resemble a Tuscan hillside, planted with olive and cypress trees. Imagine: sloped lawns, lotus ponds, sculpture gardens, fountains and lakes, panoramic views, framed vistas, patterned stone walkways, covered arbors blooming with bougainvillea, an amphitheater, a ceremonial stair, textured stone buildings with tiled roofs and French windows....

Dr. Hauber admits: “Mr. Ikeda would be the first to say, ‘Hey, they’re only buildings — what goes on inside these buildings is what really matters.’ We always have to keep this perspective. SUA is about the students.”

At the site, construction crews have already moved 3 million cubic feet of earth, shaping and grading the land. “We’ll be sitting on bedrock,” Dr. Hauber explains. Soccer fields, softball diamonds, a jogging track and tennis courts will occupy filled land.

Crews are busy making sandbag channels and putting up plastic retaining walls in preparation for the predicted El Niño rains. Several hundred trees have been planted, but much of the site is exposed, yellow-gold clay dust.

At the southwestern edge of the site, the ground drops sharply into a canyon. “In the afternoons, a breeze off the Pacific comes through that canyon,” Dr. Hauber says. “The wind hits this bluff and creates an updraft.” He squints up at a majestic bird in flight. “You can watch the hawks sail on the currents.”

A warm gust scented with salt, sage and laurel lifts the bird higher.

This is the place to soar.

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