

The Ellipse

A sculpted outdoor room for learning & the community



PHOTOGRAPHY ISAAC CAMPBELL, 2021.

The design features an informal geometry of playful curves composed of concentric and rotated ellipses that create a dynamic spatial composition. Sculptural landforms, stepped concrete seat walls, exposed aggregate walkways, and gracefully curved wooden bench tops accentuate an intimately scaled outdoor room that accommodates a variety of activities.

People love to watch people, especially in a space that combines architecture, land art, and landscape architecture and fits like a puzzle piece into its context. For the fall 2021 term, the University of Oregon unveiled a unique landscape space on its Eugene campus. Designed by Portland-based OFFICE 52 Architecture in collaboration with Eugene-based LandCurrent, the Ellipse is an outdoor room that extends into the landscape the academic programs and student-focused activity of Tykeson Hall, the recently completed innovative academic center for the College of Arts and Sciences, and adjacent Chapman Hall, home to the Clark Honors College.

The Ellipse remakes a previously transitory lawn into a welcoming outdoor room and destination as an outdoor community gathering space during the pandemic and thereafter. The design was inspired by the university's arboretum-like character as well as European public spaces (LandCurrent's founder is from the Netherlands) and the perceived simplicity of outdoor spaces such as Isamu Noguchi's Cullen Sculpture Garden at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (where OFFICE 52 Architecture's founders attended Rice University). Since the Ellipse is framed on two sides by Chapman Hall and Tykeson Hall, its orientation heightens theatrical dialogue with Tykeson's upper-level outdoor terrace and public spaces that open onto the Ellipse.

The design features an informal geometry of playful curves composed of concentric and rotated ellipses that create a dynamic spatial composition. Sculptural landforms, stepped concrete seat walls, exposed aggregate walkways, and gracefully curved lpe wood bench tops accentuate an intimately scaled outdoor room that accommodates a variety of activities and supports the academic programs in the neighboring buildings. Easily accessible by public transit, walking, or biking, the Ellipse integrates seamlessly into the campus framework of open spaces, reinforcing the neighboring Memorial Quad and Johnson Lane and connecting with existing circulation patterns.

Native and drought-tolerant plantings feature prominently in the design and support biodiversity. The team and the university worked to protect the existing heritage trees that frame two sides of the site and provide spatial definition, shade, and important habitat. Native blue and purple camas poetically complement yellow daffodils and native grasses of varying heights, and a site-wide storm water management strategy and high-efficiency drip irrigation system improve water conservation and quality. Camas is a North American plant whose greatest diversity exists in Oregon, home to over 65% of the known species. Indigenous people used camas bulbs extensively for food, and the bulbs were valued as sweeteners, and shared or traded as gifts.

The project took on added importance during bidding and construction when the University locked down due to the pandemic and the requirements for social distancing and the benefits of outdoor spaces became evident. Fully wired with power, lighting, and data infrastructure, and designed to simultaneously accommodate a range of functions, the community has successfully embraced the Ellipse for outdoor classes, student orientation, coffee meetings, impromptu gatherings, and other events as socially distanced, in-person learning has resumed on campus. It is a reminder of how important an outdoor space can be in shaping interactions.

Project team: the University of Oregon (owner), OFFICE 52 Architecture (architect), LandCurrent (landscape architect), KPFF (civil engineer), Michael Thrailkill (specifications), and Fortis Construction, Inc. (general contractor).

Project contact: Isaac Campbell, icampbell@office-52.com
Project LINK