



# Sicilian Courtyard Restored

*Students at Scripps College relive the experience of the 1930s*

Early photographs of Sicilian Court at Scripps College in Claremont, Calif., show the space serving as a quiet study court, a place for subdued conversations and a cup of tea. And that is how we see the courtyard being used again today—after a modern interlude of 29 years.

Sicilian Court, designed by campus landscape architect Edward Huntsman-Trout in 1930, was part of the initial phase of campus construction. The college—now on the National Register of Historic Places—was designed by architect Gordon Kaufmann and Huntsman-Trout. The design is based on Mediterranean architectural themes, skillfully implemented within a rectilinear site plan. Unique, intimate courtyards contrast with formal impressive vistas.

A simple, yet distinctive residence-like campus was created in response to the goal of its founder, Ellen Browning Scripps: “I am thinking of a college campus whose simplicity and beauty will unobtrusively seep into the student’s consciousness and quietly develop a standard of taste and judgment.”

*Top Left: In the 1980s, space-age canvas-covered disks replaced oak trees in the courtyard until the college decided to return to its roots.*

*Top Right: The reconstructed Sicilian Court in 2010 even returned a wellhead to its original place in the courtyard.*

PHOTO BY GREG O’LOUGHLIN



*A 1960s view of Sicilian Courtyard as designed by Edward Huntsman-Trout in 1931.*



*The view of the courtyard in 2010 after reconstruction is a mirror image of its original design.*

PHOTO BY GREG O'LOUGHLIN

## Tracing Its Roots

Sicilian Court is important as the connecting courtyard between the Balch Hall administration building and Denison Library, among the first buildings on the campus.

The space is simple in design, but rich in quality detail. It features at center an Italian limestone wellhead donated by an early college patron. Large flagstones with grass for joints floor the space. Flagstones are irregular in shape, except for wide banding defining the rectangular lines, and diagonal seams that create a subtle "X", focusing on the wellhead.

Rectangular planting areas with a variety of low grassy flowers complement the sides and corners. Three major trees and one smaller tree shade and shelter overhead.

What we see today is a replica of the 1930s courtyard. What happened to the original?

## Refreshing The Space

In 1980, the college commissioned a new design, a modernization. The flagstone was replaced with concrete and brick. A pergola and fountain were added. The wellhead was moved to another courtyard.

It was a modern look with shade from portable space-age, canvas-covered disks instead of from oak trees. Several generations of students remember the courtyard this way.

In 2004, the college completed a "Landscape and Architectural Blueprint," an effort funded by a campus heritage grant from the Getty. Restoring/reconstructing Sicilian Court to its original design was highly recommended.

By January 2007, David C. Streatfield, professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Washington, and I had completed a Restoration



*Sicilian Court adjoins the central campus green space that connects residence halls and main college buildings.*

PHOTO BY GREG O'LOUGHLIN

Report for three courtyards—Sicilian, the adjacent Iris Court, and Valencia Court, located to the north of the library.

Analyzing the historic photos and plans from Scripps and UCLA archives, we came to several conclusions regarding the assets and attributes of the Huntsman-Trout design.

### **Making New Old Again**

The space has a serene, peaceful quality, a place for quiet conversations or outdoor study. The courtyard has formal elements that provide order and stability, yet within that space are informal components that enhance the feeling of welcome and comfort. The skillful integration of the formal and rectilinear with the casual and naturalistic is at the heart of the success of the courtyard.

Understanding these attributes of the space was essential to guiding its reconstruction.

Scripps College treasurer James Manifold, Lola Trafecanty, director of grounds, and the campus building and grounds committee provided strong direction, and were conscientious in facilitating a restoration/reconstruction that represented the original as closely as possible. Donors Gloria and Glen Holden graciously added the financial support to allow for this project to move forward in a timely manner.

The historic photographs were constant references in preparing the contract documents, and Streatfield was a guiding light, reviewing the plans for historic appropriateness. Some of the original flagstones were discovered and reused, while the wellhead was successfully put back in place. Trafecanty and a civil engineer, Eric Andreasen, arranged a

successful hidden drainage system surrounding the wellhead so that no drain grates would be visible. The contractor, Tom Hiroyashu, of Excaliber Construction, endeavored to replicate the sizes and shapes of the flagstone paving stones that appeared in the photographs. The landscape contractor, Morgan Wilson, adjusted the placement of the oak trees to line up perfectly with the seams of the paving.

A beautiful, appropriate space gives peace of mind. It inspires those who work on it—and generations of future students—to do their best work.

The grand opening of the reconstructed courtyard was December, 2009.

The students arriving on campus in the years following, not knowing the sequence of the original design and the restoration, sit at the tables under the oaks and casually do what students do. Scripps' "taste and judgment" are seeping in, we trust. ■

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